

TRAVELLER

MERCENARIES OF CHARTED SPACE



SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE IN THE FAR FUTURE

TRAVELLER

MERCENARIES OF CHARTED SPACE

CREDITS

CLASSIC TRAVELLER

Marc Miller

Loren Wiseman, John Harshman, Frank Chadwick, Darryl Hany, Winston Hamilton, Tony Svajlenka, Scott Renner, Doug Poe, David MacDonald, Wayne Roth, Paul R. Banner.

MONGOOSE TRAVELLER

Author

M J Dougherty

Editor

Matthew Sprange

Layout

Cassie Gregory, Morné Schaap

Interior Illustrations

Nikita Vasylchuk, Cassie Gregory, Douglas Deri, Corey Rivera, Mark Graham, Ankit Yadav

Cover Art

Douglas Deri

Acknowledgements

Geir Lanesskog, Travis Robins

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INTRODUCTION

The fundamentals of the mercenary trade are the same everywhere – mercenaries provide combat capability in return for something they want, which is usually money. The two basic kinds of mercenary are also common to most regions; serious professionals who may or may not be very skilled, but are most definitely soldiers, and people with guns who are willing to fight but not remotely military. The latter can be effective in small-scale operations but lack the organisation and discipline to operate in larger groups. Local attitudes to the mercenary trade tend to dictate the proportions of each type available for hire in a region.

Attitudes to the mercenary trade also define – and to some extent are defined by – its characteristics in an area. If the prevailing attitude is that mercenaries are unreliable scum fit only to be used as cannon-fodder, this tends to become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, since honourable and reliable units will move on or meet misfortune when maltreated by clients. The general rule is that it is easy to move toward a situation where mercenaries are freewheeling gun-bunnies, ultimately disposable and rarely reliable, and much harder to establish a culture in which mercenaries are considered professionals and expected to act like it.

There is variation within this general rule, however, and in some areas there are mercenaries who are viewed very differently by the general populace. Image also plays a part. A force with uniformity of equipment and a military demeanour will tend to be viewed as ‘real soldiers’ and respected as much as government soldiers – which may or may not be much respect at all. Mercenaries are rarely expected to look like parade-ground soldiers but a professional manner and appearance counts for a lot. A bunch of dishevelled yahoos are unlikely to make a good impression no matter how big their guns are, unless they are known for excellent results.

In short, professionalism sells – at least to reputable clients. A client may not know all that much about military matters, and may well not care, but are more likely to hire and trust mercenaries who look like they know what they are doing. Low-end or untrustworthy clients may be satisfied with whatever band of gunmen

they can hire on the cheap but it is a truism of the mercenary trade that a lack of professionalism is a two-way street. Clients are more likely to betray mercenaries they do not hold in high regard and a shambolic unit will not be respected. Throughout Charted Space mercenaries have learned it is in their interest to maintain at least a basic veneer of military professionalism even if the client does not deserve it. There are of course units who excel at looking good whilst not being effective in combat. Such fakers pick their assignments carefully and will eventually be exposed in a particularly brutal manner.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF MERCENARY

A mercenary is someone who fights for an organisation other than their home government; nothing more or less than that. Misuse of the term can create an impression that a mercenary is someone who cares only about money and who will betray their employers if a better offer comes along. It is true that units of this type do exist but the majority of mercenaries know it is not good for business to be considered unreliable – and indeed it can be highly dangerous.

Those who hold mercenaries in contempt sometimes have their reasons but are often guided by the prevailing culture of the region. In this case, they will tend to use the term ‘mercenary’ for those they despise, whilst failing to notice the professional soldiers and armed security personnel who do not fit their biased opinion. Among these are the security professionals who guard and defend starports. In most cases these are security rather than military personnel but they are professionals who stand ready to fight in the service of their employer.

Similarly, a great many armed security companies exist in Charted Space. These tend to be paramilitary in nature rather than fielding combat forces but often need to operate in a war zone and are capable of taking on a band of insurgents or local militia. The majority of those who hold mercenaries in contempt think of these armed security forces as something other than

mercenaries, especially if they have a reputation for reliability and professionalism. Some will define those fighting a war as mercenaries and those guarding aid workers seeking to alleviate the suffering caused as something different but in truth the only difference is in the behaviour of the personnel.

Household troops of notable figures in societies that permit them are also, by definition mercenaries, although they may be subject to bonds of loyalty that go beyond their unit's contract. In this regard, household troops are akin to the military personnel of a government although they may be recruited from outside their operator's immediate holdings. This slight blurring of the line also occurs when a government recruits non-citizens into its armed forces. This may be in return for eventual citizenship, in which case the situation is little different from recruiting from their own people or might be on a purely professional basis. Some governments raise a large segment of their armed forces from freelance professional soldiers rather than local citizens, which technically is a use of mercenaries. Laws in some regions forbid such recruiting, although there are usually ways to circumvent restrictions by various legal fictions.

The security forces of large corporations are also staffed by mercenaries, although few would describe them as such. Most security organisations are paramilitary but some corporations are capable of fighting a trade war with another company or even taking on a government. In larger conflicts the corporation's own forces will generally be augmented by additional mercenary units and in the minds of at least some observers there will be a difference between 'in-house' security forces and

'outsourced' mercenaries, despite the fact that they may be recruited from the same sources and personnel may move between the two.

The lines between different kinds of mercenaries may be blurry in places, and at times there may be no distinction, but it is sometimes important to define what kind of mercenary is being discussed. Not only attitudes vary; the laws governing the use of hired combat personnel can differ greatly according to which word is used to describe them.

Mercenary is a general term for anyone who serves in a military or paramilitary capacity outside the armed forces of their home or adopted government.

Military Contractor is the common term for an organisation such as a mercenary company that serves different clients over time, generally as a purely business transaction rather than loyalty to a cause, state or other entity. Some contractors have bonds of loyalty, which may limit who and where they will serve, but most are entirely freelance. It is these organisations that are being referenced when most people use the term 'mercenary'.

Corporate Security forces are hired from available personnel, who are by definition mercenaries but generally regarded as something a little different by the casual observer. Corporate security forces may be military or paramilitary in nature or might resemble a starmerc unit. The regard in which they are held generally depends on the reputation of their parent corporation rather than the prevailing attitude towards mercenaries.



Household Troops are often hired from the wider mercenary market but once a unit is joined there are – real or presumed – bonds of loyalty that transcend soldiering for pay. Household forces are generally considered ‘not mercenaries’ by casual observers but sometimes function in exactly the same way. Most household troops are heavily armed security personnel rather than combat soldiers but some powerful individuals maintain private armies capable of fighting a war.

It is not uncommon for personnel to move between units and from one type of mercenary work to another. Those who join corporate or household formations generally remain with one employer for the rest of their service. The exception is personnel who start out in these units then move into the freelance sector once they have gained enough experience to command a mercenary’s salary.

The attitude of local populations towards mercenaries can require careful handling. Laws or public opinion might preclude the use of military contractors but a force of household troops sent by a friendly noble or a detachment of another world’s government forces, might be entirely acceptable. In these cases, mercenaries are often hired (or arrange to be hired) by someone who can legitimately send troops to the combat zone. A quick change of uniforms might be all that is required to transform a forbidden or despised unit into respectable allies.

This change of status has much to do with accountability; a corporation or noble stands to lose out if their troops misbehave, whereas a mercenary unit might not suffer so much. Often this is a question of perception, as a mercenary unit’s reputation is its main selling point, but it can be an important factor. It may be necessary to make arrangements to ‘become’ part of a corporation’s security arm in order to function legally. Some organisations are willing to make money on the side this way, whilst some licensing agencies operate in a way that suggests they are a corporate body deploying its own troops rather than facilitating the hire of mercenaries.

COMMON PROCEDURES

Even in areas with no contact with one another, certain procedures tend to emerge over time. The mercenary marketplace punishes inefficiency and tends to drive working practices towards the same general way of doing things.

Finding Mercenaries

A prospective client has two options if they want mercenaries to fight for them – hire an existing force or raise one from scratch. The latter is difficult, to say the least, for most clients but it is possible to find someone with the right skills and have them put together a force to carry out whatever mission the client has in mind. A few mercenary units started out this way but most such endeavours are short-term.

The commonest scenario for the scratch force is when a handful of mercenaries are hired as individuals to deal with a small-scale problem. Often, little or no attempt is made to forge the individuals into a military unit; they operate as a warband or much like a group of Travellers. Informal groupings of this sort can be successful, and some will give themselves a name to operate under, but they are not mercenary units as such. Individuals may come and go, and relationships within the force are usually a matter of shared ideology or friendship. Simple desire to make money, or enjoyment of violence, may also motivate some members of a warband.

Even when given a unit identifier, warbands of this sort are generally viewed with derision by organised mercenaries. This is not merely professional snobbishness; a mercenary has to be able to rely on their comrades in action and in interactions with others. Trigger-happy yahoos are generally reliable only as long as they are winning and selfish individuals only there for the money cannot be trusted. Nothing erodes a unit’s morale and effectiveness more readily than internal mistrust. The discipline of a formally organised mercenary unit minimises problems like stealing from other unit members or unauthorised looting, all of which improves internal trust and avoids a lot of potential problems with the local population.

One result of this is that in most areas there are essentially two mercenary marketplaces; one for formally organised units and another for individuals and small groups operating on an ad-hoc basis. Movement from an organised unit into the small-band end of the marketplace is usually a sign a mercenary was kicked out of their unit or otherwise considered unfit for service and in general, organised units would rather take on malleable recruits than individuals used to doing as they please.

The crossover between these two worlds is where a client needs a force but has to raise one rather than hiring an existing unit. Often there will be no choice but to recruit individuals and small bands, and try to get them to work together. Beyond a certain point such forces are inefficient but can be useful against loosely

organised or badly equipped enemies. The client or their appointed commander will face a constant struggle to keep their force effective, which could be the basis of an interesting campaign.

Wherever possible, a client will try to hire an existing force. The use of a recruiter or broker is generally desirable as most clients have little idea whether a unit is reliable or even suitable for the task. Clients sometimes will approach a totally unsuitable unit with an unworkable mission idea. They may also have ridiculous expectations, like wanting an armoured company to take on a platoon-level job for platoon-level pay, whining that the job is small and easy so the client does not want to pay for the whole armoured force. Some units will detach an element and take the job; others will chase the prospective client away.

Clients and mercenaries alike tend to prefer working through a licensing agency and brokers. The fees involved add to everyone's costs and some brokers are despised for their habit of overcharging but the alternative is a complex free-for-all where time and money are routinely wasted, and sometimes lives as well. Thus brokerages and licensing agencies tend to exist in all areas where mercenaries are used, unless there are local customs or traditions that result in a different business practice.

Agency and Broker Fees

Licensing agencies typically charge a fee to accredit a mercenary unit or assess them for accreditation. Some charge at intervals to remain licensed or may rely on income from acting as a broker for the unit once it is accredited. Brokers are the intermediaries who pair units with clients. They assist in negotiations and are generally fair in their dealings. A broker will lose out, either directly or otherwise, if a deal goes wrong so it is in their interests to ensure the contract is acceptable to both parties with no hidden extras. Crooked brokers do exist, and some will allow client or mercenary to persuade them to be biased, but for the most part a broker can be trusted because fair dealing is in their best interests.

Brokers make their money by charging a fee to set up a contract between client and mercenary. For short-duration or specific-mission contracts this is typically 10–15% of the nominal fee, whilst for long-duration tickets this is usually around 5% of the mission fee for the first six months, after which the broker receives no further payment. These fees are usually paid on signature of contract, and may or may not be returnable if the unit breaches its contract or is dismissed. A broker will normally refuse to return any part of a fee if the

client is at fault but may be forced to repay part or all of the fee if it seems they have set the client up with bad mercenaries. Some brokers never repay fees and take their chances with angry clients.

The broker's fee is normally paid by the client and thus not the concern of the mercenaries. However, some brokerages sweeten the deal (for the client) by making the mercenaries pay part or all of this fee. If they in turn can persuade the client to pay so be it but if not they will have to take the money out of their own funds. In order to get the client to pay the broker's fee, the mercenary unit's negotiators can make a Routine (6+) Persuade or Diplomat check with the unit's REP providing an additional DM. The client can be persuaded to pay 20% of the licensing agency's fee per point of Effect.

In some cases there will be no agency or brokerage fees. For example, a force might swear allegiance for a set period to a notable figure and receive salaries as household troops plus gifts and largesse from their overlord. There may be no contract in such a case; instead the mercenaries agree to abide by their lord's rules and obey orders. The sums involved depend greatly upon the generosity of the client. Standard fees and salaries can be used as a guideline but situations of this sort are unique and must be evaluated by the Referee as they arise.

Regional Variations

Charted Space is subdivided into areas controlled by the major powers but there is greater variation in the mercenary trade than this. Within the Third Imperium alone there are significant differences in the attitude towards mercenary forces and the types available; a trend repeated elsewhere. In some cases differences can be put down to the activities of neighbouring states; in others there are ancient cultural factors in play.

Charted Space is neatly divided into sectors according to the starmaps but in reality the mercenary marketplace is not so easily codified. Many areas straddle the border between two or more major powers, or contain multiple small polities. The characteristics of the local mercenary marketplace are driven by a combination of the laws and customs of the polity and other influences exerted by conditions in the region. For example, in the Spinward Frontier region the presence of potentially hostile powers influences the mercenary marketplace both within and without Imperial territory, whilst the laws of the Imperium are far more important within its borders than outside – but may still exert influence many parsecs from the nearest Imperial world.

THIRD IMPERIUM

The use of mercenary forces is well established in the Third Imperium, not least due to influences from the Vilani Imperium. During the era of the Ziru Sirka, or Grand Empire of Stars, military force was not seen as the sole preserve of the state. Indeed, it was considered one of the three interlinked tools of all organisations – economics, politics and force. This habit of mixing economic, political and military power exists elsewhere, of course, but the Ziru Sirka took it further than other human societies.

The great bureaux and corporations were part of the state, in a manner not seen elsewhere, and were expected to handle their affairs as they thought best. Approaches varied; where one bureau might have favoured economic persuasion with the threat of force as a backup, another might choose to take direct action to remove a threat or overcome a problem. Outsiders have been puzzled by the deployment of military forces without the explicit authorisation of the Empire as a whole but in the Vilani Imperium those who wielded the tools of power were an integral part of the state and could be considered to act on its behalf whenever they acted on their own.

When the Ziru Sirka fell, its traditions and practices remained in force. They survived the Second Imperium and the Long Night, and when the Third Imperium was founded it was by a businessman rather than a political or military leader. Military force was an essential tool in building first the Sylean Federation, then the Third Imperium it became, but was never fully separated from business and commerce. To this day, megacorporations remain the driving force of the Imperium and wield more military power than most small interstellar states.

The Imperium is comfortable with the use of mercenaries and considers them a useful asset. With thousands of star systems to administer it is not desirable to detach elements of the Imperial armed forces every time an insurgency breaks out or a humanitarian aid mission needs a security element. Apart from the costs and disruption involved, the presence of Imperial troops can be controversial. A mercenary provoked into an intemperate response does not harm the reputation of the Imperium, whereas a mistake by a member of the Imperial armed forces will be remembered and resented for a long time to come.

The use of military contractors is permitted – and also household troops and corporate forces – to resolve disputes under most circumstances, reasoning that a short and decisive conflict will usually be less damaging than a long-running dispute. Licensing requirements are strict and there are laws governing how a conflict must be carried out, with the result that most conflicts within Imperial space are relatively civilised.

The Imperium considers accountability to be critical when applying political, military or economic pressure. As a rule, the more an individual or organisation has to lose the more it is permitted to do. For this reason well-organised, properly regulated and highly professional mercenary formations are favoured. This is mostly for practical reasons – a band of heavily armed thugs-for-hire can slip away when their actions are called into question but the military arm of a major corporation cannot. This attitude is passed down to those who use mercenaries – they know they will answer for the actions of their hired troops and prefer units with a good reputation for reliability.

The situation is looser in the backwaters, where clients have to make do with whatever forces they can get. The result is a distinctly two-tier mercenary marketplace with reputable and professional units claiming the good jobs and bands of gunmen picking up the rest. Not coincidentally, conflict in the backwaters tends to be more brutal since units are less accountable and their clients more desperate. There is a constant market for anyone capable of handling a weapon in these regions but experience gained this way can actually count against personnel if they try to get a billet with a more highly regarded formation.

IMPERIAL RULES OF WAR

All conflicts within the territory of the Third Imperium are governed by the Rules of War. These are officially unwritten to prevent loophole-lawyering but widely understood and generally obeyed. For a conflict to be considered legitimate it must meet the definition of a ‘clean and just war’. This means there must be a good and clearly stated reason for the conflict and care must be taken to avoid collateral suffering

and economic disruption. Some weapons – notably weapons of mass destruction – are forbidden and enemy personnel must be treated in a humane manner once they are no longer a threat.

The Rules of War make provision for a variety of conflicts to be legal, including trade wars and disputes between noble houses. Wars of conquest are a grey area. It is permissible to capture and keep territory or assets in a conflict but acquisition alone is not sufficient grounds for war. Nor is it permitted for a belligerent to permanently retain territory on an enemy's homeworld or within their recognised sovereign territory. It is, however, permissible to grab an installation as a bargaining chip and drag out negotiations until the enemy finally agrees to acceptable terms.

Some belligerents are skilled at negotiating the finer points of legal conflict. For example, it would not be legal for a corporation to declare a trade war solely because it wanted to take possession of an ore processing plant in a particular asteroid belt. It could, however, find pretext to be in conflict with the operators of the plant and capture it in order to deprive the enemy of an economic asset – or to claim the conquest was meant to improve security as the enemy was likely to use the installation as a forward base. Actually taking the installation might be a quick and simple operation, followed by long negotiations interspersed with attempts to take it back by force.

If the client presented their conflict in the right light, it would be legal and the use of mercenaries acceptable. This in turn means the mercenaries would be protected by Imperial law. On the other hand, a simple conquest without valid pretext would be considered illegal and the mercenaries would be liable for prosecution as raiders or pirates. This could be carried out as a deniable operation, with the mercenaries quietly slipping away afterward, but their actions could not be defended as legal. Any injuries or damage caused would therefore be a criminal matter rather than a legitimate act of war.

The Rules of War are a specialist area for many lawyers and over the years the courts have heard a great many convoluted explanations of how a conflict actually was lawful and necessary if viewed in the right light. This can have implications for mercenaries involved, as a successful appeal by the other side can delegitimise their actions and leave them open to criminal charges. Not coincidentally, better organised units tend to be careful about the legitimacy of their operations and stay away from conflicts that might land them in legal trouble. It is the 'band of gunmen' unit that ends up taking these contracts, perpetuating the two-tier system of reputable and less-than-reputable formations.

MERCENARY LIFE IN THE THIRD IMPERIUM

The preference for accountable mercenary forces is such that life can be hard for those without a solid reputation. Any formation with a negative REP modifier doubles this when operating above platoon-level. Thus a platoon-sized band of trigger-happy yahoos does not suffer ill-effects from its bad reputation but a company-sized unit will find it difficult to obtain equipment or to negotiate favourable contract terms.

In addition, many clients will simply refuse to deal with a unit of any size that has a negative REP. This is for the Referee to decide, based on the importance of the client's public reputation. Others will insist on only hiring units that have a REP equal to or higher than their SOC, although a covert hire by way of a third party might be acceptable. Mercenaries can expect to be judged not only on their military capabilities but on how prestigious hiring them makes the client seem. It is even possible for high-status units to be hired for a trivial job just because the client does not want to be seen to hire a lesser unit.

This all adds another dimension to the mercenary marketplace in the Third Imperium and high-end units are well aware of this. Many include members of noble houses among their liaison staff and train others in how to behave at court. The politics of social status are as important as the political situation that gave rise to a need for mercenaries. Small units, and particularly low-status ones, do not have to worry so much about these factors. For them the mercenary marketplace is much the same as in any backwater area; the clients they serve will be mindful of a unit's reputation but will not decline to hire a force merely out of snobbishness.

CLIENTS

The most likely clients for reputable mercenaries are corporations, noble houses or world governments. Disputes can be settled by violence, rather than extended court proceedings, and indeed the outcome of a conflict may be influential in obtaining a legal decision leading to permanent resolution. Violence is not used lightly but provides a solution to many problems that might otherwise take considerable time. Pragmatism and a long history of such measures have resulted in an attitude that mercenary operations in support of business or minor dispute are nothing out of the ordinary.

Mercenaries might find themselves up against fellow professionals, or may have to take on household troops of a noble house, paramilitary corporate security forces or regulars serving a planetary government. The latter are the most likely to be of low quality; businesses and noble houses tend to have small forces but maintain them at a

high standard. A contract that pits mercenaries against a rabble of insurgents might be a welcome change in the Imperial interior, as the majority of contracts are connected with business or politics rather than ideology.

There are exceptions, of course. Rebellions do happen and insurgencies may simmer for decades before finally crossing the threshold for Imperial intervention. Insurgents and rebels rarely have deep pockets and typically hire small or low-end mercenary units. Mercenaries serving such clients are still protected by the Rules of War and legitimate combatant status but they are working for the underdog and may find themselves opposed by forces licensed through a high-end intermediary such as the megacorporation Instellarms.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

The Third Imperium covers a great deal of territory, with many local variations in culture and approach to mercenary operations. In the Imperial interior, regulation is strong and an escalation of conflict beyond acceptable limits will bring swift retaliation. This may take the form of direct intervention by the Imperial Army or Marines, or pressure at the diplomatic, economic and legal levels. Rogue mercenary units will be rapidly shut down and there is always the possibility that measures might be instigated by a clever opponent against an honourable but less well connected force.

Most of the Third Imperium can be characterised as 'Imperial Interior' as far as mercenary operations are concerned. The laws of the Imperium, as well as its culture and politics, impose restrictions on mercenary operations but also create many opportunities for 'good wars' – a term mercenaries use to refer to conflicts fought in a relatively civilised manner.

The Aslan Frontier

The Aslan Frontier is a relatively small region centred on the Reaver's Deep and Dark Nebula, where the Third Imperium meets the Aslan Hierate. The customs of both powers influence the conduct of mercenary operations and the forces available there. Some units are obviously tailored to fighting against the forces of one power or the other, whilst others are more conventionally equipped.

This region is politically very active. There is always the possibility that the Hierate or Imperium is carrying out some scheme through deniable parties but more commonly disputes are localised. It has been known for two organisations, both determined to keep the Aslan out, to come to blows over how this is best done.

Since the end of the Border Wars in 380, this region has been governed by the Peace of Ftahalr. Although the letter of this treaty has been ignored at times its spirit remains in force. Neither the Hierate's leading clans nor the Imperium feel that a war in the region might be desirable. Both sides have repeatedly stepped in to keep their own people from causing the treaty to collapse and today mercenaries can find work removing humans from Aslan-claimed worlds and Aslan from systems declared off-limits by the treaty. There are those who would prefer open conflict, of course, making peacekeeping operations in the Aslan Frontier particularly tricky.

The Aslan Frontier also sees a considerable amount of Solomani Confederation influence creating a complex three-way power balance, which becomes ever more complicated the closer an observer looks. Direct intervention by Solomani forces would be an act of war against the Imperium, so deniability is the order of the day. Mercenaries may or may not care whose agenda they are furthering but do need to be mindful of backlash from an unexpected direction.

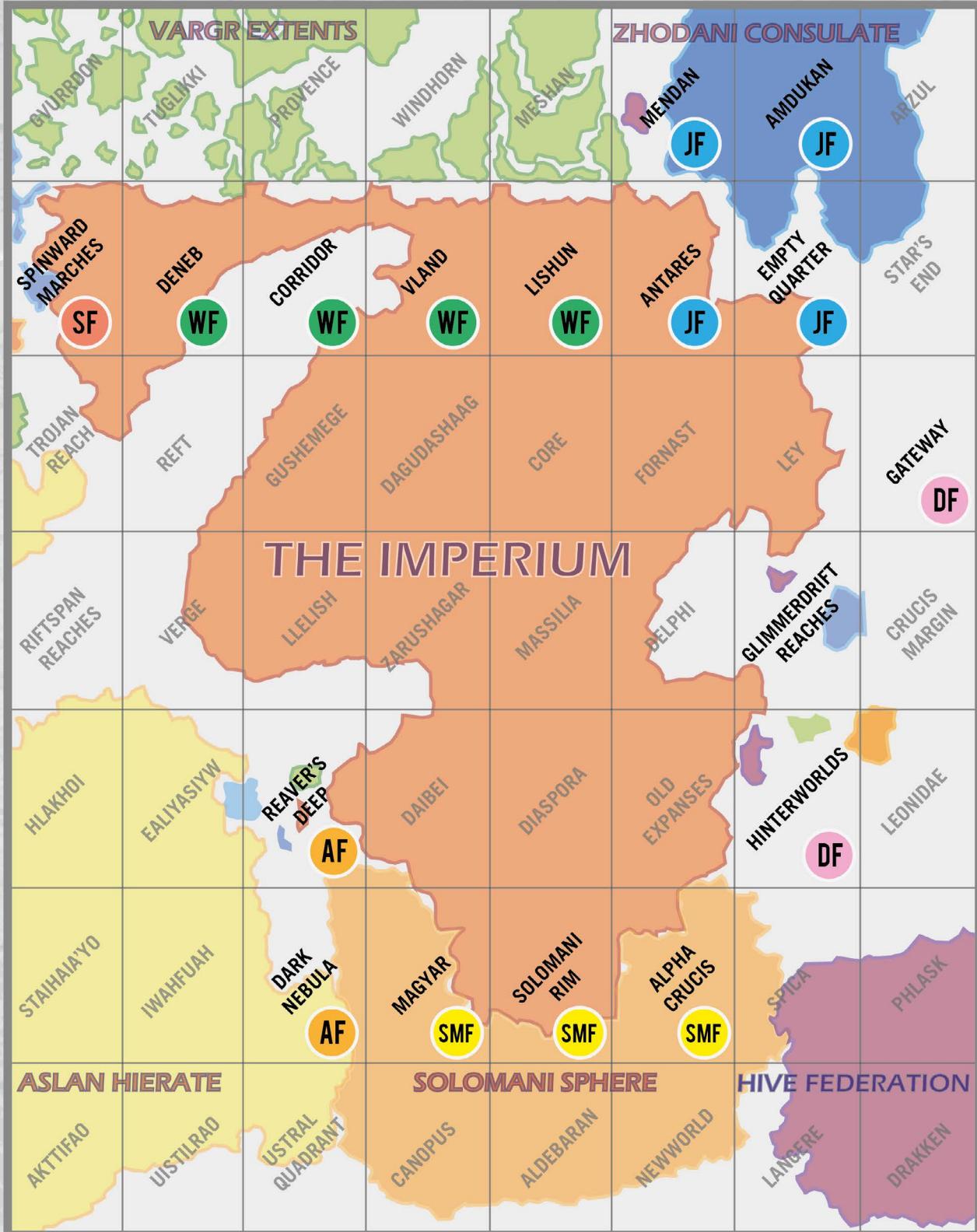
The Delphi Frontier

The Delphi Frontier coincides with the long axis of the Delphi Rift and is normally considered to extend from Imperial territory partway into the Hinterworlds, Glimmerdrift Reaches and Gateway sectors. The Third Imperium is the primary influence in this region, even beyond its borders, but this is an open and sometimes lawless place.

Mercenary operations may involve Imperial or non-Imperial personnel, possibly in the same unit. Cross-border operations are common, especially since Imperial corporations are willing to use mercenaries to remove obstacles to expansion. The border zone is as troubled as any other but does not face any major powers. As a result mercenary operations tend to be small to medium scale and rarely involve high-level politics. A world government or small power might be behind a conflict but mercenaries are not likely to come up against unexpectedly powerful resistance.

Mercenaries may find themselves fighting endless small wars among non-aligned worlds or furthering the agenda of a would-be regional power. Operations within the Imperial border may have a different flavour to those outside it, mainly due to the lack of consequences outside the border. A unit that commits atrocities or performs extremely poorly may be able to move a few parsecs over and resume operations with little chance of repercussions. Word will still get around but the chances of retribution are small.

THIRD IMPERIUM, MERCENARY REGIONAL VARIATIONS



AF The Aslan Frontier

JF The Julian Frontier

SMF The Solomani Frontier

DF The Delphi Frontier

SF The Spinward Frontier

WF The Windhorn Frontier



The Julian Frontier

The Julian Protectorate is a loose grouping of local polities and confederations lying to trailing of the Vargr Extents. With multiple states and many independent worlds it is a prime source of mercenary contracts. The Julian Frontier is a border region between the Third Imperium and Julian Protectorate, which lies to coreward and trailing of the Antares sector. The population are mostly a mix of humans and Vargr, with a significantly different culture to that of the Extents. The Protectorate is an alliance of interstellar states that has shown itself capable of unified action when necessary. More commonly the member states look to their own affairs and are frequently at odds with one another.

Relations between the Imperium and the various Julian states are generally distant but cordial, with considerable cross-border trade. Disputes do occur, some of them violent, but there has been no major war between the Imperium and the Protectorate since 191. Smaller clashes have occurred, occasionally between the Imperium and one of the Julian states, and more commonly between Julian states.

The coreward-trailing end of Antares and the non-Imperial systems immediately surrounding it are considered to form the Julian Frontier. Mercenaries may find themselves operating in Antares, Menden, Amdukan and the Empty Quarter for a variety of clients. Some favour Imperial-registered mercenaries as they are unlikely to be connected to any of the local factions – and conversely some Imperial nobles will hire troops in the Frontier for the same reason.

The Spinward Frontier

The Spinward Frontier centres on the Spinward Marches and surrounding region of space. Its main influence is the Third Imperium but the Zhodani Consulate is also present along with the Darrian Confederation and Sword Worlds Confederation. The presence of Vargr states to coreward also exerts some influence.

The most important power, in terms of mercenary operations, within the Spinward Frontier is the Third Imperium. It controls most of the Spinward Marches and part of the Trojan Reach, with influences extending far beyond. The region is also influenced by the Zhodani Consulate and some polities within the Vargr Extents. The Aslan Hierate is active to spinward of the Trojan Reach.

The area lying within Imperial territory is subject to the usual considerations regarding mercenaries in the Imperium, complicated by the fact this is a border region. Holdings in the Trojan Reach do not face much in the way of external threats but the Spinward Marches has been a battleground on several occasions. Mercenaries might be used in the inevitable internal disputes between planetary governments, disaffected groups among the population, corporate bodies or rival nobles. They may also be hired to operate against (or on behalf of) the Zhodani Consulate, Sword Worlds Confederation, Darrian Confederation or various Vargr groups.

Of these, the Sword Worlds are the most likely target or client for mercenaries. Sword Worlder internal politics are turbulent at the best of times, with occasional outbreaks of violence. The Confederation has a history of

enmity towards the Imperium, which could be escalated by intemperate mercenary operations, but at the same time there is a need to contain and oppose the – real or perceived – schemes of both parties. A similar situation exists along the borders with the Vargr and, to a lesser extent, the Zhodani.

To spinward, through Foreven and the Trojan Reach, Imperial influences become less important and the region begins to show the characteristics of a typical non-aligned area – with one major exception. The rimward side of the region is subject to regular incursions by Aslan ihatel, who attempt to seize or occupy any land they can. Ihatel bands are well armed; sufficiently so that most backwater settlements stand little chance against them. The use of mercenaries to drive off ihatel or train local militias is commonplace.

The Solomani Frontier

The Solomani Frontier is the trans-border region mostly contained in the Magyar to Alpha Crucis sector strip and a little to coreward and trailing. There is no neutral buffer zone in this region; the border is clearly defined and it is immediately apparent to anyone crossing that they are in a different interstellar state. Mercenaries operating in the border zone are likely to encounter additional scrutiny from both major powers, as interference in one another's affairs has been near-constant. Indeed, the long history of tensions between the Imperium and the Solomani Confederation gives rise to some unique restrictions and opportunities.

Mercenaries licensed on one side of the border are not permitted to operate on the other without obtaining a new license, which will involve investigation into the unit's former activities. Those that do cross and re-cross have to go through a lengthy process of clearing their heavy equipment every time. Neither the Solomani Confederation nor the Imperium is much concerned about small arms and light support weapons but any unit wanting to bring tanks and artillery with them will be watched carefully. The amount of hardware taken back across the border is of particular interest, since both powers have at times used an apparently legitimate mercenary operation to get heavy weapons into the hands of dissidents and insurgents across the border.

Most units prefer to work in one state or the other, although operating close to the border still attracts considerable attention. Cadre and counterinsurgency contracts are common and often subsidised by regional authorities. Both the Imperium and the Confederation are keen to stamp on insurrection along the border and quite willing to throw money at the problem. Mercenaries may be engaged to train local forces in remote areas even if

the residents there cannot afford their services or may spend their entire career acting as a fire brigade where insurgencies break out. Another common contract for small units is escorting investigators trying to determine whether a local conflict has been instigated or is being supported by a foreign power. Thus mercenaries may find themselves working on poor worlds and taking paycheques from the regional administration. This constant supply of work is considered worth the hassle of additional security by most units.

The Windhorn Frontier

The Windhorn Frontier runs from Deneb to Lishun, straddling the border between the Third Imperium and Vargr Extents. Some mercenary units are very firmly on one side or the other of 'the line' but trans-border operations are common – as are units experienced at carrying them out. The border is 'harder' in the inward direction; units crossing out of the Imperium to operate in the Extents are rarely scrutinised to any great degree but those coming in are usually investigated. This is particularly true of units raised in the Extents; the Imperium requires a second registry with a suitable licensing agency in its territory.

The Windhorn Frontier is more turbulent than most other Imperial frontiers, partly due to the nature of Vargr society and partly as a result of the multiple powers and independent worlds just across the border. Disputes, piracy and small wars are commonplace, having a tendency to spill out or spark other conflicts. Some of this trouble crosses the border into the Imperium, prompting campaigns to pacify or suppress the worst effects.

The use of Imperial forces is problematic, as military operations in the territory of a foreign state without permission constitutes an act of war. The Imperium could win any such war but does not want to – defeating a small state in the Extents means having to administer and police it, in addition to potentially creating a backlash against 'Imperial warmongering'. Where a state or world government is willing to accept Imperial help with security in its territory the situation is relatively simple but few are willing to do so. This may be due to a complex situation in which the government does not feel it is in its interests to suppress the trouble or more commonly the government feels it will lose face if it turns to an outside agency for help.

Mercenaries provide a way around this problem. Sometimes Imperial authorities will use a mercenary force – denably hired through a third party – to clean up an area or even topple a government to install one inclined to be more cooperative. Open operations are also common, particularly where starmercs are sent to hunt pirates or protect commerce. World governments and corporate

bodies on both sides of the border are equally keen to protect their interests and eliminate threats, and of course mercenaries are always in demand to fight in the disputes that characterise the region.

Outside Imperial territory, attitudes to mercenaries vary but for the most part expectations are low. Mercenaries are not well regarded and betrayals on the part of clients are far too common. Some units, notably Imperial-registered ones, stand out above the mass of low-end gunmen-for-hire and command much better treatment. Reputation is particularly important in this region, as many clients who try to play fast and loose with contract terms are deterred by the likelihood that a unit may turn its highly skilled attention on them. Swindling a band of warriors is one thing but only a fool would incur the wrath of an armoured company with a reputation for flattening everything in its path.

DEALERS AND AGENCIES

It is not uncommon for a corporation to act as both equipment dealer and licensing agency. Some also serve as brokers that match mercenaries to prospective clients. More commonly, these functions are carried out by separate bodies, with multi-function agencies either being extremely localised or enormous in scope. Mid-sized firms lack the resources to be all things to all sophonts over a wide area.

Instellarms Weapons

Manufacturer and Licensing Agency

As a megacorporation, Instellarms has a presence throughout Imperial space and beyond its borders. It is widely known for the quality of its equipment and its high pricing policies. Instellarms has many retail outlets and will sell to anyone with the proper credentials at standard individual-item prices. The firm does not negotiate discounts on multiple items through its retail outlets and may refuse to sell at all if the buyer is pushy or obviously outfitting a combat force. A retailer would happily sell four rifles and a light machinegun to a properly accredited starship security team if they demonstrated a suitable need – such as operating in backwater ports with weak planetside security. A request for 20 rifles looks more like a combat force and would probably be declined.

It is generally accepted – and probably true – that Instellarms has these policies in place to discourage riff-raff from buying its weapons, presumably intended to avoid the negative connotations of an ill-disciplined unit committing an atrocity with the firm's hardware. Retail outlets thus have a blanket 'no bulk sales' policy but will refer interested buyers to the Instellarms Accredited Purchaser Scheme. To join this scheme the buyer must present suitable credentials as the representative of a properly accredited mercenary unit with REP 9+ or a government, shipping line or similar organisation, and must present their case to the office of the local Instellarms regional manager. There is a non-refundable Cr10000 fee each time this is attempted. Assuming the correct documentation exists (or has been well faked, which might be an adventure in and of itself), presenting it requires an Average (8+) Advocate check. If successful, the buyer is permitted to purchase weaponry and hardware at non-retail rates and in large quantities. A failed attempt can be repeated after three months.

Units accepted onto the Accredited Purchaser Scheme are permitted to buy on 'military terms', although Instellarms' prices are higher than most other manufacturers. Before discount, a unit can expect to pay 25% over the odds, although this is reduced by 5% for every point of positive REP modifier. Bulk discounts are available but with a higher starting price Instellarms is the supplier of choice only for well-off units or those concerned about their image – or who know potential clients will judge them by the cost of their equipment rather than its effectiveness.

This exclusiveness is not entirely universal. It is very difficult to use Influence to persuade Instellarms to deal with a less reputable unit – each two full points of Influence used, or two full points of positive Influence modifier, counts as one. However, Instellarms will sell small-quantity packages to 'suitable' customers outside the Accredited Purchaser Scheme. Units with REP 10+ can have a quiet word with their local Instellarms representative and may be able to do a deal. They will need to persuade the representative as usual, using Reputation or Influence and upon a successful Difficult (10+) Persuade check the unit will be permitted to deal at military rates for relatively small quantities of equipment.

Instellarms Dealer Profile

Dealer	Max. TL	Infantry	Artillery	Combat Vehicles	Aerospace	Support and Specialist
Instellarms	15	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality

Instellarms also acts as a licensing agency for mercenary units. As with its equipment, the firm is very choosy about who is accredited, and how they behave, but registry with Instellarms opens the door to high-end clients who might be willing to pay 50% or more above the going rate for an operation, just because using such high-end mercenaries makes the client seem more important.

The accreditation process for mercenary units is not complex but tough to complete. Details of all personnel and equipment, along with proof of training and service, must be submitted to the accreditation board along with the notorious 'million Credit bond'. This is a misnomer; the bond starts at MCr1 for a company-sized or smaller unit and increases by 25% for every additional company-equivalent the unit has. The bond is partially or completely forfeit if the unit breaches Instellarms' conditions, even if misconduct in the field is not proven. MCr1 is not a huge sum for a high-end mercenary unit, and generally viewed as worth the investment in terms of access to equipment and clients. It is useful in keeping borderline outfits away and serves as a marketing tool – 'all our accredited mercenary forces are guaranteed by their million-Credit bond!'.

A unit that succeeds in becoming accredited with Instellarms will automatically have access to military-scale equipment purchases. In addition, the client notification service will provide a steady stream of employment offers from reputable and accountable clients who are willing to pay top Credit for Instellarms' excellent mercenaries. A unit registered with Instellarms receives DM+4 when negotiating fees with a client and DM+2 if facing a legal challenge or investigation from outside Instellarms. If the megacorporation itself decides to investigate the unit this DM does not apply. Refusal to fully cooperate with an Instellarms investigation or audit is grounds for immediate and irreversible revocation of accredited status and loss of bond.

Instellarms is an Imperial megacorporation run by members of the great nobility. It obviously has an interest in preserving the Imperium but this does not rule out internal powerplays against other megacorporations or political figures. Instellarms has been accused of stirring up small wars or keeping them going in the interest of additional sales but this is unlikely to be true. The corporation simply does not need to create work for itself when there is so much ongoing conflict. Smaller corporations, operating in a more limited area, will be affected to a greater extent if peace breaks out and might have incentive to cause trouble but Instellarms is above such things unless its over-arching political agenda is furthered.

Spinward Security Corporation Licensing Agency and Broker

The Spinward Security Corporation (SSC) was originally founded in the Deneb sector over a century ago and gradually expanded its area of operations all the way out to the Trojan Reach. A venture into Corridor was initially very successful but the company has lost some of its market share in recent years. SSC remains a major player at the lower end of the mercenary market throughout the spinward extents of the Imperium.

SSC is not choosy about the units it licenses but does have minimum standards. Any unit with REP 3 or less when applying for a license or at the end of a contract will be investigated. The unit's commanders will be called upon to account for their unit's notoriety, which will require a Difficult (10+) Persuade check with the unit's REP DM as an additional modifier. Failure does not result in suspension of license unless the Effect is 6-, in which case the unit is suspended for 2D weeks and required to complete a re-registry process. Perhaps not surprisingly, this process is almost impossible to fail but costs the unit Cr25000 per platoon-sized element it contains.

Failure that does not result in suspension requires 'corrective actions', which cost Cr1000x1D per point of negative Effect and take 1D days per point of negative Effect to carry out. These actions are required before any further contracts can be undertaken – not quite the same thing as a suspension but close. However, the whole process is about making money for SSC rather than ensuring a high standard of service to the client, so units will be returned to normal service sooner or later even if corrective actions result in a shambles that does not improve anything.

SSC operates on a quantity rather than quality basis and charges a relatively low licensing fee of Cr10000 per platoon-sized element of the overall force. As noted, units with a low REP will be investigated before they are granted a license but those with enough ready cash can get through the process even if they are inept. Once licensed, mercenary units receive a reasonable level of brokerage service, with the company taking a 10% fee from the client to match mercenaries with jobs.

The typical unit licensed with SSC is fairly low-end. Most are infantry formations, perhaps with a few pieces of support equipment or an armoured vehicle or two, and virtually all are company strength or less. SSC tends to specialise in small jobs as a result and in this environment the shortcomings of most of its licensed units are less apparent. The company has to some extent trapped itself in this market niche, since its business

model is based on units requiring corrective actions on a frequent basis. A unit that could invest money in proper training might improve its performance and marketability but SSC does little to actually facilitate the improvements it charges a fee to demand. However, there is no shortage of small mercenary units needing a license and lacking the reputation or funds to approach one of the more supportive agencies.

SSC is not atypical of the lower end of the mercenary marketplace, where more money is made off mercenaries than by them. The firm has little incentive to help mercenary units become more reputable, as they are likely to find another, less exploitative, licensing agency. There are limits to the firm's rapacity, since the mercenary marketplace is full of dangerous people, but agencies like SSC are one of the obstacles a unit faces as it tries to build a reputation that will bring in the big-paying jobs.

UNITS

Within Imperial space, mercenary units typically recruit personnel from those leaving Imperial service or who have struggled to adapt to civilian life. Planetary armies are another source of trained recruits. This makes mercenary units who provide basic training rare in the Imperium, although there are some notable exceptions.

Gagmi Khuzigalar

Mercenary Unit, Non-Standard

Gagmi Khuzigalar is an organisation that falls somewhere between a training and recruiting agency, and a mercenary force in its own right. It was first embodied in the Vland sector but has since expanded to other worlds with a large population of ex-military personnel. The company maintains recruiting stations at several major Imperial Army bases, taking advantage of the practice of releasing personnel from service in blocks.

In some cases particularly promising soldiers are approached before their service ends and offered a place in a Gagmi Khuzigalar unit, while more are made aware of the opportunities but otherwise left alone. A typical recruit leaves Imperial service and tries to make a go of it in civilian life for 6–12 months before turning up at a Gagmi Khuzigalar 'reorientation centre'.

Not all of those presenting themselves for service are suitable. Gagmi Khuzigalar has the resources to evaluate personnel not only for their skills and general soldiering but also suitability for the mercenary life. Those who complete the selection process are either recommended to other mercenary forces (for a fee of course) or join one of Gagmi Khuzigalar's field companies. Many personnel serve for a time then move on to other units,

providing a considerable income to the company. It is this that causes most observers to see Gagmi Khuzigalar as an advanced training and proving facility rather than a straight mercenary unit.

A Gagmi Khuzigalar field company represents the industry standard for medium-sized military formations in the Imperium. Organisation is standardised, with TL9 weaponry used throughout. All units are solid and well trained but rarely exceptional. In short, they are tailored to balance affordability with capability. Typical deployments range from cadre and training to counterinsurgency and warfighting, with an emphasis on longer operations. Field companies can be encountered throughout Imperial space, although most commonly along the coreward frontiers and in Vland itself.

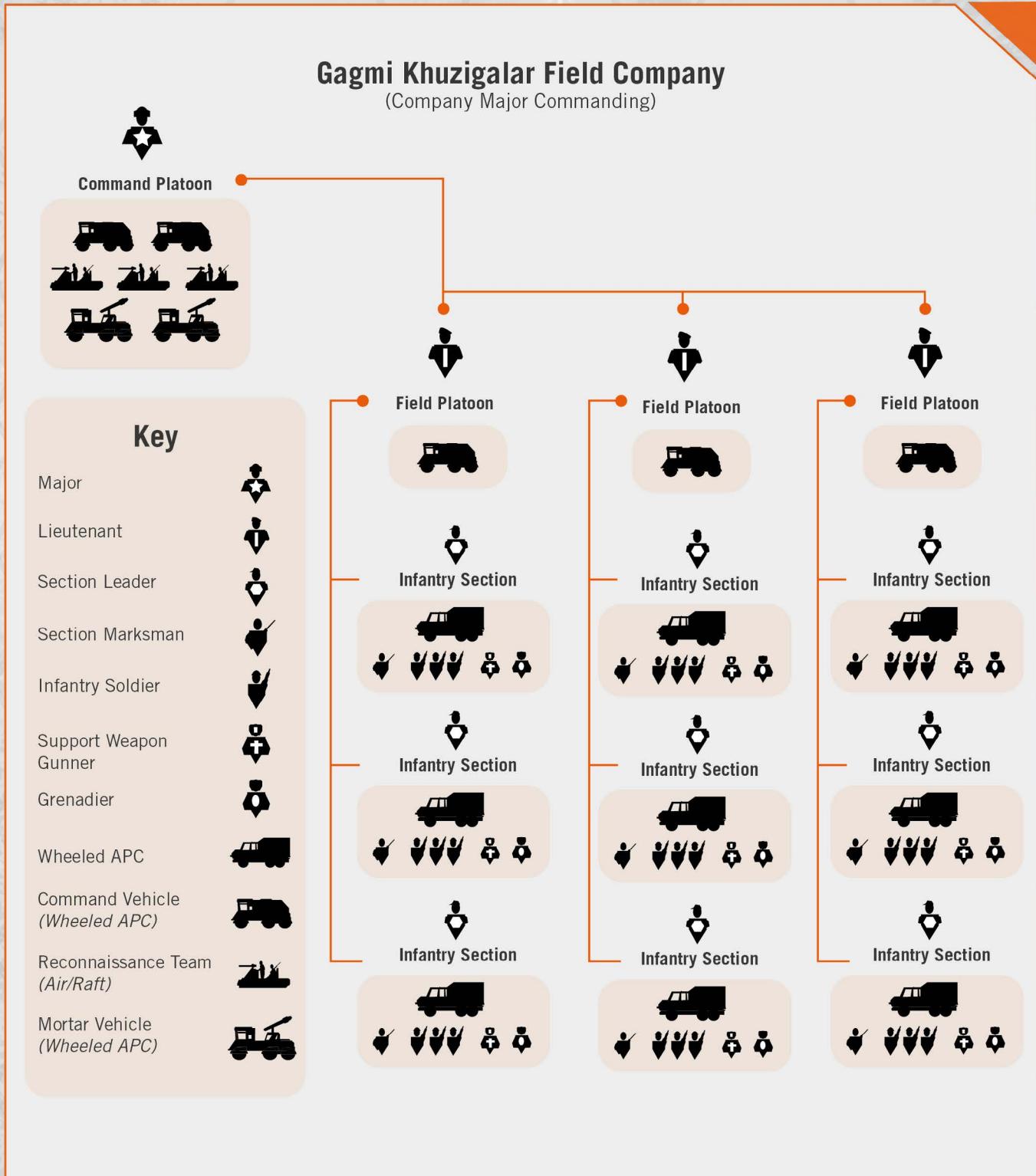
Field companies are built around motorised infantry sections, each of seven personnel plus a lightly-armoured wheeled APC with two crew. The APC provides fire support with a turreted light autocannon whilst the infantry fight dismounted. A section leader commands three rifle-armed infantry soldiers plus a gunner equipped with a light support weapon variant of the rifle. These are supported by a designated marksman and a grenadier armed with a rifle/grenade launcher combination. High explosive anti-armour grenades give the unit some capability against light armoured vehicles.

Support is provided by the command platoon, which has two wheeled APC mortar carriers and two command vehicles – one for the unit's commanding officer and one for the executive officer, who holds the rank of captain. Three militarised air/rafts mounting light support weapons provide a measure of reconnaissance and rapid fire support capability.

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Gagmi Khuzigalar Field Company	—
Unit Size	Company	—
Unit Type	Infantry	—
Unit TL	9	+1
Mobility Type	Motorised	+4
Combat	8	—
Bombardment	2	-2
Aerospace	1	-2
Support	3	-1
CEI or DEI	9	+1
Morale	11	+1
Reputation	10	+1

Gagmi Khuzigalar's field companies have a good reputation, especially in drawn-out counterinsurgency operations. Personnel tend to be experienced and well-trained to start with, fitting easily into a well-defined organisational role. Whilst capabilities are not especially high, a field company is more than a match for the insurgents it will typically face.

Gagmi Khuzigalar is an example of a large organisation – by mercenary unit standards – which can field multiple companies. Units of this sort are a common route into the mercenary trade for ex-military personnel. Sometimes members of opposing units find they started out in the same training cadre, which might lead to a reduction in hostility... or not, depending on how well they got along.



Albey's Platoon

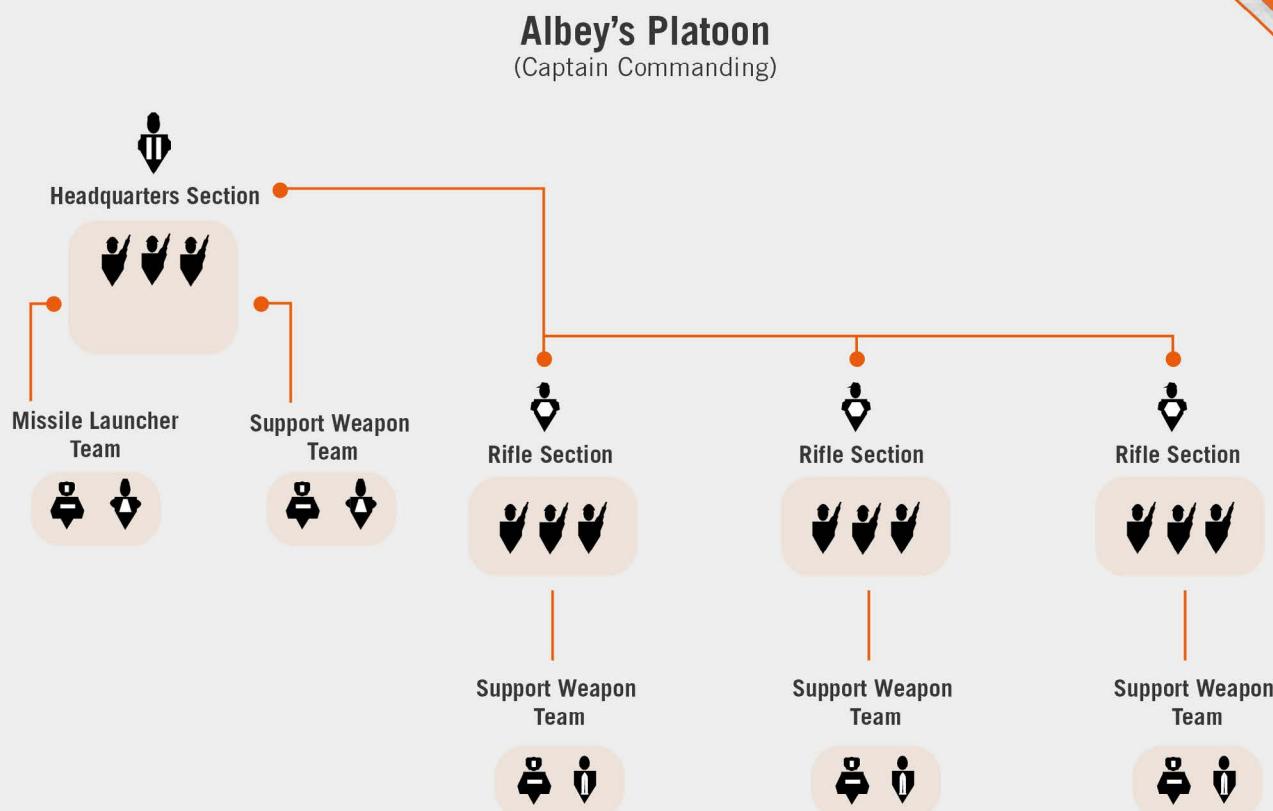
Infantry, Platoon

Albey's Platoon was raised by a former Imperial Army major. The unit has had several commanding officers over its three decades of continuous embodiment, with the original personnel all comfortably retired. It is not uncommon for a successful mercenary unit to be sold as a going concern, although this generally requires the consent of unit members.

As is common with long-lived units, Albey's Platoon has had mixed fortunes over the years. Originally a high-quality formation, the platoon suffered heavy casualties as a result of over-ambitious commanders making poor decisions and was recruited back up to strength with whatever personnel were available. This made the task of regaining previous performance levels very

difficult, seriously harming the unit's reputation in the marketplace. A year ago, the force was bought out at a bargain-basement price by a 'graduate' of one of Gagmi Khuzigalar's field companies.

Since then the platoon has begun to rebuild its reputation for efficiency but this came at a price. Forced to take unpleasant jobs for shady clients, Albey's Platoon is now known as a haven for killers unwanted by other units. Internal troubles are common and although the current captain stays on top of discipline it seems only a matter of time before she is deposed in a fatal manner. At that point Albey's Platoon will probably cross the line from being a vicious but disciplined fighting force and become a band of outright cut-throats.



Key

Captain



Section Leader



Gunner



Loader



Team Leader



Infantry Soldier



Assistant



Organisation is more or less standard for a platoon-sized infantry force. The three combat sections are equipped with TL8 small arms whilst the headquarters section, which also enforces discipline on the rest of the unit, is armed with TL12 weapons.

Albey's Platoon is renowned for its aggression and what might be termed spite. It attracts personnel who would not be accepted by other units and does not ask questions about their past. Occasionally someone is hauled off by agents of an interstellar law enforcement agency but there is always a replacement eager to take their salary and dish out violence without too much oversight. The command team will come down hard on anyone disobeying orders but otherwise give the rifle sections free rein to indulge their bloodlust. The unit has the Brutal trait.

Albey's Platoon is in many ways a typical small unit with a long history. No force stays at the top forever and previously reputable units can nosedive after a bad defeat. Albey's Platoon has gone down the road of recruiting for killing power rather than military competence and on some tickets may create more problems than it solves.

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Albey's Platoon	—
Unit Size	Platoon	—
Unit Type	Infantry	—
Unit TL	8	—
Mobility Type	Infantry	-3
Combat	10	+1
Bombardment	2	-2
Aerospace	2	-2
Support	2	-2
CEI or DEI	9	+1
Morale	11	+1
Reputation	4	-1

Security, Section Escort, Inc.

Escort, Inc. exists to get people or objects through a hostile urban environment. It is a small unit, little more than a reinforced section in numbers, with a range of capabilities suited to security rather than combat. Personnel come and go over time, sometimes creating skill gaps that have to be filled with additional operators. Most unit members can demonstrate a high level of weapons handling skill, situational awareness and additional skills such as medic, explosives detection and tactical analysis.

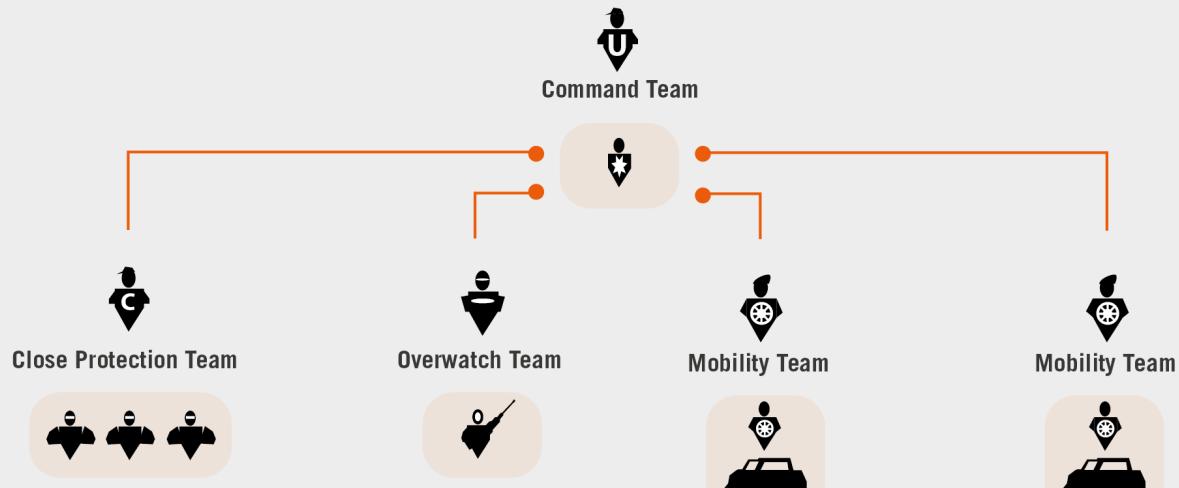
There is really no such thing as a standard mission for Escort, Inc. but a typical deployment will be to protect a person or object on the move. This might be a politician, whistle-blowing journalist, star witness or paranoid celebrity. All personnel are well-groomed and able to operate in polite society. The close protection team provides immediate protection for the client, operating well together after years of familiarity. On the move, on foot, the team tries to be unobtrusive but at the same time leapfrogs a team member ahead to the next intersection or places an operator in the way of potential threats. The close protection leader stays with the client as a last line of defence.

On some occasions the close protection team is augmented by personnel from the mobility or overwatch detachments. Otherwise, the unit uses two identical, lightly armoured wheeled SUVs, which do not stand out among the ground traffic on most worlds. Each has a crew of two – a trained combat driver and a commander/gunner. The overwatch team consists of a sniper and spotter, who is also the unit's second in command whilst the command team coordinates the operation and fills in for any additional required personnel.

Armament varies depending on circumstances. Concealable handguns are usually deployed, with small submachineguns if the situation permits. Each car has a pair of automatic weapons for the crew. One is a short-barrelled rifle-calibre carbine with a high rate of fire; the other is a longer weapon loaded with armour-piercing ammunition. All personnel are trained to shoot from a moving vehicle and put pursuers out of action or off the road as efficiently as possible. Smoke grenades and flashbangs are normally carried

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Escort, Inc.	—
Unit Size	Reinforced Section	—
Unit Type	Infantry	—
Unit TL	10	+1
Mobility Type	Motorised	+4
Combat	9	+1
Bombardment	0	—
Aerospace	0	—
Support	3	-1
CEI or DEI	11	+2
Morale	13	+2
Reputation	12	+2

Escort, Inc.



Key

Unit Leader	
Close Protection Leader	

Overwatch Leader	
Vehicle Commander	

Specialist	
Bodyguard	

Sniper	
Vehicle driver	

in the vehicles and occasionally available to foot personnel if they have somewhere to carry them without attracting attention.

Escort, Inc. has a solid reputation for not only keeping clients alive but also protecting their public image. Most operations are discreet and low-key, yet sufficiently tight that trouble is headed off or hostiles never get an opportunity to act. When action is required it is well-coordinated and efficient, with an emphasis on protecting the client rather than winning the fight. This tight mission focus has served the unit well over the years and those who cannot fit with the force's ethos are quickly dismissed. Escort, Inc. would rather be short some personnel than rely on anyone whose intemperance may derail a smooth operation. The unit has the Sharp-Eyed and Skirmishers traits.

Escort, Inc is a highly specialist unit with a long string of successes to its credit. This has come at a price, however. Every client saved from attack is another individual's plan thwarted and not all of those protected by the unit are good people. Escort, Inc has numerous enemies despite its own position being entirely non-judgemental and apolitical.

Frontier Security Services Starmerc, Flotilla

Frontier Security Services, or FSS, is a flotilla-sized starmerc unit operating along the fringes of Imperial space. The force has an 'official strength' of 2,200 displacement tons of vessels but may actually possess more than this at times. The unit is famous for its tactic of shadowing an apparently innocent merchant vessel in the hope of drawing in a pirate or commerce raider.

The flagship of the FSS flotilla is a mercenary cruiser named FSS Actual. This vessel may use alternate transponder designations at times to deceive potential targets, a gambit that is legal for properly licensed mercenaries in the course of a mission but likely to result in problems if undertaken in other circumstances. FSS Actual is supported by three 400-ton patrol corvettes designated FSS 1–3 and a 200-ton Far Trader, which acts as a supply vessel.

The force routinely operates other vessels for a short time then sells them on. These vessels may be rescued from the scrap yard, chartered from independent operators or captured from pirates. They may be used

as troop transports or supply vessels but are far more commonly deployed as decoys or intelligence-gathering vessels. Depending on circumstances, FSS may carry out simple escort or guardship operations or might send one of its temporary vessels into a suspect port to gather information before a swoop. Its combat ships sometimes operate together but can cover more ground separately.

The unit is well-funded and typically obtains recruits from former Imperial Navy personnel by personal recommendation. Relations between officers of the flotilla and senior naval personnel in the region are generally good, although some captains resent the mercenaries for various reasons. The unit as a whole has the Reputable trait.

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Frontier Security Services	—
Unit Size	Flotilla	—
Unit Type	Starmerc	—
Unit TL	12	+2
Mobility Type	Starship	—
CEI or DEI	9	+1
Morale	10	+1
Reputation	11	+1
Support	3	-1
CEI or DEI	11	+2
Morale	13	+2
Reputation	12	+2

Shandu's Brigade Combined-Arms, Brigade

Shandu's Brigade is named for its first commanding officer, Colonel Aexula Shandu. Now retired, Shandu sold the unit's identity to her successor for almost as much as the hardware and personnel. This expensive purchase paid off, allowing the brigade to retain its marketplace recognition and continue commanding large fees.

The brigade specialises in combined-arms warfighting operations, although it sometimes undertakes strike missions. Most contracts are for several months, as the cost of moving an entire brigade is enormous. Once in theatre, the force has an excellent reputation for fighting prowess and an impressive ability to improve the performance of local allies. This is done by way of smooth liaison and mentoring, carried out in a manner

unlikely to ruffle the feathers of local officers. An ability to get along with outsiders, or at least avoid antagonising them, is essential for all personnel. Anyone who cannot meet this standard, no matter their prowess in combat, is quickly discharged from the unit.

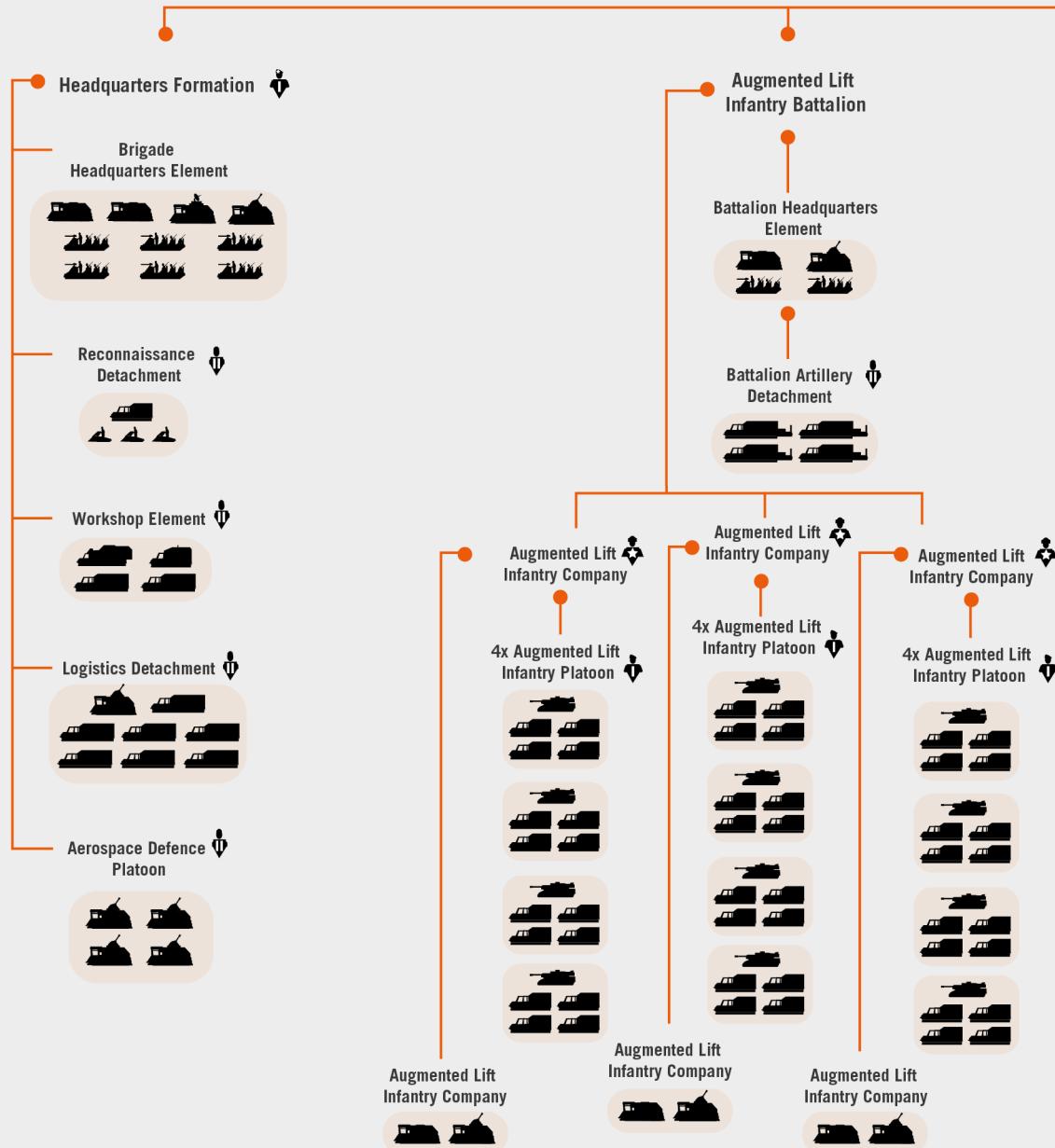
The brigade's teeth are three TL12 augmented lift infantry battalions. 'Augmented' in this case does not refer to the formation being overstrength – in fact most sub-units are below their paper strength on a permanent basis – but to the inclusion of light armoured vehicles in the lift infantry companies. These are organised as three lift infantry platoons and one headquarters platoon, with organic aerospace defence and fire support capability to permit any company to operate independently. Each platoon consists of three grav APCs with a crew of two and a six-soldier infantry section aboard, plus a light grav tank equipped with a plasma gun.

These three battalions are supported by the headquarters formation, which contains a command platoon, workshop platoon, logistics detachment, aerospace defence platoon and a reconnaissance detachment. Elements of the HQ formation are routinely detached to support other parts of the force. The reconnaissance element comprises a grav APC carrying a section of six combat pioneers, who dismount to undertake reconnaissance of enemy fortifications and potential hazards, as well as three light grav speeders whose two-person crews act as sensor pickets as well as carrying out direct reconnaissance. The speeders are armed and can provide fire support but are very lightly protected.

Each battalion is capable of all-arms action, with infantry and light armour in the lift infantry companies and a small artillery contingent at the battalion level. This consists of a platoon equipped with grav APCs mounting multi-barrel mortars and light anti-aerospace weapons, primarily used to defeat counterfire or attempts to take out the support element with an airstrike.

Shandu's Brigade is one of the most effective mercenary formations in the region, by virtue of both equipment and training levels. It is capable of taking on elements of a major planetary army and can smash through mid-tech forces many times its size. In addition to acting as a rapid-response force or spearhead, the brigade is capable of detaching several of its staff officers and a headquarters vehicle to assist local allies, and routinely provides liaison officers skilled at nudging allies in the right direction. With an impressive record of success against heavy odds the unit commands a very high fee, with negotiation starting at around 50% above normal for a force this size.

Shandu's Brigade (Colonel Commanding)



Key

Colonel



Major



Grav APC 
(Command Variant)

Grav APC (Aerospace Defence Variant)

Lt-Colonel

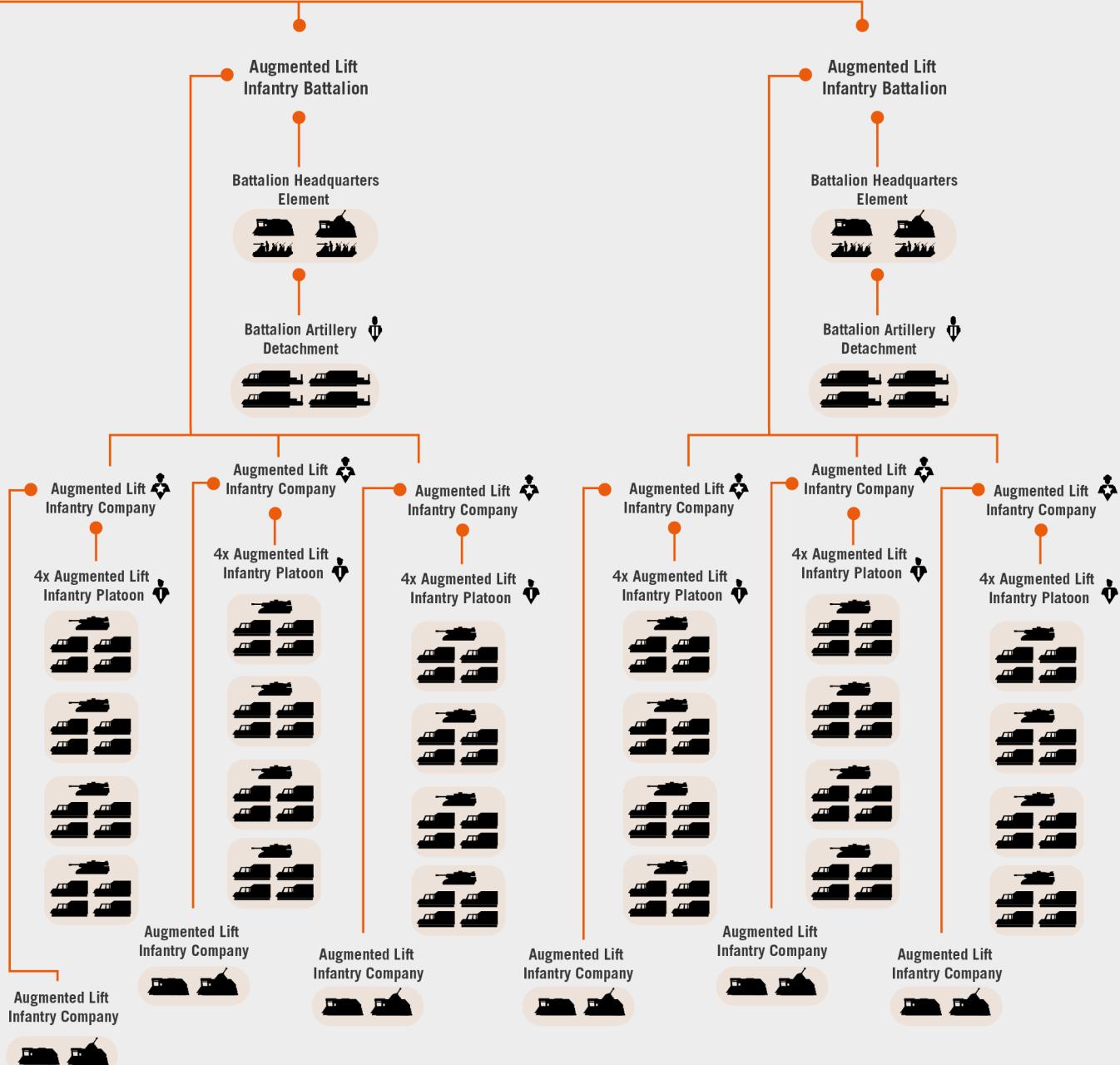


Captain



Grav APC
(Electronic Warfare Variant)

Grav APC



Grav APC
(Mortar-Carrier Variant)

Grav Truck

Grav Speeder

Light Grav Tank

Grav Armoured Recovery Vehicle

Grav APC

Military Air/Raft

Brigade-sized mercenary units are highly uncommon in the mercenary marketplace and their activities tend to make the news whenever they are deployed. Getting a billet with a force of this kind is a career goal for many mercenaries, not least because it is very much like being back in the regular army.

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Shandu's Brigade	—
Unit Size	Brigade	—
Unit Type	Combined-Arms	—
Unit TL	12	+1
Mobility Type	Grav	+8
Combat	12	+2
Bombardment	4	-1
Aerospace	9	+1
Support	6	-1
CEI or DEI	12	+3
Morale	14	+2
Reputation	14	+2

CONFLICTS

At any given time there are countless conflicts ongoing in the Imperium and far more situations that have the potential to become conflicts. Mercenaries might find themselves fighting a war or trying to prevent one, whilst those who have to police the aftermath of a conflict often end up wishing for something as clear-cut as an all-out war before long.

THE ILELISH TRADE WAR

The Ilelith sector is very much ‘Imperial interior’ in character despite being in some ways a border province. It is bounded to rimward by an arm of the Great Rift, separating the sector from the rather more troubled Reaver’s Deep. The Great Rift also occupies most of Verge, to spinward, with the result that Ilelith faces few external threats. The region is heavily influenced by Vilani culture, with a strong presence from the megacorporations as well as multiple regional corporations.

Conflict between corporate bodies is permitted within the Imperium, so long as it does not seriously disrupt the regional economy. For this reason the feud between Zaghiir Industries and the Ilelith Free Trade Group (IFT) has been permitted to smoulder for nearly a decade without attracting Imperial intervention. The conflict

arose out of bitter competition for mining rights in the Fergie system and has expanded into a general state of hostility between the two corporations.

Although never formally discussed, there are some rules adhered to by both parties. This is not uncommon in trade wars and is more about self-interest than a desire to behave in a humane manner. Escalation beyond a certain point will trigger the intervention of the Imperial authorities or possibly a larger and more aggressive corporation, and the creation of an economic vacuum will bring in smaller corporations to fill the gap. Thus it is in the interests of both participants to choose their battles wisely and accept losses rather than fighting to the last over an installation or supply contract. The conflict has been fought as much in courtrooms and negotiations with third parties as with weapons but it has been hard-fought all the same.

Zaghiir Industries

Zaghiir is a heavy industrial concern, with foundries and production facilities on several worlds. It does not operate mining vessels but instead buys ore and ingots from independent or subcontracted producers. The firm’s assets are concentrated in a few major installations, all of which have been heavily secured since the dispute began. Zaghiir Industries has thus far preferred to defend its holdings, rather than make military strikes, but is very active in the legal and economic sectors. Despite significant resources put into this non-military campaign, there have been few successes. A couple of minor members of the Ilelith Free Trade Group have been put out of the fight but the tactic has proven expensive and has not produced significant results.

The Ilelith Free Trade Group

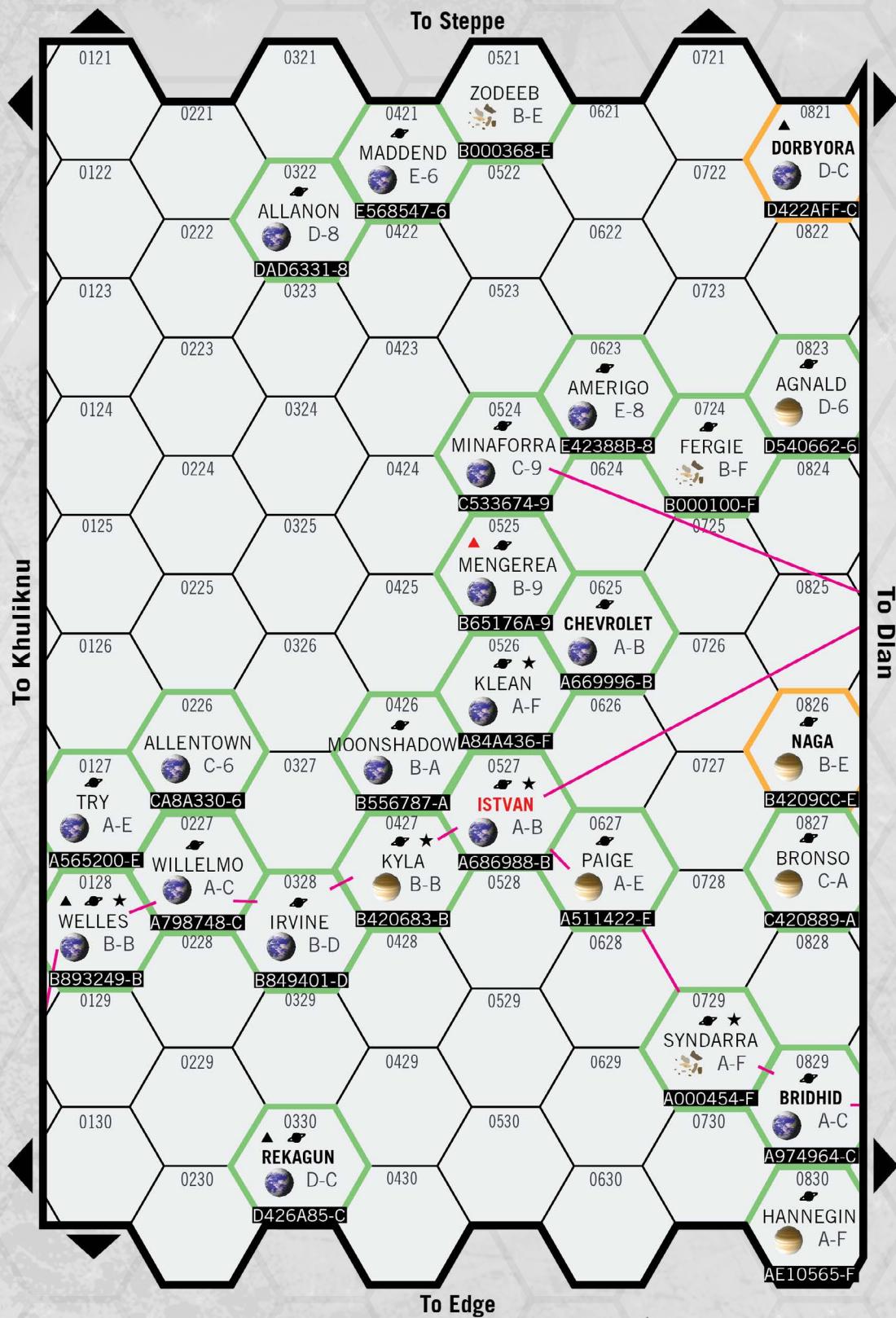
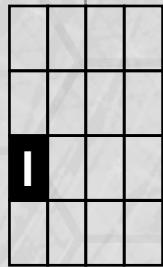
IFT is the apparent underdog in this conflict. It is a loose alliance of small producers, shippers and manufacturers who banded together to prevent domination of the local market. IFT actually has greater net worth than Zaghiir but is decentralised and cooperation can be rather loose. Up to now, Zaghiir has targeted the major players in IFT for legal or economic operations, attempting to force them out of the conflict or out of business altogether by entangling them in legal challenges. IFT’s strategy is similarly based on economics, attempting to make operations too expensive by pinprick raids that require a heavy investment in security. The drain on resources will hopefully make the conflict unviable and force Zaghiir to negotiate a settlement.

Escalation

Neither strategy is working very well but whilst both sides were sure they could outlast the opposition there was no need to escalate. Ironically, a legal success by Zaghiir, which forced one of the main IFT members to

Ilelith

VERRAN SUBSECTOR



- Gas Giant
- Imperial Naval Base
- Imperial Scout Base
- Imperial Scout Way Station

- Secure System
- Amber Zone
- X-boat Routes
- B-6 Starport Class & Tech Level

- Asteroids (no atmosphere/water)
- Planet (dry)
- Planet (water present)

stand down, sowed the seeds of escalation. IFT began to fear they would be ground down if they did not change strategy. Given a choice between salvaging what little they could and relocating or making a bid for victory, they chose the latter.

IFT began with an unusually well-coordinated attack on a Zagshiir manufacturing plant. This was conducted by mercenaries rather than forces contributed by IFT members and caught the defenders of the plant unprepared. A virtually bloodless victory gave IFT a bargaining chip, at last, but Zagshiir has decided not to negotiate. Instead, the firm is hiring mercenaries and apparently intends to take back its manufacturing plant and/or strike at assets of IFT members. This degree of escalation is within acceptable limits so IFT cannot rely on Imperial intervention. Its members are scrambling to raise troops and hire mercenaries.

Zagshiir has a large security element of its own but this is a light infantry force optimised towards protecting installations and would not be effective in offensive operations. IFT can field more troops by pooling its own security elements but they would be even more inept as a military force. Clearly both sides need the help of professionals, creating many opportunities for mercenaries.

IFT intends to win the trade war by capturing more Zagshiir assets. Imperial laws prohibit immediate sell-off of seized assets – they are ‘held’ rather than ‘owned’ until end-of-conflict negotiations determine ownership. The security forces at these installations are now on high alert and have been augmented, in some cases; there will not be another easy victory. IFT is therefore looking to hire forces capable of overwhelming a security detachment and seize an installation or to launch raids against the Zagshiir supply and logistics chain. It will also need to keep control of any gains and defend its own assets, so defensive assets are required. Infantry and light armoured forces are most desirable but IFT will take what it can get.

Zagshiir Industries has taken a different approach. Its opponents are dispersed and individually weak, so the strategy is to eliminate them from the conflict one at a time. Zagshiir needs additional security at its facilities and a strike force to retake the captured one. This might be a starmerc outfit or a unit optimised for commando/strike operations. The plant must not be harmed as it contains expensive equipment. For offensive operations Zagshiir needs small units capable of commando and strike operations to hit the headquarters of IFT members or capture their assets, which include small merchant ships as well as

industrial sites. Capture of leaders is also an option. Intelligence or cyber-warfare units will be added to Zagshiir forces if they can be obtained.

Summary

The Illeish Trade War offers opportunities for medium-sized forces carrying out strike and security operations, as well as smaller units to undertake commando and starmerc operations. Restraint is necessary, as any excess violence will allow the opposition to make a legal challenge that might take a mercenary unit out of the fight, and of course serious collateral damage will trigger intervention by Imperial forces. This is very much the sort of limited war that mercenary forces like. It can be dangerous but the risks are predictable and manageable.

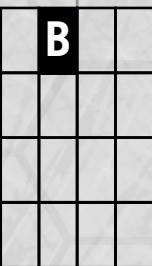
THE ZEDESU CIVIL WAR

Zedesu is a small, dry world with a thin atmosphere and a population of just over 90 billion. It is located in Antares, close to the border between the Imperium and the Julian Protectorate. The world is part of a small cluster accessible by jump-2 ships and important to the Imperium as a market rather than a producer, although it does have a Class C starport and a modest TL10 industrial base.

It is a dictatorship, which for many years has been stable and relatively untroubled. Dissent has always existed but has been kept at acceptable levels by a combination of security measures and the cultivation of a good standard of living. Unfortunately, this has resulted in high spending levels, which have proven unsustainable in the long term and the emphasis lately has been on arrests and removal of ‘privileges’ for suspect areas. This has created increasing anger among a population wearied of collective punishments and the emergence of an armed insurgent movement.

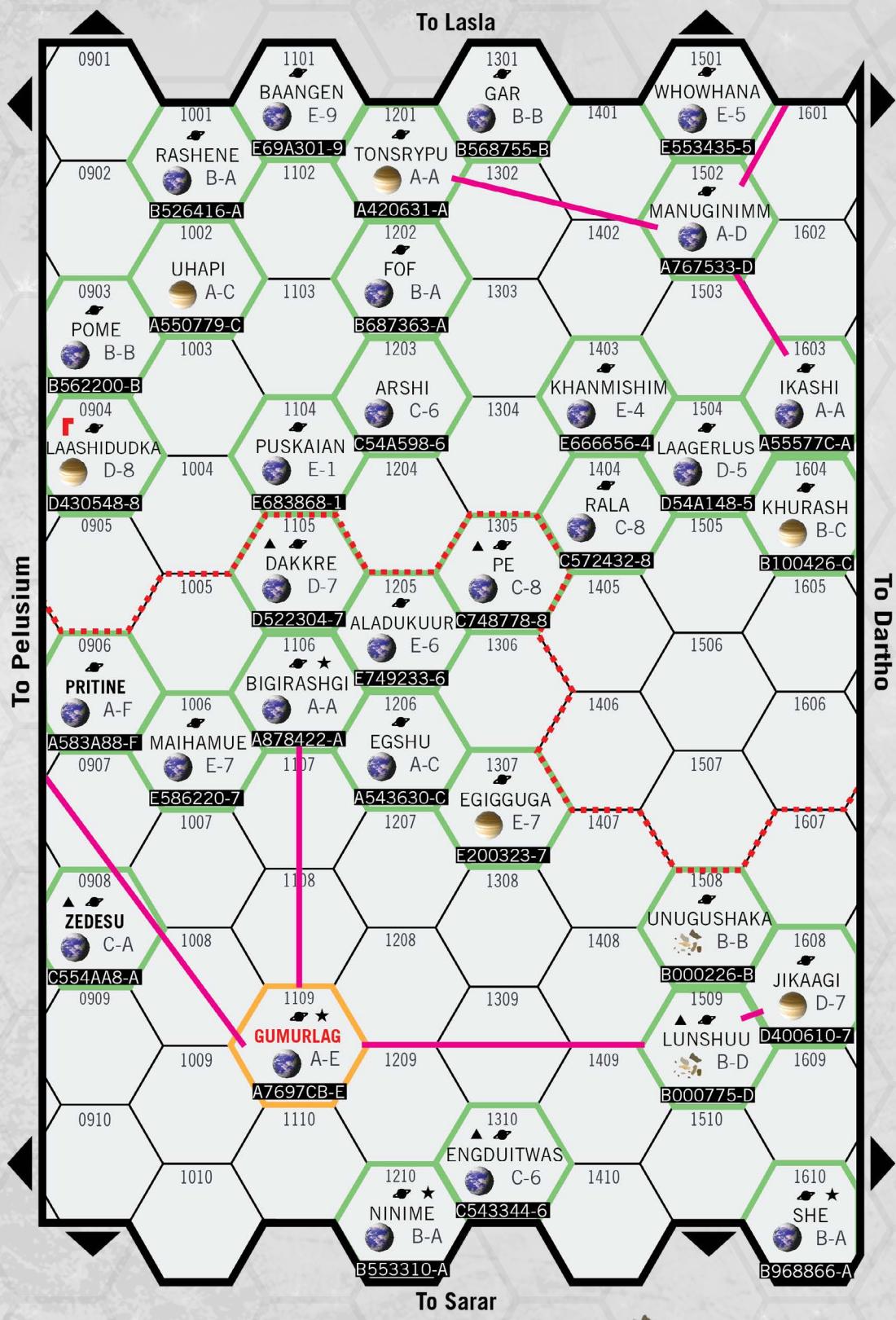
The insurgents were initially inept and suffered heavy defeats leading to the capture of their entire upper leadership. Rather than collapse entirely the insurgency fragmented into small regional cells, which proved difficult to eradicate, prompting harsh crackdowns on populations suspected of supporting the insurgency. This backfired, to the point where several regions are now in open rebellion and elements of the military have declared for the rebels.

The situation has been declared by the Imperial ambassador to be an ‘internal dispute arising from questionable policies on the part of the planetary



Antares

NINIK SUBSECTOR



• Gas Giant
 ★ Imperial Naval Base
 ▲ Imperial Scout Base
 B-6 Starport Class & Tech Level

■ Secure System
 — Amber Zone
 — X-boat Routes
 - - - Imperium Border

⚡ Asteroids (no atmosphere/water)
 ☽ Planet (dry)
 ● Planet (water present)

government' – a phrase used often enough that its underlying meaning is lost on no-one. The regional administration has taken the view that the central government has caused a problem for itself and the Imperium as a whole might be better off with a different regime in charge on Zedesu. Intervention will take place if matters escalate too far but the dictator cannot expect help in dealing with a problem of his own creation.

The Zedesu Dictatorship

Zedesu possessed significant armed forces at the beginning of the conflict, although the lion's share of the budget was spent on in-system defences since the world lies close to the Imperial border. The majority of the world's ground forces were equipped to resist an external threat in the form of raids coming across the border and relied heavily on a handful of grav-mobile brigades. These were backed up by local defence formations equipped with wheeled ground vehicles. Few heavy armoured vehicles of any kind existed.

This force was never intended for counterinsurgency work and whilst its equipment proved adequate training was anything but. Pitted against equally ham-fisted insurgents at the beginning of the conflict, the government forces did well but once the conflict became more widespread their unsuitability for such operations became readily apparent. Refusal among some units to take part in harsh crackdowns further reduced effectiveness. As a result, the government forces of today are disorganised and demoralised but numerous and well-equipped.

More than anything else the government forces are hamstrung by mistrust. Personnel and whole units may go over to the rebels at any time and even staunch loyalists can come under suspicion. Officers are afraid to admit failure or weakness and may commit forces to actions they are not in a position to win or else be removed from command for possible disloyalty.

The Rebels

The rebels are not much more organised than the government forces. In some cases cities or entire military units have joined the rebellion but this does not translate to 100% loyalty to the cause. It is not unknown for units to keep switching sides or to be vague about their allegiance in order to gain some advantage, and there are opportunists who seek to take advantage of the situation. Indeed, the situation can be summed up by the old adage that 'the enemy of my enemy is the enemy of my enemy – and no more or less than that'.

The rebel's most reliable forces consist of militia and insurgents equipped with whatever small arms can be scavenged or appropriated from government arsenals. Those regular army units that have gone over to the rebels are well equipped with the same TL10 arms as their opponents but suffer from an extremely disjointed command structure. This results from the fact that several commanders have decided they should be the next dictator and are more committed to furthering their own agenda than fighting for the insurgency.

The Civil War

Few areas are wholly under the control of one faction or the other but for the most part the main cities are controlled by loyalist forces and those more distant from the capital are either in rebel hands or trying to remain neutral. The space forces have remained more or less loyal but are resisting calls to assist in the ground fighting. Instead the system defence squadron is making a big show of protecting its bases and the starport, and preventing arms from reaching the rebels.

Propaganda and persuasion is playing a large part in the conflict, with a major campaign promoting loyalty to the central government yielding better results than military operations. The dictator is reluctant to use mercenaries, as this might be seen as a sign of weakness, but is interested in hiring a reliable force to act as a 'palace guard' and protect against a coup attempt in the capital. Other forces might be hired if they seem useful, especially those skilled in counterinsurgency warfare.

The rebels have managed to hire a few mercenary units so far, mostly low-budget or small infantry forces. This has caused controversy among the regular army officers backing the rebellion but representatives have been smuggled to other worlds to seek further assistance. The main problem with this is that the rebels have few funds and are having to offer more than usual to compensate for the additional risk. They are seeking warfighters or strikers for the most part, or cadre units to assist in the creation of an effective combat force.

Summary

The Zedesu Civil War represents a risky but potentially lucrative environment for those willing to assist the rebels, who will mostly be inexpensive warfighting units or small strike formations. Starmercs and gunrunners can also make a good profit here, whilst effective security and counterinsurgency formations will find a ready client in the dictator. The war is limited by the possibility of Imperial intervention but those involved are not highly skilled, which can lead to bloody mistakes.

ZHODANI CONSULATE

The Zhodani Consulate does not favour the use of mercenaries in the usual sense and can be considered a closed market to forces licensed outside its borders. That does not mean such forces do not operate in the Consulate but they will always be considered illegal and are not protected by laws concerning legitimate combatant status. Few mercenary units will take a contract that requires operating in Consulate space for this reason and most of those are covert or antagonistic towards the Consulate itself.

The only exception to this is when a mercenary force is used by an interstellar state or corporation that is willing to answer for its conduct. For example, a transborder shipping company might deploy a force of mercenaries to secure its facilities on the Zhodani side of the border. As far as the Consulate is concerned these are the forces of the shipping company itself and any misconduct will result in consequences for the company. Long experience has shown that the Zhodani are absolutely not interested in protests about rogue elements within an apparently reliable mercenary unit. Not coincidentally, attempts to use mercenaries to damage the Consulate's interests then disown them are never successful. The mercenaries themselves will be treated as criminals and the client blamed no matter what excuses are made.

The Consulate and its members will not hire outsider mercenaries and operating there carries significant risks for mercenaries hired by clients with interests in Consulate space. Mercenaries of a sort do exist within the Consulate but they are known as Ojach Shezh – ‘transferable servants’ and viewed differently to mercenaries elsewhere. As with outsiders, a client answers for the actions of their ‘transferable servants’ whilst they are in service. In effect, Ojach Shezh are considered to be part of the client’s organisation until they finish their tasks and are discharged with due formality.

Ojach Shezh are usually, but not always, military in nature. Diplomatic and scientific groups also operate under the same title and provide their services in much the same way. Hiring is a formal and lengthy process, with ritualised oaths of mutual respect and commitment. Ending service is similar, with a complex release and end-of-commitment ceremony. A unit

that skips this for whatever reason will lose its status as Ojach Shezh. Their client will still answer for their actions until this is formalised.

Obviously, the use of mercenaries is a weighty matter in the Consulate but transferrable servants allow a client to obtain capabilities that would not otherwise be available without the expense of setting up a unit on a permanent basis. Gaining Ojach Shezh status requires a petition to senior regional nobles, which must be supported by a notable individual acting as sponsor. Sometimes this is the unit’s first client, who helps the group become established in return for solving a problem or accomplishing a task.

One of the most common uses for Ojach Shezh is transborder operations or dealing with non-Zhodani. For outsiders this is the only viable route into mercenary work on behalf of the Consulate or its members. Taking on non-Zhodani as Ojach Shezh is a risk for the client, and even more so for the sponsor, but it does permit the deployment of personnel with knowledge of likely foes. For example, a Zhodani noble might seek out a reputable outsider mercenary unit and offer Ojach Shezh status in return for dealing with a threat the noble’s household troops have no experience of. The learning curve can be steep for those without experience of non-Zhodani and mistakes could derail an operation or cost lives.

CONFLICT IN THE CONSULATE

Internal conflict is less common in the Zhodani Consulate than most other large interstellar states but it is by no means unknown. Outsiders often assume that everyone is kept happy and aligned with the overall aims of the Consulate by the Tavrchedl or ‘thought police’. In fact the situation is far more complex than this and factional disputes sometimes escalate into violence. One factor outsiders are typically correct about is the fervour of Zhodani for their chosen cause. This means that when conflict flares up it is vicious.

Most commonly, conflict erupts when a segment of society on a world rejects the status quo and attempts to force its beliefs on others. This is never done half-

heartedly – Zhodani society tends to be placid or tumultuous, with little in between – but the beliefs in question can vary considerably. Often, the root of a conflict is the Consulate's position towards a given group of outsiders – a Vagr state or the Imperium usually – with mild disagreement about how foreign affairs should be conducted eventually escalating into warfare. Other conflicts have been brought about by fervent supporters of territorial expansion or the Core Expeditions clashing with those who feel resources are better spent elsewhere.

Usually these conflicts are led by the noble class; revolts against rulers are highly uncommon. The usual pattern is an escalation of discord until nobles among the conflicting factions feel that warfare is justified. The Consulate does not discuss these internal struggles with outsiders but generally lets them take their course providing they remain within acceptable limits. It is usual for a conflict to be brought to an end if it escalates too far but skirmishes between minor forces and the occasional decisive battle typically remain below the intervention threshold.

Internal conflict tends to be self-limited by the participants, who remain loyal to the Consulate as a whole and its people – even if they are currently shooting at one another. Wars are in general very ‘clean’ and followed by reconciliation even if the actual fighting was intense. Casualties are often high, as neither side is willing to relinquish their ideological position,

but once dominance is established it is generally accepted. Internal wars of this sort might be thought of as extremely violent arguments in which one faction attempts to force another to accept its views. Fighting for its own sake, or out of hatred, is rare.

The result of this is that wars in the Consulate have clear aims and are not prolonged beyond what is necessary to achieve them. The few outsiders who know much about these conflicts tend to be astounded that the supposedly docile population can clash savagely over some apparently minor ideological difference, then forgive their former enemies and live alongside them.

Conflicts along the borders tend to be of a different nature as they involve outsiders. Wars over resources and territory occur, as anywhere else, and the Consulate has demonstrated a willingness to strike first if conflict threatens. Experience has taught the border population that outsiders bear grudges to a much greater extent than Zhodani and it is possible for a bitter war to erupt when there is no obvious territorial, resource or ideological issue. The Zhodani know that outsiders might attack them for no better reason than to take revenge over a conflict that happened decades ago. Where possible, such situations are carefully observed and defused, or kept at a low level, but occasionally the nobles of the Consulate will decide they need to cripple a potential enemy just in case. Outsider mercenaries might be used by either or both sides in such a conflict; this is one of the few opportunities for non-Zhodani.



MERCENARY LIFE IN THE CONSULATE

The life of a mercenary, or Ojach Shezh, in the Consulate is different to that of mercenaries elsewhere. Outsider mercenaries, on the occasions they are hired at all, are the subject of puzzlement from most Zhodani. They typically either serve a non-Zhodani client who treats them just like mercenaries elsewhere or they are held at arm's length by their client by way of intermediaries. This creates a general impression that the Zhodani despise mercenaries. In fact, the problem is not mercenary status but the problem of being certain the mercenaries will not do something the client has to answer for. Zhodani are often just as uneasy dealing with non-military contractors or service providers. This situation can be alleviated by good liaison protocols and a willingness of both parties to learn a little about one another. Mercenaries who can adjust to their standing within the Consulate will gradually be accorded a status not unlike that of Ojach Shezh.

Ojach Shezh are not viewed with the same uncertainty or unease as outsider mercenaries. Whether they are of Zhodani origin or have demonstrated their adoption of Zhodani customs, Ojach Shezh are considered to be as worthy as the household troops of any noble. They serve a useful purpose with integrity and honour, and are expected to behave just like household troops until released from service. If a noble's bodyguard is willing to fight to the last, their hired Ojach Shezh would be expected to do so as well. Disgrace and loss of status is inevitable for a unit that falls short of these high expectations.

Since most Ojach Shezh enter the service of a noble each time they change client, their living standards are relatively luxurious compared to those of ordinary mercenaries. Training facilities and equipment are also of above-average standard. The opposite side of this coin is the difficulty of obtaining or maintaining Ojach Shezh status and the quality of service expected. Ojach Shezh are one of the 'public faces' of their client and expected to be smartly turned out at all times. Weaknesses of character such as drinking and gambling are unacceptable, as is any form of dishonesty.

Status as Ojach Shezh is only available to units with REP 9+ and requires a series of demonstrations of competence and reliability as well as psionic testing. This may be little more than the same honesty-probing a common citizen might expect when attempting to enter a sensitive occupation but there are rumours of 'psionic simulations', which can be damagingly realistic. Units that do not yet have the

requisite REP undergo a similar process, akin to endless exercises and wargames, which increase their skills and allow them to develop a sufficiently solid reputation. The unit is not paid during this time as it is not fit for service as Ojach Shezh, so must provide adequate funding by its own means. This serves as an effective barrier against timewasters.

Units and individuals who lose Ojach Shezh status are reduced to the level of outsider mercenaries, even if they are Zhodani. They may be able to get work for less choosy clients, filling a niche between Ojach Shezh and common mercenaries, but if not they will end up doing the same work as outsiders and under the same conditions. Disgraced Ojach Shezh are, if anything, considered less hireable than outsider mercenaries, and occasionally turn up outside the fringes of Consulate space. Their high standards of equipment and professionalism make them desirable to clients but not all former Ojach Shezh make the adjustment to the rather different conditions outside the Consulate. Those that do typically maintain their above-average capabilities for a while then go into decline but a few notable mercenary units started out this way and managed to bring recruits up to their standard rather than falling to meet them. It is almost unheard-of for these units to regain their former status, so most tales of their exploits end tragically in some far-off war or in far more mundane fashion as personnel leave the unit and return to mainstream Zhodani society in whatever capacity they can find.

CLIENTS

Common mercenaries are highly unlikely to find employment with the nobility of the Consulate, nor with its major institutions and business entities, unless there is a special requirement for outsiders. This might be for purposes of deception or concealment of intentions but is often a matter of expedience. A Zhodani group seeking mercenaries to operate against outsiders may choose to use other outsiders. This is the only way a typical mercenary unit can end up working for a Zhodani client – at least openly – without going through the long and expensive process of proving Ojach Shezh status.

Those that do meet the standard are likely to have a wholly different client experience. They will rarely, if ever, deal directly with senior officials but will liaise through junior nobility. They will almost certainly have to function at a high social level, being present at important functions requiring tact and diplomacy. They will encounter a little of the internal politics of Zhodani society, not least since opponents of their

client may see Ojach Shezh as a vulnerability that can be used to discredit the client. If the transferrable servants are not up to standard and can be induced to commit some gaffe their current client will still pay the price. This can have serious consequences for the mercenaries as well, perhaps resulting in exile and loss of Ojach Shezh status.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

Most of the Zhodani Consulate is considered to be 'Consulate Interior' in character. Mercenary operations are somewhat different in Zhodani territory than elsewhere, few outsider units are permitted to undertake them and the prevalence of psionic investigators makes covert operations difficult at best. As a result there are virtually no opportunities for mercenary work in the interior, other than as escorts for dignitaries visiting member worlds or security for objects being transported through Consular space.

The Consular Fringe

The outer border of the Consulate, to spinward and to coreward, is collectively known as the Consular Fringe. Mercenary operations are sometimes carried out here using non-Zhodani units. This is intended to reduce friction with small polities along the border by ensuring Zhodani troops are only deployed on 'positive' operations. Units hired by the Zhodani are expected to conform to their high standards of conduct despite their behaviour possibly not having consequences for relations between the Consulate and nearby world governments.

The Consulate maintains bodies of mercenaries on long-term contract close to likely trouble spots and provides funds to some friendly local worlds to hire forces as necessary. Dotted throughout a zone up to 30 parsecs wide are many such 'stability hubs', which allows the Consulate to project a stabilising influence among the non-aligned worlds without getting involved in their politics. Many observers fail to realise the mercenaries hunting pirates in their system, or conducting peacekeeping operations after a long war has finally ended, are ultimately paid for by the Consulate.

The Extents-Facing Region

The Extents-Facing Region is the trailing side of three sectors of the Zhodani Consulate that see considerable contact with Vagr states and worlds across the border. Mercenary operations in this area are different in character to those of the Consular Interior and often against or involving Vagr personnel. The Consulate finds it useful to employ mercenaries

familiar with the tactics and attitudes of likely opponents, making this one of the few parts of the Consulate where outsiders may find work.

Mercenaries are often hired to play the part of opposing forces in the training of Zhodani troops. Barring the occasional accident this is a safe deployment, with the prospect of getting free training time into the bargain. Depending on the circumstances the mercenaries might be expected to follow a tight script or may be encouraged to do their best to defeat the Consulate force they are up against. A victory bonus is typically offered as an incentive in this case.

When acting in a more conventional manner the mercenaries will be expected to use their knowledge of the enemy to predict actions and exploit opportunities that Zhodani forces might not even be aware of. Deniability is rarely an issue but the Zhodani prefer to keep out of conflicts among outsiders with a strange way of life. Mercenaries familiar with the local culture – or at least less baffled by it than Zhodani – are more likely to be successful in carrying out peacekeeping or counterinsurgency operations. As a result, this region has no shortage of work for units that can meet high Zhodani standards.

DEALERS AND AGENCIES

The process of obtaining arms and licensing mercenaries is quite different in the Consulate. Licensing, or its equivalent, is for the most part undertaken by a body appointed by local Consulate authorities and arms are not sold in military quantities to unlicensed groups. Along the frontiers there are official bodies dedicated to overseeing the activities of outsiders operating in a military capacity, which also have control over arms sales.

Zhdiazh Tliafl Ojach Shezh Assessment and Licensing Agency

The first step in achieving Ojach Shezh status is to make representations to the regional Zhdiazh Tliafl. This is a ceremonial title with a long and honourable history that goes far beyond the mercenary marketplace. The name Zhdiazh Tliafl can be roughly translated into Galanglic as 'deliberation body of assessed worthiness'; in other words the Zhdiazh Tliafl was created to rule on the worthiness of individuals to hold a given post and also debate the suitability of policies to be implemented by local or Consulate-wide bodies. In the latter capacity it is purely an advisory body but one that is deeply respected.

With regard to the mercenary marketplace the primary function of the Zhdiazh Tliafl is to assess the worthiness of candidates for Ojach Shezh status. Just getting an application before the regional panel is a long and difficult process requiring the candidates to prove their worth to one of various gatekeepers. These are typically trusted minor nobles who filter out obviously unsuitable prospects. Occasionally those rejected at this stage are redirected into a covert operations training programme intended to create deniable assets for use outside the Consulate or along its borders. Most are politely informed they do not reach the standard for an application, let alone acceptance, and advised whether it is worth making any further attempt.

Getting past the gatekeepers requires a Difficult (10+) Persuade check with the unit's REP modifier as DM. A unit that fails can usually reapply through the same, or a different gatekeeper, but not until a period of D3 months has passed, plus one month for every point of negative Effect. Effect -6 or worse indicates this unit has been noted as completely unsuitable and may not reapply. In addition its personnel may be investigated and, if found lacking, may be barred from any future service.

There are no costs at this stage and the unit does not need to stage a physical demonstration of its prowess. There is a fair amount of documentation required but this will be needed at other stages of the application so time spent preparing is not wasted. If the initial application is accepted the unit is referred to the Zhdiazh Tliafl as a potential Ojach Shezh formation and enters a period of formal assessment. It may find there are other combat units being assessed at the same time and also non-military Ojach Shezh who may be administrators, scientists, diplomats or legal experts. It is absolutely forbidden to try to recruit any of these personnel or assist another group in any way. Once the assessment process has begun the unit succeeds or fails entirely on its own merit.

The assessment phase lasts 1D months, during which time the unit must demonstrate not only its competence as a combat force but also its ability to operate with discretion and meet appropriate social standards. This is done as an Average (8+) check with CEI providing a DM and a negative DM for those from outside Zhodani society. For those familiar with but not immersed in Zhodani culture this is DM -2. Complete outsiders will suffer DM-4 at least and possibly as much as DM-8 for those from incompatible cultures.

If the check is passed, the unit is designated Ojach Shezh and may begin searching for clients. A failed check with Effect -6 or worse results in complete

and permanent rejection. Any other level of failure requires the unit to carry out a 'mission of remorse', after which another assessment period can begin. The unit must pay all its own costs during this period and consumes supplies and materiel as if on combat deployment the entire time.

A mission of remorse is always a difficult or dangerous task and often something the regional or central government needs doing. Along the frontiers it is not uncommon to find failed but still hopeful Ojach Shezh units carrying out distinctly 'grey' missions. If their activities are uncovered the authorities will admit to them but point out that this is a substandard force being given a chance to redeem itself and failing. The official Consulate position is that whatever the victims may have to say, this is not as serious a diplomatic incident as if approved forces were caught carrying out the mission. It is almost as if the Consulate is saying 'yes, we sent mercenaries to act against you but they were incompetents so it's not that bad really'. This position is baffling and infuriating to Imperial diplomats but seems to make perfect sense to the Zhodani.

Neklchte Aedi Outsider Oversight Committee

The regional Neklchte Aedi, or 'controllers of military circumstances', are charged with ensuring those outsiders permitted to bear arms in the Consulate are aware of their duties and responsibilities, and that they fulfil them. The Neklchte Aedi are licensing agencies of a sort but oversee the operations of mercenaries far more closely. The process begins with what amounts to an orientation class lasting one to three days, ensuring the mercenaries have no excuse for not understanding what it is to operate in the Consulate. Personnel and units with a history of successful operations within the Consulate usually receive a version shortened to a few hours but orientation is a weary ritual at the beginning of almost every contract.

The Neklchte Aedi will outright reject mercenaries who do not satisfy the representatives of their sincerity and reliability. Outsiders are prone to make gaffes even if they are trying to conform to Zhodani norms, so an Average (8+) ECEI check with REP as an additional DM is required to demonstrate the right attitudes. Some mercenaries will say all the right words but not convince their assessors. This is occasionally due to psionic snooping but more commonly simple observation will suffice. A mercenary unit that fails the check will be rejected for service and cannot reapply for 2D weeks. Units not accepted are not permitted to operate as a military force. Heavy equipment and weapons must be placed in storage whilst undertaking agreed training.

Neklchte Aedi Dealer Profile

Dealer	Max. TL Available	Infantry	Artillery	Combat Vehicles	Aerospace	Support and Specialist
Neklchte Aedi	14	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality

Acceptance does not mean the unit has been given a job but they are now allowed to negotiate contracts and accept those suitable. There is no licensing fee and the Neklchte Aedi does not act as a brokerage. Instead, it is responsible for deciding whether or not a unit is suitable for Consulate service – and can revoke this status at any time, for any reason. It is common for a liaison and training officer to be assigned to a mercenary unit operating in the Consulate or on its behalf. These officers bring with them a small staff but are not combatants. If they are with a unit under fire they will act in self-defence but only as a last resort. Liaison officers have been known to serenely observe a firefight going on – literally – around them, with only the occasional shot from their bodyguards at someone foolish enough to involve the observers.

Once a unit has been given permission to serve by the Neklchte Aedi it may obtain weapons through the Consulate's merchants. There are no restrictions, other than extremely destructive weapons and classified systems, on what can be bought by a unit that has been accepted for service. The unit's liaison officer will arrange contact with an arms supplier for no fee, after which negotiations take place as normal. Under this system, the Neklchte Aedi can be considered an arms dealer with access to anything manufactured in the Consulate. However, some systems will take longer to obtain than others. Small arms and light artillery can be obtained quickly almost anywhere but very powerful weapons or unusual requests may take several months to obtain.

Obrar Zhiavr

Arms Procurement Oversight Committee

The Zhodani Consulate has numerous arms manufacturers, as any other interstellar state. However, there are differences in how the arms market operates and is regulated. The primary oversight body for the

industry is the Obrar Zhiavr, which combines the role of a standards agency and industry regulator with that of a government procurement department.

All legal arms sales within the Consulate follow the same procedure. Designs are approved by the local Obrar Zhiavr, at which point permission to manufacture is granted. Any other firm can obtain the design schematics and produce the same weapon but must pay a small fee – which would be considered a license fee elsewhere – to the Obrar Zhiavr, which in turn passes most of it on to the original designer. The result is that there is relatively little variation in weapons design and rigorous inspections ensure that any version of a licensed design – no matter who actually produces it – are up to standard.

As a result of this system Zhodani weaponry tends to be of high quality and is sought-after by brokers outside the Consulate. Of course, the Obrar Zhiavr also controls who arms can be sold to and will only work with reputable dealers. It does not sell directly to outsiders, so those who want Zhodani weaponry will have to develop a relationship with someone who already has dealings with the Obrar Zhiavr. One such is the independent Dellar Military Brokerage or DMS.

DMS has offices on a few worlds close to the Consulate border and the right connections to buy military hardware from producers inside the Consulate. The firm is officially choosy about its clients, requiring REP 6+, but has been known to fall for a combination of Influence and money. A mercenary unit wanting to register as an approved purchaser must spend one point of Influence permanently to make the attempt and succeed in an Average (8+) Advocate check using REP as a DM. The process involves a lot of (real or at least convincing) documentation and takes 2D weeks to complete. It will also eat up Cr10000 per week in 'miscellaneous fees' which are mostly spent on entertaining and impressing the DMS representatives. Once registered a mercenary unit can buy DMS-supplied equipment at standard costs.

DMS Dealer Profile

Dealer	Max. TL Available	Infantry	Artillery	Combat Vehicles	Aerospace	Support and Specialist
Dellar Military Brokerages	14	Quality	Standard	Standard	Standard	Quality

UNITS

Outsiders rarely encounter ‘internal’ Zhodani mercenary forces, such as Ojach Shezh, and may not recognise them when they do. A unit with Ojach Shezh status is likely to be indistinguishable from the rest of the forces fielded by its client, at least to an outsider. Other mercenary types are more obvious.

Force lachez

Reinforced Platoon, Mixed-Capability

Force lachez began as a unit with Ojach Shezh status but failed in a critical mission and was sent to the frontiers to carry out an extended mission of remorse. Few details are available but it seems the force has remained in the field for an unusually long time; it is not clear if this indicates the mission was failed.

The unit is led by Officer-of-Fifty lachez, often mistakenly referred to as Captain lachez. Nominal strength is around 60 effectives of all types, not all of whom are people. A significant percentage of the unit’s fighting capability is provided by warbots, which are illegal in the Imperium but an integral part of Consular armed forces. Warbots are organised in squads of three, with a warbot handler and a Leader-of-Five who commands the squad and protects the handler at need.

The force is organised as ‘five-tens’, of which three are organised as a Five (squad) with warbots and a Five of infantry personnel. The other two Tens are composed entirely of infantry. Additional personnel, some with special capabilities, are attached to the unit headquarters. At present the headquarters includes two commandos capable of teleporting and a clairvoyant who acts as a remote scout. Headquarters personnel are armoured infantry equipped with combat armour and heavy personal weapons, whilst the rest of the unit wears non-sealed suit battlefield armour.

Force lachez started out as an overstrength unit, nearly 100 in number and with very good combat capabilities. Over time these have been degraded and personnel have not been replaced. Captain lachez refuses to allow non-Zhodani in the unit and cannot obtain replacement warbots. The current set are gradually being cannibalised to keep the others running and a further reduction in warbot strength is likely in the near future. Nevertheless the unit is potent in small-unit combat and can surprise enemies with the unexpected appearance of teleporting commandos.

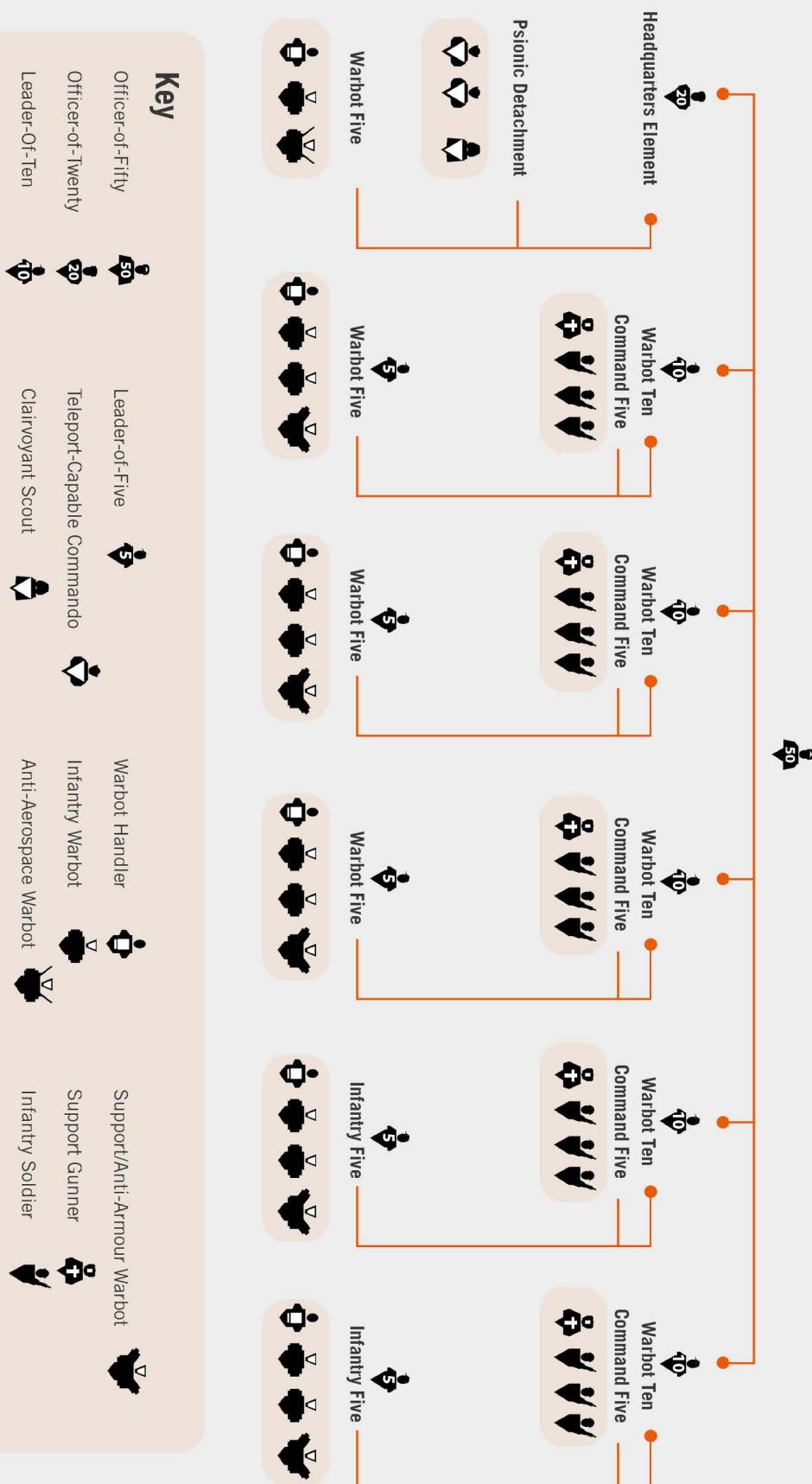
Force lachez is well-respected in the regional mercenary marketplace. Its personnel behave strangely compared to typical mercenaries but can be relied upon to get the job done efficiently. However, they are mistrusted by many who fear the reputation of Zhodani psionics. The unit’s use of warbots is disturbing to those unaccustomed to them but allegations of mechanised bloodbaths are completely unfounded. So long as the warbots are controlled by experienced operators they are no more likely to cause collateral damage than any other weapon system.

There are no employment prospects with this unit for non-Zhodani and it is most likely to be encountered in service to Zhodani-aligned governments. It will not act against the Consulate no matter how much money is offered; clients have tried to persuade the unit to do so, since its personnel are essentially outcasts, but to no avail. It is not clear if the force completed its mission of remorse but remained outside the Consulate or whether the mission was failed. Some have suggested it is ongoing or that the unit is awaiting some circumstance that will finally allow completion.

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Force lachez	—
Unit Size	Reinforced Platoon	—
Unit Type	Infantry with Warbots	—
Unit TL	14	+2
Mobility Type	Foot	-4
Combat	13	+3
Bombardment	1	-2
Aerospace	5	-1
Support	8	—
CEI or DEI	10	+1
Morale	11	+1
Reputation	10	+1

Force Iachez

(Officer-of-Fifty Iachez Commanding)



Key

Officer-of-Fifty		Leader-of-Five	
Officer-of-Twenty		Warbot Handler	
Leader-Of-Ten		Infantry Warbot	

CONFLICTS

The Zhodani Consulate is not without internal conflict but the majority of incidents involving mercenary forces are external. Operations may take place within the Consulate but will be against threats originating outside. It is rare indeed for mercenaries to be employed against Consulate citizens, although this could happen in the event of serious unrest or on newly acquired planets.

Zone of Concern Shtatle

The three worlds of Eiao, Gvoguek and Vaekfue are collectively designated Zone of Concern Shtatle. It is common to assign 'zone of concern' status to areas outside the Consulate, which are experiencing events that could affect Consulate citizens. In this case, the zone is experiencing an internal conflict that has created opportunities for raiders. There is a real possibility that one or more of the worlds in the zone could experience a violent regime change and become a haven for pirates. This would be an inconvenience, as the zone provides a jump-2 route into Consulate space. At present there is little or no threat to shipping in nearby Zhodani systems, allowing naval assets to be deployed elsewhere.

The world of Eiao is a rockball with about 600,000 inhabitants, most of whom are Vargr. It has a good port capable of building small merchant ships and for many years has been a trade route between the Consulate and the Vargr worlds to trailing. The system is a possession of the largest state on Gvoguek and until recently was well secured.

Gvoguek is a rich and pleasant world with around 900,000,000 people, most of whom dwell in seabed cities dotted around the world's shallow seas. Gvoguek is heavily balkanised. Its largest and most powerful state is the Association of Saktag. Despite its name, which arose from the state's beginnings as an alliance of independent cities, Saktag is a dictatorship containing around 10% of the world's population. It owns Eiao and has become wealthy from interstellar trade passing through the port. Indeed, Saktag has become so rich compared to its neighbours that the dictator believes she can annex them one-by-one. Initially, a mix of what amounts to bribery coupled with economic influence, and the implied threat of force, was sufficient to bring a few independent cities into the Association but now the dictatorship is faced with increasing resistance.

Vaekfue is a sort-of-unified world of around 7,000,000 inhabitants. The population are dispersed in low-tech agricultural settlements and at present this underdeveloped world is of little importance. However, it is likely that the winner in the power struggles on Gvoguek will annex Vaekfue and bring

in advanced farming machinery. The world could become a breadbasket for the region and a significant economic asset.

The Association of Saktag

Saktag is rich by the standards of its homeworld but its economy is fragile. The small TL12 manufacturing base at Eiao was created by spending a large proportion of income from the port. This investment paid off but disruption to trade going through Eiao could send Saktag into a downward spiral. For this reason the dictatorship has spent considerable sums on an in-system navy to protect its asset – to the point where the defence budget for Eiao is larger than that of Saktag itself. None of the military vessels deployed in Eiao are jump-capable, so cannot intervene in Gvoguek.

The garrison at Eiao's starport is equipped with TL12 weaponry manufactured locally, whilst only a handful of units stationed on Gvoguek have these advanced weapons. Most of the dictator's forces are equipped to TL9 standards and are primarily an aerospace defence and security force. Maritime craft are mainly patrol and security vessels rather than true warships, although a programme has been implemented to build more capable vessels.

The Independents

Some of the states on Gvoguek are openly opposed to Saktag, creating a state of cold war on the homeworld. Others are neutral but wary, as they fear they will be targeted for annexation sooner or later. The forces of these independent cities and small states are equipped with TL9 weaponry but set up for internal security rather than warfighting. Individually the independents will be unable to resist an open attempt at conquest and they are not inclined to cooperate to any great degree. Those who wish to oppose or impede the expansion of Saktag have chosen an indirect means.

Several independent states have sponsored raiders, encouraging them to attack Saktag's shipping. Exactly which states have done so is a matter for speculation, increasing tensions all over the homeworld. Meanwhile others have attempted to sabotage the starport at Eiao or installations on Gvoguek. Like Saktag, the independents are attempting to build or obtain combat-capable maritime vessels.

Multiple Conflicts

Zone of Concern Shtatle is highly complex. On Eiao there is a security problem with the starport, whose garrison has been stripped to bulk out forces on the homeworld. The situation at the port is a security



Ziafpilans

Etszdili

To Tekli

To Keditye

To Lanshep

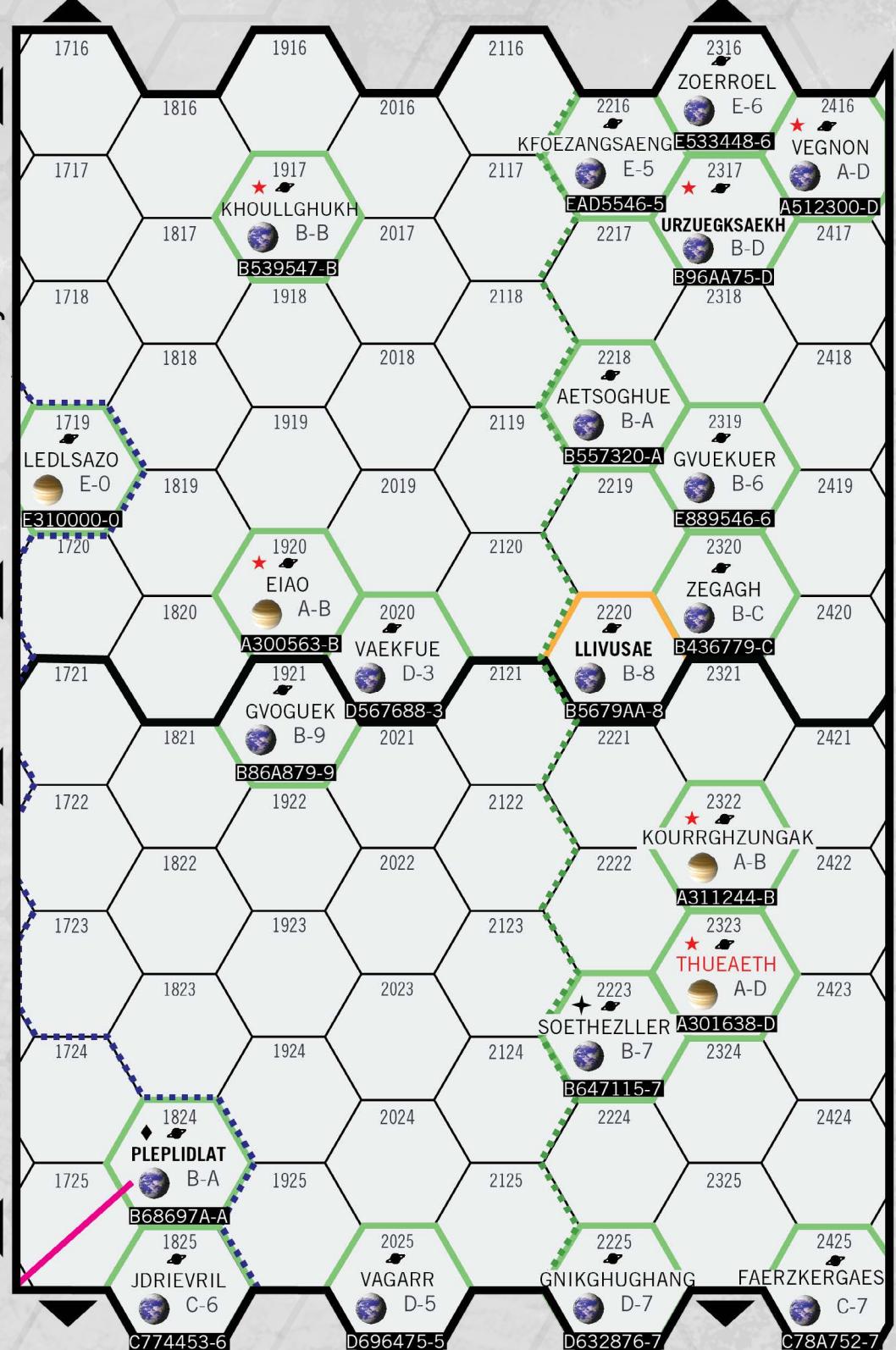
To Dlazziaz Shtiaklbo

Tliaqlvie

- Gas Giant
- Imperial Naval Base
- Naval Base
- Military base/Garrison
- B-6 Starport Class & Tech Level

- Secure System
- Amber Zone
- X-boat Routes
- Zhodani Consulate
- Thirz Empire

- Asteroids (no atmosphere/water)
- Planet (dry)
- Planet (water present)



emergency rather than a straight fight but visitors are becoming less frequent and the economic situation looks perilous. The system's defensive squadron is capable of dealing with piracy around the mainworld and port but the rest of the system is largely ignored. This is of little consequence since only the port matters to Saktag's economy.

Piracy is a problem in other systems of the zone and vessels have to pass through to enter. Saktag has attempted to counter the rise in attacks by removing weaponry from some of its patrol craft, to be fitted to jump-capable vessels, but there are few of these and they are not very effective. Meanwhile, a state of cold war – actually multiple cold wars – exists on the homeworld and occasionally erupts into short-lived and amateurish but intense conflict. This is mostly skirmishing between grav craft or improvised maritime warships, with the occasional raid on an installation or small city.

The situation is of great concern to Zhodani authorities for several reasons. Already the rise in piracy has affected regional trade and instability along borders is never a good thing. There is a real risk that open warfare might break out on Gvoguek, which is likely to draw in pirates and other ne'er-do-wells seeking opportunities. On the other hand, the Consulate does not want to commit troops or naval assets to an external conflict, especially one that is so complex and difficult to understand.

Summary

The situation in Zone of Concern Shtatfle offers many opportunities for non-Zhodani mercenaries, especially those experienced in dealing with Vagr politics. Security forces could assist in protecting the starport at Eiao, gradually reducing the saboteur threat. Starmercs will find plenty of opportunities to hunt pirates and may be able to eliminate bases they have set up. Conventional forces may be deployed to deter aggression against the most threatened independents or might find themselves reinventing maritime warfare.

The Consulate wants stability in the zone but without being seen to take sides. Mercenaries are an ideal choice for this, although they have the potential to make things much worse if they do not behave with restraint. There is no guarantee the situation will not develop into a major war, in which case the Consulate would prefer that somebody won quickly. The Zhodani do not have a preference as to whom this would be, so long as the victor returns the region to stability. Thus mercenaries might find themselves in the odd position of being hostile to Saktag whilst there is a chance to avert war but then supporting the dictator as she annexes the other states of her homeworld. The situation in Zone of Concern Shtatfle is certainly complex even without external intervention and it is possible that some of the nearby Vagr powers might take advantage to expand their own influence.



VARGR EXTENTS

The interstellar states and independent worlds of the Vargr Extents are well-known as a source of frequent if not regular mercenary contracts. The turbulent nature of local politics and a rather loose attitude to the use of violence for gain make this an attractive environment for those who think they have what it takes. However, there are a few surprises awaiting those unfamiliar with Vargr society.

One of the commonest misconceptions is that 'Vargr admire pirates'. This is not entirely correct. What Vargr tend to admire is a go-getter attitude, a willingness to pit strength and guile against that of others and the ability to succeed where others cannot. Successful corsairs display these traits, and do indeed attract admiration, but that does not mean the general citizenry will venerate any band of violent thugs who take what they want at the expense of others. Indeed, part of the mystique of the pirate is the against-the-odds daring required to pull off a successful raid. An overpowered force that kerbstomps weak opposition is unworthy of regard even if they win every battle.

The nature of leadership and charisma also confuses many outsiders. There is a common misconception that Vargr will switch loyalty as soon as their current commander suffers any sort of setback and that it is somehow acceptable to flit from one allegiance to another. This can lead to behaviour that ends in disaster for mercenaries, as disloyalty is as unacceptable in the Extents as anywhere else. All that differs is what actions would be considered disloyal.

As a general rule, there is a balance to be struck between how much the present client or leader deserves loyalty and how much more the prospective subject does. Money alone is never sufficient reason to change allegiance and likelihood of victory is rarely sufficient either. Indeed, a mercenary unit that accepted an offer to abandon their obviously doomed client could wreck their reputation if the general populace felt the client deserved better. This can lead to a romantic expectation that worthy mercenaries should follow their gallant and charismatic client into destruction rather than abandon an obviously lost

cause. Actions that would be viewed as pragmatic and sensible might cause severe harm to a unit's reputation in the Extents.

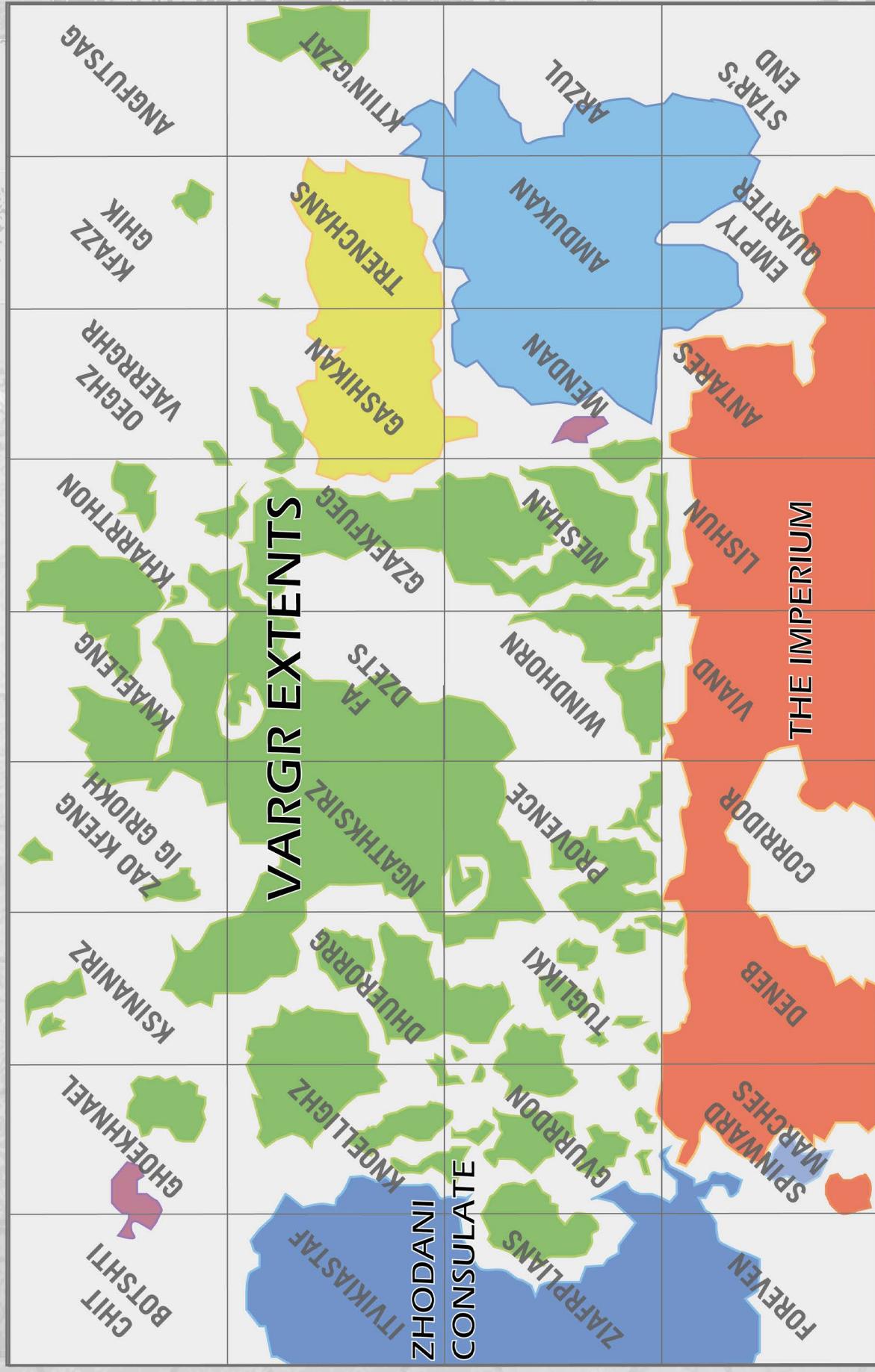
If a client is apparently undeserving of loyalty, mercenaries may well be expected to jump ship. It may even be remarkable if they do not. Demonstrating unwavering loyalty and professionalism to an odious client may be a good way to build a reputation elsewhere but in the Vargr Extents it can be harmful to the unit's reputation as it makes them look weak and ready to follow inferior commanders. The sort of leader a force is willing to follow is an indicator of its worth, so those who take service with weak or uncharismatic clients in exchange for a large payment may actually devalue themselves.

At the end of service, mercenaries may face investigation in almost any culture. The details are different in Vargr society. Rather than establishing the mercenaries performed duties required to fulfil their contract, the question may be whether the mercenaries performed at a level acceptable for personnel in service to that particular client and whether what they did reflected the charisma and status of the client. It is often possible to have charges of breaching a contract dismissed by showing the client was not worthy of loyal service. This is a dangerous route to take, in part because the client will defend their good name and actions, and mercenaries who betrayed someone who came out of the inquiry looking like a hero will suffer a serious hit to their reputation. In addition, in order to 'prove' they were justified in abandoning the contract the mercenaries will have to publicly denounce their former client – who will certainly hold a grudge.

MERCENARY ORGANISATIONS AND OPERATIONS

Mercenary forces in the Vargr Extents are extremely varied. Formally organised units do exist, even some high-level formations above battalion size. However, the majority are either starmerc crews or small forces

VARGR EXTENTS



organised more as a personal warband than a military force. Starmercs are usually one-ship outfits but flotillas and fleets do exist. These are almost always composed of small vessels banding together, rather than being constructed for optimum effectiveness, and usually organised as an alliance of captains owing allegiance to an overall commander. It can be difficult to distinguish these bands of interstellar mercenaries from corsairs and in many cases members or a whole group may switch between piracy and mercenary work depending on circumstances.

Outside those organised as formal military units, Vargr mercenary bands are generally organised as layers of charismatic leaders and their immediate followers. The result is that these units generally lack heavy equipment or vehicles when they first form but gradually acquire it the longer they stay together. Making the transition from a band-of-warbands to a capable military force is the hallmark of a successful and extremely charismatic commander, who can persuade subordinates to accept a smaller percentage of the unit's fees in return for the support of heavy weaponry bought with the funds. This weaponry belongs to the unit as a whole rather than any particular sub-unit, which means the commander has sole discretion over who uses or benefits from it. This situation continues until a charismatic member decides to leave and wants to take 'their' share of heavy equipment with them. This can lead to a vicious internal struggle or an amicable separation depending on the personalities involved.

The organisation of the typical Vargr mercenary force is an artefact of its life cycle. Almost every force begins as a charismatic leader and a band of followers, equipped with small arms and perhaps possessing a vehicle or two. Organisation tends to be quite flat, with a commander and one or two trusted lieutenants. Everyone else is theoretically equal in rank, with leadership being a matter of personal charisma. Pay is likewise based on perceived level within the unit, although commonly every member gets a flat salary with bonuses based on performance and the esteem of their peers.

This organisation is fine for small groups of up to around 20 members, although it can create inequalities in size as sub-units form around the more charismatic unit members. It is not uncommon for a sub-unit leader to poach key personnel such as support gunners or specialists from less charismatic leaders, sometimes leading to more than half the unit's personnel and all the best equipment being in one sub-unit. This is not militarily efficient but

will suffice when carrying out small-scale operations that require daring and firepower rather than careful planning and organisation.

Often, quite large forces are created by hiring several of these units and declaring them to be a higher formation. Typically the most charismatic of the unit leaders will be appointed overall command, although there may be infighting before that particular matter is settled. Alternatively the client may provide a leadership team, who will have their work cut out at first getting the whole sack full of cats to cooperate. These ad-hoc forces are one reason why mercenaries are held in low regard in many areas. They are inefficient and undisciplined but often ferocious in combat.

More formal or at least long-lived formations can grow out of this temporary setup. In this case the leaders of sub-units must accept their overall leader on a long-term basis and be willing to undertake reorganisation. Uneven distribution of personnel and equipment must be tackled to create a semblance of organisation. This need not parallel a formal section/platoon/company setup but the overall commander needs to have a clear idea of what each sub-unit is capable of. When there are just a few this is easy enough but as a formation grows in size it becomes increasingly difficult to keep track.

Once a unit grows beyond reinforced company level, an even greater level of organisation is required. Sub-leaders must be persuaded to relinquish part of the unit's earnings to purchase equipment they may not immediately benefit from and some will have to take over less glamourous specialist roles. Often a higher-level structure emerges, which is quite formal and controls the unit's major assets such as artillery or armoured vehicles, with most infantry sub-units continuing to operate on a warband basis. This can work, although command and control becomes more difficult as the unit grows larger.

Outside observers compare this sort of organisation to a piece of string that has become frayed at one end. The upper echelons of the unit are akin to a recently cut end, capable of undertaking fine and detailed work. This end of the string can be pushed through a small hole and will drag the remainder with it but attempting to do the same with the other end of the string will lead to complete failure and a certain amount of mess. Which end of the string dictates the course of events depends largely on the skill and charisma of the unit's top leaders and the level of confidence sub-leaders have in them.

MERCENARY LIFE IN THE EXTENTS

The life of a mercenary in the Vagr Extents can be more exciting than elsewhere due to a number of factors. The relatively informal nature of command and control means that a unit can suddenly acquire a new leader or fragment due to a leadership challenge. A commander who took on a battalion-sized ticket with adequate forces may have to decide whether to allow a charismatic subordinate to take over the unit or lose a third of it when they break away. The period immediately after a force takes on a major assignment is notorious for leadership challenges and bids for greater authority by subordinates. Wise commanders gauge the mood of their force before committing to anything major.

The letter of a contract means less in the Extents than elsewhere. Members of a mercenary unit can often escape from their force without censure if they demonstrate (truthfully or otherwise) that it was not worthy of their service. This creates mortal enemies among former commanders and comrades, which makes recruiting breakaway personnel hazardous for their new companions. This in turn leads to more rivalry and even enmity between units and, when combined with the inevitable posturing and putting-down of rivals that forms an essential part of marketing a unit, can lead to large operations becoming chaotic.

On the plus side, a mercenary will rarely be short of work. There will always be a unit seeking to replace personnel poached by another or an ambitious commander needing to recruit a force to match their ego. Overall, this keeps the quality of mercenary units down and reputations rather poor by the standards of outsiders – although since this is commonplace within the Extents, Vagr clients rarely expect better.

A mercenary must be constantly mindful of their reputation, whether they command a brigade or carry a rifle. This translates to boastfulness and routine overstating of capabilities. Clients within the Extents know this and adjust their expectations accordingly. More honest personnel, who state their capabilities as they are, can find it hard to get a suitable rank or pay grade as humility tends to lead to an expectation of incompetence. Likewise, blame must be deflected and failures presented as not the mercenary's fault.

Inquiries do happen but typically the word of the most charismatic participant is assumed to be the truth. This perpetuates the situation where the most successful mercenary leaders are the loudest and

most charismatic, and the most adept at presenting the situation in a favourable light or dumping blame on a competent but less well regarded individual. Commanders of this sort can survive only so long before some disaster befalls, so there is a regular turnover of large units collapsing to be replaced by up-and-coming formations. Those few who combine charisma and competence become legends in the field; others have periods of ascendance followed by eclipse and disgrace.

CLIENTS

Clients also vary considerably in the Extents, since the use of armed force is generally considered a 'charismatic' way of resolving a dispute. It is not so much the violence that is admired as the daring, since using mercenaries invites a reply in kind and raises the stakes for everyone involved. Small units are generally hired for local disputes, sometimes bouncing around between clients on a single world for months or years at a time as one matter comes to a close and someone else makes an offer of employment.

Jobs of this sort are ideal for the 'band of gunmen' type mercenary unit and characterised by unreliability on both sides. This is not always intentional but clients often hire mercenary units without much idea of how they want to proceed, give vague orders and are then surprised when the mercenaries do not produce exactly the outcome the client would have wanted had they given the matter more thought.

One reason for this is the tendency of would-be charismatic Vagr to posture and make bold declarations, which they then have to back up with action. Hiring a mercenary force is a dramatic gesture, which the client may not expect to go further but when the prospective opponent refuses to cave in the client must act or back down. Mercenaries frequently find themselves in unintended conflicts this way and sometimes trigger them either from indiscipline or because it suits their ends. A conflict is an opportunity to show what the unit can do, so would-be charismatic mercenary commanders will commonly take advantage of clients who are similar in temperament in order to get into action and win a wholly unnecessary fight for the prestige they think they will earn.

Larger contracts tend to be more organised and often longer in term. Any client hiring in company strength or greater will almost certainly have clear aims in mind, although even then there is a tendency for 'mission creep'. Pushing just a bit further or carrying out a minor side mission might allow the client to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity. Vagr

mercenary commanders are used to this and tend to be flexible but aware of when they are going beyond what they are being paid for. Clients will try to sell mercenaries the idea that the extras are actually within the original brief or that they will benefit from carrying out the client's revised orders.

This can lead to acrimonious clashes between client and commander, although as usual charisma and perceived status play an important part. Very charismatic clients will often lean on their mercenaries to carry out a few extras and this can be hard to refuse since the client has the capability to damage the unit's reputation. Where the converse is true, a commander might try to get away with redefining the mission parameters such that the client has to pay the full fee but gets less than agreed. The upshot of this is a self-selection process whereby mercenaries tend to work for clients of roughly the same level of charisma and reputation. At the top end the best units get the good jobs at a fair price, working for reliable clients with few unexpected complications. At the other end of the scale the mercenary marketplace is another example of the 'frayed string' model, with clients and mercenaries alike struggling in a minefield of inflated claims, exaggerated abilities and misrepresented contracts.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

The Vagr Extents is a complex and varied region. Some areas are almost entirely lawless at times but the trend is generally towards stability, with occasional upheavals or low-level disruption from minor disputes and piracy. Pirate bands and adventure-seekers tend to gravitate to the latest conflict zone, seeking to make a reputation and a fortune before matters settle down. Some of these bands are actually forces for stability, in that they will take control over a territory and eliminate opposition, but for the most part a seriously disrupted area will get worse before it gets better.

The impression gained by many outside the Extents is of constant chaos but this is not the case. New reports speak of troubles in far-off places with difficult-to-pronounce names and many assume the whole of the Extents is constantly aflame. In fact, most of the time the Extents is little more turbulent than any other region of small states and independent worlds – the trouble spots are reported but not the large areas where life goes on as normal.

Thus, with some exceptions, conditions in the Extents vary over time rather than by region. A war zone might have become a fledgeling state by the time a mercenary unit arrives or the opposite might happen. Up-to-date and accurate information is essential but also surprisingly hard to come by. There are plenty of mercenary outfits with enough firepower in the Extents but the ones that do best also have a good intelligence component.

The Spinward Territories

The spinward end of the Vagr Extents has borders with both the Third Imperium and Zhodani Consulate. This region is a hotbed of mercenary and related activity, some of which is sponsored by the major states or primary Vagr polities. This part of the Extents is more 'active' than anywhere else due to cross-border agendas, which may contribute to the impression that the Extents as a whole is an extremely turbulent place.

Both Imperium and Consulate sponsor mercenary operations in this region. Usually this is small-scale and more about the ambitions or fears of a corporation, minor noble house or world government than grand politics. Some operations are intended to counter potential threats and may or may not be conducted openly. A raid against a pirate band that has caused trouble along the border will typically be conducted openly, inasmuch as there will be no attempt to conceal who has instigated it. On the other hand there are some who believe it is in their interests for the border zone to be unstable and weak. This results in many small problems rather than a much larger one.

Some mercenary operations in the Spinward Territories are conducted through multiple layers of deception, such that mercenaries and their targets can only guess who is the end client. Mercenaries might be sent against insignificant targets in the hope of triggering local disputes and may encounter a complex situation. For example they may be faced with opposition armed with weapons sold by a corporation hoping to profit from the conflict but which is also paying mercenaries to contain the fighting.

The Coreward Sprawl

The Coreward Sprawl is the region of Vagr-dominated space coreward of the Windhorn astrographical feature. Like most Vagr-inhabited regions it can be turbulent, with mercenary operations commonplace. These tend to be more driven by 'internal' Vagr

politics than the machinations of the Imperium or Consulate. In this region there is little influence from the distant great powers.

The majority of mercenaries operating in the Sprawl are Vargr. A completely non-Vargr unit would stand out but might have an advantage in that potential clients would consider it less likely to be entangled in local politics. There are many Vargr units free from such connections but often those originating from the Sprawl have an agenda of their own even if they are not an extension of the local powers. In most cases that agenda is simple ambition – being a mercenary commander is a stepping-stone to carving out a petty-kingdom.

It is very common for mercenary groups, especially starmercs, to change in character over time. One way to get rid of a pirate band is to offer them employment as a small navy and most are willing to go where the money is. This can create a situation where a group of worlds has joined together to buy out the local pirates, who then protect them against other pirates until they are lured back to their old ways by the prospect of greater profit. Pirate-hunters might arrive in a region to find their intended quarry is now ‘official’, which might make acting against them extremely hazardous.

DEALERS AND AGENCIES

Obtaining arms and equipment is generally easier in the Extents than elsewhere. This is mainly due to the number of independent worlds and small states, whose attempts at regulation are local and leave huge gaps in which traders and buyers can operate. On the downside, there is a lack of standardisation and quality assurance, with the result that what looks like a good deal can turn out to be a waste of money.

The Arms Company of the Extents

Arms Dealer

The Arms Company of the Extents, which trades under the acronym ACE, is one of the larger suppliers in the region. It has a number of manufacturing centres and also buys from smaller firms, selling their weaponry on at a markup. ACE has a reputation for buccaneering, indiscriminate business practices. Its sales representatives seek out potential clients and offer them cut-price deals for weaponry they do not really need.

An ACE sales team may be given a regional office, typically at a busy starport, but the most successful sales personnel are rewarded with their own mobile showroom in the form of an armed yacht. Whilst modest in performance these vessels have a luxurious interior where prospective clients can be entertained and dazzled with glitzy marketing vids. All yachts carry a fearsome array of demonstration pieces and crews are well trained to repel any attempt to acquire merchandise without paying for it.

ACE representatives are frequently accused of stirring up trouble for their own gain and generally the allegations are true. Sometimes this is indirect, such as when a dealer persuades someone to buy a large amount of hardware they cannot properly maintain. As this equipment ages and deteriorates there is an incentive to get some value out of it by entering into a conflict that might otherwise be avoided. In this manner, ‘ACE fire sales’ result in violence 10 years later. On other occasions the dealer is directly responsible for starting a war, done by using mercenaries to provoke one side or the other, or escalating tensions then selling to one party so the other has to buy sufficient arms to counter the threat. If this goes on long enough outright war is likely.

Despite their unsavoury reputation, ACE dealers are often hailed as celebrities. Their bold and brazen dealings, combined with a lavish lifestyle and apparent ability to shape the policies of planetary governments, fits with the archetype of the daring go-getter that Vargr admire. Some dealers are so influential they can and do interfere directly in politics and may be able to hold governments to ransom with the threat of giving their enemies a great deal on the weapons they need to win a ‘hypothetical future conflict’.

ACE deals mainly in small arms and personal weapons, plus a few vehicles and heavier weapons. Quality is rarely high but prices are acceptable and few questions are asked. The profile that follows refers to any ACE dealer, particularly those deployed at starports. Rockstar mobile dealers may be able to obtain higher-tech gear or Quality equipment in one or more areas. They are also likely to have large amounts of basic but cheap weaponry available or offer strange one-off deals on items obtained on their travels.

ACE Representative Dealer Profile

Dealer	Max. TL Available	Infantry	Artillery	Combat Vehicles	Aerospace	Support and Specialist
Arms Company of the Extents	9	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic

Vazghoz

Mercenary Accreditor and Recruiter

Vazghoz is both a person – actually multiple people – and a brand of sorts in the mercenary marketplace. Presumably at some time in the past there was a person named Vazghoz who had a recruiting or accrediting business but since that time the term has become a generic term for private recruiters/ accreditors, many of whom claim either to be the original Vazghoz or the legitimate inheritor of the title. This naturally leads to disputes when there are too many ‘Original Vazghoz’ businesses in the area.

At the head of each business is an individual who may go by their own name and describe themselves as ‘a Vazghoz’ or someone who uses the identity as a professional name – and who may or may not claim it as their own. The service provided is broadly the same in most cases and tends to be more personal in character than outside the Extents. A Vazghoz will of course have detailed records of the personnel and units available; their successes and failures, unit histories and related facts such as other units hired by the same client. However, this is only part of the picture. A Vazghoz will also have a reasonably up-to-date personal impression of the forces available and can match client to unit in terms of more than statistics and capabilities.

A good Vazghoz can measure the temperament of a unit and its commander, which may make some units unsuitable for certain jobs or clients. The Vazghoz will also be a shrewd judge – or think they are a shrewd judge – of what the client really wants. Essentially, clients pay a Vazghoz to make a recommendation based on their personal impression of the situation, cutting through layers of exaggeration and half-truths.

Not all Vazghoz’ are skilled at this, of course. Some are prone to the same characteristics as clients and commanders, over-inflating their abilities to demand a higher fee. They do not last long in such a dangerous marketplace and have been known to meet a bad end. A long-established Vazghoz is something of a guarantee of a good match; this is one reason why so many claim to be the original.

Achieving a good match is art as much as science. Obvious factors like the nature of the mission and the level of opposition must be accounted for as well as the character of the client and the forces on offer. Some Vazghoz’ pay informants within mercenary units to keep them appraised of the internal situation and many have a network of spies who may be able to furnish accurate information on targets as well as clients. When not working in the mercenary field these spies typically funnel more general information to their handlers, enabling a Vazghoz to function as an information broker. This knowledge is often used to predict situations, giving a well-informed Vazghoz an apparently magical ability to have a list of units ready the moment a client says they are in the market.

Each Vazghoz has their own terms and requirements to be associated. Typically a relationship is built rather than a formal application being made with units operating on the understanding they will pay a percentage (typically 1–3%) of their fee to the Vazghoz for any job put their way. Clients are usually charged a flat fee, which will be as much as the Vazghoz thinks they can get away with, for finding suitable mercenaries. This is typically 5–15% of the prospective mission fee, including bonuses, all up-front. Negotiation is always possible, especially for powerful clients, but the lower end of the Vargr mercenary marketplace is such that it is generally considered worth paying. The services of a Vazghoz are not a guarantee the mercenaries will be a good fit and reliable but the risks are greatly reduced.

A Vazghoz will also act as a mercenary recruiter, directing personnel to units that need them. Again, this is as much about fitting the character of the unit as having the correct skills. A Vazghoz will typically charge 50–100% more than the standard recruiter rates (see page 13 of *Running a Mercenary Force*) but will generally provide personnel who are reliable and will fit in well. A unit that recruits in a more conventional manner will pay the standard recruiter fee and can only hope the personnel they take on will be suitable or they may prefer to do their own recruiting.

UNITS

Forces-for-hire are common in the Extents but not all fit the standard model. Indeed, some do not work for money in the usual sense. These units will attach themselves to a cause or charismatic leader without going through the usual hiring process and whilst they expect to be paid enough to support their personnel they serve for their own reasons. Typically this is association with a powerful or charismatic leader, which can boost the reputation of those who have served. Alternatively some such forces want to fight against a hated enemy or gain experience before setting out on their own and are willing to pass up a big paycheque to get what they want – at least for the time being.

Ghizlae's Followers

Combined-Arms, Platoon

Ghizlae's Followers is a typical small unit of the sort often encountered in the Extents. It is nominally a platoon-sized force but in practice personnel numbers vary considerably. Expansion typically occurs just after the unit wins a notable victory or engages in a particularly destructive session of roistering upon receiving payment for a task. Casualties and retirements reduce numbers on a gradual basis and occasionally a dispute results in a sub-unit breaking away to become independent or follow a 'better' leader.

Internal organisation is uneven. Typically the most charismatic sub-unit leader gradually poaches personnel from other sub-units until they have sufficient to form their own unit or challenge for command of the overall force. This process begins anew after each challenge or breakaway. Similarly, sub-unit designations change over time as the capabilities of the force change. The least charismatic sub-unit leaders are inevitably left with a handful of loyal followers and must invent a role for them based on equipment they have managed to retain, whilst the most powerful sub-unit can end up with sufficient hardware to take on multiple contradictory roles. This is inefficient, and the force commander knows it, but there is a balance to be struck between effective distribution of equipment and alienation of sub-commanders who feel they deserve the best of everything the unit has.

Ghizlae styles herself 'Grand Captain', a self-assumed rank unlikely to be recognised outside the unit. However, as the commander of a roughly platoon-sized unit she is not being unreasonable about the 'captain' part at least. Her headquarters unit, impressively titled Grand Captain's Guard, comprises the most loyal personnel. It is grav-mobile, with a handful of infantry riding air/rafts when on the move. These are used as light fire support platforms in action, usually operating independently

but sometimes escorting Ghizlae's command tank. This is a horrific Frankensteinian creation cobbled together from scavenged bits and pieces. It has numerous faults and weak points but the plasma gun works. That alone can be sufficient to lead the unit to victory – and has deterred or ended a number of leadership challenges.

The Foremost Fighters is a loose term applied to whichever of the sub-units is most favoured by the Grand Captain. It is an expectation as much as a label. Currently this section is an inefficient mix of grav and ground vehicles, with most equipped for direct fire support of the infantry that ride on them. The trucks are overloaded with bits of armour plate and one has been converted to carry a light howitzer. This high-trajectory weapon is virtually useless in direct combat and should really be the centrepiece of a dedicated artillery section but the Foremost Fighters have claimed it and will not let go.

The other four sub-units are variations on the theme of motorised infantry. One section consists of a handful of infantry who ride on an unarmed and very beat-up truck, whilst two others have defined themselves as scouts or close-assault specialists to justify their existence as a discrete sub-unit. Grand Captain Ghizlae would be well advised to move some personnel from the Foremost Fighters to balance out these sections but the egos of her sub-commanders will not countenance losing troops or being made subordinate to another.

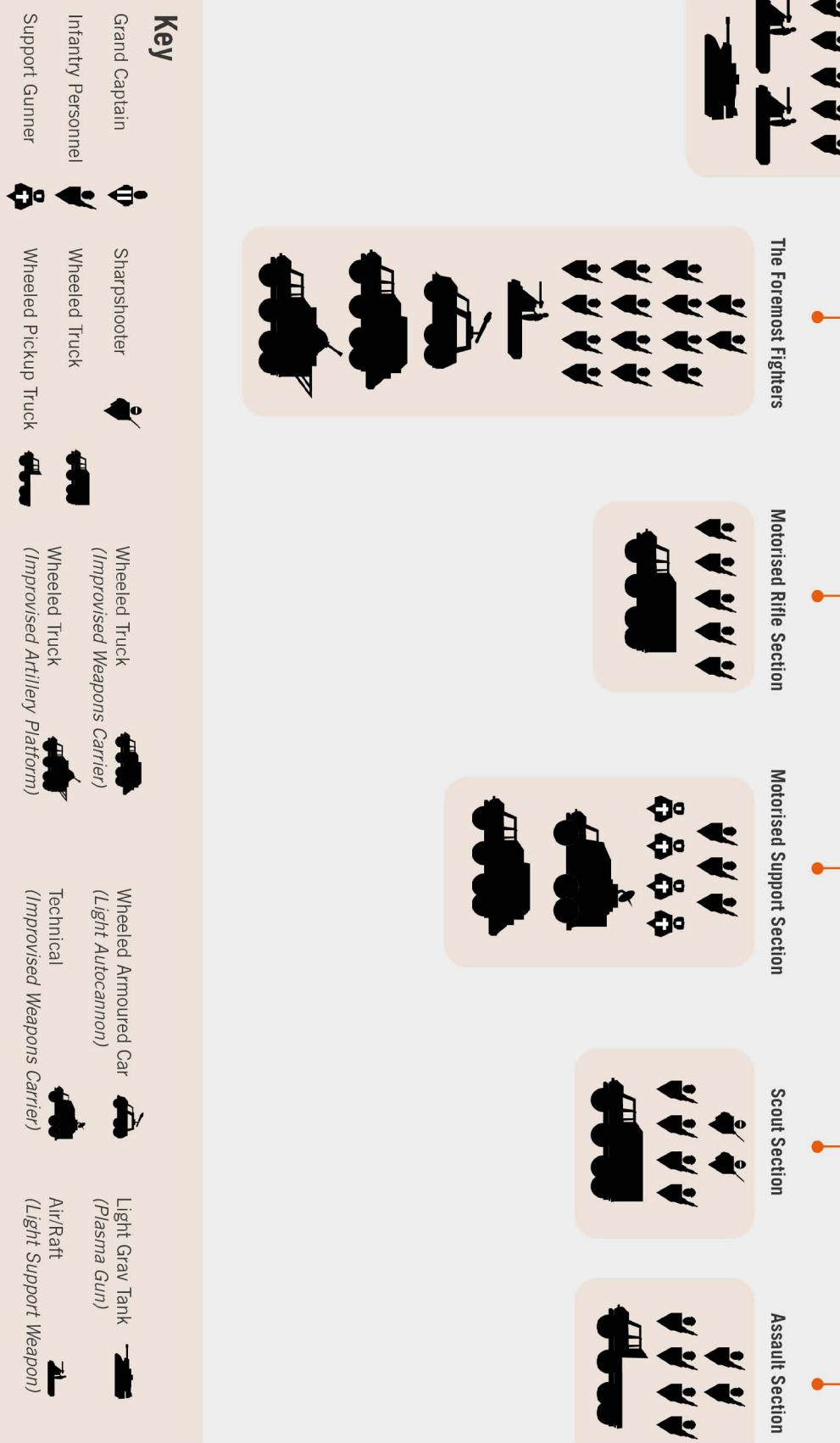
The Motorised Support Section is built around a truck and two pickups that have been converted to Technicals – light fire support platforms, which can also carry a couple of infantry fighters. These characterise the force as a whole, which is best considered a motorised infantry formation with an overabundance of direct fire support weapons and a grav-mobile command element. Most weapons are TL8, with a scattering of more advanced systems.

Whilst inefficient in terms of organisation and specialisation, Ghizlae's Followers is an effective force in its normal operating environment. Tactics are generally basic, based on fluid movement and high firepower, and the force is at its best in a chaotic situation. Impetuosity is the unit's greatest weakness, along with a lack of mutual support between sub-leaders who see their peers as rivals and may ignore requests for assistance in case they look like they are deferring. Nevertheless, Ghizlae's Followers have a reputation for getting the job done – providing the job is straightforward and does not require subtlety.

Ghizlae's Followers is a typical Vargr mercenary force that could be encountered anywhere within or along the fringes of the Extents. Its leaders ultimately hope to move

Ghizlae's Followers

(Grand Captain Ghizlae Commanding)



Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Ghizlae's Followers	—
Unit Size	Reinforced Platoon	—
Unit Type	Motorised Infantry	—
Unit TL	8	—
Mobility Type	Motorised	+4
Combat	9	+1
Bombardment	2	-2
Aerospace	1	-2
Support	1	-2
CEI or DEI	7	—
Morale	9	+1
Reputation	8	—

on to bigger and better things, which usually means becoming a petty warlord somewhere or securing a place in the entourage of a powerful and charismatic leader.

CONFLICTS

Most of the conflicts going on in the Extents are small and local in scale, or of low intensity. Major wars are uncommon as few states have the resources to conduct one. As a result conflict is characterised by raiding, insurgency and harassment of shipping rather than invasions and conquest.

THE PRETORIA PROBLEM

The Pretoria subsector is mostly Imperial territory, with three systems lying just outside the border. As is common in such areas the systems outside are of great significance to Imperial authorities but there are significant problems in operating there. In the case of the world of Taa, there is also interest from the nearby Vargr state of Ahkstuu.

Taa itself is a dry world with a thin atmosphere and a population of around three million. It is not an economically significant world but is the site of a Class A starport. This was built several decades ago to take advantage of an expected upswing in cross-border traffic. The predicted boom did not happen, although for a time the port was prosperous as shipping companies tried to expand into the region. Taa's highport became a turnaround point for many ships, with the transborder run handled by specialist merchant lines, adept at negotiating the customs and legal difficulties encountered when entering Imperial space.

The situation was positive for over 20 years, but the port at Taa never became profitable enough to pay back its costs. Maintenance was deferred and eventually parts of the installation fell into disrepair. The port was then sold by its operating consortium, passing through the hands of two other business groups before being purchased at a bargain price by what is now the Taa Starport Company. This was a legitimate corporation but funded by Ahkstuu.

Most of the goods crossing into Imperial space were legitimate but the ability of transborder shippers to get contraband past Imperial customs allowed a considerable amount of under-the-table dealing to take place. The Imperium was slow to react, not least because some powerful figures in the region found it to their advantage to have a semi-legal smuggling link into the Extents. Once the authorities began to take more notice of the smugglers the transborder shippers' profits fell and many got out of the game. Those left were diminished and either found a lower niche to operate in or looked for opportunities elsewhere.

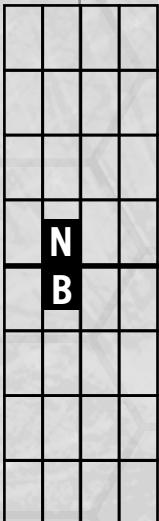
Today, Taa's highport is in poor repair and a known haven for transborder smugglers. The downport was never large and was built on land that was never fully paid for. The people of Taa have never held any stake in the orbital port and benefited little from its presence. Now they are insisting that they receive a share of the profits in recompense for missing payments. They do not realise how poor the highport now is.

Taa

Taa has a population of around three million and no significant armed forces. However, a militia has been formed and equipped with cheap locally-made weapons. This militia 'observes' the downport and conducts occasional demonstrations of strength in the area, hoping to intimidate the Taa Starport Company. The militia leaders have openly stated they will annex the port by force if their demands are not met but are reluctant to take measures that cannot be undone.

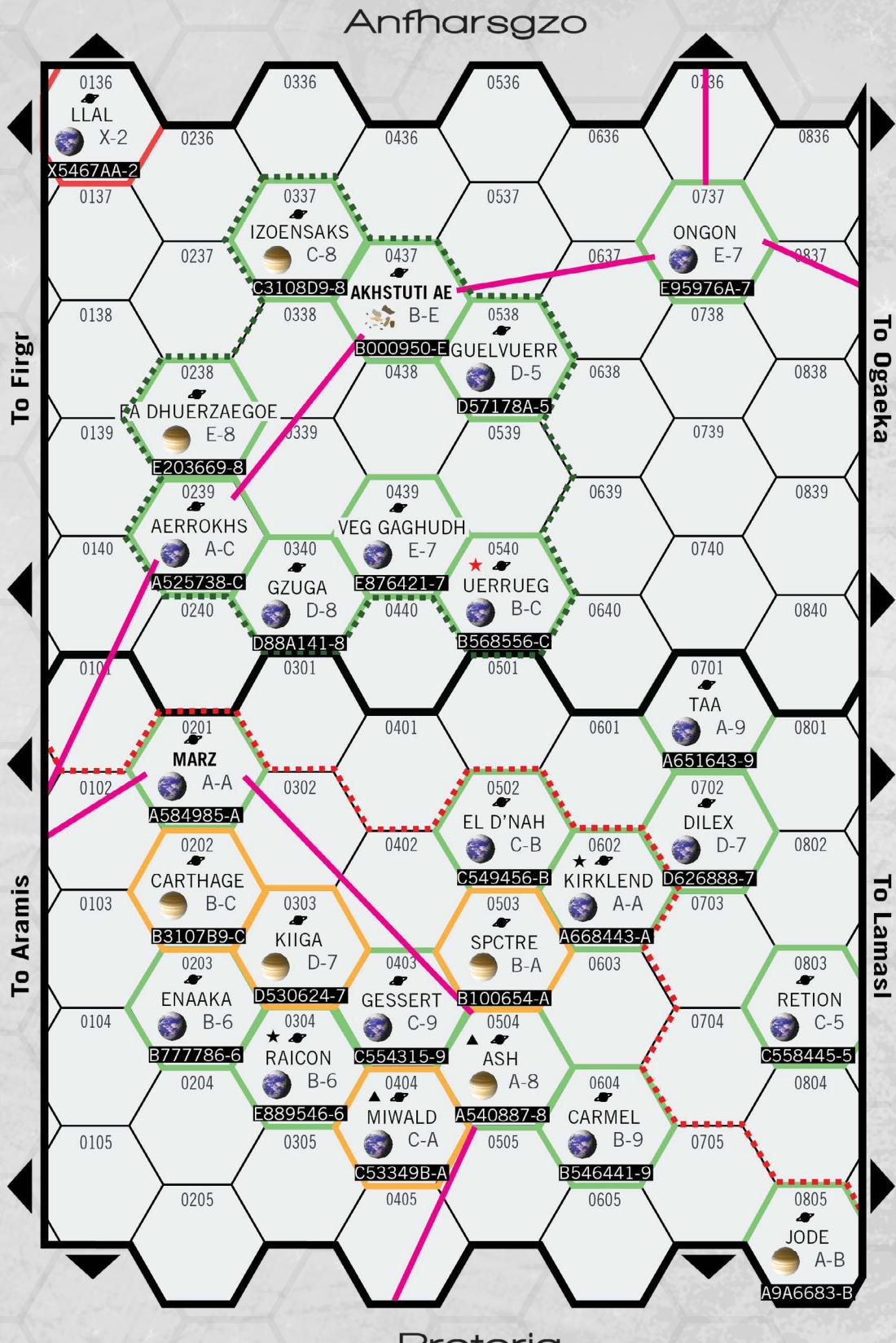
Taa Starport Company

The Taa Starport Company is pretty much broke. Support from Ahkstuu was cut off years ago and the port does not bring in enough revenue to keep up with maintenance, let alone fend off attacks on the downport. The legitimate merchants using the port want no part of the dispute and smugglers are unwilling to contribute to anyone else's financial wellbeing. The company cannot afford to give away part of what little income it has but does not wish to withdraw from the downport, which supplies much of the food required by the orbital population.



Anfharsgzo

Deneb / Tuglikki



Pretoria

- Gas Giant
- ★ Imperial Naval Base
- ★ Naval Base
- ▲ Imperial Scout Base
- B-6 Starport Class & Tech Level

- Secure System
- Amber Zone
- X-boat Routes
- Imperium Border
- Akhstuti

- Asteroids (no atmosphere/water)
- Planet (dry)
- Planet (water present)

Taa Downport is protected by a paramilitary security force equipped with TL9 small arms and little heavy equipment. The force is demoralised, in part due to pay arrears, and wholly unsuited to operations outside the port and its small associated startown. The town's population of around 10,000 are mostly loyal to the company and some would fight if necessary but no attempt has been made to organise them.

Skirmishing on Taa

The situation is gradually escalating towards conflict. The militia has begun interfering with food convoys coming in from those well-watered areas willing to sell to the port company and the security force has tried to protect them. The result is, predictably enough, a series of incompetent skirmishes and sniper/countersniper incidents. Both factions are trying to control the land around the downport and its supporting roads but lack the personnel or skill to make a decent job of it. The conflict so far is characterised by armed mobs blundering around the countryside with little idea of what to do if they run into one another.

Summary

The situation on Taa provides opportunities for low-cost mercenary forces to tip the balance of the conflict. The small scale of operations is such that even a handful of skilled fighters could be sufficient to defeat the opposition. However, neither faction wants to escalate the situation. Both hope the matter can be de-escalated over time and lack the confidence to take bold action. Their opposing requirements mean this is unlikely and the conflict will either sputter on indefinitely or accidentally expand into a small but nasty war.

The situation in orbit also presents opportunities. A security unit with sufficient backbone could root out the smugglers – or force them to pay a bigger cut to the port company. It is also possible the port could change hands again. This would require a sudden strike by a mercenary force sneaked onto the station or otherwise brought aboard without revealing its purpose. The Imperial authorities would not become involved in a coup unless Imperial trade was harmed. Indeed, if the port's new owners took steps to curb cross-border smuggling the Imperials would be pleased at having their problem solved for them.



TWO THOUSAND WORLDS



The Two Thousand Worlds of the K'kree is a very different environment to the rest of Charted Space. Mercenaries from outside of K'Kree society are almost unheard-of there, although they might be encountered along the fringes. K'kree mercenary groups occasionally make forays into the non-aligned space between the Imperium and the Two Thousand Worlds. There is little activity along the Hive Federation/Two Thousand Worlds border and what goes on deep in K'kree territory remains something of a mystery to outsiders.

The K'kree are militant herbivores who would not tolerate meat-eaters serving them in a military capacity. Indeed, the concept would inspire horror and terror – doing so would put the meat-eaters in a position where they could slaughter their clients as soon as they got hungry. Rational arguments about the unwillingness of other species to eat sentient people make no impression here; the K'kree aversion goes soul-deep and cannot be overcome by logic.

Thus the only non-K'kree mercenaries that will be encountered – other than those operating covertly against the Steppelords of the Two Thousand Worlds – are either naturally herbivores or follow a strict no-meat diet. The K'kree can smell if someone has consumed meat of any kind in the past few weeks and would react violently towards any covert meat-eater they detected. This is a factor that must be borne in mind by mercenaries whose clients intend to operate in the Two Thousands Worlds or close to it.

Non-K'kree mercenaries are collectively known as Kri Grak!r, which translates in Galanglic as ‘protectors-not-of-the-herds’. They are uncommon but sometimes considered useful, particularly when operating in the territory of alien species. K'kree are large and must travel in groups to avoid a level of loneliness, which can lead to insanity. This is not conducive to covertly observing an enemy installation or carrying out sabotage, so non-K'kree may be useful.

To some extent this applies to conflicts between K'kree groups as well; guards will be on the lookout for a warband of K'kree, not a lone primate crawling slowly through the undergrowth or remaining alone in a hide for long enough that a K'kree would go mad. Indeed, K'kree are prone to a ‘conclusive assumption’ that a small space cannot hold an enemy if no-one has entered or left for a lengthy period. In addition to their need for company K'kree are immensely claustrophobic. These assumptions have been exploited by non-K'kree often enough that training is provided to warriors who may face non-K'kree infiltration. Its effectiveness varies considerably, however, making the use of outsiders a useful gambit in some situations.

Kri Grak!r make most K'kree nervous and must have proven their loyalty over a lengthy period before permitted to bear arms in the presence of any K'kree. This is reflected by the unit’s Reputation. A unit with REP 5 or less will not be permitted to bear arms in the presence of any friendly K'kree and must ceremonially surrender weapons upon returning to base. The arming of such a unit is a matter of great formality and dire oaths taken under the guns of K'kree guards. A unit with REP 6+ is not required to surrender weapons but is not permitted to bear them in the presence of a K'kree, whose SOC is higher than the unit’s REP, except under desperate conditions. Even then it has been known for Kri Grak!r who valiantly defended their clanlord to be executed for being armed in his presence. Such is the nature of Kri Grak!r service that many would accept this as just and necessary.

This requirement applies only to the client served by the Kri Grak!r or to great and important figures such as a Steppelord. Kri Grak!r are of course permitted to bear arms against an enemy of their clanlord-client but would be expected to fling down their guns mid-battle and abase themselves if a suitably high-status K'kree unconnected with the conflict were to appear. For example, if two clanlords were fighting and their

Steppelord's representative entered the battle area to mediate, all Kri Grak!r would be expected to down their arms immediately. In the case of a meeting between two clanlords, the decision not to down arms would be seen as a calculated and very serious insult as it implies more than potential enmity – in this case the client of the Kri Grak!r is effectively stating his non-K'kree mercenaries are of higher status than his rival.

K'kree do sometimes serve as mercenaries of a sort. A clanlord might loan out some of his clan's forces to another, usually in return for a favour or gift rather than a grubby cash-for-soldiers deal such as those made by other races. If on a short-term basis this is merely an arrangement between clanlords but some clans generate considerable income by bolstering the forces of their allies. As noted above, this is not seen the same as mercenary service and is more feudal in nature. Effectively the clanlord places a force at his ally's disposal, on an ostensibly voluntary basis, and receives gifts in return. There is an unspoken going rate for such service, which is not all that different from the mercenary trade elsewhere but any suggestion it is the same thing would be considered deeply offensive.

An impoverished noble might also choose to pledge service to a more important leader on a temporary basis. This is a curious mix of honourable service and disgrace, as it is an admission the noble cannot support his family and entourage as an independent. The warriors of the serving noble, and the noble himself as their leader, become subordinate to the client in far more than military matters. The family (or an entire clan in some cases) are designated Ukirr Gilti, or 'honourable hostages', for the duration of their service. Their new master has an obligation to protect them as his own but may also use their forces as he wishes. This can result in a period of service, until the noble can get back on his feet or the absorption of the whole group after its leaders and warriors are cynically expended.

Ukirr Gilti are not paid as mercenaries but treated as second-class (although honourable) clan members and receive a fair share of everything their client-clan earns. Warriors are not normally considered cannon-fodder any more than the client's own troops, unless there is a plan to get rid of them and absorb their families. This tends to happen as the result of a powerplay, where a noble forces another into servitude in order to legally destroy him. More commonly the Ukirr Gilti will eventually be able to go their own way and will end their service. At that point it is more common than not for the newly released family to request membership of their former client's clan and be accepted as full-status members. This is the risk run when accepting Ukirr Gilti status – it can lead to renewed independence, honourable membership of a respected noble's clan or complete disaster.

CONFLICT IN THE TWO THOUSAND WORLDS

The Steppelords and their subordinates all owe allegiance to the Grand Steppelord of the Two Thousand Worlds but this does not guarantee a harmonious society. Conflict occurs between Steppelords – who govern entire planets – and between the lesser nobles who lead clans, herds and families. In general, conflicts are ignored by those not affected by them and tolerated if they cause only minor disruption. Those pursuing an armed dispute are wise to ensure it remains within acceptable limits or to secure the approval of a senior noble who can overrule any attempt to close down the conflict.

Disputes are typically about territory or precedence, which can often amount to the same thing. The majority of clanlords or Steppelords are not overly concerned if their subordinates fight over their favour, or if assets change hands after a conflict, so long as their herd remains strong and effective. If fighting between subordinate nobles becomes too destructive – or if a favoured underling is losing – the overlords will order a stop. They may even intervene directly, although this is rare as a noble who disobeys a command to cease hostilities will be disgraced and probably outcast.

Conflicts are usually limited, either explicitly or because the factions involved follow the traditions of their people. This does not mean fighting is not savage but it will be confined to a particular area or involve only a certain number of personnel. Escalation can occur in any conflict; sometimes clans are drawn into what started as a family dispute and even whole worlds may be pitted against one another. This is rare however, since the nature of K'kree society tends to cause escalation to start at the top rather than the bottom. That is to say, if clanlords or Steppelords want a conflict to expand, it might well. On the other hand, if it is not in their interests that a lower-level conflict become larger, they will take measures to prevent it.

MERCENARY LIFE IN THE TWO THOUSAND WORLDS

There really is no such thing as a mercenary lifestyle in the Two Thousand Worlds, or rather all subjects of the Steppelords have a near-identical lifestyle. A noble in temporary service lives as a K'kree noble; his family and followers live exactly as they would if they were normal clan members. For an overlord to treat the Ukirr Gilti with anything less than the respect due to them would be a great disgrace, so whilst an Ukirr

Gilti noble (and thus his household) may be inferior in status to full clan members they are still honoured, respected and treated as custom requires. In turn, they honour their overlord's clan as if it were their own – which it is, until they are released from service.

CLIENTS

Other than K'kree nobles of whatever rank, the only possible clients within the Two Thousand Worlds would be one of the subject races that have accepted K'kree overlordship or had it forced upon them. Even then, the activities of these races are closely monitored and often heavily restricted. The use of meat-eating mercenaries would result in reprisals against a subject race, so the same restrictions apply as to mercenaries serving the K'kree themselves. The only exception would be an open rebellion, which is likely to end with the extermination of everyone involved. It is thus safe to say that there are no clients for mercenaries who do not observe a strict no-meat diet and few for those who do. Outsiders might be used in a clan war and if so they will not be as well regarded as K'kree forces. This translates to being used as cannon-fodder, making the Two Thousand Worlds a hazardous place to operate.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

There is little regional variation within the Two Thousand Worlds. The K'kree have deep-rooted traditions and follow them wherever they may be. The only significant variation is near the borders of K'kree space, where outsiders might be considered useful for operations against other non-K'kree.

DEALERS AND AGENCIES

There are significant differences between the Two Thousand Worlds and all other societies and the realm of mercenary armament is no different. Licensing agencies as such do not exist, although there are officials who carry out a similar function. Some merchants specialise in arms manufacture or sales and will generally sell to any approved client. In practice this means that if the sale is approved (or not vetoed) by a clanlord or Steppelord it will be as simple to buy weapons as any other goods.

Clanlord Kigruuhka K'kree Official

Clanlord Kigruuhka is charged with coordinating the activities of mercenary forces along a section of the Two Thousand Worlds' border. His superiors feel it is expedient to use outsiders to do their dirty work; in part

to distance the K'kree from whatever action must be taken, also in part to conserve valuable K'kree warriors for more important or fitting tasks.

Kigruuhka will not deal directly with any non-K'kree but has a chain of intermediaries consisting of K'kree at the upper levels and various races performing any work that requires contact with outsiders. Meat-eaters are not usually tolerated, although little effort is made to ensure mercenaries meet the required dietary standard if they are operating outside the Two Thousand Worlds – which is almost always the case. Typically a mercenary force is told it is a condition of their contract that they do not eat meat and are then left to enforce this rule – or not – as they will.

Those recruited for covert operations against non-K'kree are not subject to this rule as an attack by vegetarian mercenaries would point straight back to the K'kree. Indeed, many of the operations overseen by Kigruuhka are against opponents or potential opponents of the Two Thousand Worlds. In many cases operations are undertaken openly but non-K'kree mercenaries are also used to destabilise nearby worlds and open the way for annexation either on some pretext such as 'restoring order' or simple conquest. In such situations the mercenaries may not know who the end client is but they will have been approved by Clanlord Kigruuhka whether they realise it or not.

Clanlord Kigruuhka does not have high standards regarding the mercenaries he uses. He has a use for scum, and even incompetents, and treats forces in a manner suited to his perception of them. Those he despises are given unpleasant or excessively dangerous tasks or deliberately sent to fail a mission if that suits the Steppelords' current agenda. More professional units are well looked after, although they may never realise they are working for the K'kree.

For those openly recruited, a post-mission inspection is the norm. This is never conducted by Kigruuhka in person but there will be K'kree present who are particularly good at detecting the merest whiff of a carnivore. Units that have failed to enforce the no-meat stipulation may – if they are lucky – find that a minor clause in their contract permits Kigruuhka to withhold part or all of their payment. More blatant meat-eaters might simply be gunned down at a word of command from the inspection leader. This is rare but has happened often enough that there are at least rumours on the mercenary grapevine.

The actual missions assigned by Clanlord Kigruuhka are much the same as anywhere else, with the exception of an underlying pro-K'kree agenda possible ulterior motives. Mercenaries may also attract the attention of

local intelligence services, who have learned to predict the next moves of the Steppelords by observing where they send their expendable outsider mercenaries and what they order them to do.

Clan Trira

K'Kree Arms Merchants

Clan Trira is one of the few K'kree clans operating close enough to the border to buy and sell weapons on both sides. K'kree-made weapons are generally unsuitable for non-K'kree, although adapted versions are sometimes produced for Kri Grak!r units. These are still rather awkward to use and require long practice to handle as effectively as a weapon built for the user's own species. Most commonly Clan Trira will provide weapons more suited to the users but some clanlords insist that their Kri Grak!r be equipped as similarly to K'kree warriors as possible.

The clan is known primarily for small arms and support equipment, since vehicles and artillery are normally dealt with by specialists. They will sell to outsiders providing the usual requirements are met, which means the people the clan deals with must not be meat-eaters and must show proper deference to the clan's representatives. It is highly likely that the clan uses its arms sales as a political tool along the border, selling to those it favours or offering deals that come with strings attached.

Clan Trira requires all clients to provide regular briefings on what they have been doing and against whom. This is an open secret and correctly assumed to be part of a wider intelligence-gathering operation. In fact, the clan's trade scouts are employed primarily to monitor the military marketplace along the borders. Most representatives operating outside the Two Thousand Worlds are non-K'kree and few openly announce their allegiance. Bland fronts are common, with many representatives posing as independent brokers.

Campaigning-Force Kaxarrkak

K'Kree Mercenary Unit

Campaigning-Force Kaxarrkak is, in conventional terms, a reinforced battalion-sized formation operating along the borders of the Two Thousand Worlds. It is unusual in that it contains both K'kree warriors and a human Kri Grak!r contingent. The force is renowned

for its ferocity in the field, especially against G'naak (meat-eaters or more literally, 'vermin') and may be associated with the dissident Lords of Thunder faction. The Lords of Thunder are considered extreme even by K'kree standards and often send their forces to fight G'naak in someone else's war, just for the sake of exterminating vermin.

Campaigning-Force Kaxarrkak fits the description of these units. Its commander does not seem to care what contracts he takes on so long as the enemy is G'naak and there is a prospect of gratuitous bloodshed. The force is unsuited to security or similar roles where a degree of discretion is necessary but has proven effective in the assault or general warfighting role.

Organisation is along standard K'kree lines, built around Fighting-Bands of 4–10 individuals grouped into Warring-Bands each led by a minor noble. These Warring-Leaders typically command 3–8 Fighting-Bands plus supporting robots and form the basic tactical units of the force. Multiple Warring-Bands form a Battle-Force equivalent to a reinforced company, commanded by a Battling-Captain, who in turn answers to the Campaigning-Captain in overall charge.

Most K'Kree troops are infantry, in the sense that they operate on their own four hooves in the manner of cavalry, with robotic platforms providing support and heavy weapons capability. The human contingent travels in lightly armoured wheeled vehicles but usually dismounts to fight on foot. The Battling-Captains of each sub-unit have large armoured platforms crewed by multiple K'Kree as their battle transports, acting as a mobile weapons platform, and the Campaigning-Captain has a more impressive one.

The force is formally divided into five components, corresponding to the traditional Head, Body, Loins and Hands of a K'kree battle array. Warring-Bands are sometimes swapped between these sub-units on a temporary basis but for the most part each is optimised for its primary role in action.

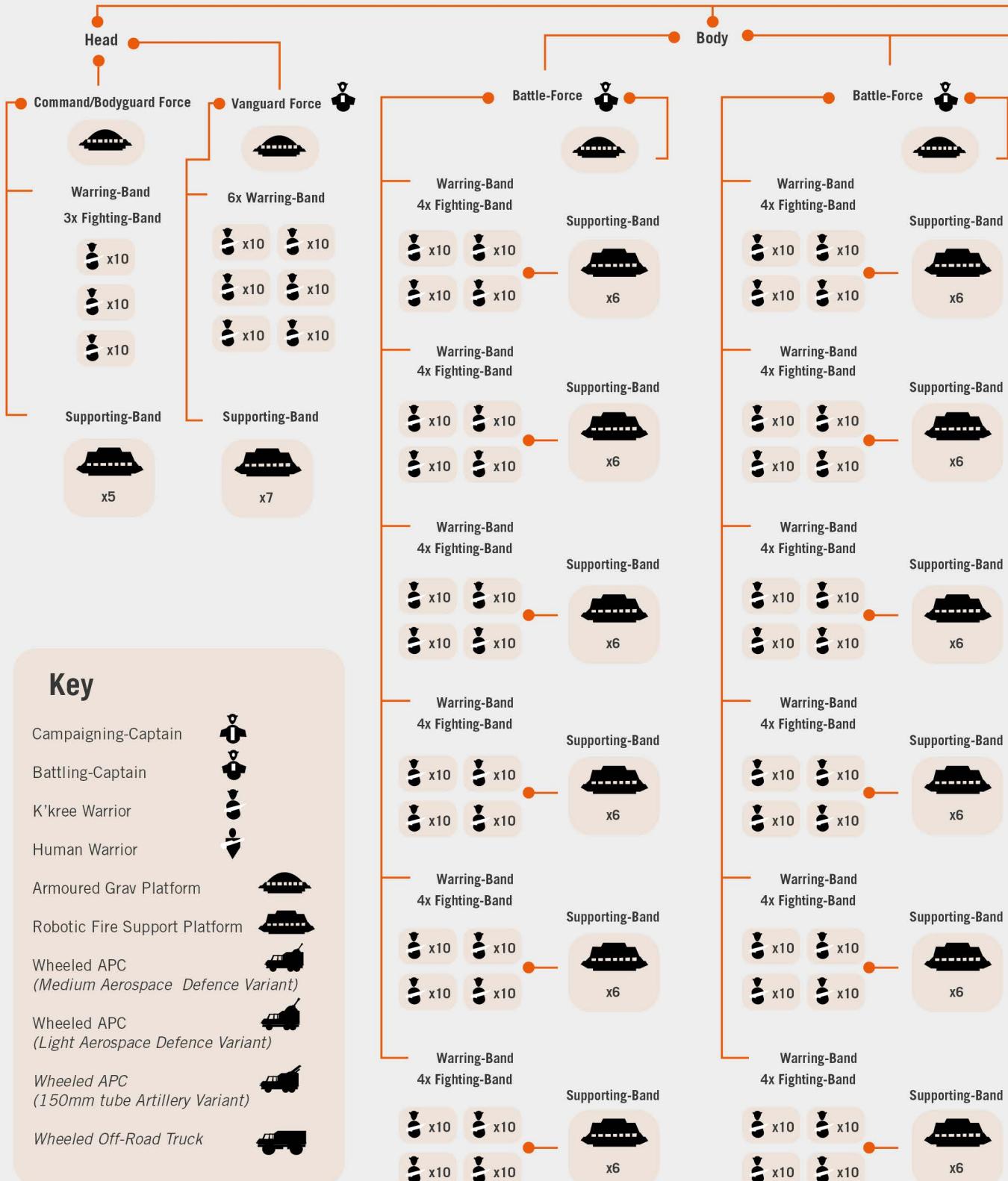
The Head is the command formation and vanguard of the force. It contains the best warriors and most potent direct-fire weapons. The overall force second-in-command leads the Head from the front, with the Campaigning-Captain normally located at the rear of the Head formation to direct the following and flanking units.

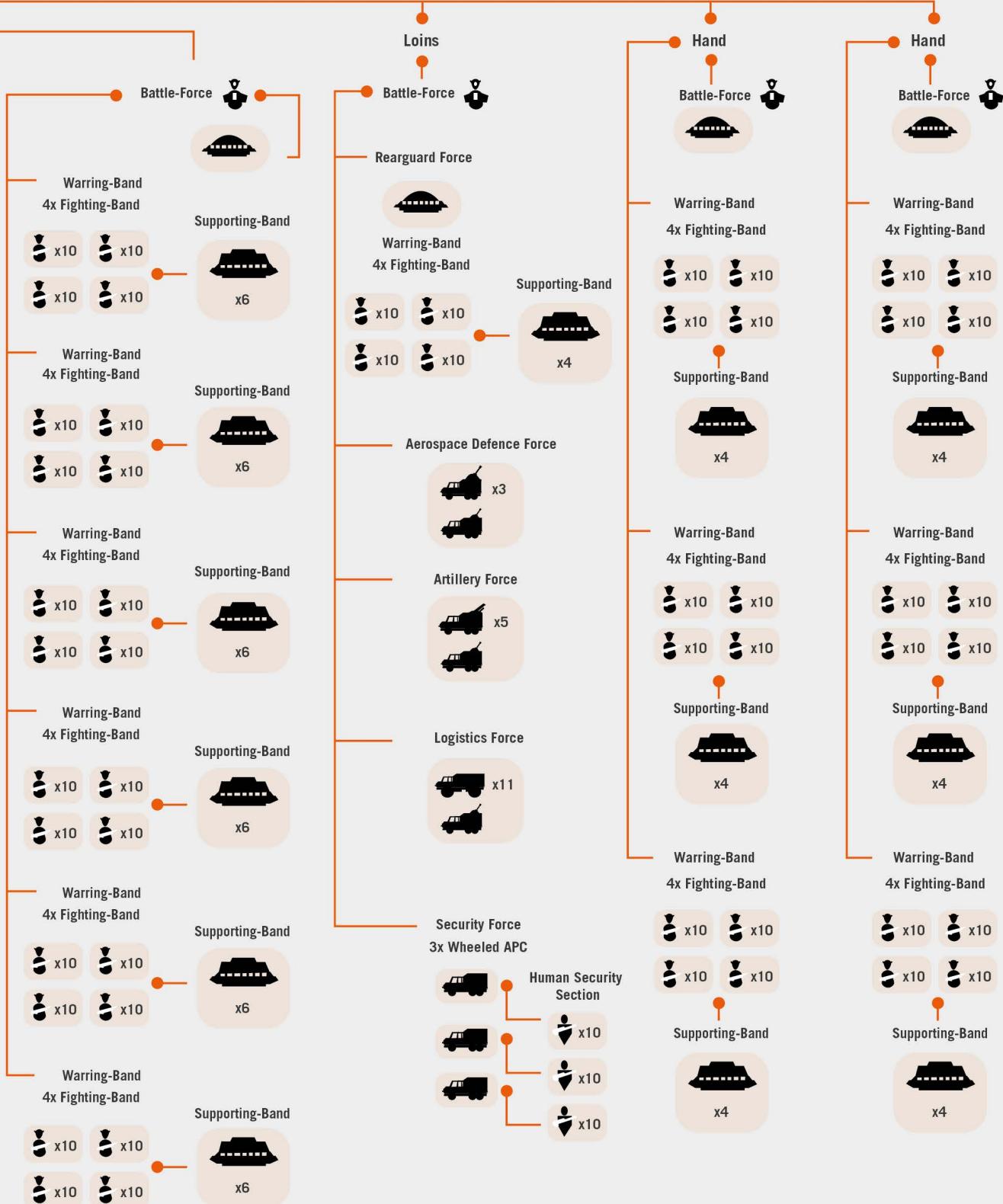
Clan Trira Dealer Profile

Dealer	Max. TL Available	Infantry	Artillery	Combat Vehicles	Aerospace	Support and Specialist
Clan Trira	10	Quality	None	None	None	Basic

Campaigning-Force Kaxarrak

(Campaigning-Captain Kaxarrak Commanding)





The Body contains most of the unit's direct-combat forces. It is led by a Battling-Captain who fights aboard an armoured grav platform along with his immediate bodyguards and companions. The remainder of the force is mostly K'kree infantry with robotic support platforms mixed in among them.

The rearmost of the main force segments is termed the Loins. Its primary direct-combat contingent is made up of K'kree and robotic support platforms commanded by a Battling-Captain. This force would form the rearguard under most circumstances or act as a final reserve. The remainder of the Loins is made up of human troops who crew and protect the force's logistics assets, aerospace defence and artillery weapons. The human troops are capable of fighting but normally held in reserve as a security element for their weapons and vehicles.

The two Hands are lightly equipped flanking/screening units composed of K'kree and robotic supports. Each has a Battling-Captain in charge and can be expected to operate semi-independently at need.

Typically, the whole force remains together as a herd rather than establishing a base for supporting elements and operates in a highly mobile manner. K'kree units are considered to be Mounted in terms of mobility and can undertake a rapid advance or charge over most terrain. The usual manner of combat is straightforward; the Hands begin skirmishing and establish the enemy's strength and position whilst the Loins halt to begin artillery harassment or conduct aerospace defence. The Head then engages, with additional forces from the Body fed in to the Head or Hands as appropriate.

Tactically, the unit is a collection of small fighting bands that cooperate and support one another in an informal and fluid manner. Aggression borders on the reckless at the best of times but this is tempered by an ability to withdraw or launch a flanking attack with minimal preparation. The force's leaders ride atop their grav platforms, with gunners blazing away from the sides, inspiring their troops to ever-greater deeds of bloodshed against the hated G'naak. Mercy is never granted to meat-eaters, although the force is known to fight honourably and with surprising restraint against other K'kree.

The Campaigning-Force has a good reputation for tenacity in the right kind of action and can conduct harassment or skirmishing operations in open country with great effectiveness. Direct assault on a defended position may be costly but the combination of heavy fire support and extreme aggression can carry the unit through. Relations with allied formations depend largely

on whether they are K'kree or not. Outsiders, even non-meat-eaters, are largely ignored. Cooperation tends to be minimal, ensuring the force is best used as a blunt instrument with more adaptable formations exploiting the chaos. The unit has the Skirmishers trait.

Campaigning-Force Kaxarrkak is likely to be encountered as opposition, rather than an ally, and has minimal opportunities for non-K'kree. It is typical of K'kree ground combat units encountered throughout their space and outside its fringes.

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Campaigning-Force Kaxarrkak	—
Unit Size	Reinforced Battalion	—
Unit Type	K'kree Infantry	—
Unit TL	9	+1
Mobility Type	Mounted	+2
Combat	12	+2
Bombardment	3	-1
Aerospace	4	-1
Support	3	-1
CEI or DEI	9	+1
Morale	13	+2
Reputation	9	+1

CONFLICTS

With virtually no opportunities for non-K'kree mercenaries inside the Two Thousand Worlds, the most likely contact with the K'kree will be along the borders with non-aligned space. K'kree can be encountered as mercenaries in this region or may be in the service of their parent clans and herds. The Lords of Thunder are particularly prone to launch attacks on nearby meat-eating societies but mainstream K'kree have also been known to do this.

THE RENKARD CAMPAIGN

The Lords of Thunder are an extremist faction, even by the standards of the K'kree, who were driven from the Two Thousand Worlds to settle in the Luretir!girr sector. From there, they have gradually pushed spinward, overwhelming worlds one at a time and adding them to their domain. Populations have converted to

vegetarianism or been exterminated and in some cases were not offered the choice. Eventually the Lords of Thunder reached the boundaries of the Renkard Union, a human state at the trailing end of Gateway. After a period of standoff and skirmishing they advanced into Renkard space, overrunning the capital at Silest.

The Renkard Union had requested help for many years before the K'kree invasion and received it from a variety of different sources. In addition, the Union bankrupted itself hiring mercenaries and building defences. These measures may have been at least somewhat successful, since the K'kree advance has halted for the time being. It is only a matter of time before the rump of the Renkard Union is overrun and the Lords of Thunder begin their advance across Gateway. There are many organisations and governments that would like to impede their plans but are not willing to act directly in case they attract the ire of this powerful interstellar state.

Mercenaries provide a useful means of creating opposition whilst remaining at arm's length, so there is no shortage of money on offer to any unit willing to take the job. It is, however, a dangerous one. A unit caught planetside when the Lords of Thunder invade is unlikely to be treated mercifully, so defence is an all-or-nothing prospect. Other worlds are less threatened but see incursions by K'kree forces or non-K'kree acting for them. Some of these worlds are becoming war zones or suffering economic damage that will make a takeover much easier when the Lords of Thunder decide to move.

THE LORDS OF THUNDER

The Lords of Thunder will happily pay G'naak to fight other G'naak if they can do so through a third party. Mercenaries may be offered a contract to start trouble or escalate it, or simply to war down the target world's defences. Those same worlds will be hiring mercenaries to protect themselves, creating a proxy war between the Lords of Thunder and their prospective targets even if no K'kree are in evidence. Opposition in these conflicts is likely to take the form of insurgents, local forces or whatever mercenaries the Lords of Thunder have hired.

If K'kree are engaged on a world they will probably be rogue elements whose leaders want to make a name for themselves or just like killing G'naak. Some may be on legitimate business for the Lords of Thunder, insomuch as they may be attacking a world government or organisation that has slighted or otherwise offended the Lords. Many are simply looking for trouble, so the reasons behind a

conflict may not be discernible. Due to this, negotiations are unlikely to succeed but the K'kree will withdraw if they face strong opposition.

THE RENKARD WORLDS

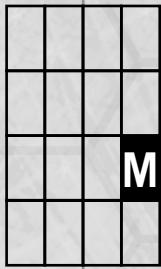
The term 'Renkard' has come to refer to any world threatened in the short to medium term by the Lords of Thunder, whether it belongs to the Renkard Union or not. The forces fielded by these governments can vary considerably. Many now have large militia movements – legal and otherwise – dedicated to preparing for invasion. This can sometimes make the situation worse, as militias fragment with internal discord or fight over supplies and weaponry. Some militias are a front for organised crime, in league with criminals, or dedicated to overthrowing their government and installing a 'more suitable' one. This might mean a government better prepared to resist the Lords of Thunder or one that intends to somehow avoid invasion.

The situation on these worlds is rather complex. Whilst there is no shortage of work for mercenaries it can be difficult to determine which side a client is on and mercenaries might be drawn into local politics. A unit might be offered payment to simply go somewhere else and not come back. When this happens, it is unusually at the instigation of the Lords of Thunder and might be seen as a token of respect. In reality, paying more effective mercenaries to leave the area is part of a strategy that also includes paying incompetent units to undertake missions they are incapable of completing, contributing to the instability of the region.

Summary

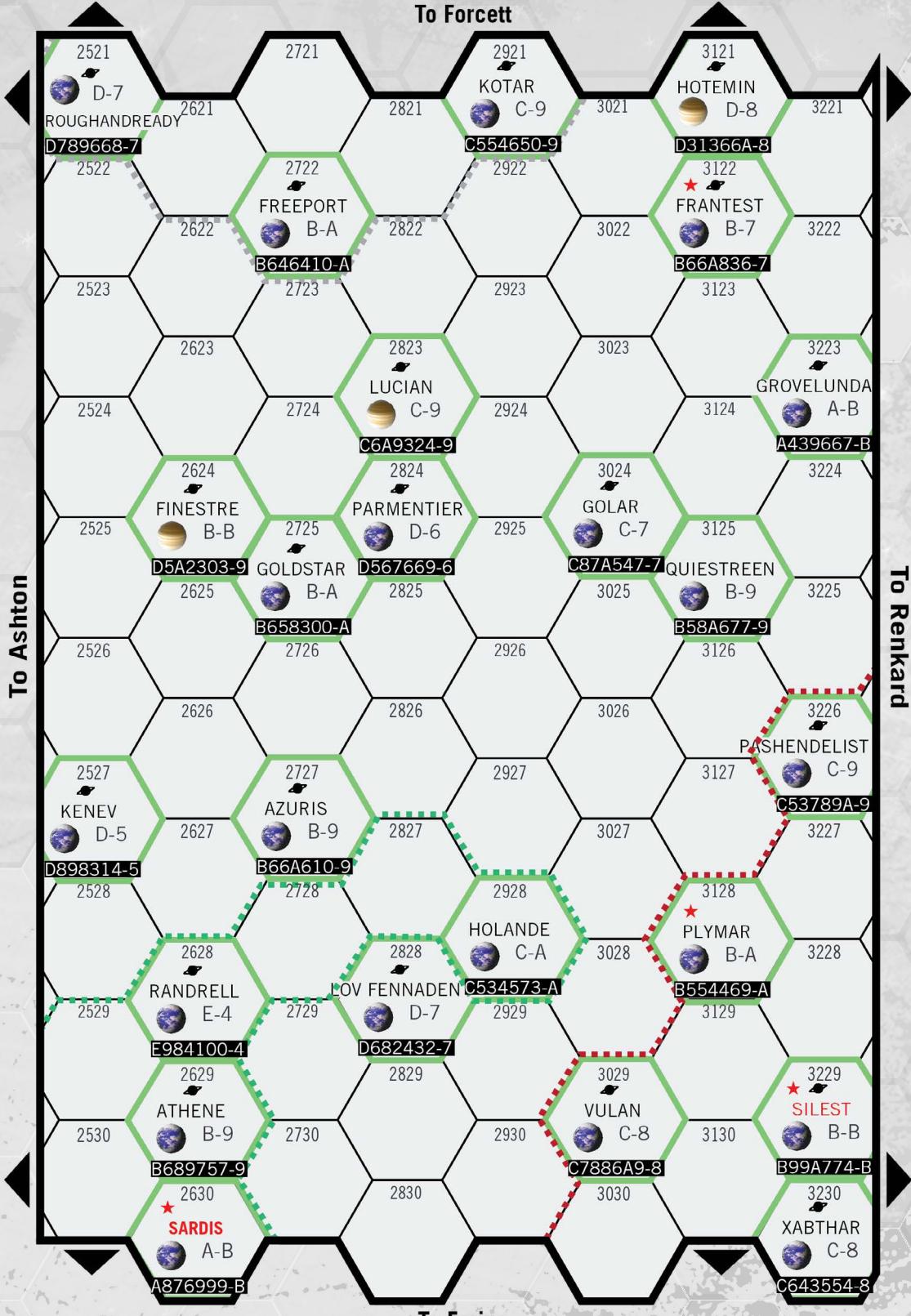
The situation in and around the Renkard Union is chaotic but there are opportunities. Small forces might be sent into the territory of the Lords of Thunder to raid or gather information, as might starmercs. Extraction of key personnel – if still alive – from the former capital is also a possibility. These are missions for small, highly skilled units that have made preparations to avoid being detected or intend to deceive the defenders.

Others may find themselves fighting in one of the intermittent conflicts of the Renkard Worlds, perhaps trying to support a government under attack from militias or assisting in making preparations for 'the big one'. When invasion begins, units that do not have access to a ship will be trapped on-planet and must either defeat the invaders or escape. A desperate guerrilla campaign is possible but the odds would not be good.



Gateway

RIFTIN SUBSECTOR



Gas Giant

Naval Base

B-6 Starport Class & Tech Level

Secure System

Amber Zone

X-boat Routes

Renkard Union

Megusard Corporate

Swanfei Free Worlds

Asteroids (no atmosphere/water)

Planet (dry)

Planet (water present)

HIVE FEDERATION

Outsiders typically assume the Hive Federation is a stable and well-ordered place, with few opportunities for mercenaries. This is a false impression, created in part by Hiver propaganda. The Hivers know very well that a state which seems to have no internal conflict projects an aura of untouchability, and that the converse is also true. In fact, there is considerable internal conflict at any given time. Outsiders rarely hear of it and most is non-violent in any case. However, there is always work for mercenaries in the Hive Federation.

The Federation consists of a great many races, all under guidance of the Hivers. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the region ruled by the notoriously manipulative Hivers contains many races content to perform a single role within the Federation and this tendency towards specialisation has served the Federation's citizens well. Most groundside military action is the preserve of the Ithklur, a warrior race co-opted by the Hivers after many years of quarantine. The Ithklur are enthusiastic about warfare and certainly effective, although not the solution to every military problem. The Hivers are entirely willing to work with external mercenaries and there are some who think this – like everything else the Hivers do – is in fact a manipulation. As the theory goes, reminding the Ithklur that they do not have a monopoly on violence is part of the Hiver plan to keep them in their place.

Whatever the reasoning, Hivers will use mercenaries like any other tool – if they seem suitable to the task they will be hired. Hivers work with almost any race and do not seem to care much about the ideology of those they hire. So long as the mercenaries get the job done and do not cause additional problems the Hivers are content.

INTERNAL CONFLICT IN THE FEDERATION

Although physically averse to violence, Hivers are quite willing to engage in conflict providing someone else does the fighting. Indeed, the highly individual nature of Hiver society creates a tendency towards conflict as one master manipulator's plans interfere with others. Usually conflicts are kept at a safe distance – it is rare for a Hiver to go directly after another. Instead it is played out by proxy

using political, economic and/or military means. Mercenaries are perfect for this, especially if led to believe they are working for someone other than their devious client.

Conflicts are typically small and focussed with mercenaries used to seize assets or interfere with movements of personnel or items. Plans are often convoluted and indirect. A mercenary unit might be sent to stir up trouble on a world so that the Hiver leaders there are distracted, causing them to miss a business opportunity, which then forces the redeployment of funds... all of which eventually causes the plans of another Hiver to be derailed by changing economic conditions. Some Hivers are clever enough to pull something like this off but most only think they are. The result is that a complex scheme can have unexpected consequences, leaving the mercenaries in the middle of a rapidly changing situation with no real idea what is going on.

This lack of clear information is a fact of life for mercenaries working in the Federation. Usually it is enough to carry out the mission and collect the payment; trying to figure out who the client really is and what they are hoping to achieve is a route to madness and paranoia. Mercenaries who penetrate the fog of obfuscation and cross-cutting agendas may end up as players in the same game as their clients. Indeed, a few legendary commanders became rich by creating a situation in which they commanded the highest possible fee for the smallest amount of risk. This is not unique to the Federation but is a much more difficult undertaking there.

MERCENARY LIFE IN THE FEDERATION

Life for mercenaries is much the same in the Hive Federation as elsewhere, with a few exceptions. Hivers are averse to physical violence and wary of those who make it their profession, whilst at the same time considering them useful. It is not uncommon for mercenaries to find they are having troubles with accommodation or mundane living requirements, which may necessitate a change of location. Sometimes this just happens, like everywhere else, but often it is

because local Hiver leaders are uncomfortable with having mercenaries so close and want them to relocate. The Hiver obsession with manipulation ensures this is never simple or straightforward and mercenaries can never be entirely sure if a chain of apparent bad luck is not a manipulation intended to push them into doing something a Hiver wants.

The general populace tend to be more accepting of mercenaries, largely due to the tendency towards specialisation. There is a collective mindset, carefully nurtured by the Hiver ruling class, that decisions made by society's leaders – the Hivers – must be correct and made for good reasons; if a band of heavily armed strangers moves into a vacant building and the rulers do not move them on, it must be acceptable for them to be there.

Recruiting can be a problem within the Federation. The underlying culture is one of racial specialisation and contentment with that role, which reduces the number of people who could even conceive of being a mercenary. Those who come from martial cultures such as the Ithklur have no such issues but mercenaries have traditionally recruited among people who want a different life to mainstream norms and those are far less common in the Federation.

As a result, mercenaries tend to be recruited from a small number of Federation races, or from worlds outside its borders, and tend to live within but slightly apart from mainstream society. They are valued for what they can do – or more accurately, for what any given Hiver thinks it can use them for – and respected so long as they do not cause needless trouble. At the same time, mercenaries represent not only the potential for violence but also a more unruly element than most citizens, which makes Hivers nervous.

Nervous Hivers will work to either move the mercenaries on or find them something to do that benefits the Hiver. This makes finding work a little easier than elsewhere, as it is in the interests of the rulers to keep the mercenaries busy – and unavailable to those that might use them to counter a Hiver's schemes – but the nature of missions can be unsatisfactory. Mercenaries may find themselves sent off on what is apparently a make-work assignment or stirring up trouble for another Hiver just to keep them off the market. This, and never knowing the whole truth about anything, makes mercenaries in the Federation a somewhat paranoid lot.

CLIENTS

The most likely client by far is a Hiver who thinks it is (or actually is) a master manipulator whose machinations shape society within and beyond the Federation. Groups will also hire mercenaries but there tends to be a single Hiver at the centre of any endeavour. It may be that several Hivers all think they are the instigator of an operation or that they can gain control of it once under way. This can lead to confused or contradictory orders, or a lack of clarity about the goals of the operation. This lack of clarity may manifest during the preparation or implementation of an operation but it may not become apparent until the mercenaries think they have completed their mission.

Another problem when working with Hivers is that those who believe they can shape society – in other words, those most likely to hire mercenaries – tend to believe that anyone can be persuaded to do anything. Nailing down the terms of an acceptable contract can be difficult and only a newcomer to the Hiver way of doing things would expect it to be honoured as written. An ambitious



Hiver simply cannot help but try to manipulate everyone at every opportunity. Thus the mercenaries can expect to be renegotiating their deal with the client right up to the point they receive final payment.

On some occasions this is not the end; some Hivers will try to add unrelated tasks to the one just completed. Clever mercenaries sometimes make use of this malleability, making their own redefinitions and alterations as they go. The experience of working with Hivers has been compared to negotiating a minefield in dense fog. Mercenaries who realise the client is equally blind may be able to take advantage but that does mean playing a master manipulator at its own game.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

Despite the many cross-cutting agendas of manipulators, the Federation is generally homogenous in terms of culture. Mercenaries might find themselves serving all manner of causes but the way they are viewed and treated does not vary much. Changes, when and where they occur, are more to do with prevailing attitudes at the time rather than by region and these are usually driven by the impression made by prominent Hivers; if an impressive success is scored by use of a surgical military strike, other Hivers may try to emulate this even if the method is not ideal for what they are trying to achieve. On another occasion a manipulator's scheme might fail due to a mistake made by mercenaries, causing their use to fall into disfavour for a time.

DEALERS AND AGENCIES

The Federation has no real equivalent to the licensing agencies that exist elsewhere. A mercenary unit succeeds by its ability to convince potential clients it is worth hiring. Actual competence is only part of this process; a reputation must be built and maintained. A semi-decent unit headed by a skilled con artist will be more successful in the short to medium term than a highly skilled one that does not play the promotion game well. The bubble will burst sooner or later, however.

If a unit prone to faking competence does not self-destruct due to its own actions it will attract the ire of disappointed clients. These are likely to be Hivers whose grand plans have gone awry due to the unit's over-selling of its abilities. Causing damage to a manipulator's reputation is about the worst offence imaginable, so the unit will face retribution. This might be direct, in the

form of opposition to the unit's plans but is far more likely to be convoluted and clever-for-its-own-sake. Typically a disappointed Hiver will seek to destroy the unit's reputation and humiliate its members and will go on doing so for as long as the project seems interesting. This might be many years and occasionally a Hiver will make it their life's work to punish someone for a relatively minor slight.

The converse is also true; manipulators pleased with work done by their mercenaries may be willing to endorse them. Having influential people willing to vouch for the force is certainly useful, especially those with a reputation for being knowledgeable about military or political matters, but there is also the risk that a Hiver might endorse a bad unit in the hope that a rival hires them. This can result in surprisingly lucrative contracts going to a band of no-hoppers if it suits a Hiver's plans.

Overall, there are no rules or laws about who can or cannot form a mercenary unit – not as such, anyway. Conditions within the Federation mean that some areas or worlds may forbid mercenary operations or restrict recruiting but like everything else, this custom is malleable and can be altered by a suitably talented manipulator. Success in the marketplace is much more likely if the unit can attract the favourable attention of influential figures. Fitting well with the plans of a major manipulator is the shortest and easiest route to success but is a tricky path to tread.

The Military Operations Club of Othrerta

Topical clubs are a major facet of Hiver society, consisting of Hivers with similar interests. Thousands exist, most of which are very niche or of minor importance, whilst some of the major clubs become leaders and an inspiration to others operating in their field. In some cases a major topical club becomes the body that judges the activities of others. So it is with the Military Operations Club of Othrerta.

Outsiders might expect this body to pass judgement on the lawfulness or necessity of mercenary operations but that is not its main function. Sometimes the senior members of the club will rule on such matters but for the most part the club is interested in the effectiveness and elegance of the operation. It will deliberate and comment on the cleverness of the client in using mercenaries, as opposed to some other way of obtaining a desired result, and the effectiveness of the Hiver's plans. In short, the Military Operations Club of Othrerta is not a licensing agency or a governing body for the use of mercenaries, it is an awards committee interested primarily in how mercenaries are used.

Saxuganto Dealer Profile

Dealer	Max. TL Available	Infantry	Artillery	Combat Vehicles	Aerospace	Support and Specialist
Saxuganto	13	Basic	Quality	Quality	Quality	Basic

The Military Operations Club of Othrerta regulates the use of mercenaries to some extent but not formally or directly. Instead it exerts what might be considered peer pressure on those who use mercenaries, ridiculing any who are inept or clumsy in their actions. A Hiver whose mercenaries cause unintended casualties or produce unexpected consequences will be held up as an example of ineptitude and will lose status. Clumsy use of mercenaries is therefore indirectly censured but judgement is for the most part passed on how well the Hiver executed its plans rather than the necessity of the operation.

The Interstellar Trading Companionship of Saxuganto

The Interstellar Trading Companionship of Saxuganto, usually shortened to just Saxuganto, is a body similar in many ways to a trading company elsewhere but with some characteristics unusual outside the Hive Federation. It is led by a group of Hivers, whose membership fluctuates over time as interests change. New or returning members add their own assets to what might be described as the Saxuganto brand but retain ownership and take their assets with them when they leave.

Most of the Hivers within Saxuganto are traders, either operating one or more starships or working out of a starport. Some have different roles, which contribute to the overall success of the group, such as manufacturers or diplomats. Others are members-of-convenience pursuing their own plans. Of these, some operate under the guise of being primarily traders whilst others are members due to an alignment of goals rather than a mutual interest in trading.

Saxuganto operates much like a trading company, at least most of the time. Occasionally it meddles in the affairs of local worlds or other groups, either to improvise trading conditions or pursue some goal of its members. For the past decade Saxuganto has operated primarily in the military and heavy-industry sectors, supplying hardware and weaponry to clients over a wide area. It is likely Saxuganto's members have stirred up trouble to create a marketplace or influenced local leaders to undertake expensive infrastructure upgrades.

In the military field, Saxuganto has access to a variety of manufacturers but is known for the quality of its combat and support grav vehicles more than anything else. Aerospace defence and artillery weapons are available as independent systems but for the most part come attached to a light grav-mobile chassis. Wheeled or tracked vehicles are much less common than grav vehicles and may not be available in the same quantities as Saxuganto's core lines.

UNITS

Mercenary units in the Federation tend to be organised along conventional lines if influenced by outsider societies such as the Third Imperium or the Solomani Confederation. Those drawing upon warrior cultures from within the Federation may use their species' traditional organisation instead.

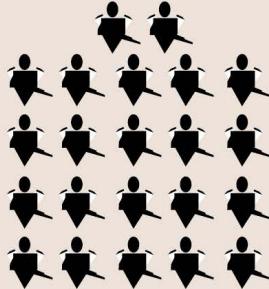
Dahzoklo Company, Specialist

Dahzoklo is a company-sized unit comprised entirely of Ithklur a warrior people native to the Hive Federation. The majority of the ground troops in the service of the Federation are Ithklur and many more join independent units. Their reasons are more straightforward than with most species – Ithklur enjoy violence and seek fulfilment through it. Ithklur philosophy is actually quite complex but they prefer to accept what they are rather than trying to conform to someone else's ideals. The challenge and intensity of experience found in violent confrontation offers a chance for self-realisation and the Ithklur are not shy about admitting they enjoy it.

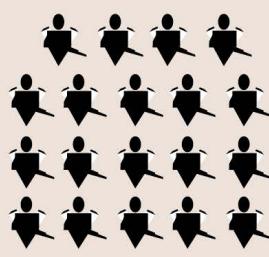
That is not to say the Ithklur are indiscriminate; quite the opposite. There is no challenge in destroying someone who cannot fight back and no self-realisation possible in an easy fight. By seeking out the most worthy opponents an Ithklur warrior can find the best in themselves and enemies that fight hard are respected in victory or defeat. Units in service to the Hivers are often called upon to take part in actions against weak foes, which offer little entertainment, which is one reason some Ithklur join the equivalent of mercenary formations. They take pay to make a living and replace equipment but evaluate missions on their merit as a challenge – interesting is better than lucrative to an Ithklur mercenary.

Dahzoklo

Leader's Fighting Group



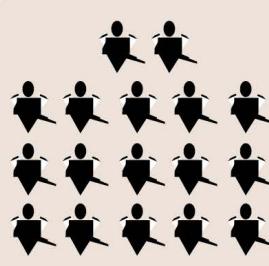
Fighting Group



Fighting Group



Climbing Group



Flying Group



Key

Ithklur Warrior



Dahzoklo is an Ithklur word that describes this unit's characteristics. It does not translate well into Galanglic and Ithklur who try to explain usually end up describing their unit as 'enlightened warriors seeking a suitably worthy foe'. Most mercenary Ithklur unit names translate this way, with the subtleties lost somewhere along the way. Be that as it may, Dahzoklo is a unit that specialises in hunting hard targets through urban terrain. Personnel are armed for combat against other infantry but everyone carries an anti-armour weapon.

favoured tactics vary between individuals. A sub-unit might contain a couple of Ithklur who like to plant mines and draw the enemy onto them, plus others who like missile launchers or plasma guns. There may be daredevils who yearn to jump onto a passing grav tank from an upper window and attach charges to the hull. There is no possibility for coordination among such disparate troops but cooperation takes place on an almost instinctive level. A missile team may loose a shot at

just the right moment to force an enemy grav vehicle to dodge behind a building, thus allowing an assault team to jump onto it, attach their charges, then drop off using grav parachutes. This is rarely planned or rehearsed and after-action debriefings can be frustrating. Commonly the missile gunners would confess they did not know their colleagues were in assault position but just thought 'it would be cool if they were'.

The personnel of Dahzoklo come across as amateurish to outsiders who do not understand the Ithklur psyche, however those who can see past the happy-go-lucky attitude recognise a deep understanding between unit members. One will set up a situation for another to exploit, working on the assumption that if they were that colleague they would hide in that building just there hoping someone sent a tank for them to destroy. There are those who question whether there may be telepathy involved but it seems more likely it is just a shared relish for exciting and memorable exploits.

The personnel of Dahzoklo like to fight in three dimensions and will scramble up the outside of a tall building using the most precarious of handholds. They are quite happy to be conveyed in a grav vehicle, of course, but urban free-climbing under fire seems to suit them. Most carry a one-use grav parachute, although using it to recover from a fall is grounds for ridicule. Jumping from a stricken grav tank is acceptable, although making an escape without the parachute is grounds for a joyous unit-wide cry of ‘bonus points’! For reasons unknown this phrase is only ever rendered in Galanglic.

Personal equipment is light, with very little body armour or other protective equipment. Unit members will go into action with a gauss carbine, anti-armour weapon and a small pack containing a few essentials... and usually multiple grenades. Combat against them is a chaotic maelstrom of fire coming in from unlikely directions, followed by a hail of grenades and a direct assault. It is not uncommon for a position to be entered from multiple directions – and above – as the last of the grenades go off. Being wounded by a friendly grenade is a weird badge of honour among these strange alien warriors.

Organisation is almost non-existent. There are usually five sub-units (if they can be called that) of which two are about average for the force. The leader’s fighting group is little different and since leadership style is rather hands-on there is little command and control once an action has begun. However, if a situation looks dangerous enough the command group will ‘get dull’ as they term it, setting up a defensive position from which to control other fighting groups and receive casualties. It appears that Dahzoklo can function as a professional mercenary force but prefers not to.

The Climbing Group consists of the best and most daring free-climbers, and only accepts those already famed for their exploits. The Flying Group is exclusive for a different reason; its members are equipped with custom high-speed grav belts and specialise in unexpected assaults from above. They occasionally assist the climbers, exchanging friendly insults as they do.

Dahzoklo is a highly effective unit but operates in a manner that cannot be replicated by non-Ithklur. It can be considered to have both the Tankbuster and Close Assault traits. The unit can be hired for a standard company fee, more or less, but will wave aside most contract discussions in favour of more questions about how badass the opposition is likely to be. A contract is an irrelevance as far as Dahzoklo’s leaders are concerned. They will take a job they want to do and get it done – usually in a messy and needlessly violent sort of way.

Dahzoklo has no hidden agenda, but that does not mean it is not unknowingly serving the interests of some master manipulator. The Ithklur would strenuously deny this, insisting they are captains of their own fate. All the same, their most likely clients are Hivers or those working for them.

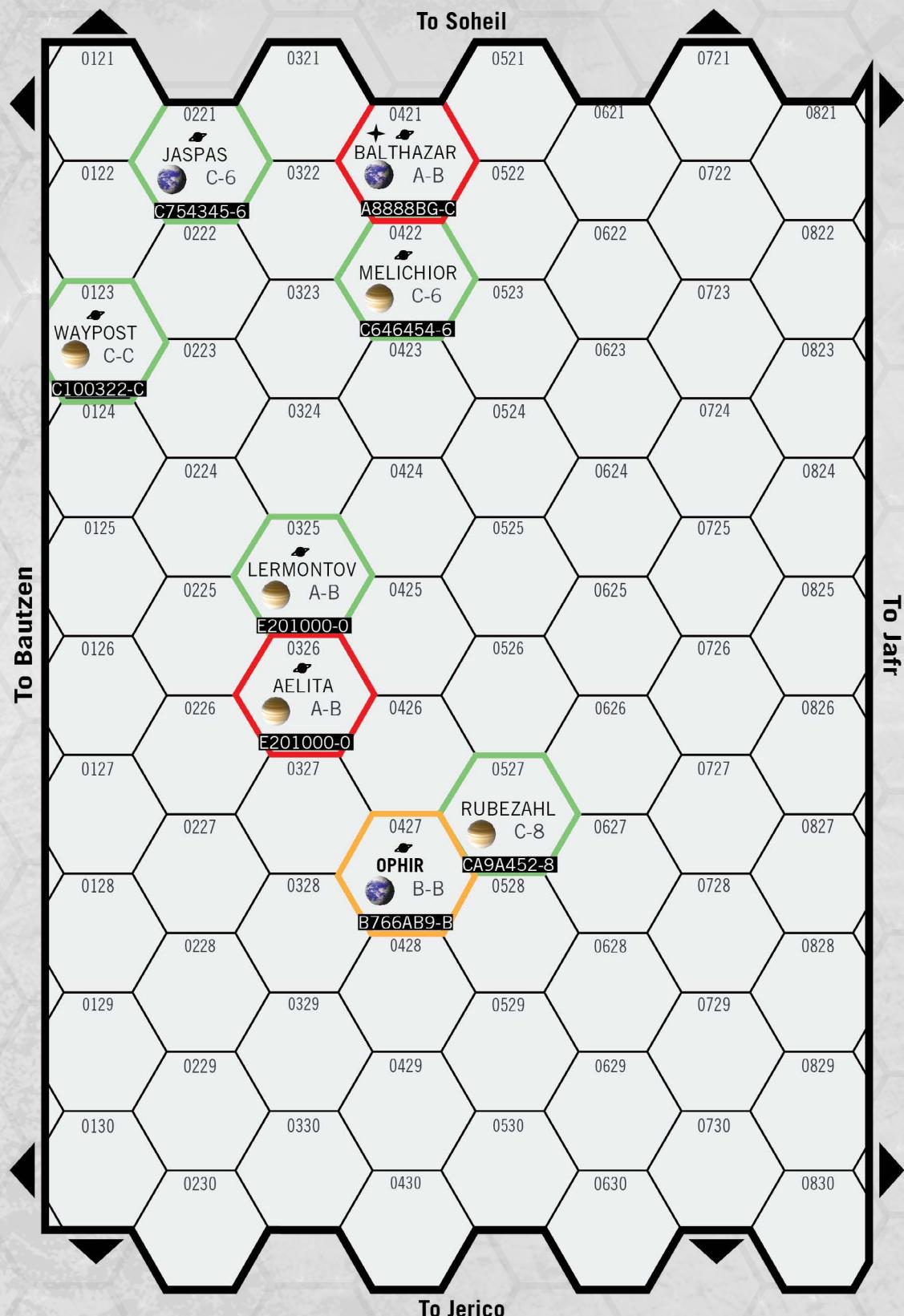
Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Dahzoklo	—
Unit Size	Company	—
Unit Type	Ithklur Urban Combat Infantry	—
Unit TL	13	+2
Mobility Type	Infantry	-3
Combat	14	+2
Bombardment	2	-2
Aerospace	2	-2
Support	3	-1
CEI or DEI	14	+2
Morale	15	+3
Reputation	12	+2

CONFLICTS

The Hive Federation does not advertise its internal conflicts to outsiders and rarely uses external mercenaries in any important issue. There are, however, plenty of low-level operations suitable for the use of mercenaries. These are not conflicts as such, as most are closely targeted operations launched by one manipulator against the assets of another, or carried out to inconvenience and impede another Hiver as part of some convoluted scheme. Mercenaries hired by Hivers are likely to operate outside the Federation, usually in support of a local agenda.

BALTHAZAR IN THE BALANCE

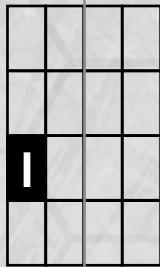
Balthazar is located in the Last Frontier subsector and widely considered the ‘subsector capital’ insofar as such labels matter in this region. It is a high-population, high-technology world with a dense atmosphere and around 80% water coverage. The population are mostly human and have been ruled for decades by a succession of ever more brutal dictators.



• Gas Giant
 ★ Naval Base
 B-6 Starport Class & Tech Level
 ✠ Military base/Garrison

— Secure System
 — Amber Zone

● Planet (dry)
 ● Planet (water present)



Langere

LAST FRONTIER SUBSECTOR

As a result of worsening internal conditions, Balthazar was placed off-limits to unauthorised Travellers by the Solomani Confederation. This had the effect of cutting off much of the trade that passed through its excellent starport and weakening the world's economy at a time when dissent was already rising. No amount of posturing on the part of the world dictator could persuade the Solomani to reverse this policy and independent ships began to avoid the port as well.

Offers of aid and assistance from the Federation were initially well received but it soon became apparent that trade ships were positively festooned with strings attached. An attempt at economic subversion was foiled by a crackdown – yet another one – allowing the dictator to maintain their precarious position for a while longer. However, this brought into the open the activities of Hivers behind the trade initiative.

Balthazar has attracted the attention of a topical club; in this case the Threat Annulment Society of Glyah. This band of like-minded Hivers is working for the good of the Federation – or so they say – by quietly removing threats along the borders. By ‘quietly’ they mean ‘without repercussions for the Hivers responsible’ – economic subversion is preferred but the Threat Annulment Society has sent troops to invade entire worlds. It is more interested in regime change and the removal of threats than conquest and has generally left behind better and more stable worlds than it found.

Now, with parts of Balthazar in open revolt, the Threat Annulment Society is operating more openly. It has sent funds and forces to help overthrow the dictator, hedging its bets by supporting several prominent opponents. These vary from political figures trying to work within the law and hoping for a peaceful transition of power to wild-eyed rebels who want to tear down the whole establishment. It is likely that long-term the Hivers want a stable society dependent on the Federation for necessary goods to prop up its economy. The Solomani Confederation, on the other hand, does not want a de facto conquest on its doorstep but is bound by its own declaration of ‘off-limits’ status for Balthazar. Both sides, naturally, are seeking mercenaries to tip the balance.

The Dictator's Forces

Most of the military is loyal to the dictator. The world's armed forces are equipped to TL12 standards, with a large ground forces contingent and a smaller elite guard, which includes the system defence squadron. Most regular units are security or aerospace defence formations, as is common on such worlds, whilst the guard has a modest amount of heavy armour and grav-mobile infantry. The army is depleted after some units rebelled and others were purged but is more than sufficient to retain control over key cities. The guard is almost completely loyal.

The Rebels

In addition to some regular army units, the rebels have a large but woefully under-armed militia. The majority of this force is deployed in an effort to retain control over the rebellion's centres of manufacturing and political importance, with cells of saboteurs and troublemakers tying down government forces elsewhere. The rebellion is gaining support almost daily but cannot take on the loyalists in a head-on confrontation. It desperately needs a training cadre, some means to counter the guard's tanks, and a very large amount of weaponry.

Summary

The dictator is in a dominant position but weakening every day as the stalled economy presents ever-greater problems. Maintenance and supply are already major issues and disaffection is growing even within the loyal elements of the army as pay arrears increase and demands to crack down on protests require ever greater violence. The dictator wants to avoid becoming reliant on the Federation but if the strangely resilient rebellion is not defeated soon they may have to accept a one-sided deal.

For their part, the rebels are greatly overmatched and would have already been defeated but for the quiet assistance of the Federation. The Threat Annulment Society prefers not to be seen to intervene directly but has supplied quantities of arms by way of third-party smugglers. Mercenary forces slipped onto Balthazar offer the chance to force the dictator into a corner, at which point the Threat Annulment Society will help stabilise the situation with either the dictator or whoever replaces them under their control.

This is a highly complex situation in which the Threat Annulment Society is playing both sides of the fence. If the dictator is overthrown they expect to control their successor; if not they should be able to make them their puppet. The Solomani Confederation is not very concerned who officially rules Balthazar but does not want them to be a tool for the Hivers. It is likely to hire forces to support the dictator, although backing a rebel faction that seems clear of Hiver control is another option.

At present the situation is one of armed standoff and internal insurgency but if the dictator becomes too desperate they will attempt to crush all their enemies before their force crumbles completely. They know this will drive more of the army into rebellion so they are trying to thread a path between getting their cities under control and cracking down so hard they lose most of their forces. This is unlikely to succeed in the long term and it may be the dictatorship on Balthazar is doomed. The question is who will control its successor state – a question that may well be answered by a mercenary force.

SOLOMANI CONFEDERATION



The Solomani Confederation was, for many years, part of the Third Imperium and to some extent its attitudes helped shape the Imperial view of mercenaries. Since breakaway from Imperial rule, the Confederation has developed its own rules and regulations over mercenary operations, which differ in some ways from Imperial standards. Most importantly, the Confederation is strict about not allowing armed foreigners to travel through or operate in its territory. Licenses to operate inside the Confederation can be obtained but typically a unit has to be able to offer something not easily available locally.

Within the Confederation, the use of mercenary forces is heavily regulated and subject to stringent laws regarding the use of armed force. This is not entirely different to the situation in the Third Imperium but overall the desire of central authority

to control mercenaries is greater in Solomani space. In the Imperium, there are a great many cross-cutting agendas and powerful groups who want to be able to use mercenaries as they please; in the Confederation the Solomani Party is more concerned with the stability of the Confederation than the rights of powerful individuals to pursue their interests. The fact that the Confederation is far smaller and more astrographically compact than the Imperium makes this position both easier to implement and more acceptable to regional powers.

All use of mercenary forces must be sanctioned by Solomani Security (SolSec), which will veto any operation considered to be against the best interests of the Confederation as a whole. Factionalism and the agendas of some powers within the Confederation can cause rules to bend one way or the other, to



some extent, but overall any conflict that employs mercenaries will attract the attention of SolSec investigators who will require justification and a detailed after-action report.

There are ways around these restrictions, notably the use of unregistered mercenaries or cover stories, which present the operation as something other than a mercenary contract. This can work, depending on the local situation and SolSec's perception of the parties involved. However, the use of hired forces from outside the regulated mercenary sector can be seen as implicit criticism of the Confederation. If the local branch of the Solomani Party did not consider it necessary to dump several hundred armed personnel onto a world, a consortium of small businesses that did so might find its leaders answering difficult questions about much broader topics than the local conflict.

CONFLICT IN THE CONFEDERATION

Some areas of the Confederation are known trouble spots, either due to internal dissent or external threats such as incursions by Aslan. At times the Confederation will permit local groups to raise or hire mercenary forces to deal with such problems and may even provide funds and advice. These conflicts are by definition sanctioned by SolSec, reflecting a choice on the part of the Solomani Party to help its citizens help themselves.

Conflicts of this sort are governed by a set of laws, which in turn produce standardised rules of engagement, which can change as the situation evolves. As a general principle, rules of engagement are much looser where the enemy is expected to have a deep-rooted hatred of the Confederation or poses a serious threat. Rules of engagement are also used as a political tool; a population with a history of defiance and insurrection can expect mercenaries operating among them to be governed far more loosely than a group loyal to, and supportive of, the Solomani Party. This is just one of many ways loyalty is rewarded within the Confederation.

Mercenary operations against definite foes of the Solomani people are easily sanctioned and generally supported, although the mercenaries' actions will still be monitored as the Party does not want to set borders aflame with unregulated military actions. Clients who want to use mercenaries for internal disputes will have a tougher time getting approval, although much depends on their level of connection to the local Party and its officials' perception of the situation.

The emphasis is much more on the overall welfare of the Confederation than local interests and those who know how to present their case – or are well enough connected – can usually find a way to push through.

MERCENARY LIFE IN THE CONFEDERATION

Mercenaries are almost exclusively recruited from Confederation citizens. Most are human, whether pureblood Solomani or not, with significant minorities coming from races well suited to military service. The Confederation is exceedingly snobbish about bloodlines and far more inclined to trust a unit led by a pureblood Solomani than one commanded by a mixed-blood human or alien. Such units do exist, and can enjoy trusted-mMercenary status, but the road is definitely easier for pure Solomani.

Similarly, promotions and positions of responsibility within a unit tend to go to pure Solomani, even if this means passing over a promising non-Solomani of superior capability. A unit that takes this to extremes is bound for disaster but it does happen from time-to-time. Those that have extremely racist policies end up putting incompetents in charge over more talented but disaffected subordinates. The latter either move on to a unit that will treat them better or underperform until the force goes out of business – one way or another. Conversely, a unit with extremely egalitarian principles, which promotes on merit alone, will also run into problems. Some pure Solomani will not join such a unit, or quickly become disgruntled when they are not promoted on the strength of their genes alone, and less enlightened clients may be unwilling to use a force that does not have the expected pure Solomani in positions of command.

These two forces tend to balance one another out, creating a situation not unlike that elsewhere in Confederation society. Pure Solomani are given slightly preferential treatment but expected to rise to the challenge of proving they are worthy, whilst non-Solomani must work harder to prove they deserve their position. This goes for units as well as individuals; a force where pureblood Solomani are commanded by non-humans or mixed-race humans will be scrutinised more closely than a conventionally organised force, however a good record in the field speaks for itself. There are a few zealots who will refuse to work with such a force but most clients are pragmatic enough to want the most capable mercenaries rather than ones who suit social preferences.

A non-Solomani mercenary may encounter racism in the course of their career but it is nothing like as bad as Imperial propaganda makes out. The Confederation, as a whole, gives preferential treatment to pure Solomani rather than oppressing non-Solomani. The majority are snobs rather than haters and willing to be impressed by a ‘worthy outsider’. Indeed such figures are sometimes venerated to a degree that surprises those who have bought into the Imperial propaganda. They have a special role to play in Solomani culture – akin to an excellent opponent in a sport or game. The Solomani see themselves as a little bit better than everyone else and there is no joy in being a little bit better than a clueless rabble. The achievements of these worthy outsiders are often lauded for their own sake but there may be an undertone of ‘this is what we have to beat’.

CLIENTS

The majority of clients in the Confederation are either Solomani Party officials or agencies overseen by the Party. This means planetary governments, corporate bodies and interstellar government agencies including SolSec itself hire the majority of mercenaries. These agencies normally deal with reputable mercenary units; occasionally an unsavoury band of killers will be hired for some unpleasant task but these deals are done under the table and in a deniable manner.

It is an open secret that at least some of the ‘other’ clients within the Confederation are actually fronts for SolSec or one of the other government agencies. Mercenaries may be used to carry out ‘black operations’, which the agency would prefer not to be connected to, but in the case of SolSec the usual practice is to send its own personnel then deny everything. SolSec has little need to do more than this, so rarely takes the risk of using deniable mercenaries. Other agencies do not have the luxury of being charged with investigating themselves to see if they are responsible for an operation so generally try to create distance between a ‘dirty’ operation and its instigators.

Where unpleasant or deniable operations are to be carried out, the more reputable mercenary units are rarely involved. Many are too honourable – or too aware of their precarious status as trustworthy agents – to take on nasty jobs. This leaves formations that cannot find other work due to political considerations or previous failures, and of course the usual rabble found at the bottom of the mercenary marketplace.

Mercenaries operating at this end of the industry can never be sure who their end client is, although this is probably more to do with paranoia. If an insurgent movement or shady client hires a mercenary unit, chances are the contract is genuine. SolSec is rumoured to use deniable mercenaries to cause trouble, in order to have a pretext for a crackdown, but this is far less common than conspiracy theorists believe. More often, champions of a cause that cannot obtain official sanction must make use of whatever forces are available. This can trap low-end mercenaries in a cycle of dubious operations, which do not contribute towards the reputation required to get the good jobs.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

Most of the Confederation follows the same general practice but there are two significant regions with a different character. In both cases the presence of a major power is the primary influence.

The Trans-Canopus Reaches

The Trans-Canopus Reaches are a border zone between the Confederation and Aslan Hierate, with a region of non-aligned space to rimward. Operations in this region are affected by historical tensions between human states and the Aslan, as well as the current political situation. The Imperial presence in the Dark Nebula creates additional problems.

Mercenaries are widely used along this border to allow the agenda of the Confederation – or powerful groups within it – to be furthered without ‘official’ conflict with Aslan or Imperial groups. Mercenaries are typically used to support legitimate, or portrayed-as-legitimate, local concerns and cannot help but become embroiled in the complex local situation.

Further rimward, there is considerable opportunity in the parts of the Ustral Quadrant not claimed as Aslan territory. As elsewhere, the Hierate’s borders tend to creep outward as ihatei seize territory and build their own proto-states. Those who dislike the idea of being driven out or forced to accept Aslan rule resist as best they can and will readily employ mercenaries. Periodic surges of ihatei activity have been observed, prompting specialist anti-ihatei formations to offer their services or raise their rates depending on how seriously the threat is being taken by local world governments.

The Trans-Neworld Reaches

The Trans-Neworld Reaches are a border zone between the Confederation and Hive Federation, with a region of non-aligned space to rimward. This region has its own character, largely due to the recent development of many of its worlds. Troubles are more commonly internal than external or at least this is the general appearance. As always when Hivers are involved, there is a great deal of paranoia and suspicion that any given conflict might be the result of Hiver machinations but it is far more likely that this developing region is simply going through difficult times as its power structures coalesce.

SolSec and the Party are as prevalent in Trans-Neworld as anywhere in the Confederation but there are so many agendas and development plans that clashes and disputes are inevitable. Mercenaries are unlikely to be short of work at the platoon to company level. Conflicts large enough to employ multiple battalions are uncommon but have at times drawn in all available forces from across the region. However, as a rule, Trans-Neworld is an area where lightly equipped mid-sized units are most likely to be successful as prospective clients do not have sufficient budget to hire larger or more heavily armed forces.

This does not mean that clients will not overspend. It has become far too common for governments and other bodies to simply hire everyone they can and hope to defer payments or win before their mercenaries lose patience. This has resulted in severe instability in some areas, as disaffected mercenaries turn on their clients or units disband, dumping large numbers of personnel into the marketplace. These are snapped up by others who cannot afford them, continuing the cycle. The Confederation authorities have begun trying to deal with the problem but it is a big task. Current endeavours – ironically perhaps – revolve around hiring units, paying off their arrears and using them as peacekeepers. However, not all forces are up to this task and others want to chart their own course. Trans-Neworld remains a hazardous region for mercenaries and clients alike.

DEALERS AND AGENCIES

The Confederation has more centralisation of power than some other states, resulting in a slightly different licensing system for mercenaries. Similarly, large-scale arms sales are heavily regulated, with SolSec 'liaison staff' stationed at the headquarters and

manufacturing plants of arms companies as well as places where trading is likely such as major starports. An approved mercenary unit will have little difficulty obtaining weapons from a reputable supplier but gaining that status can be difficult.

Regional Mercenary Operations Oversight Committees

The Solomani Confederation has a great many regional committees charged with oversight of everything from public health to movement of art objects. The Mercenary Operations Oversight Committees (MOOC) are responsible for accrediting mercenary units, ensuring they meet an adequate standard of conduct and professionalism, and investigating breaches of regulations. The latter function is normally carried out in conjunction with SolSec and may be hijacked by that organisation if there are indications of a political problem rather than a regulatory one. The usual practice is for SolSec to shadow the investigation and withdraw from it if there is a threat to the Confederation as a whole. If a unit has merely screwed up it is investigated by what are inevitably termed 'mooks' but if there are irregularities suggesting one party or another is acting against the good of the Confederation the 'spooks' – SolSec – will take over.

To operate legally within the Confederation, a unit needs to be properly registered with its regional MOOC. This process is fairly straightforward but more stringent than in many areas. A sizable amount of documentation must be presented, along with a Cr25000 registration fee. The unit's command team must then succeed in a Difficult (10+) Advocate or Admin check to correctly present their credentials. The MOOC will deliver a decision within 1D weeks. If the application is successful the mercenaries will be free to operate immediately, although in some cases they may be subject to restrictions on access to equipment or enhanced scrutiny for a time.

Guardian Military Systems Arms Manufacturer/Dealer

Guardian Military Systems (GMS) is a diversified manufacturer of weapon systems and heavy military hardware. It holds 'favoured contractor' status with several world governments, supplying Home Forces with inexpensive but generally good quality weapon systems. This hardware is built to standard designs, specified by regional Home Forces Armaments Advisory Committees, and is also available on the open market.

Guardian Military Systems Dealer Profile

Dealer	Max. TL Available	Infantry	Artillery	Combat Vehicles	Aerospace	Support and Specialist
GMS	12	Quality	Basic	None	Quality	Basic

GMS does not build starships or armoured vehicles but produces modular weapons that fit on most standard mountings. A significant proportion of the laser and missile systems carried aboard privately owned vessels were made by Guardian. Their products are especially prevalent in the Canopus sector and surrounding subsectors. The same laser and missile systems are available as ground-based weapons for starport and installation defence.

Guardian is willing to sell to almost any client providing they have the correct paperwork. In recent years a new line of 'simple but sure' weaponry has been marketed to colonists – both individually and as an armament pack providing immediate security to a new installation or colony. These packs are sometimes bought by aspiring mercenary forces. The weaponry is not particularly impressive but it is a cheap and simple way of outfitting a couple of dozen personnel. The basic pack consists of 20 TL8 semi-automatic carbines plus four marksman rifles and two light machineguns, provided with 1,000 rounds of ammunition per gun and all necessary magazines, belts and feed accessories. The whole package costs Cr5000 before any negotiated discount. Other packages of more 'military' weapons are available but the entry-level offering remains popular with units just starting out.

Mercenaries operating against colonists or other groups equipped in this manner can often predict the number and type of weapons they face. For example, if Guardian laser carbines are present there will almost certainly be two laser sniper rifles, as the only weapons pack that contains laser carbines also has these. There is always the possibility a user might buy additional weapons but typically an organisation will prefer to obtain ready-made packages and will not see the need to pay more for individual items.

UNITS

Some mercenary units in the Solomani Confederation are detached elements of a world's Home Forces. This enables the formation to gain operational experience, which can be shared when the unit returns to its planet of origin. When serving as mercenaries such units are treated the same as any other, except that their home government is responsible for their

behaviour. Usually fees are paid to the government rather than the unit, with personnel receiving their normal salary plus an increment for offworld service.

Bushwack Company Company, Anti-Armour

Bushwack Company is the commercial identity of a detached force seconded to the marketplace by its parent government. The unit is equipped as wheeled-mobile infantry and trained to fight defensively in a city or other urban environment, specifically against armoured infantry or heavily equipped assault forces. A variety of weapons are used in this context and Bushwack Company is capable of fighting armoured vehicles or infantry as well as its intended prey.

The use of battle dress and combat armour by the Imperial Army resulted in a perceived need for troops capable of containing and ideally eliminating an armoured assault force. The Confederation Army and the Home Forces of many worlds close to the Imperial border consider the ability to deal with armoured infantry an essential capability. This rests not just in equipment but also requires experienced troops able to hold their nerve in the face of apparently superior opposition. As a result, the anti-armour contingent has been sent out to gain experience in the field. It has been slightly rearmed to give a more general set of capabilities but remains a primarily defensive formation with impressive anti-light armour capabilities.

The company is organised in a standard manner, with an attached pool of transport vehicles. These are not armed and are used only for logistics and movement in the field. The force would not accept contracts requiring high mobility without serious reorganisation and the assignment of more suitable transport for field operations.

The unit's headquarters detachment is small, containing only the command staff and a handful of soldiers as a final reserve. These are equipped in the same manner as the rest of the unit's infantry, with a TL10 Advanced Combat Rifle capable of launching RAM grenades. All personnel are issued one anti-armour grenade and one of another type – obscurants or anti-personnel types for the most part.

Armour-piercing ammunition makes up about a third of the average soldier's load. The percentage would be higher on a specific anti-armour deployment but as mercenaries the force would expect to engage conventional infantry far more commonly than battle dress or combat armour-equipped troops.

The command staff of each platoon, and the unit overall, consists of a senior officer and NCO, a medic and a communications technician or other specialist, supported by whatever infantry soldiers or specialists are available but do not fit in the unit elsewhere. They will be moved to a permanent slot when one opens and if the unit does very well they may be formed into a provisional extra platoon. The unit does recruit in the field, with citizenship and a career in the homeworld's armed forces as part of the benefits package. This is attractive to many citizens of underdeveloped worlds; it is not uncommon for a unit to gain whole platoons over the course of a year's offworld deployment. The main HQ detachment also has a contingent of scouts who operate covertly in pairs to locate potential targets. The scouts will be tied into the local artillery support network if one is available.

Rifle platoons have traded most of their heavy weapons for infantry-combat equipment; Advanced Combat Rifles and the light support equivalent. Rifle grenades and armour-piercing ammunition are available to all personnel and the platoon marksmen are equipped with longer variants of the ACR with specialist ammunition. This gives the unit improved capabilities against armoured infantry and light armoured vehicles without impeding mobility in the urban environment.

The Weapons platoons have retained their anti-armour capability and are less mobile than Rifle platoons. Each has three sections, containing a four-soldier infantry team (three rifles and a light support weapon) and a four-soldier 'gun' team. The latter consists of the section leader and three soldiers who operate and support a 'crunch gun' variant of the Advanced Combat Rifle. This 17.5mm anti-materiel rifle uses an artillery recoil system and a 'fix anywhere' mobile mount to create an extremely potent sniping capability. Armour-piercing rounds from these guns can crack battle dress or take out light vehicles and hardware. The command section is equipped the same as the infantry sections, with two 4-soldier teams containing a support gunner and three rifles.

Tactically, the unit usually divides into two forces, each with a Rifle platoon and an Anti-Armour platoon. The latter will establish overwatch positions whilst the Rifle platoons spread out to act as security and set up an ambush if at all possible. The 'Bushwacker'

designation comes from a preference for ambushing enemy forces in cluttered urban terrain overlooked by positions for the platoons. Convoys of light military vehicles are especially vulnerable to having the end vehicles disabled, after which the convoy is chopped up at close range and picked apart by crunch gun fire.

Bushwack Company is at its best when ambushing infantry or lightly armoured targets in urban terrain. The unit has the Can-Opener trait and is competent across the spectrum of infantry operations. Equipment is mostly TL10, creating a balance between ease of maintenance and capability. The unit suffers a little from the usual Solomani snobbery, to the point where a non-pureblood Solomani cannot expect to rise higher than section leader unless they are truly exceptional. Non-Solomani and even non-humans who have proven themselves in the unit can expect to join homeworld society as full and respected citizens, and those who stand out whilst serving as mercenaries might even be recommended for officer training in the Home Forces. This is rare, however, and would require impressive deeds in the field.

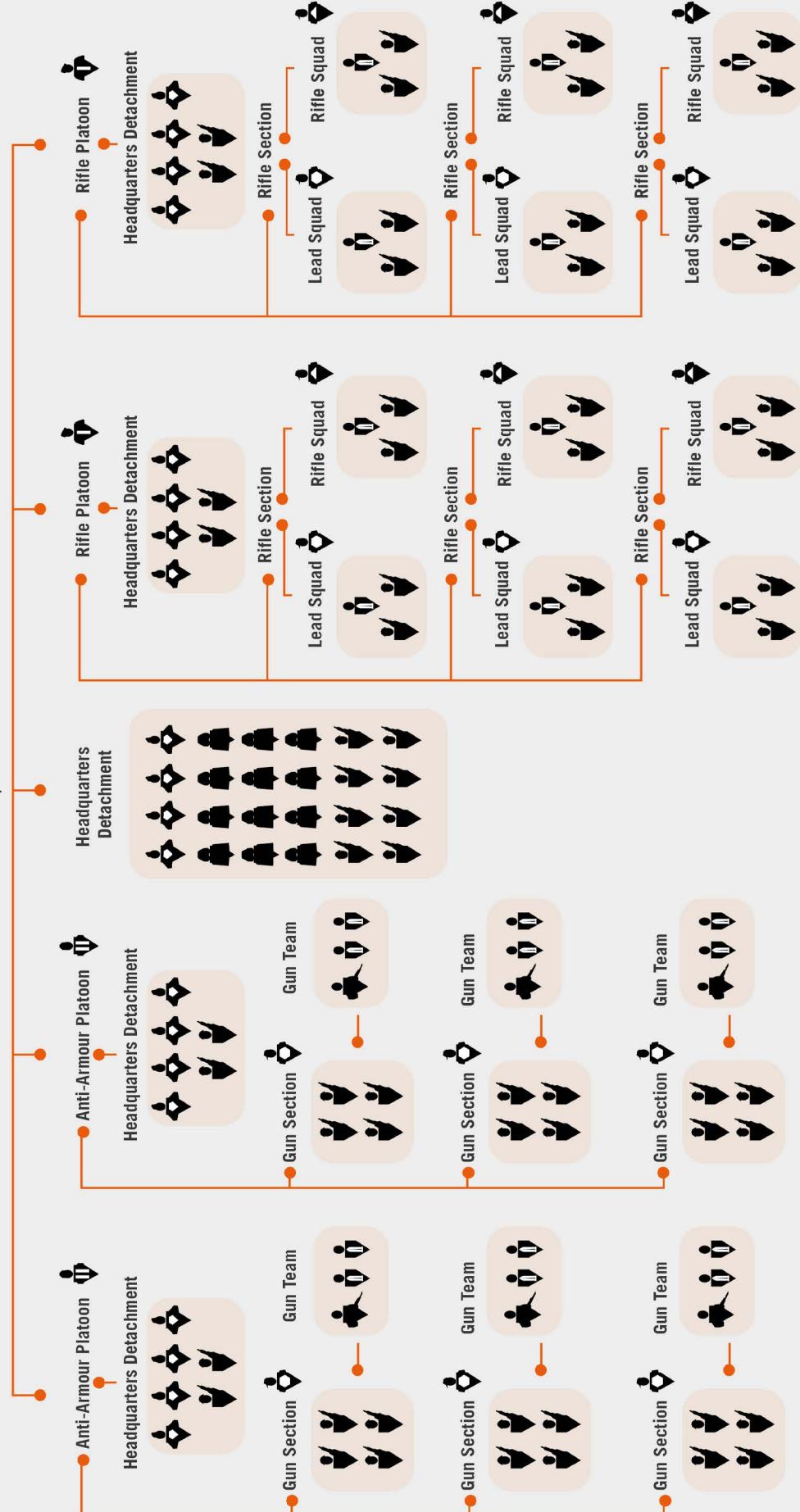
Bushwack Company is slightly more specialised than most mercenary infantry units and geared towards defensive operations. Its heavy-weapons personnel are quite capable of swapping their crunch guns for Advanced Combat Rifles but conversion to a more general role would likely require the provision of transport assets. It would probably be cheaper to hire a more generally-capable unit for this role.

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Bushwack Company	—
Unit Size	Company	—
Unit Type	Infantry	—
Unit TL	10	+1
Mobility Type	Infantry	-3
Combat	9	—
Bombardment	0	—
Aerospace	1	-2
Support	3	-1
CEI or DEI	10	+1
Morale	12	+2
Reputation	11	+1

Bushwack Company

(Major Commanding)

(Major Commanding)



Captain	 	Lieutenant	Squad Leader	Infantry Scout	Support Gunner
Major	 	Section Leader	Command Staff	Infantry Soldier	Crunch Gunner
Key	 	Captain	Major	Lieutenant	Squad Leader
		 	 	 	 

CONFLICTS

Internal conflict is not uncommon in the Solomani Confederation and occasionally Home Forces units on secondment as mercenaries find themselves fighting in someone else's war. On other occasions mercenaries may find themselves far beyond the borders on some barely-explored planet. Opposition in such areas is likely to be mid-tech or lower, creating a niche for lightly equipped but intelligent and adaptable mercenary formations.

THE KILDER INITIATIVE

The Kilder Initiative is not a campaign or conflict as such, although it might result in mercenaries seeing active service. It is a wide-ranging programme of exploration, pacification and colony establishment throughout the sectors to rimward of Solomani space. This is not an official Confederation operation, although it has been given clearance to proceed. The initiative is a privately funded umbrella for the activities of several interested parties.



In some cases, mercenary operations have been pre-sanctioned against local populations. This has occurred where the locals are hostile to a Solomani trade mission or outpost on their world and in these cases the operation is ‘official’ in the sense that the Solomani Party has decreed it necessary to support the interests of the Confederation as a whole. Most other operations need to be justified, although this is likely to be a matter of course in most cases.

Operations are likely to be straightforward and conventional: strikes against local installations, warfighter missions against more stubborn opposition and a lot of security deployments on a just-in-case basis. Some operations are unusual in nature, and may require greater flexibility on the part of the mercenaries. Among these are the Auberne Colony mission and the SQ-7804 Project.

The Auberne Colony Mission

The Auberne colony is to be established on a habitable world well outside Solomani space. It is named for its instigator, Francis Auberne, and a long-term initiative intended to create a forward supply base and stopover for Solomani ships heading further to rimward. In short, Auberne and his associates believe they can corner the market in resupplying exploration and exploratory-trade missions, ultimately attracting investment from Confederation authorities. As the border expands outwards, Auberne will become a natural hub for expansion and the regional capital.

All this is likely to take place without the consent of the local population, around 210 million TL5 humans who consider themselves indigenous to the world. It is possible the locals can be convinced of the benefits of hosting the Auberne colony but if not they may resist. Auberne and his associates do not want a war and believe they have a better chance of avoiding one if they can negotiate from a position of strength. This will also allow them to win quickly if conflict does begin.

The Auberne colony currently consists of around 10,000 people, although the intent is to become a much greater number in a succession of expansion missions. The colonists have a small security contingent but cannot defend themselves against a serious attack – even by TL5 forces. One or more mercenary groups will be hired to prevent the colony from being overrun and if the unit’s leaders are skilled negotiators they may be tasked with obtaining local cooperation or at least avoiding trouble.

The locals are subdivided into multiple small states, some of which are hostile to one another. They possess modest ground and air forces, and in some cases can field maritime vessels. The local population is not inimical to the colonists, nor are they overawed by visitors from another world. It might be possible to conquer the local states one-by-one, and indeed some of them will propose the offworlders join them in a plan to eliminate their unspeakably evil neighbours. Good diplomacy on the part of the mercenaries could lead to a bloodless takeover of at least one local state, which would advance the plans of Auberne. Failing that, the mercenaries will certainly be outnumbered but have an immense technological advantage.

The SQ-7804 Project

SQ-7804 is an internal code-name given to a distant, semi-habitable world; ‘internal’ in the sense that only the small scientific and exploration company interested in it knows which world is actually the target of their mission. There are reasons for this secrecy beyond mere paranoia – other expeditions have gone missing and it is not clear whether the cause was foul play or something they found.

The target world is a mix of barren plains and badlands, with thick temperate forests in well-watered and sheltered areas. The open lands are wracked by storms that deposit dust onto the forests, creating unique ‘mud-from-above’ conditions. This gives rise to a secondary ‘forest floor’ high above the ground with its own complex ecosystem.

SQ-7804 is of interest for its interesting ecosystem alone but in addition there have been sightings of ruins within the forests. There seems to be no sophont population today but it is possible the world had a civilisation at some time or was the outpost of one. It is the latter possibility that has drawn the explorers; that and wild tales told by survivors of previous expeditions.

Mercenaries are needed to protect the expedition’s base camp and forays into the forests. Against what or whom is an open question. The wildlife on SQ-7804 seems to be extremely aggressive, not to mention cunning, so the mercenaries’ work might be similar to that of safari guides or forest-rescue teams. It is possible that other interested parties might try to run off or even kill the explorers... or there may be completely unanticipated dangers on-planet. Mercenaries signing up for this operation are expected to be smart and resourceful, rather than killers-for-hire, and may have to fill in as research assistants or equipment-luggers from time-to-time.

ASLAN HIERATE



The Aslan Hierate has an entirely different culture regarding mercenaries both of indigenous and external origin, which makes it both a lucrative and a dangerous place to operate. Aslan mercenaries can be encountered throughout the regions surrounding the borders of the Hierate, either as individuals serving in a mixed force or all-Aslan units.

The most common mercenaries in the Hierate have Aslan leaders, who bring with them forces of varying sizes. These warrior leaders are not hired in the usual sense but instead enter into an agreement to serve a clan or other client in return for fair reward. This works out much the same as a mercenary contract elsewhere, in that a leader's worth is determined, at least in part, by the forces he commands. However, his reputation is also a factor in what is considered a fair reward.

The letter of a contract is not the driving force in Aslan mercenary affairs. Instead there are social pressures and traditional laws regarding honourable conduct on both sides. Both mercenary and client have the right to terminate the agreement to serve at any time, although there are rules ensuring allies and former mercenaries are not placed in danger. A mercenary must obey the orders of his client to his best ability or terminate his service – there is nothing in between.

If one side or the other does terminate service, the actions of both will be judged by any and possibly all observers. This is not a formal enquiry but a passing of personal judgement on the part of anyone interested in the matter or who hears about it. How much that affects the mercenary or client can vary considerably. It might seem that large and powerful clans can treat



mercenaries as they please but this is not the case. Honourable conduct is the primary factor in making Aslan society work and even powerful clans can be diminished if their reputation is tarnished. In addition to an almost religious veneration for their reputation, important Aslan know their ability to maintain status depends on others believing they will honour their agreements. Mercenary contracts are effectively regulated by the whole of Aslan society.

The consideration of ‘fair reward’ is a complex one in the Hierate. The salary scales for a mercenary unit can be used as a guideline but most Aslan leaders will have an inflated idea of what they think is a fair reward for their services. An Aslan from a prestigious clan, even if he is a landless *i hatei*, may feel that his current employer should feel honoured to have him around and expect a greater reward than someone who commands more and better troops. Indeed, all Aslan leaders tend to have an over-inflated opinion of their worth, creating a constant struggle to find a midpoint between actual worth and their expectations.

An Aslan who does not receive what he thinks he is worth will become troublesome and whilst he is honour-bound to obey, this does not preclude posturing, tantrums and repeated threats to terminate service. Aslan are used to dealing with such things but it can be a shock to outsiders who have hired a unit. This happens quite frequently along the borders and Aslan troops generally give good and honourable service to those who know how to treat them.

A unit that terminates its service over a major dispute would be considered – within its home society at least – to be quite within its rights to attack the former client or their forces once the traditional ‘one day of reflection, one day of preparation’ period is over. This tradition requires a terminated unit to spend a day considering its next move. At the end of this day the leader of the unit must declare his intentions. He may rescind his termination of service, in which case the client is required to take him back into service without comment or he must declare whether or not he is the enemy of the client. If not, they part ways with no further obligations. If the leader declares enmity he is required to give the client one day to prepare.

The client may also terminate service at any time and also has to observe the two-day pause. At the end of the first the client may invite the leader back, usually bestowing some minor gifts and honours to soothe his ego or declare peace or enmity. The same day of preparation is required and a client is also expected to assist a newly-hostile mercenary group to relocate rather than holding them where they are vulnerable.

These processes appear to be open to exploitation. For example, a mercenary leader might repeatedly walk out and demand gifts to return to service. However, the nature of Aslan society is such that this would be seen as dishonourable. Such a leader would be unlikely to find service elsewhere and very few would be willing to even attempt such a dishonourable milking of the situation. Aslan males might withdraw service over a tiny imagined slight to their ego but they would not do so as a money-making gambit.

The Aslan are entirely willing to use outsiders as mercenaries, under the right conditions. Non-Aslan are expected to conform to Aslan customs whilst in service, although it is notable that Aslan serving outside the Hierate usually insist on following their own traditions of mercenary employment. This way of doing business can make those who like neat contracts and legal threats nervous, and can spell ruin for unscrupulous mercenaries or clients who try to twist the wording to their preference. The Aslan way of doing things is much simpler, yet also looser. A leader pledges service to a client and since the leader’s followers owe him allegiance they must obey orders coming through him. The unit must then do whatever the client asks of it or withdraw service. Negotiations are virtually non-existent.

Typically, rewards for service are equivalent to a unit on Warfighting duty, whether or not they fight. This seems like overpayment for those merely acting as guards or a garrison but the unit can be ordered on a highly dangerous mission at any time and is expected to defend the client to the death. Service is not given or received lightly and both sides are expected to behave honourably throughout.

Sometimes mercenaries are offered land as reward for service. For a landless *i hatei*, this is the best possible reward assuming the land is viable. In such cases the mercenaries will agree to serve for a set period, which might be time-limited or could be for the duration of a campaign or even a client’s lifetime. During this period they receive full support and a modest amount of cash, and at the end they are granted ownership of land.

Occasionally the land does not actually belong to the client or is otherwise unavailable. This is rarely done deceptively by Aslan but outsiders might – unwisely – try to swindle a mercenary force. An Aslan client might have claim to the land and offer it in good faith because they think they own it, only for the mercenaries to find someone else also claims it. This has sparked endless small conflicts along the borders of Aslan space.

THE ASLAN WAYS OF CONFLICT

Military power is a means to an end in the Hierate. Its use is fully accepted and usually condoned, since strength is admired. There are exceptions but as a rule if a clan is in conflict with another the dispute will be allowed to run its course. Territory can and does change hands after a war between clans and some of today's greatest powers within the Hierate got where they are by simple conquest. There are limits but a straightforward declaration that 'they have something we want and are too weak to defend it' will normally be considered sufficient pretext for a conflict.

Honourable conduct is expected and where possible wars are limited. This means military forces clash and the losing side accepts the situation rather than being annihilated. Honourable surrender can sometimes be seen as an admirable act – a leader who knows when they are beaten and submits, rather than escalating the conflict, is accepting personal disgrace for the good of his followers and may receive the dubious distinction 'a good foe to have'. The humiliation of defeat will be avenged if possible and Aslan warleaders are often ranked by the number of good foes they have waiting to pounce if they show weakness.

Attacks against non-combatants are unusual, although sometimes it may be necessary to weaken an enemy economy in order to eventually overcome their military. This is not a dishonourable act if deemed necessary but for that to be the case the opponent must be the sort that will wage total war. Sometimes clans will fight to annihilation over some ancient feud, in which case there are no restrictions on what might be done and a similar situation exists when fighting enemies who do not follow the traditions of war. For example, if a group of *ihatei* seizes land on a human-occupied world and the inhabitants are indiscriminate in their response, the clan of the *ihatei* would be seen as justified in attacking a civilian population if this was necessary to end the threat.

MERCENARY LIFE IN THE HIERATE

For an Aslan mercenary, military service is a matter of following a leader and obeying his orders. Whether the leader is serving his clan or has taken temporary service with other Aslan or outsiders, the Aslan mercenary simply does his job and fights when ordered to do so. Aslan mercenary units will usually include some females but they are never direct combatants – Aslan society has strict gender roles. Females will handle the administration of the unit and technical tasks unsuited to a warrior. They may be armed for self-defence and are considered legitimate targets in a fight.

This gender specialisation is a source of weakness within Aslan units. Males are taught from an early age that they are warriors and leaders, and that technical tasks are beneath their dignity or beyond their comprehension. Whether or not the stereotype of an Aslan leader who cannot understand money is true, he will rely on his female accountants and analysts when considering an offer of service. More importantly, all forms of combat are male roles, despite many tasks being very complex in modern warfare. Gunners and combat vehicle crews are males, despite the fact females would be better in the role. This is a rigid social tradition, with no exceptions; there are no enlightened Aslan leaders who have figured out that institutionalised sexism is a bad idea.

These social norms will be extended to non-Aslan serving in an Aslan-led unit. Females may be forbidden entirely from taking combat roles, or may be considered to be males of their species by Aslan incapable of telling the difference. The latter is possible in mixed units commanded by non-Aslan, whereas strict gender roles will be enforced on anyone – no matter their record – in an Aslan-commanded role. Aslan units serving outside Aslan society will stick to their traditions and would consider an order to do otherwise grounds to terminate service.

In the case where a non-Aslan unit has entered service with an Aslan clan or leader, it will normally be treated the same way as an all-Aslan unit, with the exception that little attention is likely to be paid to internal organisation. Aslan encountered in the course of the unit's duties will address anyone in a 'male' (combat or leadership) role using male honorifics and anyone in a 'female' (supporting) role as female. This is most likely because the Aslan has put aside attempts to figure out how aliens organise themselves in favour of just getting the job done but it is possible that at least some Aslan genuinely cannot conceive of a society different to theirs.

Whatever the case, non-Aslan units are treated exactly like Aslan ones or else they are not hired. A unit will be subject to the same conditions as Aslan – they agree to serve and obey orders, and are rewarded accordingly. Those that try to barrack-lawyer their clients will find them inflexible and then implacable; warriors who fail to serve their overlords are an affront and possibly a threat to Aslan society. They will at best be driven off and may find themselves under attack.

Those mercenary units that can adapt to the Aslan system can do well and will be honoured like any other fighting force. They may have to politely explain they cannot make use of the land they are offered but whilst this might surprise some Aslan leaders

they are usually willing to offer an alternative reward. Indeed, many Aslan would prefer not to have outsiders mingled in among the new settlements they are developing on reward-land. Better to pay them money and see them move on.

CLIENTS

Within the Hierate, mercenaries will find themselves working for an Aslan leader who may be their direct client or a representative of a more powerful leader. Clients tend to be egotistical and prone to displays of self-importance, which must be tolerated and received with convincing appreciation. No client will tolerate challenges from outsiders, no matter how good they are at what they do. Indeed, this level of pride and ego has derailed many a project when skilled mercenaries pointed out flaws in the plan or a more efficient way of carrying it out and the client simply could not admit they were wrong.

This is a fact of life when dealing with Aslan clients. In addition, the client expects total loyalty and obedience. Mercenaries need to be aware that when they agree to serve an Aslan client they are not contracting to perform a single mission, they are entering into service until released or they withdraw. The difference is significant; elsewhere the mercenaries might be able to have their lawyer explain the changes to the contract are unacceptable but in the Hierate a lord commands his troops as he sees fit.

Mercenaries may be expected to drop everything and redeploy – repeatedly and without grumbling – or suddenly switch from patrol duty to a commando raid. They are also expected to fight to the death unless given permission to surrender, although a prudent withdrawal from a bad situation is within their remit as warriors. In short, mercenaries are not expected to be stupid or to throw their lives away but they do not have the professional discretion they would enjoy elsewhere. Normally, mercenaries are on contract to a client but in the Hierate they belong to the client.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

There are virtually no regional variations in how mercenaries operate in the Aslan Hierate. Culture is more or less uniform and the underlying traditions are shared by all clans. Along the frontiers there are areas where non-Aslan might be encountered in service to a clan but this becomes increasingly rare towards the interior. There are honourable legends of non-Aslan mercenaries, whose deeds are recorded as faithfully as those of Aslan warriors, legends invoked from

time-to-time when knowledgeable outsiders present themselves for service. Some legends are local to particular areas, which is as close to regional variation as likely to be encountered.

OPERATING IN THE HIERATE

There is no mercenary licensing agency in the Hierate, nor any close parallel. Any leader can offer followers for service if he is prepared to answer for them and take an oath of allegiance, and outsiders led by an Aslan noble are in the same position. A clever unit might have an Aslan as a figurehead but making this work will be a challenge. No Aslan leader is going to knowingly deceive his fellows or pretend to be in charge when he is not, so the figurehead must believe he is in charge and be carefully manipulated to avoid him making bad decisions.

A much more workable strategy, although one requiring patience and hard work, is to gain acceptance through previous service. It can be very difficult to break into the Hierate mercenary marketplace, since what is needed is a period of satisfactory service with an Aslan client, which cannot usually be obtained without already having done it. The answer to this conundrum is to cultivate good relations with one or more Aslan leaders. This is a matter of diplomacy rather than military excellence and might be accomplished by the unit's liaison officer or through an intermediary such as a world's ambassador to a nearby Aslan clan.

Cultivating good relations is not a matter of a single Diplomat check but must be accomplished over weeks and months. Polite and respectful interactions at social functions, gifts, offers to solve minor problems and the like will eventually lead to a positive relationship. The unit's commanders will need to ensure the Aslan leader is aware of their unit's capabilities. This might be done openly, for example by inviting him to visit the unit or witness an exercise or a reputation could be established by quiet hints over a protracted period.

Ultimately, the unit will develop a contact who can recommend them to his peers or hire them himself. It is extremely unlikely an Aslan leader would recommend potentially unreliable outsiders merely for money or some simple gain but a deal is possible whereby the mercenaries provide the Aslan with something he wants or needs in return for his recommendation. The Aslan will be aware that the mercenaries can pull him down with them if they fail to live up to his recommendation, so will only stake his reputation if he is sure they are reliable.

This process can be abstracted by a Formidable (14+) Diplomat check, with DM+1 for every week spent building a relationship between attempts. Influence can be used on this check but the unit's Reputation does not modify it at this point. Failure with Effect -6 or worse will anger the Aslan and terminate the process; otherwise the mercenaries can continue until they have his ear. At this point they can present their credentials or demonstrate their capabilities.

Demonstrating capability requires a Difficult (10+) check using the unit's REP DM. If this check is passed the unit has made a good enough impression that the Aslan will vouch for them or hire them himself. Once this stage is reached the unit can put itself forward whenever they hear a leader is looking for some troops. They will need to demonstrate or prove to any prospective client that they are worthy – not just effective – servants. This is abstracted by a Very Difficult (12+) Diplomat check with the unit's Reputation modifier providing an additional DM. The Referee may apply an additional DM+1 for every successful period of service with Aslan the unit has previously undertaken, providing the service was at least a month.

There is also a possibility for under-the-table contracts set up by intermediaries, with the mercenaries running the risk of being disavowed if caught. Such work is extremely dangerous in the Hierate but can pay well for those willing to take the risks. Operations of this sort are set up from a safe distance, so the usual process regarding outsiders seeking work from Aslan does not apply.

DEALERS AND OFFICIALS

Within the Hierate, arrangements between those offering to serve and those who might employ them are not the business of outsiders. Interactions are normally by way of representatives and emissaries, up to the final point where the force swears loyalty to their new master. The situation is different near the borders, where Aslan mercenaries offer service to outsiders, and foreign units are sometimes hired by clans for service inside Hierate space. Some clans manage to position themselves as overseers of the mercenary marketplace or brokers who match missions to capabilities.



Standard Energy Weapons Dealer Profile

Dealer	Max. TL Available	Infantry	Artillery	Combat Vehicles	Aerospace	Support and Specialist
Standard Energy Weapons	14	Quality	None	None	None	Basic

Clan Euaoei Aslan Martial Diplomats

Clan Euaoei is small but influential, with a strong economy in its core territories. It has holdings on a number of distant worlds and positions itself as an arbiter of the mercenary marketplace, a result of a long history of wise dealings in the field. According to legend, it was Clan Euaoei, or a distant ancestor of the modern clan, who arranged the passage of human fugitives aboard the transport Gram through Hierate space. The humans traded mercenary service for passage and support, and served honourably enough to have a place in the annals of Aslan history. They ultimately founded the Sword Worlds Confederation and although these events took place long ago Clan Euaoei has built on its reputation for getting the best out of interactions with outsiders.

Today, the clan sends emissaries to trouble spots within the Hierate and outside its borders, assessing the situation and making recommendations about which forces would be best suited to solving the problems at hand. Clan Euaoei will arrange meetings between Aslan mercenary commanders and prospective clients, and between those wanting to work within the Hierate and those who feel the need for outsider mercenaries.

The clan has high standards for outsiders but for Aslan it is enough to have successfully completed a period of service to a reputable client – which means any Aslan clan and various respected outsider governments. An Aslan unit that has proven itself in this manner will be recommended without hesitation. For non-Aslan, the clan requires REP DM+1 and evidence of satisfactory service with a reputable client.

Getting on Clan Euaoei's recommended list requires a series of diplomatic overtures but once the relationship is established it is characterised by loyalty and respect. If the latter is not returned, contact will be severed immediately. This means that outsiders are expected to treat the representatives of Clan Euaoei as great lords and treat their visits as a state occasion. The same applies to non-Aslan who want to do business with the clan.

Clan Euaoei does not charge a fee for introductions or service; at least not as such. Instead it expects a shower of gifts from the grateful client or mercenary force equal to 20% of the mercenary unit's fee. Gifts must be – for the most part at least – of monetary value but also not-money-as-such. A great chest of shiny golden coins, spilled out in a clattering mass onto the negotiating table, is a fine gift that just happens to be easily convertible to bank balance. There is no such drama associated with a soulless Credit transfer between banks, even if it is more convenient. This is an important part of the trade for Clan Euaoei; the excitement of the gift-giving, and the way it impresses those privileged to attend, is an important part of the reason for doing business.

Standard Energy Weapons Aslan Arms Dealer/Manufacturer

Standard Energy Weapons is a Galanglicised name given to a specialist business group operating along the borders of the Hierate. Its weaponry is sold under license deeper in Aslan space, by clans that have developed a long-term business relationship with the group. As the name suggests, Standard produces only energy weapons; laser and plasma types as well as the occasional experimental project. It does have component and system contracts to other firms, which allow related equipment to be supplied.

Related equipment in this context means vacc suits and other hardware required for operations in space or on airless planets. Standard Energy Weapons is capable of completely equipping a vacc trooper unit with everything required for combat and support in the field. Even combat armour and battle dress can be obtained but as these have to be sourced from third parties the cost is significantly higher than usual.

Weaponry is of high quality, with variants designed for use in hostile environments. This includes radiation-shielded variants of weapons and third-party equipment. Radiation can interfere badly with sensitive electronics, sometimes rendering laser

weapons inoperable and causing plasma guns to malfunction in a dangerous manner. Disruption to the plasma containment field can be catastrophic and whilst all plasma weapons incorporate some degree of protection from this hazard, Standard's proprietary shielding system is considered the industry standard by many.

Standard Energy Weapons will deal with any Aslan clan or mercenary unit not currently in disgrace, with little paperwork required for even the most potent weaponry. Outsiders must forge a relationship with the company or work through a third party and even then they will be expected to pay a price inflated by at least 50% for the privilege. The firm is jealous about its equipment and pays a bounty for weapons recovered from outsiders who have obtained them without going through the proper channels. This is more to do with the status of the company's owners than any concern with weapons being in 'the wrong hands'.

Owning a weapon made by Standard means paying due respect and deference to the owners and their representatives and not doing so is considered an affront. Such is the firm's influence that some clans and mercenary units will act against those suspected of stealing or looting Standard weapons, returning them with great ceremony to the company in the hope of a favourable deal on a new batch.

UNITS

Although Aslan mercenary units consist of a noble leader and followers, the distinction between these and formally organised mercenaries is often lost on outsiders. Aslan warriors tend to be extremely self-disciplined as a result of their culture and traditions, removing the need for discipline to be externally imposed. Gestures of respect and etiquette are the same whether from a clan member to one of higher station or a soldier to a superior – the two are essentially the same thing in Aslan society and in most cases are identical.

Honoured Warriors of Hlaeai Platoon, Vacc Trooper

Hlaeai is a minor Aslan noble who has taken a route some landless 'second sons' choose over trying to directly carve out a territory by landgrab; he has formed an effective mercenary unit operating in a specialist niche and is accumulating wealth and prestige. How he intends to convert this to land and territory is his own secret but it is likely he will be offered land in return for some important mission. This may well have already occurred but the more impressive Hlaeai's record is the

greater the reward he can expect. He will have to finely judge when his force is at the peak of its career but for now it continues to increase in reputation.

The fighting component of the force is roughly platoon-sized, although with a different internal organisation to a non-Aslan formation of the same size. In addition, there is an administrative and support element composed of female Aslan in technical and administrative posts. Extreme gender specialisation can be limiting in many ways but it is the Aslan way. The Hierate has been making the system work for many centuries.

The support component is led by a high-ranking male, since all leaders are male, but his grasp of the subtler aspects of mercenary administration is tenuous at best. This individual's main job is to look impressive and command attention; beyond that he is little more than a figurehead for his highly competent administrative, diplomatic and technical staff. A handful of male bodyguards are also assigned to this component of the force.

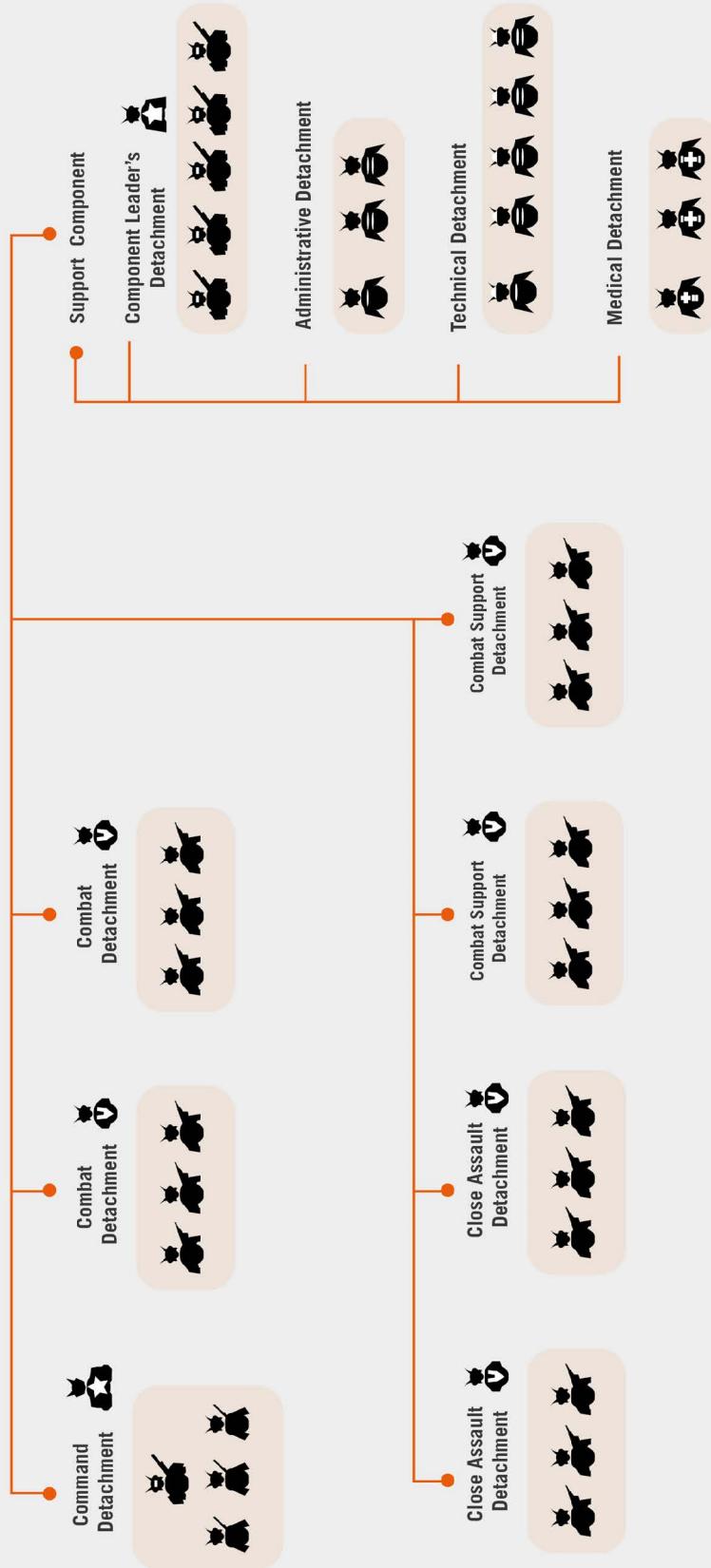
The support component operates rather loosely, with technicians, medics and administrators moving from one task to another as needed. Negotiations are officially presided over by the male leader of the component but in reality it is the administrators who conduct negotiations whilst he makes haughty demands and 'directs' the negotiators in a rather vague manner. It is possible that the apparent disconnect between the razor-sharp female admin team and the noisy and demanding male leader is a deliberate bargaining tool.

The command detachment contains the force commander himself who, along with his bodyguard, is equipped with battle dress. Those honoured with companion status are equipped with combat armour and their choice of the best weapons available. The other fighting detachments are equipped with combat armour, with most warriors favouring laser carbines. The combat support detachments are armed with a mix of laser rifles and plasma guns.

Most operations are short, fast and vicious, and conducted in an airless environment. Detachments do not remain distinct in action but instead flow into and around one another as the situation requires. Those that favour close combat will move to engage, whilst the support element backs them up and the combat detachment does whatever seems best to the individual warrior or his immediate leader. No warrior is ever abandoned and the unit never quits the fight unless ordered.

Honoured Warriors of Hlaeai

(Hlaeai Commanding)



Key

Force Commander
Detachment Leader
Bodyguard Warrior

Companion
Asian Warrior
Senior Advisor
/Negotiator

Administrator
Senior Technician
Technician

 Force Physician Supporting Medic

The Honoured Warriors of Hlaeai is an effective vacc trooper unit, not atypical of small Aslan forces. It has an excellent reputation for both extreme violence and honourable conduct and will show haughty mercy to anyone who surrenders. Those who fight well will be saluted and their leaders may even be invited to an audience with Hlaeai himself before they are freed.

The dark side of this ostentatiously honourable conduct is that the unit never forgets a slight or a betrayal and will occasionally turn down paying work to go after those who have insulted the force or its members. An honourable enemy who returns the bodies of the fallen and treats the force with respect does not become a friend – there is more to earning friendship than that – but they will be well regarded and Hlaeai might even order his warriors to help a former enemy, purely out of courtesy. The Honoured Warriors of Hlaeai has the Vacc Troopers trait.

The Honoured Warriors of Hlaeai is a typical Aslan space-combat unit. It has no employment opportunities for non-Aslan but might be encountered as an ally or enemy.

CONFLICTS

Non-Aslan mercenaries are rarely used to prosecute internal disputes, for a variety of reasons. A clan that has to turn to outsiders risks being seen as weak or unprepared and of course outsiders are not Aslan. That distinction is very important in the Hierate. On some occasions practicalities require the use of non-Aslan and there is a sliding scale of approval to requirement that dictates what sort of unit is hired. The use of highly approved units is most likely; in this case

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Honoured Warriors of Hlaeai	—
Unit Size	Platoon	—
Unit Type	Vacc Trooper	—
Unit TL	14	+2
Mobility Type	Infantry	-3
Combat	12	+2
Bombardment	0	—
Aerospace	0	—
Support	2	-2
CEI or DEI	13	+4
Morale	15	+3
Reputation	14	+2

fighting power is not as important as the prestige of the unit and its ability to observe at least the basics of Aslan culture. As a client becomes more desperate, complete outsiders become acceptable despite this will reflecting on the clan hiring them. It is better to have to restore a reputation than rebuild a clan.

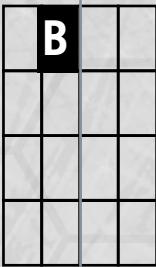
THE WAR OF DESPERATION

The origins of the War of Desperation are lost in the histories of clans Trea and Khteayuei. It is probable that both were part of a larger clan or one split off from the other. Conflict goes back centuries, with allegations of dishonourable conduct on both sides. Attempts to mediate have foundered on the rocks of hatred; neither clan will yield anything to the other no matter what they get in return. It has also been in the interests of some other clans to allow the war to sputter on.

Trea and Khteayuei have holdings on multiple worlds and in some cases both are present. Where there is a strong clan with interests in stability the warring factions have to tread carefully, creating an unpleasant cold war in which small raids and economic gambits are the usual means of harming one another. There are areas where unrestricted warfare is taking place but even there the conflict is self-limiting. Both clans exhausted themselves many decades ago and can only strike intermittently. Gains are sometimes made, prompting the opposition to fling everything they have left into restoring the situation. Outsider mercenaries are distasteful but necessary and neither clan can afford to be choosy.

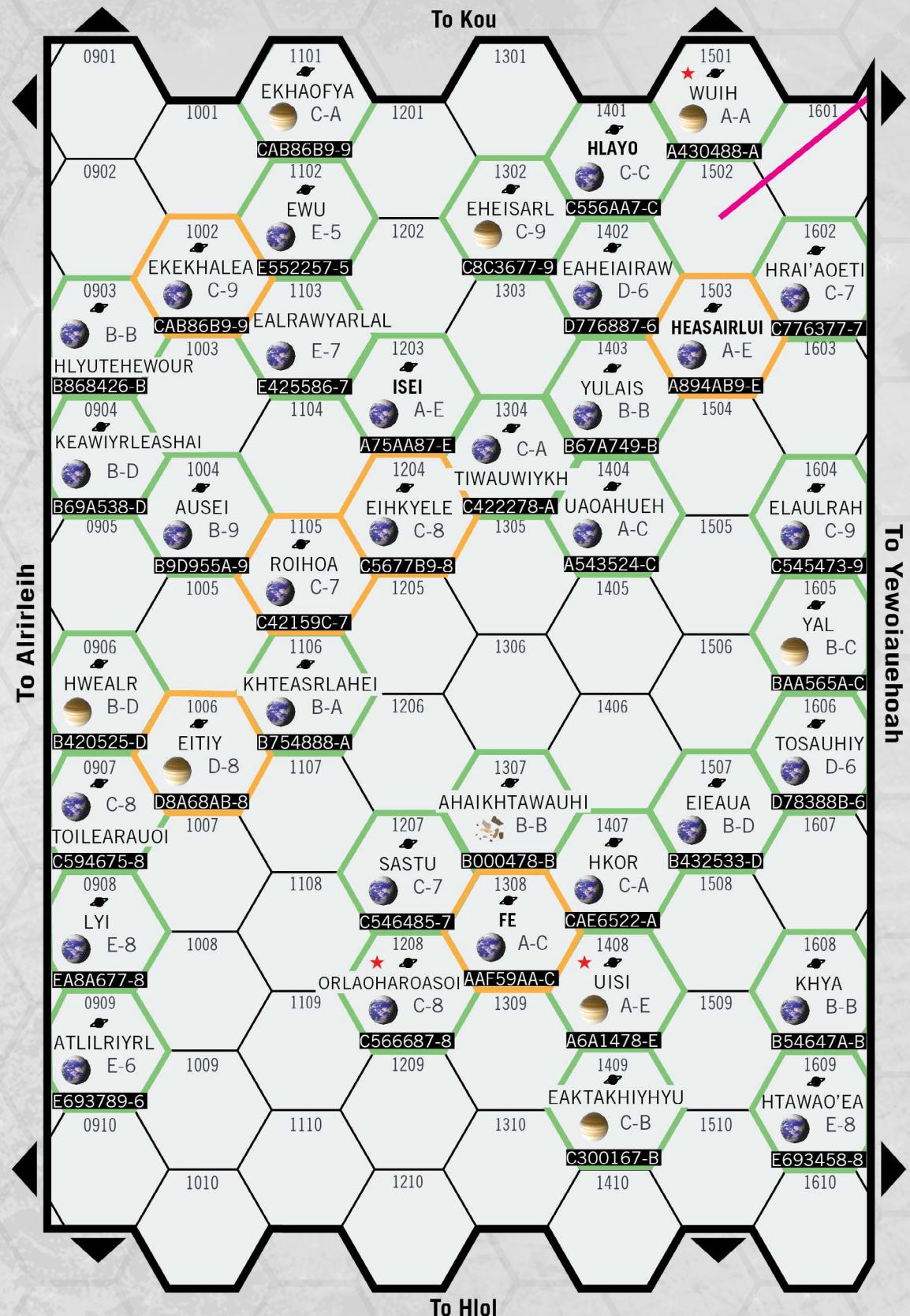
An outside observer might conclude the war could still be won and in other circumstances it might. This would necessitate abandoning all but the clan's central holdings, concentrating force and launching a campaign against the other's scattered resources. This might bring ultimate victory but neither side is willing to do it. The disgrace of abandoning loyal clan members is one factor, along with pride and spite. Neither clanlord is willing to leave anything undefended and allow their enemy to take it without paying a price in blood.

So the war continues and has gained a name that loosely translates into Galanglic as the War of Desperation. Trea and Khteayuei raid one another or send mercenaries to stir up trouble with third parties but lack the resources to exploit any victory. The downward spiral continues for both, whilst other clans pick up their assets on the cheap in return for paltry aid or simply walk in and take what the clans cannot hold. The only people benefiting from this endless conflict are the procession of mercenaries who are increasingly the only combat assets available to either clan.

B

HEASAIRLUI SUBSECTOR

Ustal Qudarut



• Gas Giant
 ★ Naval Base
 B-6 Starport Class & Tech Level

— X-boat Routes
 — Secure System
 — Amber Zone

♦ Asteroids (no atmosphere/water)
 ♪ Planet (dry)
 ● Planet (water present)

Clan Trea

Clan Trea is more centralised than Khteayuei but its infrastructure has been heavily damaged or allowed to decay as more and more money is funnelled into the war effort. The clan's wealth, such as it is, comes from manufactured goods, which are acquiring a reputation for being shoddy and often defective. This is partially the fault of the clan's neglect for its economic lifeblood but there has been a great deal of sabotage and damaging propaganda as well.

The clan's main holdings are a vision of decaying magnificence, with new features mostly limited to grandiose statues depicting victors of very minor engagements. The clan is spending an increasing percentage of its diminishing wealth on bolstering its own morale with such empty and rather pathetic gestures. Aslan uniforms are always ostentatious but Trea has been showering personnel with honours at the slightest excuse, even to non-Aslan mercenaries.



Clan Trea's strategy is based around raiding and destruction, against whatever targets present themselves. Attempts have been made to hold any gains that might be made but Khteayuei is capable of bringing reinforcements and always keen to retake any scrap of territory that is lost. Trea has learned that trying to take-and-hold is a recipe for disaster. Instead it attacks where the enemy seems to be weak, causing damage and looting valuables to support the war effort. Ideally, the Trea force retires before a response materialises, causing enemies to waste time chasing raiders and tying down forces. Expendable mercenaries may be left behind to hold the gains. If they succeed, so much the better but if not they will inflict casualties before being overrun.

Clan Khteayuei

Khteayuei is in somewhat better economic shape than its enemies but its holdings are widely scattered, which drains resources if they are to be adequately protected. The clan's wealth was based on trade more than manufacturing and it retains a number of aging freighters and merchant ships. These spend more time acting as troop transports than making money and are often diverted to rush equipment or personnel to a trouble spot.

The clan's leaders are more realistic about the situation than those of Trea but they have less need to deceive themselves. The situation for Khteayuei is very poor but Trea has been coming off worst in the majority of engagements for some years now. Khteayuei's economy is also stronger and their situation less obviously dire. The clan's strategists have correctly anticipated that Trea is being made ever more desperate by the derision of other high-ranking Aslan and has been pushed into making mistakes by injured pride. Typically this means overambitious attacks, which have only occasionally been successful. Khteayuei is confident that it can hold on long enough to see its rival collapse and this in turn drives a defensive mindset.

Khteayuei generally seeks to hold what it has and maintains a ready-reserve to counter offensives as they occur. In practice, this force usually arrives too late to do anything except take back the wreckage of the target. When attacks are made directly against Trea they are rarely successful and always costly. Despite its resources being lesser, Trea's more centralised asset base means it can protect what little it has with smaller forces.

The Conflict

The conflict is characterised by Trea launching pinprick raids and Khteayuei responding to them. Occasionally one side gathers enough resources for a serious offensive somewhere, drawing in whatever the other has assembled. Some regions of shared worlds have changed hands dozens of times and here and there both clans are fighting an indigenous population that has grown weary of both.

Both sides hate one another with a passion that strains even the Aslan penchant for honourable conduct. Mercenaries that sign on with one side will be lured by the other with promises of better pay and treatment but would be despised for changing sides. Those who resist the overtures of the opposition are hated as much as the opposing clan – and as non-Aslan they are not protected by the rules of honourable conduct to anything like the same extent. This makes the War of Desperation a 'bad war' by mercenary standards. It is not one they can dip in and out of or launch a low-percentage operation and surrender if things go hard. Most survive captivity by the enemy but prisoners are not well treated.

Both sides have a very small budget and will try to hire the cheapest mercenaries they can get. This has resulted in large numbers of ill-trained cannon-fodder joining the fighting and absorbing more resources than they are worth. Many of these low-end mercenaries are as savage in their hatred as the clans they serve, having seen colleagues shot out of hand or denied medical attention after surrendering. This combination of low competence and ill-feeling contributes to the generally nasty nature of the conflict.

Summary

The War of Desperation is most likely to attract entry-level mercenary groups or disreputable mobs of armed people who cannot find other employment. Mid-level forces are too expensive most of the time but when they are hired they find much of the opposition to be a pushover. This leads to unrealistic expectations on the part of the client, which can eventually put even a skilled unit in a bad position. Smart mercenaries tread very carefully and know when to get out even if the client starts promising vast riches for delivering modest success. There is money to be made here but the long-term prospect is not good.

NON-ALIGNED REGIONS

There are numerous non-aligned regions in Charted Space and small powers scattered among them. Some follow the practices of nearby major polities to a greater or lesser degree, whilst a few areas are completely unregulated. Mercenaries in such regions tend to have a bad reputation and many deserve it. More commonly, a variety of licensing agencies exist and those from the major powers may have branches in the area. The degree of regulation can vary and often a licensing agency can develop a reputation that spills over onto its licensees.

Non-aligned regions close to a major power generally follow the practices of that power, albeit in a looser and less organised fashion. Regulation and accreditation of mercenaries becomes more local and less reliable with distance from a major power. Politically or economically important worlds typically serve as hubs for the mercenary trade unless there are particularly militaristic local cultures, which have risen to dominate the marketplace. In a few localities all mercenaries come from one source, either a warrior culture local to the region or a small power that tolerates no competition. More commonly the mercenary trade is a free-for-all, with the types of unit available generally geared to local conditions.

Licensing agencies, or their equivalent, can be every bit as professional in non-aligned regions as elsewhere but lack of oversight or even a common body of law can result a scramble for market share among those seeking to make money without doing any fighting. Eventually, solid and reliable agencies will arise but their struggle is made more difficult by the fact they have to accredit potentially dubious mercenaries. An agency can be dragged down by the actions of the mercenaries it licenses.

The usual way to overcome this is to spend, or at least have, money. A well-funded licensing body can turn down all but the most promising mercenaries and impose meaningful sanctions that keep licensees on the straight and narrow. This will impact earnings at first but over time these agencies will become the go-to bodies for reliable mercenaries and solid contract enforcement. This in turn means the big-money jobs go through their offices while everyone else scrabbles for what is left over.

For those without the funding to get a head start in this manner, the climb can be a long and arduous one. Licensing agencies are often judged on the reputation of the units they accredit as much as their own performance, so an agency that intends to make the big time will need to develop effective oversight.

For mercenaries, there are many opportunities but the marketplace is more hazardous than in a highly regulated interstellar state. Clients may be able to escape consequences of betraying or refusing to pay their mercenaries – or think they can – and may decide this is the best option at the time. Conflicts tend to be small and localised, which translates to greater employability for units on the platoon scale and lower. Large formations may struggle to find suitable clients and may have to detach elements to take on multiple jobs at once.

Recruiting can pose an additional problem in such a region. Typically, within a large interstellar state military training and doctrine will be similar from one world to another. This means that ex-military personnel will be familiar with the same general type of equipment and have received the same general ‘military education’ as other potential recruits. Outside the large states this is rarely the case, so mercenary recruiters must carefully identify strengths and weaknesses without making assumptions. They must provide training where needed, not just in deficient skills but in communications protocols and general doctrine. Units that pay attention to such matters are more likely to prosper than those that rely on individual fighting prowess.

NON-ALIGNED REGIONS

Some of the non-aligned regions within Charted Space have their own distinctive flavour as a result of proximity to great powers or due to events in their history.

The Outrim

The Outrim is a loose term for the region of space to spinward of the Imperium's spinward frontier. It is influenced by Aslan and human cultures, and traditionally a place of opportunity and danger.

Mercenaries are in constant demand to resist Aslan incursions or fight the many small wars that seem to erupt as soon as one conflict is ended. Specialist anti-Aslan units are not uncommon, trained in tactics designed to counter those used by ihatei. Such units might not fare so well against the forces of an Aslan clan, as these more closely resemble a formally organised army with good support. Ihatei bands, on the other hand, tend to be composed of loosely organised warriors who have plenty of personal firepower but little in the way of support or specialist troops.

The Rimward Scatter

The rimward end of the Solomani Confederation and the non-aligned space beyond offers many opportunities for mercenary activity. Most of those involved are from the Confederation or Aslan Hierate, often operating in a different manner to the Imperial norm. This region has only been explored in a patchy manner, other than close to the borders of the Hierate and Confederation, so mercenaries might find themselves operating as a security element for a scientific expedition or colony mission. Lack of concrete information on local conditions results in a need for intelligent and cautious personnel, with specialist explorer/security units offering services to those headed rimward.

The Trans-Gateway Region

The Trans-Gateway Region is another land of opportunity for mercenaries, with numerous small states and many independent worlds all in need of experienced soldiers. Threatened by K'kree and Imperial expansion, many governments have embarked on an expansion of their forces that has only increased tensions. There are multiple small powers and a great many independent worlds, some of which are aligned with or targeted by the interstellar states. This environment is well suited to starmercs and company-sized units, with larger formations being rare until recently.

The threat of K'kree expansion into the trailing end of the Trans-Gateway region has prompted the formation of larger mercenary forces suited to resisting an invasion. These are on retainer to worlds of the threatened region for the most part, although in some cases they are deployed elsewhere to gain experience. In theory, they can be recalled to their clients' homeworlds in time to protect them. Whether this is possible, and whether the clients can afford to maintain these forces in the long term, remains to be seen.

AGENCIES AND DEALERS

The agencies and dealers active within the major powers often have a long reach. They, or their subsidiaries, will often cultivate contacts and outlets across a non-aligned region. Such areas can be hazardous to operate in but rarely lack opportunities. On the other hand, lack of regulation means that smaller – and often rather disreputable – organisations can thrive.

Solutions

Interstellar Arms Dealer

Solutions is a small-scale arms dealership with a difference. The difference is that the company operates out of a heavily converted Borwen transport. This is not a combat vessel and Solutions does not engage in combat other than in self-defence. The vessel allows Solutions to slip through blockades and deliver shipments of arms to those requiring them, although sometimes it will simply turn up in a troubled region and open its holds to create a weapons bazaar.

The vessel's low berths and barracks have been converted into additional cargo space, allowing Solutions to deliver or make available over 250 tons of ordnance. The company specialises in small arms and infantry weapons, and rarely has more than a few vehicles or heavy weapons available. However, Solutions has an impressive (and secretive) array of contacts and can obtain almost any weapon if the client is willing to wait long enough and pay a suitable price.

Solutions goes where the trouble is and rarely fails to find a buyer. The company's analysts are good enough that they can predict where conflict is likely and what weapons will be in demand with sufficient time to get there with goods ready for sale. The company will deal as readily with a rancher needing a gun for property defence as with a mercenary unit wanting six grav tanks and offers exactly the same efficient, no-questions-asked-or-answered service.

It apparently does not have any minimum standard for reputation but does not take custom orders from one-time clients. A mercenary unit or other organisation that wants specific weaponry or vehicles must have a proven record with the firm, which typically means spending at least Cr100000 on arms before making

Arms Dealer Profile

Dealer	Max. TL Available	Infantry	Artillery	Combat Vehicles	Aerospace	Support and Specialist
Solutions	12	Quality	Basic	Basic	Basic	Quality

the custom order. Prices tend to be around 25% over retail for small buys and 10% above standard bulk rates for unit outfitting. For an additional fee, the firm will source specific items and even deliver them to a third party.

The profile here indicates what Solutions normally has available. Custom clients may be able to obtain higher-tech or specialist equipment, possibly including weapons from foreign powers, for a suitable fee.

Solutions does not have an agenda in terms of supporting any particular cause. The company will sell or run weapons to almost anyone, although they consider psychopaths to be bad for business in the long run and will not provide weapons of mass destruction. For the most part, Solutions operates legally within Imperial space and has not been caught breaking any major laws.

However, at its heart the operation is illicit. Solutions is run by a group of former military personnel who retain connections in the Imperial Army supply chain. Some of the company's stock is obtained from diverted shipments and highly illegal. However, such weapons are never sold in Imperial space. There, Solutions always has a provable source for its goods and makes profits from charging higher prices to those in desperate need.

Trojan Military Recruitment Licensing Agency/Recruiter

Trojan Military Recruitment (TMR) is an Imperial company based in the Tobia subsector of the Trojan Reach. It does business on both sides of the border and has attracted considerable controversy over the years. The two sides of TMR's business complement one another; it provides training to potential mercenaries and existing units and licenses mercenary formations.

TMR typically recruits batches of potential mercenaries and provides basic military training to those who need it before forming platoon-sized units with the graduates and those who arrived already trained. These units are then brought up to a 'fieldable' standard and offered as a package to mercenary units seeking to fill their ranks. Individuals or small numbers are routinely diverted from the

training programme when a client needs personnel. Typically this is a handful of infantry soldiers or specialists who will be brought up to standard by their new unit. TMR's appraisals of such personnel are brutally frank – nobody can claim they did not know what they were getting when they took on a bunch of part-trained recruits.

The vast majority of platoons created by TMR are infantry or motorised infantry, provided with a package of weapons and equipment suited to their role. Equipment is of a reasonable standard but not outstanding and geared towards small-unit combat against an enemy that has few vehicles. Such forces are ideal for taking on similarly equipped ihatui bands and are typically acquired by units working along the Aslan frontier.

TMR will provide recruits to any mercenary unit, although it is the individual's choice whether or not to take up employment. The company is honest about the calibre of personnel and will give an equally blunt assessment of the prospective employer if asked. If service is agreed the company takes its fee and the recruit moves on. TMR is one of the primary sources for entry-level infantry soldiers in the Spinward Frontier but does have more advanced personnel on its books, soldiers with previous military or mercenary experience looking for a new billet. TMR does not train specialists, vehicle crews or artillery personnel but is equipped to assess their skills.

It does not have a minimum standard for accreditation as a mercenary unit, beyond basic competence at the small-unit level. This is assessed by a simple demonstration taking a few hours, performed by a Routine (6+) Tactics check with the unit's CEI DM. A Cr10000 fee is charged for the assessment, which can be taken any number of times. TMR will provide scathing but useful feedback to those who fail.

Once a unit has demonstrated competence its license will be issued. TMR requires a bond equal to one month's salaries for the unit, a very low amount in any marketplace, and will list the unit as available for hire as soon as the process is complete. Once the unit begins working its performance is monitored and status will rise over time if the unit behaves in a professional manner. All new units begin as 'unproven' in the eyes of TMR's administrators and clients are always advised of a unit's unproven status.

TMR demands a very high percentage of the prospective mission fee from unproven units. This starts at 25% and gradually decreases as a unit proves its worth. This is a relatively subtle – and generally effective – way of regulating the conduct of mercenary forces. A well-proven unit will pay 10% of its nominal fee to TMR and there are additional advantages to maintaining a good reputation. Most units will try to get the client to pay TMR's fee but unproven or low-reputation forces are unlikely to succeed.

TMR is a legitimate company and most of its dealings are as they seem. However, a small proportion of recruits are siphoned off in the late stages of training. This generally goes unremarked, as many are hired by mercenary units who do not advertise their dealings. Some, however, do not go to mercenary units – at least, not to ones operating on the open market. Instead, those with the right combination of promise and attitude are funnelled into units destined for the Asian frontier. These units are mercenaries in most senses but they usually serve only one client in their entire careers.

They form part of an initiative to counter encroachment by Aslan ihat ei. In some cases small numbers of personnel are assigned to settlements in a likely landing area, passing on their military skills and providing a cadre around which resistance will hopefully form. Others move from one trouble spot to another, dislodging new ihat ei settlements wherever they can. This is a risky strategy, since attacks on ihat ei are often seen as attacks on their parent clan. However, the leaders of this initiative see it as the only alternative to allowing the Aslan to settle wherever they please.

UNITS

Lack of regulation in non-aligned regions can result in mercenary units being extremely varied. At the low end are gangs of incompetents who talk tough but cannot fight or groups of untrustworthy killers who could not get hired elsewhere. There are also apparently reputable forces that spend a lot more time and effort looking hireable than training for combat. Such units tend to underperform unexpectedly. Good forces do exist, of course, and as a rule reputation is even more important where there is little regulation. It can be difficult for a fledgling mercenary unit to establish such a reputation and without one the force may be forever trapped in the low-paying/dubious client end of the market.

Team Xtreme Platoon, Mixed-Capability

Team Xtreme is a moderately famous mercenary force, which does not entirely live up to its reputation. Rather than being founded by an experienced mercenary or a group of former military personnel, Team Xtreme was built around a marketing concept. The idea was simple – this mercenary unit is bolder and wilder than anything else on the market. Its personnel have the best weapons and the flashiest equipment available. Their methods are straight out of entertainment vids. Sadly, there are reasons why such antics only work in fiction.

The unit is roughly platoon sized but organised in a non-standard manner. The overall image is anything but military; individualism is encouraged and recruits are selected as much for their 'big personality' as capabilities in combat. Garishly coloured variants on military dress are the norm, along with wild hairstyles and designer fashion accessories. Equipment is similarly modified, sometimes in a dangerously ramshackle manner.

Team Xtreme rarely goes into action without its camera drones nearby and has a reality-vid show based on the footage from these cameras. Post-production editing and the addition of dramatised scenes all serve to build the legend of a band of daredevils and drive up their fees – in addition, of course, to the revenue from vids and Team Xtreme merchandise.

The command squad, inevitably known as the Most Xtremers, travels in a luridly decorated G-carrier equipped with a fusion gun. According to the vid show this gun is grossly overpowered due to some crazy modifications and routinely 'malfunctions' or 'threatens to explode' during a mission. These scenes are usually added post-production, along the lines of 'after the break: will the fusion gun be back online in time?'. In fact, it is a standard weapon, well-maintained and works just fine.

The Xtreme Grav team rides one-and two-person grav cycles or small personal speeders fitted with excitingly scanty hand and footholds for up to three other personnel. This team specialises in skirmishing from its vehicles or hit-and-run raids involving flying right into an enemy formation and blasting a path out again. This aspect of the unit's operations is not faked and tends to result in high personnel turnover.

Team Xtreme

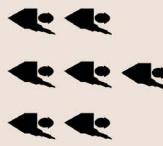
(Captain Xtreme Commanding)



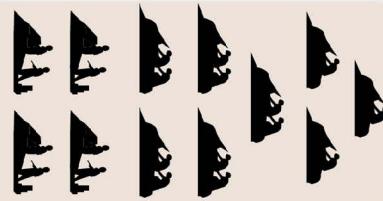
Most Xtremers



Xtreme Grav



Xtreme Warriors



Department of Crazy



Technical/Modification /Invention Team



Admin/Marketing/ Vid Production Team



Key

Captain Xtreme



Combat Armour Infantry



G-Carrier (Fusion Gun Variant)



Grav Truck (Mobile Workshop Variant)



One-Seater Grav Cycle (Various support weapons)



Two-Seater Grav Cycle



Grav Speeder (2-4 additional personnel)



Infantry Personnel



Non-Combatant



Battle Dress Infantry



AirRافت



G-Carrier (Laser Cannon Variant)



Grav Truck (Vid Production Variant)



The other fighting sub-unit is known as the Xtreme Warriors and consists of a mix of variously armed infantry personnel. These fight as individuals, supporting one another on an ad-hoc basis and are successful due to firepower and aggression rather than good tactics. The equipment used by the most heavily-armed of these personnel is maintained by the Department of Crazy, which contains technicals as well as the vid preparation crew and a small marketing department.

Tactically, Team Xtreme is prone to finding the most outrageously aggressive method to tackle any given problem. Ironically, perhaps, its unconventional approach succeeds most of the time. It is possible to achieve surprise by ignoring all established precepts of warfare and bull through as resistance firms up. Enthusiasm only goes so far, however, and the force has been vigorously rebuffed by more professional military formations. Its marketing and administrative personnel know this and try to select jobs suited

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Team Xtreme	—
Unit Size	Platoon	—
Unit Type	Mixed capability	—
Unit TL	13	+2
Mobility Type	Grav	+8
Combat	12	+2
Bombardment	0	—
Aerospace	0	—
Support	2	-2
CEI or DEI	8	—
Morale	13	+2
Reputation	14	+2

to people who like to bungee jump onto an enemy position from an air/raft rather than those requiring skill and discretion.

Team Xtreme is something of a legend and at the heart of that legend is a band of warriors willing to risk their lives to achieve a goal. Members make their own lives more dangerous for the sake of image and ego, so casualties are common. The unit typically demands two to three times the standard fee for a mission, expecting to be bargained down by the client. Overall, Team Xtreme is arrogant, overblown and ostentatious to the point of being ridiculous but its members fight hard and get results. The unit has the Mismatched Equipment trait.

Team Xtreme has no political agenda but constantly seeks to build and protect its brand identity by ever more outrageous stunts and clever manipulation of footage. This has resulted in enmity from more professional units, in part because of lost market share but also because they have been cast as the 'dullards and bad guys' in Team Xtreme's vids. This can harm a unit's reputation, which is not taken lightly.

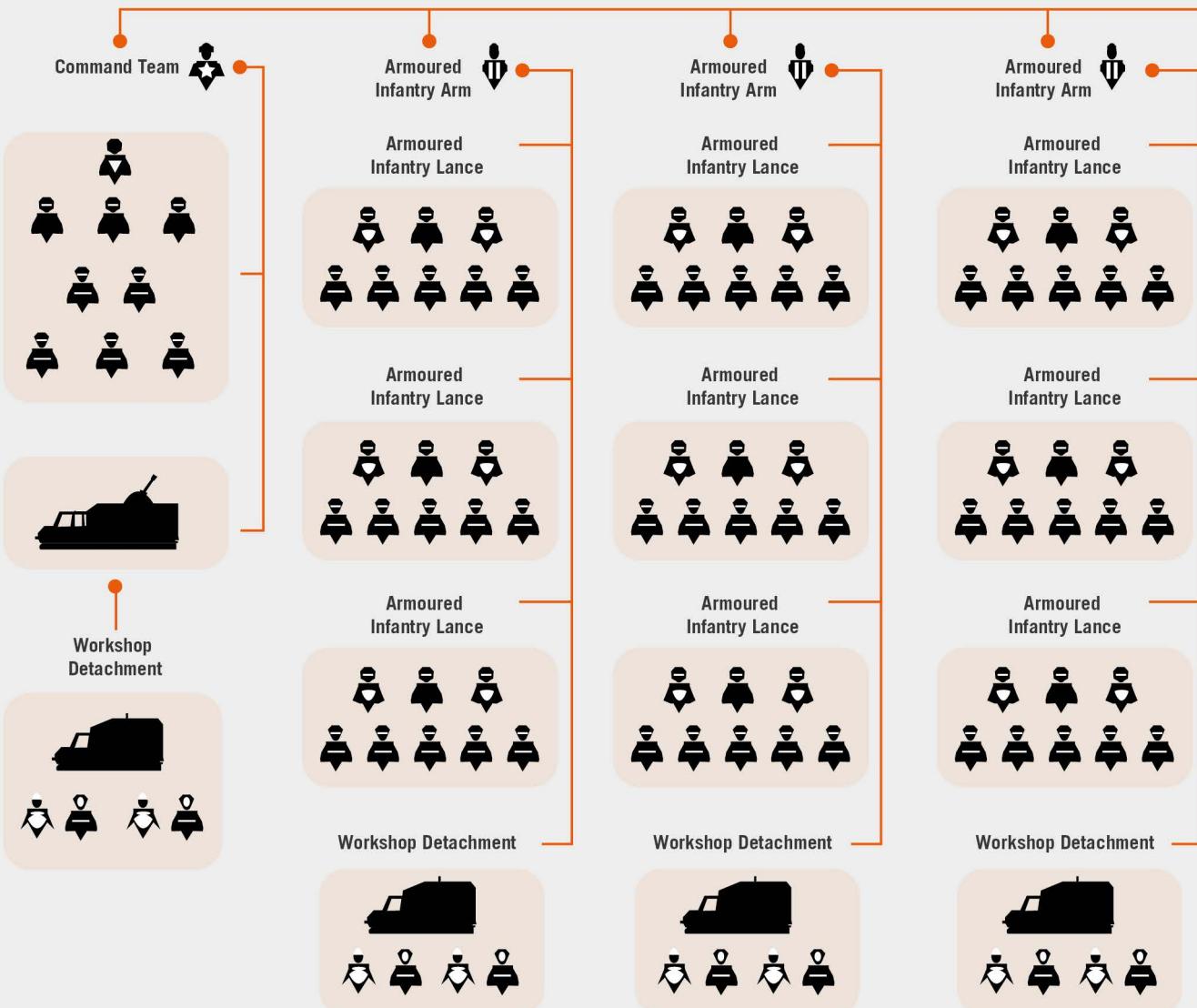
Assault Force Alpha Company, Armoured Infantry

Assault Force Alpha is one of the few armoured-infantry formations on the mercenary marketplace. It markets itself as fully armoured infantry but this is not quite true. The lead combat elements of the force are equipped with a mix of battle dress and combat armour but supporting troops are not. Rather than being organised as a standard company, Assault Force Alpha is divided into 'arms' and 'lances'. A lance is usually formed around a single battle dress equipped trooper, who is supported in action by one or two combat armoured soldiers and three to five equipped with unpowered armour. Depending on the environment this may be vacc suits or heavy conventional body armour.



Assault Force Alpha

(Major Commanding)



Key

- Major
- Captain
- Unit Commander (Battle Dress)
- Armoured Trooper (Battle Dress)

Armoured Trooper (Combat Armour)



Battle Dress Technician



Support Trooper (Unpowered Armour)



Grav Truck (Field Workshop Variant)



Security Trooper (Unpowered Armour)



G-Carrier (Aerospace Defence Variant)



Infantry Soldier (Unpowered Armour)



Support Arm



Armoured
Infantry Lance



Support Lance

Sniper Team



Sniper Team



Light Missile
Launcher Team



Light Missile
Launcher Team



Light Missile
Launcher Team



Light Missile
Launcher Team



Security Team



Security Team



Support Lance

Sniper Team



Sniper Team



Light Missile
Launcher Team



Light Missile
Launcher Team



Light Missile
Launcher Team



Light Missile
Launcher Team



Security Team



Security Team



Workshop Detachment



Each arm is the equivalent of a platoon, containing its own mobile workshop and small security contingent. Arms are operated on a franchise basis, with whoever can afford to provide support for the armoured troops being put in charge regardless of military capability. This pseudo-feudal setup is inefficient in terms of combat power but allows the unit to maintain more armour suits than otherwise would be available. The overall effect is a mix of disorganisation and firepower than few other units can match.

Battle dress equipped personnel favour plasma guns or heavy lasers, with combat armour and unpowered armour-equipped personnel generally using gauss weapons. Snipers are equipped with gauss sniper weapons and missile teams have gauss carbines. The support troopers of a lance are variously equipped, some set up for fire support, others for close-range defence of the armoured troopers. Some are field technicians who fight only in self-defence. In action, the armoured component of each lance may rush ahead of its supports, leaving them behind to secure gains or hold open a line of retreat. If resistance is not heavy the supports will follow their heavily armoured leaders and participate in a close-quarters breaking of enemy positions.

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Assault Force Alpha	—
Unit Size	Company	—
Unit Type	Armoured Infantry	—
Unit TL	14	+2
Mobility Type	Infantry	-3
Combat	13	+2
Bombardment	1	-3
Aerospace	4	-1
Support	5	-1
CEI or DEI	10	+1
Morale	12	+2
Reputation	13	+2

Assault Force Alpha is well-regarded for its fighting power and its unusual organisation makes recruitment easier in many ways. An individual who has managed to obtain a suit of battle dress can join the unit as a subcontractor, receiving a share of payment but taking responsibility for their own immediate followers. This system is accessible but flawed; Assault Force Alpha would be wiped from the field by a regular military force with similar equipment. It rarely comes up against such tough opposition and has won a series of respectable if predictable victories against less well equipped forces.

Assault Force Alpha has one serious problem; it needs to source spares for its armour on a constant basis. This is less of a problem when operating on high-tech worlds but in the backwaters it can rapidly degrade the capabilities of the unit. The leaders do not inquire too closely where components came from and consider the upkeep of individual suits a matter for the owner. Occasionally someone is arrested and the rest of the unit comes under scrutiny but for the most part the force's equipment has been obtained legitimately. Heavy damage from a tough fight might necessitate a revision of this policy.

Intervention, Incorporated Starmerc, Frigate

Intervention, Incorporated is a single-ship starmerc unit operating an Ouragan frigate. This is an expensive and significant force to deploy into any backwater system but one capable of solving a great many problems without backup. Intervention, Incorporated usually carries a complement of light fighters and specialises in blockade, anti-smuggling and system-security operations.

The unit's personnel are for the most part highly skilled but not all have an impeccable pedigree. Intervention, Incorporated will hire crewmembers away from down-at-heel merchant ships or snatch up qualified personnel as they muster out of the armed forces but is rumoured not to care much about background or proof of qualifications. This implies that at least some of the crew are former pirates or have had to leave their old life behind.

Intervention, Incorporated is an above-average mercenary unit but not outstanding. This is at least in part due to the advantages it enjoys in terms of equipment. Since most opponents are grossly outgunned by a frigate and her brood of fighters, the crew tend to be a little lax and complacent. It is probable that the unit is in a downward spiral, which will only be reversed by a sharp but not too damaging defeat acting as a wake-up call.

In the meantime, Intervention, Incorporated roams the spaceways earning a good living without having to do much more than be present. Planetary governments are only willing to pay the unit's rates for a time but there is always another client needing convoys escorted or a powerful ship in orbit near the starport. It is uncommon for Intervention, Incorporated to engage in planetside operations as the frigate carries only a small troop complement. Its barracks have accordingly been converted to extra living and operations space.

Intervention, Incorporated is one of the most powerful and expensive starfaring mercenary units available for hire and is not always employed. This time might be given over to rest and recreation, repairs, maintenance or speculative bounty hunting in systems known to have a lot of pirate activity. The unit has a rather cynical policy of not assisting vessels unless paid to do so and will actually negotiate a fee whilst the victim of an attack is under fire a few kilometres away. This is good business but has not endeared the crew to local merchant captains.

Characteristic	Value	DM
Force Name	Intervention, Incorporated	—
Unit Size	Frigate	—
Unit Type	Starmerc	—
Unit TL	12	+2
Mobility Type	Starship	—
CEI or DEI	8	—
Morale	9	+1
Reputation	8	—
Support	5	-1
CEI or DEI	10	+1
Morale	12	+2
Reputation	13	+2



OURAGAN MERCENARY FRIGATE

The Ouragan and similar vessels are the largest likely to be encountered in the hands of a mercenary force. It is a true warship, albeit a light one, and has found favour with minor governments as a patrol and escort vessel. The Ouragan is not intended to take on major warships, even en masse, but can outfight many ships in its class. Most importantly, it is capable of running down and eliminating the sort of vessel typically used by pirates.

Hull form is conventional for the type, with a central primary hull and two 'operations pods' along the flanks. The bridge and gunnery control chamber are forward in the primary hull with accommodation midships and engineering spaces aft. The vessel's power plant is slightly oversized, allowing power-hungry systems to be swapped in as necessary. This is a useful feature as many variants of the Ouragan have been produced.

Each of the two operations pods houses a docking area capable of supporting 100 tons of small craft. Since the Ouragan is incapable of landing on a planetary surface some of this space must be allocated to utility craft but it is not uncommon to find a frigate carrying at least some fighters. These may be used to protect assault shuttles or conduct patrols if acting in a security/escort capacity.

The remainder of the two operations pods is largely taken up with accommodation for craft crews and ground troops. Barracks space for up to 50 personnel is provided in each, with cabins for flight

crew and leaders. There is also a medical bay and armouries, plus a small amount of cargo stowage. Vessels not intended to land ground troops may reduce the barracks space, retaining sufficient to accommodate a small number of marines or delete it entirely. In such cases the space freed up is sometimes used for additional small craft or converted to full hangars. A small weapons bay can be fitted in place of the barracks in each pod, although some of the ship's armament must be removed to accommodate it.

Primary armament as constructed consists of four particle accelerator barbettes, in two batteries of two. One battery is located on the forward dorsal surface, the other opposite it on the ventral surface. The dorsal, ventral and outer surfaces of the operations pods each mount a triple pulse laser turret, which can be fired individually or grouped as port and starboard batteries. Fore and aft on each operations pod are turrets mounting a mix of missiles and sandcasters, which can switch between defensive and offensive fire at need.

Ouragans are typically encountered in pure-warship form (with the ground troops barracks replaced by weapons bays) in vessels intended for a straight naval role. These have found favour both as escorts and raiders. Those built to their original design have slightly less fighting power in space combat but are more than a match for the typical corsair and often encountered in the hands of pirate-hunters.



660

HULL POINTS

OURAGAN MERCENARY FRIGATE

		TON	COST (MCr)
Hull	1,500 tons, Close Structure	—	67.5
Armour	Crystaliron, Armour: 6	75	20.25
M-Drive	Thrust 6	90	180
Jump Drive	Jump 2	80	120
Power Plant	Fusion (TL12), Power 1,500	100	100
Fuel Tanks	J-2, 8 weeks of operation	320	—
Bridge	Holographic Controls	40	9.375
Computer	Core/50	—	60
Sensors	Military Grade	2	4.1
Weapons	Particle Barbettes x 4	20	32
	Triple Turrets (pulse lasers) x6	6	24
	Triple Turrets (missile racks x2, sandcaster) x4	4	11
	Point Defence Battery (Type II)	20	10
Screens	Nuclear Dampers x2	20	20
Craft	Docking Spaces (50 tons) x4	220	55
Systems	Repair Drones	15	3
	Briefing Rooms x4	16	2
	Medical Bays x2	8	4
	Armouries x24	32	6
	Brig (capacity 12)	8	0.5
	Workshop	6	0.9
	UNREP System (40 tons/hour)	2	1
Staterooms	Standard x24	96	12
	Barracks x100	200	5
Common Areas		100	10
Software	Manoeuvre/0	—	—
	Jump Control/2	—	0.2
	Library	—	—
	Auto-Repair/2	—	10
	Electronic Warfare/1	—	15
	Fire Control/1	—	2
Cargo Space		20	—
TOTAL: MCr 784.825			

CREW

CAPTAIN, PILOT, ASTROGATOR,
ENGINEERS X4, GUNNERS X9

RUNNING COSTS

MAINTENANCE COST
Cr65402/month

PURCHASE COST
MCr784.825

POWER REQUIREMENTS

300

2

BASIC SHIP SYSTEMS

600

202

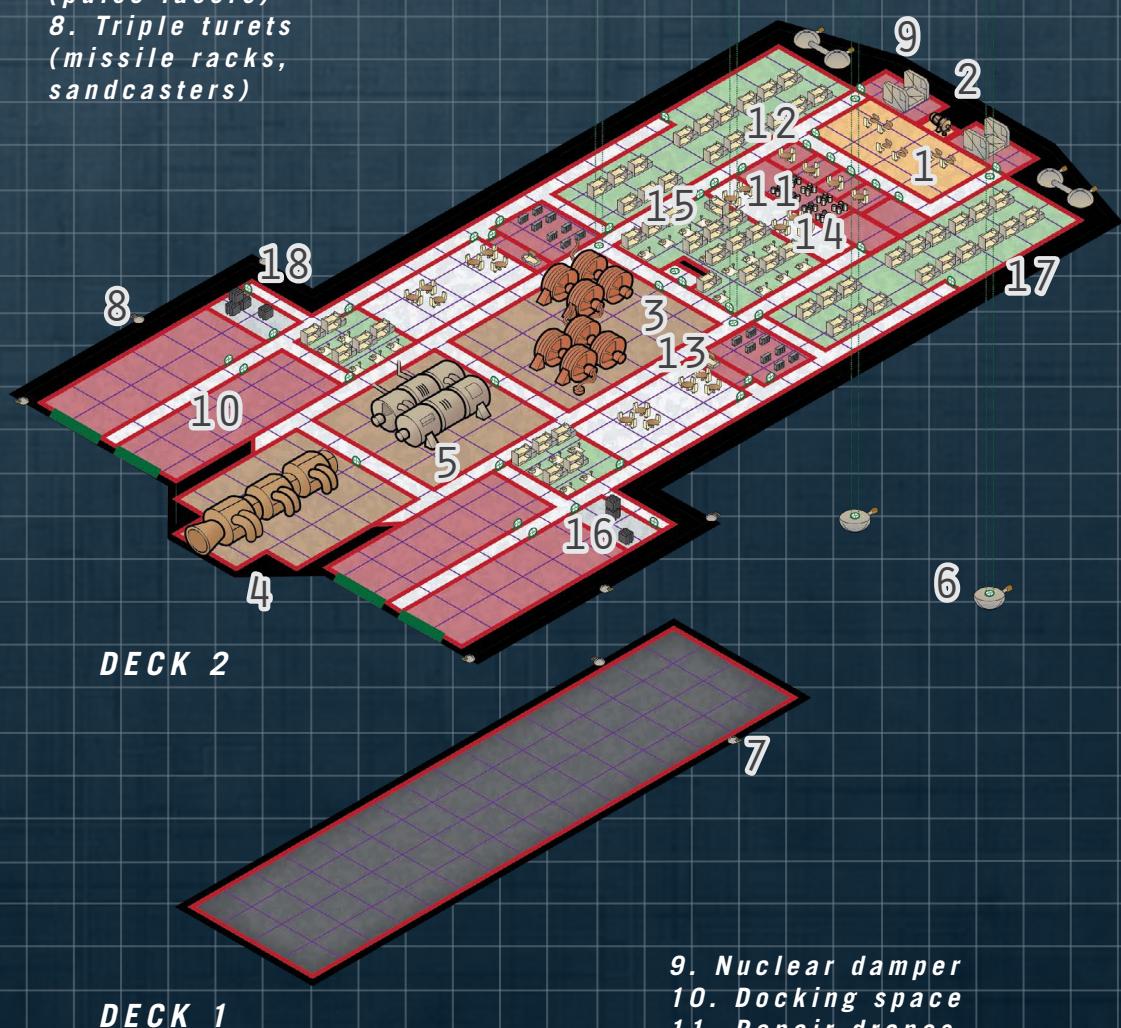
MANOEUVRE DRIVE

300

JUMP DRIVE

LEGEND

1. Bridge
2. Sensors
3. Power plant
4. M-drive
5. J-drive
6. Missile barbettes
7. Triple turrets
(pulse lasers)
8. Triple turrets
(missile racks,
sandcasters)



9. Nuclear damper
10. Docking space
11. Repair drones
12. Briefing room
13. Medical bay
14. Brig
15. Stateroom
16. UNREP system
17. Barracks
18. Cargo hold

CONFLICTS

Conflicts in the non-aligned regions tend to be relatively small in scale, although there are exceptions. Balkanised worlds generally have multiple powers with armed forces optimised for fighting one another, whereas unified planets are more concerned with security and defence against offworld threats. Societies equipped for the wrong sort of war often turn to mercenary forces to remedy the situation.

THE MENORIAL PACIFICATION

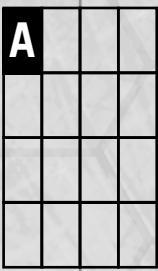
The Menorial subsector lies between the borders of the Third Imperium and the Florian League, offering a jump-3 link for long-range trade ships. The centre of the subsector is dominated by the Strend Cluster, which has one world of significance – Strend, with a population of 80 billion crammed into high-tech but still rather grim megacities. Strend claims the rest of the cluster, maintaining outposts on some worlds and backs this up with a modest fleet of patrol craft. Although no match for the vessels of the Imperial Navy, these ships are sufficient to make trade within and through the cluster reasonably safe.

Strend also maintains a sizable trading fleet, divided into three quasi-military commands. Local Command is exclusively equipped with jump-1 vessels and operates only within the Strend Cluster. Area Command has jump-2 vessels and maintains links into the Imperium by way of Zephyr, whilst other vessels ply routes to spinward through Dustpan and Padgo. Regional Command has control of all jump-3 vessels, most of which are employed on the run to Florian space or into Marrakesh, both by way of Crescent.

These ships are lightly armed and capable of acting as naval auxiliaries. Vessels assigned to Regional Command may spend years jumping back and forth between Crescent and Strend, whilst others undertake out-and-back long-range trade missions. The upshot of this situation is that Strend derives considerable wealth from its position as a link between the Florian League and Imperial holdings in the Spinward Marches.

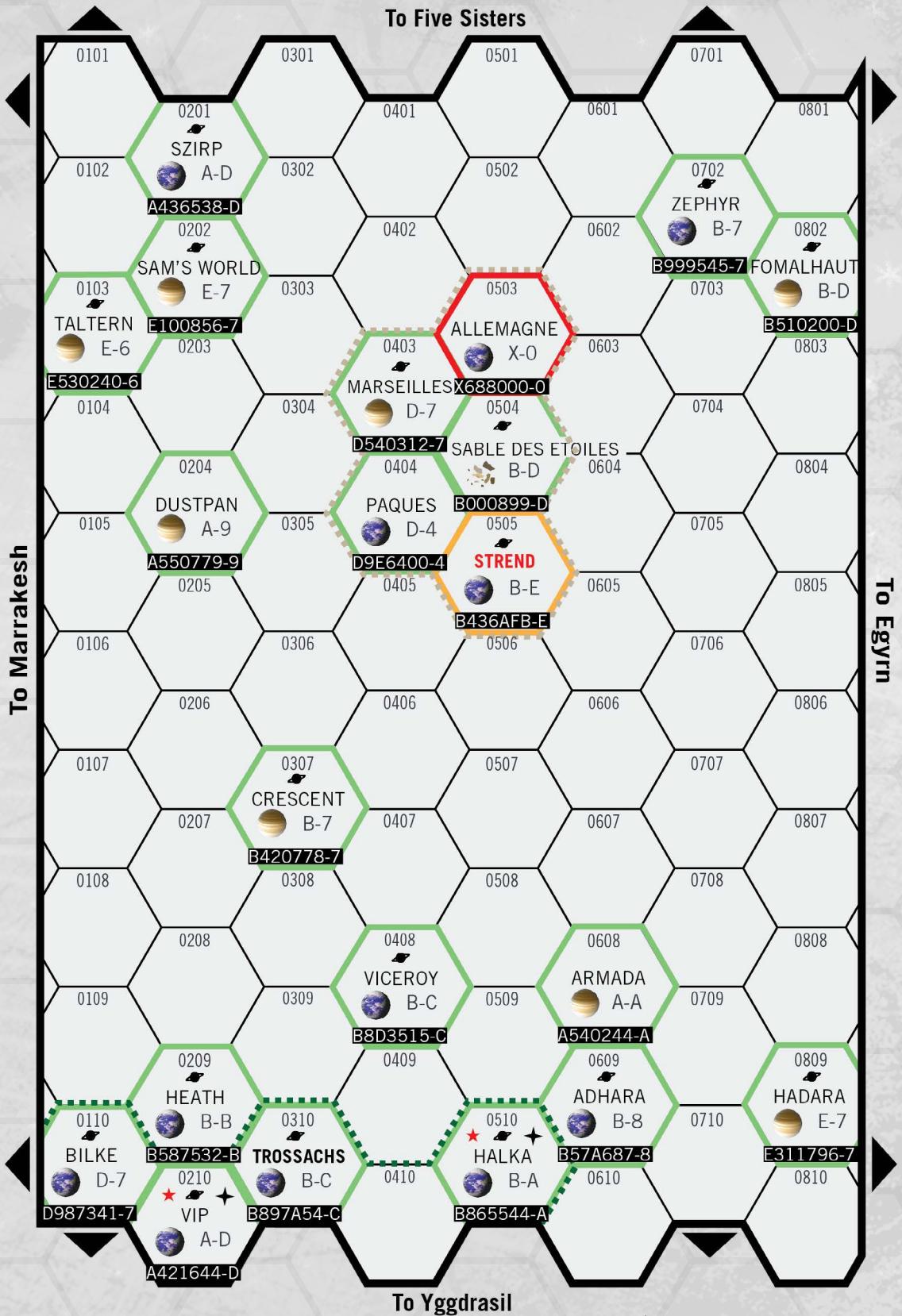
This situation is threatened by instability on Crescent, a balkanised world of around 90 million inhabitants. Crescent has a good orbital starport and multiple downports serving different nations. It is not a very important trade partner for Strend but in recent years has begun to pose a security problem. Nations on Crescent, feeling they are not getting a fair share of offworld trade





MENORIAL SUBSECTOR

Trojan Reach



Gas Giant

Naval Base

B-6 Starport Class & Tech Level

Military base/Garrison

Secure System

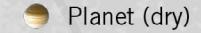
Amber Zone

Strend Cluster

Florian League



Asteroids (no atmosphere/water)



Planet (dry)



Planet (water present)

and interstellar commerce moving through the starport, have begun interfering with portside operations. This ranges from protests outside the docking area through legal challenges to outright sabotage and the same nations have refused to deal with the 'small element of troublemakers' they say are responsible.

Strend's leaders responded in their usual style. Theirs is a totalitarian government that relies on repression to keep the masses in line. If the nations of Crescent would not take care of the security problem, Strend would. Troops were landed at several downports, which were placed under martial law. This cut off access to the highport at a stroke for anyone who did not get through Strend's security screening. Problems in orbit cleared up almost overnight.

The problem is that Strend is now forced to undertake a military occupation of sovereign territory and whatever legal claims it makes the local population are not receptive to the idea. Some ports are under virtual siege whilst others have become war zones as local powers try to retake them or populations rise up. Retreating from planetside holdings is an option but the leadership on Strend need to maintain their image as strong and unyielding overlords so will not consider it. As a result Strend is fighting a number of small wars on Crescent, a situation made more problematic by troubles elsewhere. The decision to intervene on Crescent was loudly trumpeted and somehow escalated into a commitment to deal with problems elsewhere. Strend's groundside forces are now scattered across multiple worlds, trying to cope with conflicts they are simply not trained for.

The Army of Strend

Like many starfaring states, Strend's emphasis is on space forces. The merchant fleet is arranged along quasi-military lines and between these two most of the best recruits are destined for a career aboard starships or installations. There is a guard component of the army, made up of the best and most loyal, but the majority of military personnel are low-value infantry whose primary occupation is bullying the populace to keep them in line.

These paramilitary security troops are not well trained in combat operations and until recently were not equipped for warfare against a credible opponent. Even the TL7 forces of Crescent are a match for Strend's troops, soldier-for-soldier, as they are experienced at fighting one another. Garrison duty at an occupied spaceport is easy enough but attempts to drive off surrounding enemy forces or retake captured sections of a startown generally go badly. Quantities of warfighting equipment have recently been delivered but the army lacks the retraining to make good use of it.

The Opposition

Strend is fighting multiple conflicts, of varying intensity, all at once. Some are on different worlds in the region but most are on Crescent. The local forces are small but cohesive and much better at making use of support weapons or armoured vehicles. They are, however, vulnerable to aerospace attack despite buying all the weaponry they can get. This has to be smuggled through concealed landing sites as Strend controls orbital space.

The usual solution to this problem is to use small units and infiltration tactics, through some of the opposing forces are adept at drawing inept Strend troops out of their positions where they can be bombarded or attacked with armoured vehicles. If the nations of Crescent could agree a cohesive strategy they might be able to drive off the occupying forces but as yet each is determined to chart its own path. Nations weakened by war might be overrun by their former allies.

The Conflicts

This complex situation includes rat-warfare in the wreckage of startowns, skirmishing in the countryside around working ports and the occasional incident in space where a smuggling ship is intercepted or starmercs are hired to launch a raid. It can best be described as several semi-related quagmires tying down large numbers of troops and costing a great deal of money.

Strend is willing to hire mercenaries to break the deadlock, whilst opposing nations are most interested in aerospace defence and an ability to strike at Strend's orbital holdings. Both sides need arms and someone to train their troops. In addition, unrest is on the rise back home on Strend itself. The army's recruiting base is increasingly rebellious, making the raising of new units a risky proposition. Mercenaries are more likely to be trustworthy than newly formed units, and might end up being the only thing propping up the regime on Strend.

Summary

There are opportunities for security units on Strend, warfighters on Crescent and cadre units almost everywhere, plus starmercs in any of the troubled systems. This conflict is unlikely to end any time soon, as this would require a decision to pull out or decisive action that Strend's forces are unfit to implement. Enough debacles will undermine the regime, so the endgame might be a strike by mercenary forces to win a victory in Strend's name followed by what can be spun as a proud withdrawal after a job well done.

