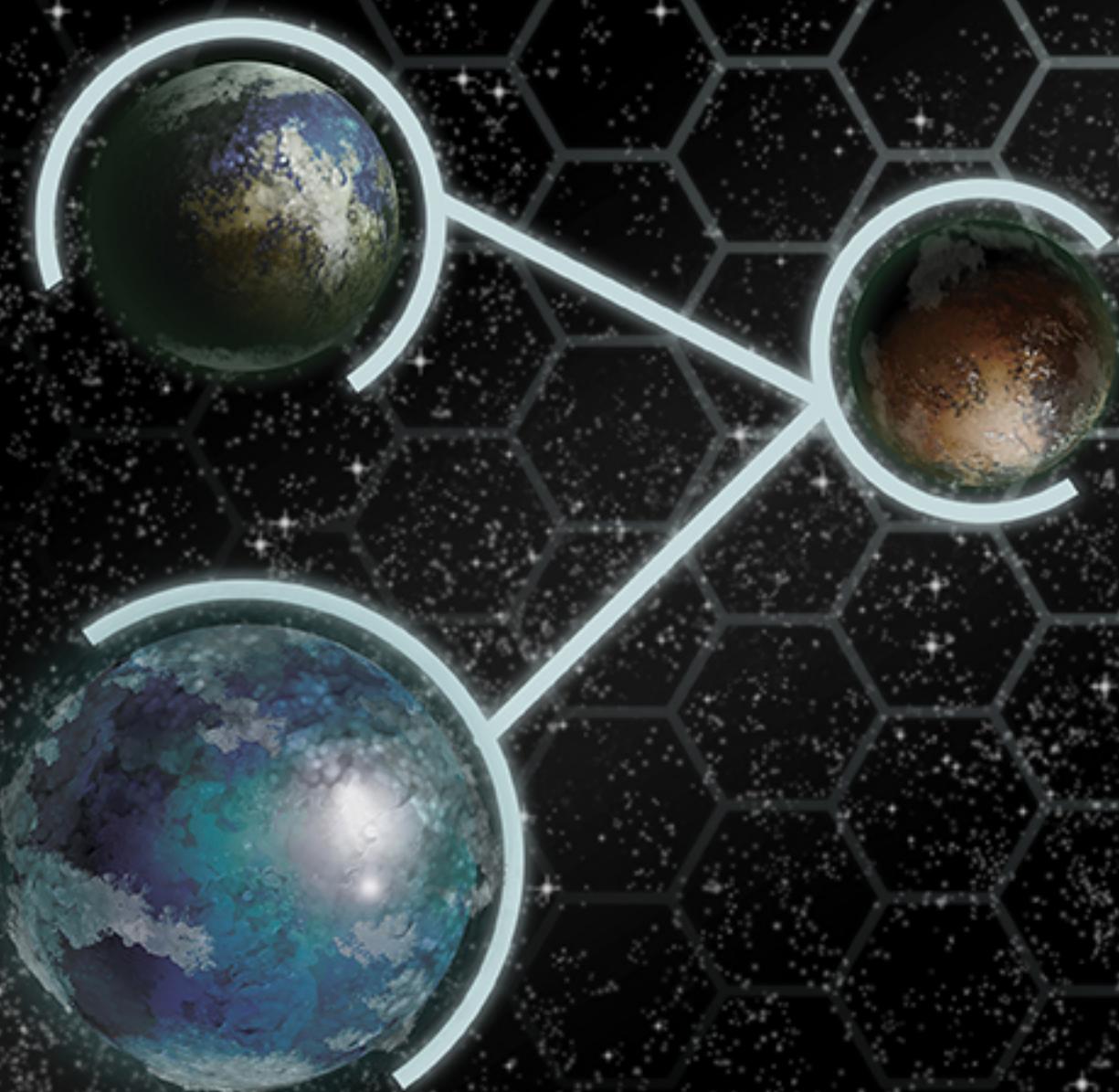


TRAVELLER

PIRATES OF DRINAX: THE TORPOL CLUSTER



SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE IN THE FAR FUTURE

TRAVELLER

PIRATES OF DRINAX: THE TORPOL CLUSTER

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------|----|
| INTRODUCTION | 2 |
| TORPOL | 4 |
| CLARKE | 9 |
| BLUE | 13 |

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INTRODUCTION

This mini-series details the worlds of Trojan reach sector that might be visited during the Pirates of Drinax campaign. The material in this book is set in Sindal Subsector of the Third Imperium universe, but can be easily transplanted to other regions or any game setting that follows the general standards and assumptions of the Third Imperium.

TORPOL CLUSTER

The Torpol Cluster is the name given to three worlds in Tlaiowaha subsector which all lie within jump-1 of one another. Three worlds is a small cluster, but these three are important as they provide a link between the Wildeman Cluster and the Sindalian Main (by way of Marduk), which permits jump-2 traffic to transit from Imperial space to the territory of the Florian League. Traffic bound for the Aslan Hierate also comes through these systems as an alternative to the Wildeman Cluster/Borderland Cluster transit.

These three worlds are therefore of strategic importance to both the Imperium and Aslan Hierate, just as they were to the old Sindalian Empire. That importance was a double-edged sword; the wars that wracked the empire in its last days caused enormous damage on Clarke in particular. The scars of orbital bombardment can still be seen, and there are lingering psychological effects too. The strange society of Clarke was born in nuclear fire, and while Torpol and Blue have gone in different directions there is still a cultural memory of what happened and could happen again.

At the present time the border of the Aslan Hierate is stable, not least due to the jump-3 or jump-4 gap between the worlds at the outer edge and those deeper in. Eventually, expansion will occur and when it does it is likely to come rapidly. A more powerful Drinax could be a barrier to such expansion, at least for a time. Not only would Drinax prevent the annexation of its own

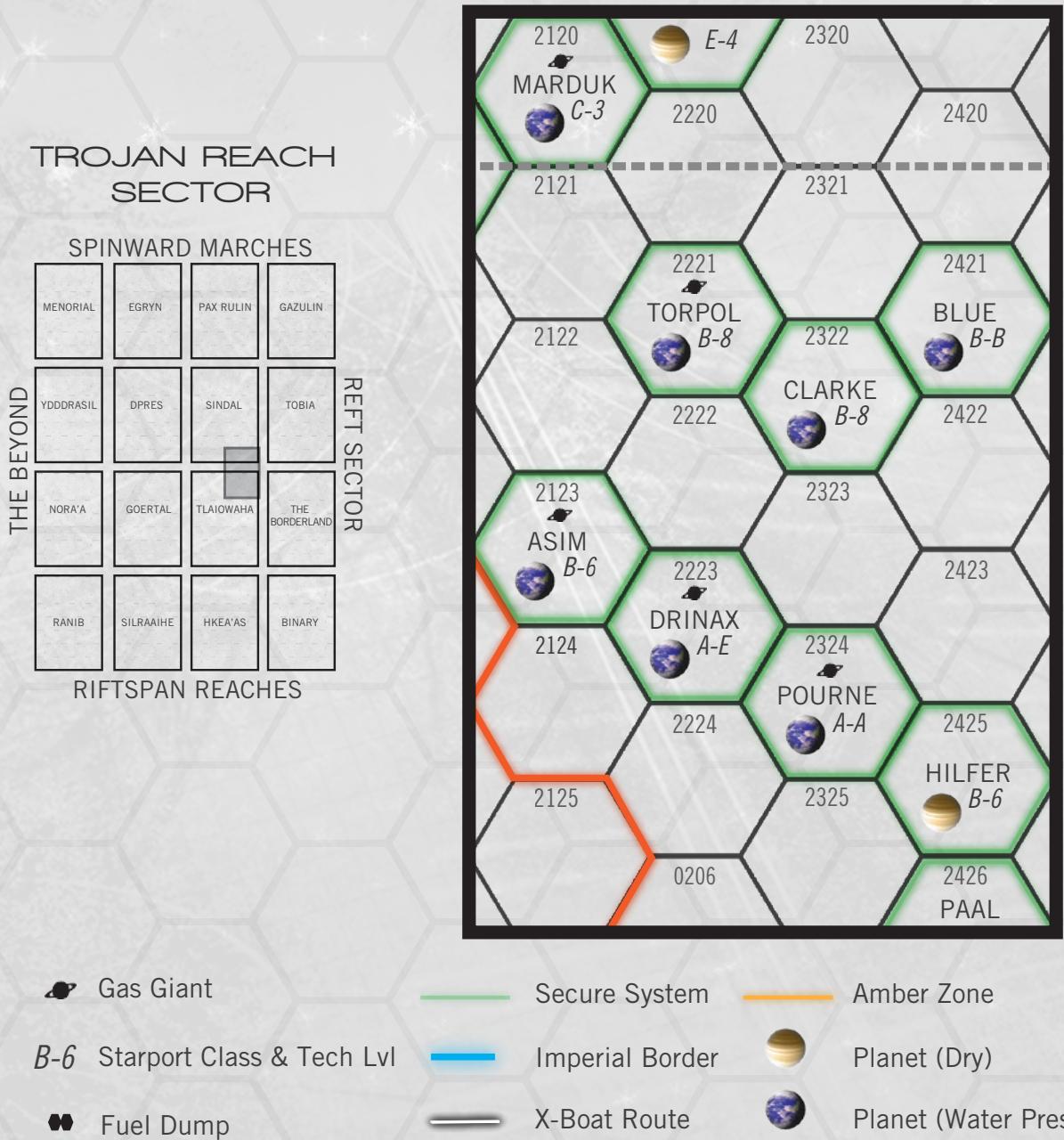
system but presumably those surrounding it too. That would buy the Torpol Cluster some time, though in the long term an Aslan explosion up and along the Sindalian Main is probably inevitable.

This is most definitely not in the interests of the Third Imperium, since it would not only move the Aslan border much closer to Imperial territory but also cut off the Imperial-Florian trade route or at least force it to run through foreign territory. This is one of a great many strategic concerns for the Imperium, whose resources are spread thin. As a result there is a small Imperial presence in the cluster, mainly in the form of intelligence-gathering agents and local assets. These are typically people and organisations unconnected with the Imperium except but willing to take Imperial Credits in return for furthering the Imperium's agenda.

The Imperium sends naval ships through the cluster on a semi-regular basis. Some are escorts for particularly important trade ships or convoys; others are warships showing the flag. Old destroyer escorts and fleet destroyers are the most common vessels sighted in the cluster, often spending a week or two in the Torpol system and a shorter period around Clarke or Blue. The Imperial Navy has no official jurisdiction in this area, but the principle that the Imperium is powerful enough to do as it pleases applies here; Imperial ships will hunt pirates or search suspect vessels if there is need, though they usually request (and receive) permission from local world governments.

The cluster sees a fair amount of internal trade, with ships plying between ports in the same system or jumping within the cluster. Through trade is extensive, with Torpol acting as a stopover and liberty port for many ships that come through. The cluster might thus offer rich pickings for pirates, though the presence of an Imperial trade route makes this a potentially hazardous undertaking.

PARTIAL MAP OF THE SINDAL & TLAIOWAHA SUBSECTORS



TORPOL



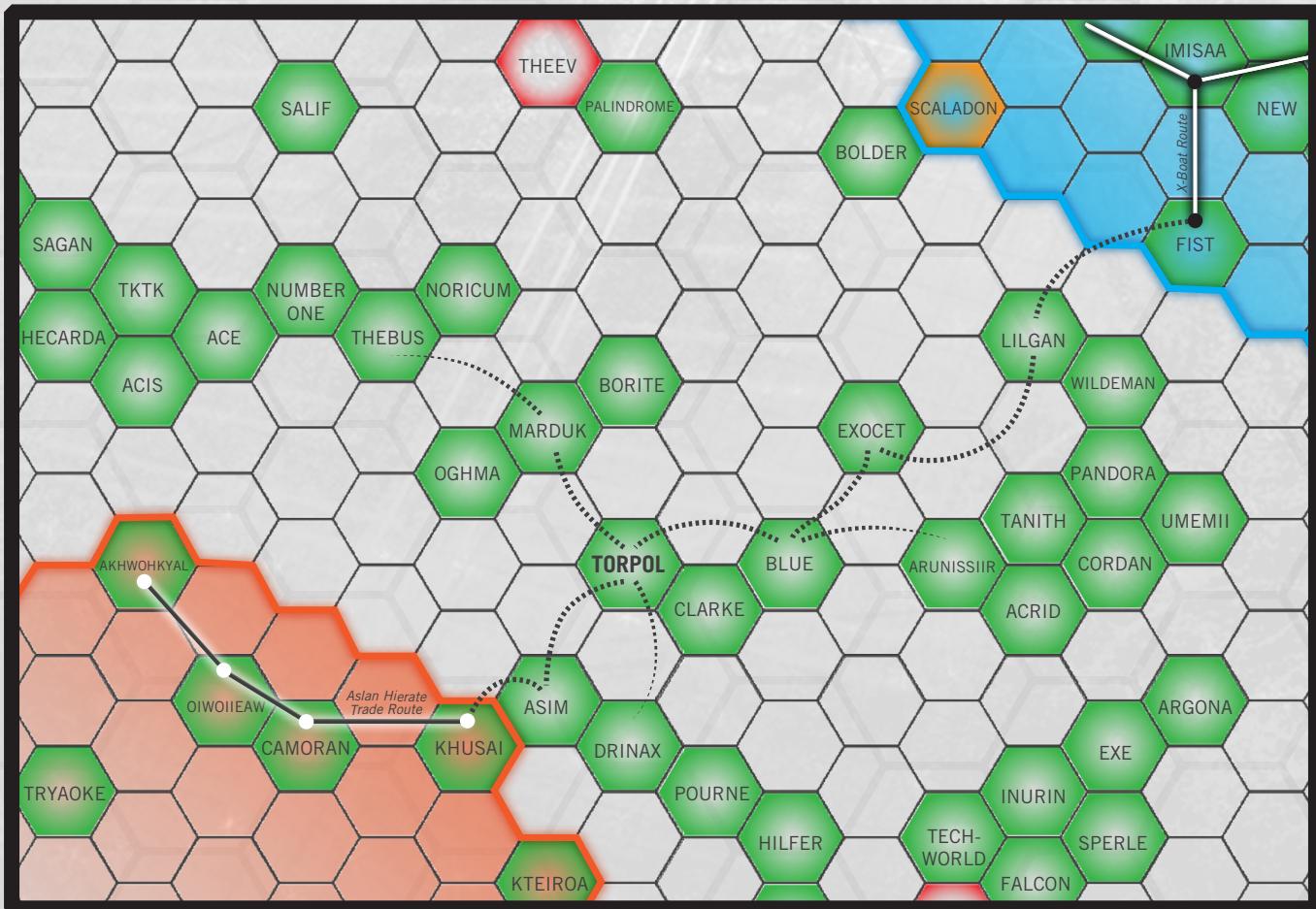
Torpol is astrographically the most important world in the Torpol Cluster, as it provides jump-2 access between the Sindalian Main (via Marduk) and the Aslan Hierate (via Drinax or Asim) as well as acting as a jump-2 link via Blue to Arunissir or Exocet, and thence to Imperial space. Jump-4 vessels (typically warships) usually transit to Torpol from Fist via Exocet. It receives far more interstellar traffic than Clarke or Blue, a factor that has heavily influenced its economic development.

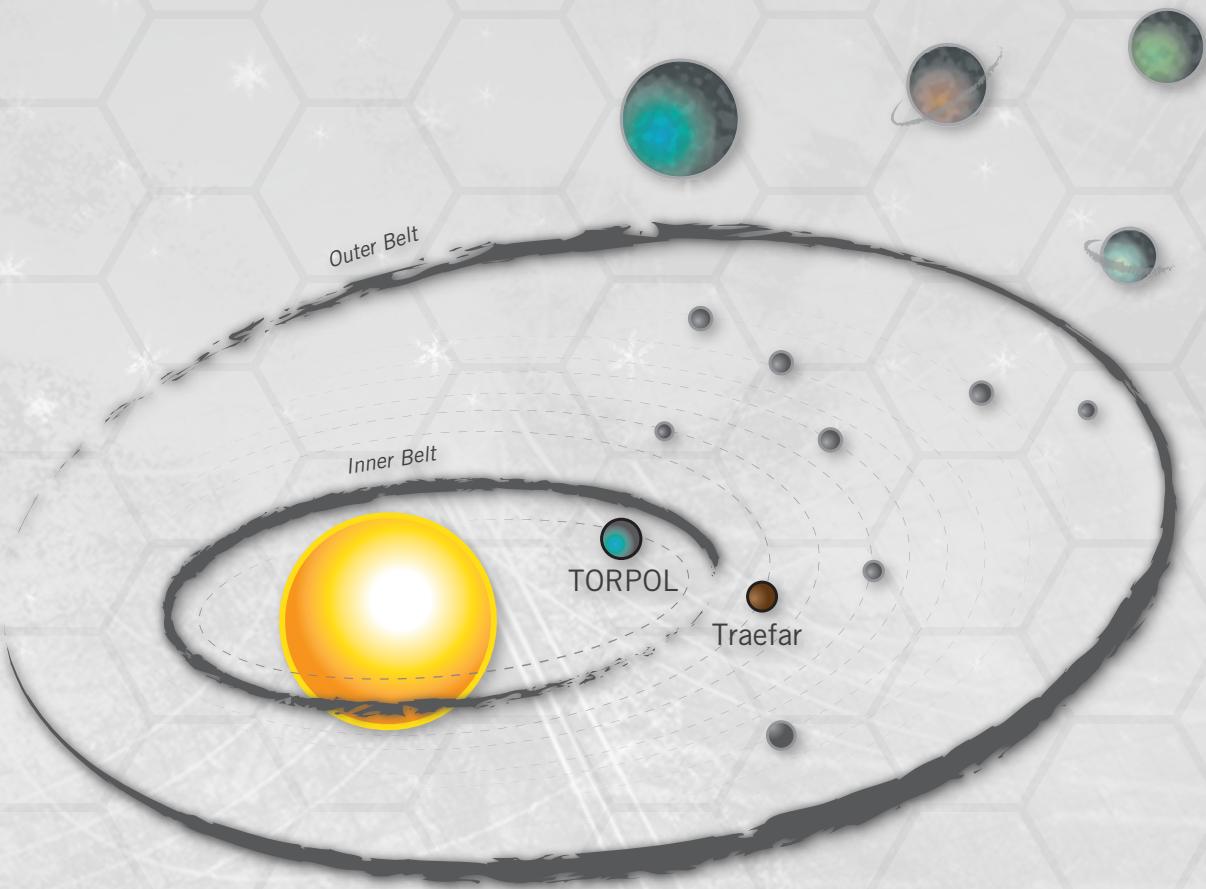
THE TORPOL SYSTEM

The Torpol system is centred on a type F4V star, a fairly bright and hot main sequence star. It is orbited by two planetoid belts, four gas giants and ten terrestrial (rocky) planets including Torpol itself. Of these, only Torpol is correctly positioned to receive enough stellar energy for liquid water, and is the only planet in the system to have life on its surface.

That does not mean the rest of the system is uninhabited. The outer planetoid belt has an extensive belter community whilst the inner one has less belters but more commercial mining operations. Most of these are local companies operating out of Torpol or Clarke, but the Imperial megacorporation Sternmetal Horizons also has a mining base in the inner belt.

There are outposts on various gas giant moons, but of the system's planets only Torpol and Traefar are inhabited. Traefar is the next world out from Torpol, on the far side of its inner planetoid belt, and is a cold rockball with only a trace of atmospheric gas. Traefar was a colony of no great importance in the era of the Sindalian Empire, and survived the death throes of the empire well. 'We have nothing worth bombing' is not much of a defensive strategy but in the case of Traefar it seems to have worked.





Traefar has a small commercial spaceport which mainly serves mining ships whose operators do not want to pay the high fees charged at Torpol Highport. The port is rather basic, but the associated city of about two million inhabitants has enough recreation facilities to entertain commercial spacers who have been cooped up in a mining ship for weeks on end. Belters from the outer belt sometimes call there to trade or to enjoy some 'sophisticated' leisure time.

Traefar spaceport is a good place to pick up new crewmembers. The sort of spacer found there tends to have few formal qualifications but solid practical experience. Most are former commercial spacers or belters who have decided they want a change of lifestyle. Some are inveterate drifters, and a few are the sort of spacefarer who has to stay away from the major ports.

The Imperial Navy has been known to raid Traefar spaceport from time to time, searching for pirates and similar criminals. They tend not to find many however; Traefar is not a pirate haven and is culturally quite hostile to those who rob and kill for a living. It is a place where hard-working spacers congregate, and whilst few questions are asked about individuals it is not somewhere to spend a ton of pillaged booty and rest up before the next raid.

Traefar spaceport is defended by the grandly named Traefar Flotilla, which consists of a handful of armed small craft and a couple of old fighters. This small force could be augmented in a crisis by belters and commercial miners, some of whose ships are lightly armed.

TORPOL HIGHPORT

Most of the vessels that come through the Torpol system dock at the large orbital port and use local shuttles to send crew and passengers to the surface. Smaller vessels sometimes proceed directly groundside but this is uncommon. The highport is modern and well-run, with good facilities for overhaul and maintenance. There is a small private shipyard, which mostly produces small craft for local clients but can also supply standard components for starships. Jump-capable vessels cannot be built at Torpol but they can be serviced and repaired.

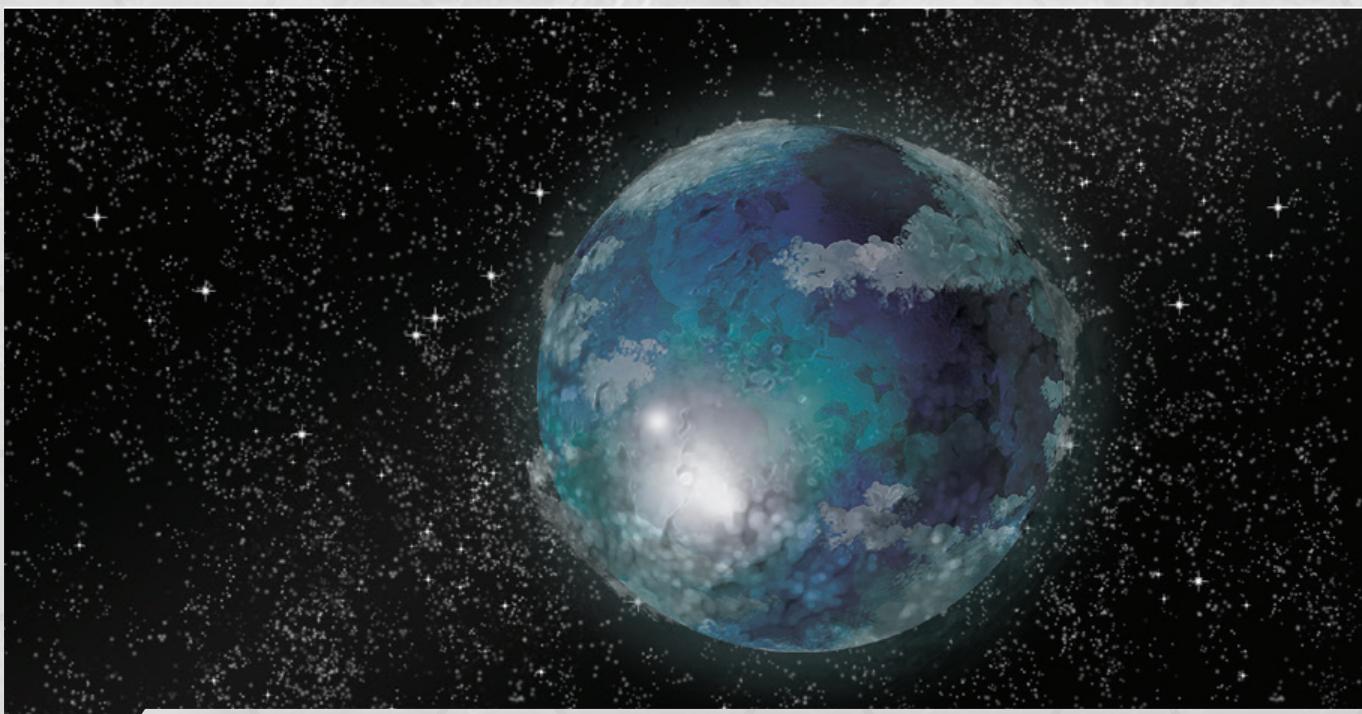
The port has an efficient security service which is intolerant of boisterous behaviour. Those who want to blow off steam or make a nuisance of themselves are 'advised' to take it planetside, to one of the spaceports which offer a range of entertainments. The highport is a bit straight-laced, being geared to business negotiations and interstellar commerce rather than fun.

The highport is where the system's business sector is located, including the headquarters of most large planetside firms and offices maintained by the world's ruling elite. Speculative cargo is often traded here, with shipments split for transfer to various end clients. All manner of goods can thus be found in the warehouses of the highport, though there are restrictions on what can be traded to some clients. With the proper licenses, almost anything can be bought and sold at Torpol, but an all-cargoes license is expensive and complex to obtain. As a result, a large number of 'middle-brokers' have emerged who can wriggle a restricted cargo through the legal process for a fee – this is typically 10-15% of the cargo's value.

Torpol's highport has for many years now also served as a sort of planetary capital. Officially, no such place exists and the cities of the surface are self-governing. However, each city sends representatives to a council which meets at the highport, and it is here that most inter-city deals are done, with decisions affecting more than one city debated. This is another reason why thrill-seeking starfarers are sent planetside – the planetary rulers really do not want partygoers stumbling through their corridors of power.

As might be expected from a busy, highly profitable port, Torpol Highport is well defended. Its security contingent includes numerous gunners who man a primarily missile-based armament. Missile bays are located in areas of the port that are off-limits to civilians, but numerous beam weapon turrets are scattered all over the outer surface of the station.

This defence system provides a measure of protection to vessels near the station, but is incapable of reaching far out into space. For this purpose, Torpol maintains a flotilla of fighters at the highport and a single large defensive craft. This is a (very) old Imperial Gionetti-class light cruiser, a huge ship by local standards, which was provided several decades ago under a now-defunct 'trade route security assistance' scheme. The cruiser is in relatively good repair considering its age, but is not jump capable and several of its systems have been replaced with locally produced alternatives of lesser capability. Still, a light cruiser that was once a unit of the Imperial Navy is more than a match for most threats encountered in Trojan Reach sector.



TORPOL

Torpol itself is a small world with a thin atmosphere, whose surface is completely covered in water. In places this is quite shallow, though there are some very deep abyssal areas with trenches that have never been explored. Torpol is poor in terms of natural resources (other than water) and has little manufacturing capability of its own. Its prosperity is founded on trade, both in terms of its own commercial activity and also facilitating the trade of others. The Imperial/Florian and Imperial/Aslan trade routes are vital to Torpol's economy, bringing in most of the world's income.

Commerce is, to a great extent, at the heart of life on Torpol. The ruling Provosts are essentially merchant princes, and many have extensive offworld holdings. Some of the mining operations of the inner belt are owned by or do regular business with certain Provosts, whilst others own one or more commercial spacecraft and starships. A lot of money changes hands at Torpol Highport; the Provosts work hard to create an atmosphere where trade and commerce are easy to accomplish. Thus, despite a high law level, Torpol's rules and regulations are surprisingly straightforward for most activities.

The majority of the sixty million population live in cities built on the polar ice caps. These are built as rafts that 'float' on the ice and have few very tall buildings. Instead, the cities sprawl outward as new raft sections are added and connected by flexible roadways that carry ground vehicles. Rafts and roads are built to insulate the ice from any heating effects and spread out the load passing over or built on top. The system is complex but has worked for many years.

The remainder of the populace live in smaller cities built on stilts in shallow water. Most of these form a chain around the equator, though there are a few in other areas. The equatorial cities are mainly geared to offworld commerce and, essentially, tourism. Passengers and crews from visiting starships are enticed to spend some time (and a lot of Credits) in the equatorial city-ports. Some of these have themes or attempt to offer something others do not, though a successful gimmick will rapidly be copied elsewhere.

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Thus, some cities have created artificial landscapes far beyond the usual meaning of the term parks, with small forests and open areas of greenery. There is something faintly surreal about going white-water rafting on a river that runs through a park in a maritime stilt-city, but if an activity is popular then at least one city will find a way to provide it.

The equatorial city-ports typically feel wild and wanton to visitors, though some are geared to those who prefer culture. An example of the latter is Esafen, which hosts several very good museums and performance venues as well as the world's best university. Its primary attraction is the Museum of Sindal, which traces the history of the Sindalian Empire from its humble beginnings to its bloody end. Naturally, there is a large exhibit devoted to the Sindalian Renaissance which implies Torpol is the spiritual and cultural heart of the region. This maybe a bit far-fetched, but Esafen does a good job of telling the Sindal story in an easily digestible format.

Torpol has a high Law Level, though enforcement is surprisingly subtle. The intent is to keep visitors safe and happy without an intrusive law enforcement presence. This is generally achieved, though occasionally it is necessary to take direct and overt action. When a light touch and a system of community service for most offences does not work, Torpol's cities send in a heavily armed paramilitary security force to break heads and restore order.

The security force – actually termed the Enforcement and Protection Service, or EPS – is the only real combat force on Torpol. It has specialist sea, ice and air units as well as aerospace defence forces, and whilst all of its personnel have law enforcement powers, many specialise in tasks that would fall within the remit of a planetary army if Torpol had one. Others provide a fire and rescue service.

Torpol is officially listed as being balkanised, though this is slightly misleading. It is true that all cities are self-governing, each with its council of Provosts, but cooperation is necessary to the world's economy and political affairs. As a result, the advisory council formed from representatives of each city finds it easy to come to a consensus on most matters. For a balkanised world, Torpol is unusually harmonious.

PIRACY IN THE TORPOL SYSTEM

Torpil might be considered a target rich environment with all the ships that pass through. However, although its force of starport-based fighters is not large, it is backed by a heavy missile capability at the port itself. There is also the factor that the Imperials consider Torpol to be of strategic importance and sometimes have a ship in the system. More important than these occasional guardships or the escorts that accompany some convoys is the fact that the Imperium might well consider any disruption of the trade routes to be a threat, and act accordingly. The Imperial Navy cannot deploy ships to this region permanently, but if the need is perceived it could flood the surrounding systems with cruisers until large numbers of pirates had been killed or captured.

Attacks in the vicinity of the port therefore carry very significant risks in the short and longer term, but elsewhere in the system a heavy response would be highly unlikely. The belter ships of the outer planetoid belt are not much of a target, but the mining vessels of the inner belt or the trade to and from Traefar might be a reasonable prospect. Defences are much weaker in this part of the system, and an attack on the in-system trade would probably not be considered a threat to the main interstellar trade lanes. The Provosts of Torpol are known to put out bounties on those who attack the shipping their economy depends upon, though the effectiveness of this can vary considerably.



CLARKE



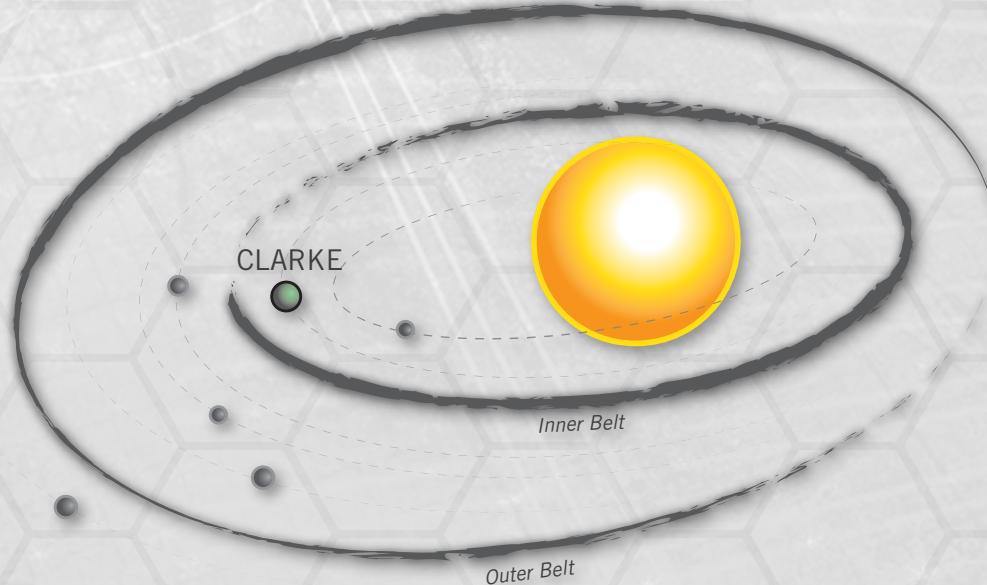
Clarke is, astrographically at least, the least important of the three cluster worlds, though it does see significant amounts of offworld traffic. This is mainly local, i.e. jump-1 ships moving within the cluster or jump-2 traffic coming in from Drinax and Arunisiir (by way of Blue). Long-range ships tend to use the port at Torpol and move on, with any elements of their cargo that enter the cluster's economy moving by local transport.

Clarke has a reputation as a gloomy and rather unsettling place, which is probably deserved. It has never truly recovered from the bloody days of the late Sindalian Empire era, either physically or psychologically, and its strange religion is famous for

many parsecs. The real Clarke is not quite the same as the image most offworlders have but it is certainly not a cheerful place. As a result, those who have the choice do business at the altogether more welcoming Torpol.

THE CLARKE SYSTEM

The Clarke system is centred on a yellow-white (F1V) main sequence star which has a distant red (M9V) companion. The companion system does not normally appear on starcharts as it is not inhabited. It is known to have several mapped comets, and not much else.



Companion Star

The Clarke system proper has no gas giants, making it necessary to obtain fuel from the starport or go looking for ice on a planetoid or comet. Few vessels can afford the time for such an undertaking, since the saving on fuel would be vastly less than the costs of running life support whilst searching – let alone the time lost from commercial activity. However, since many of the system's comets and planetoids are charted it is possible that those who want to stay off the spacelanes might have their own wilderness refuelling spots.

There are two planetoid belts, neither of which is especially rich in minerals, and a total of seven terrestrial (rocky) planets. Two of these (other than Clarke) used to be inhabited; one still is. The old colonies were shot up in passing during the wars of the Sindalian Empire. Those settlements not eradicated were abandoned or succumbed to systems failures, creating mass tombs for their remaining inhabitants.

The only permanent settlement in the Clarke system outside the mainworld itself is a small town that grew up around a religious mission on one of the former colonies. This project aims to recover all the remains from those that died and inter them properly. They cannot be preserved in the way that recent dead are, of course, but the religion of Clarke demands they be given the proper rites and not left lying in the cold and dark for all eternity.

The two belts have communities of belters here and there. These are independent and do not answer to the world government. As a result their numbers are unknown. The belter population is probably quite small, and although belter ships do come in to the highport to trade, they contribute relatively little to the local economy.



CLARKE HIGHPORT

Many visitors to Clarke are reluctant to visit the surface, and prefer instead to stop over at the highport. Although given the same classification as the port at Torpol, Clarke's is much less grand. It is functional, and well able to serve the needs of passing trade ships, but has none of the vibrancy and welcome of Torpol. Most of the ships that come through Clarke are local and small compared to the large long-range freighters seen elsewhere in the cluster. Clarke Highport's large-ship docking areas can stand empty for weeks or even months on end, but there is a constant turnover of smaller ships.

Trade is also generally on a smaller scale, with Clarke considering a large cargo to be tens of tons rather than hundreds or thousands. Despite this, there are good trade links with Drinax and Pourne, and thence to other systems. Some Aslan clans maintain a jump-3 trade and passenger service to the Imperial worlds of the Trojan Reach sector, and many use Clarke's port as a stopover en route to Arunisiir. Aslan are more common at Clarke than in most systems along the human side of the border.

Like most starports in the region, Clarke's Highport was built to withstand attack, and is armed with a mix of missile and beam weapons, along with a handful of system defence boats are available to protect traffic in the vicinity of the mainworld. The port's operators really do not care what happens in the rest of the system. With one minor exception, the rockball worlds are uninhabited, and belters can take care of themselves – if they cannot, it is not the concern of the world government.

Clarke's highport can maintain starships and build small spacecraft, but in practice does little of either. Most activity of this sort is undertaken on a part-time basis, or by what amounts to a handbuilding industry. The craft put together at Clarke tend to be very well finished and are generally turned out to a high standard, since the crews that construct them often have the time to spare. This quality comes at a slight premium in price (10-15%), but there is a limit to what Clarke can charge for craft available elsewhere.

CLARKE

Clarke was once a garden world, largely unspoiled except for a concentration of high-technology manufacturing around the capital. This was the first target for orbital bombardment when the wars of the Sindalian Empire came to Clarke. It was also the last, and was worked over a few times in between. As a result, the capital region is still a radioactive wasteland, its terrain pocked with craters interspersed by mounds where rubble has been buried in the years that followed.

The rest of Clarke had little industry, but that did not save it from the bombing. Indeed, Clarke stands as a particularly thorough example of Sindalian spite. Every major settlement was flattened in a series of attacks, with refugees from one disaster zone finding shelter at another city, only to be bombed again. The result is a ruined world whose technological base was completely shattered and whose cultural psyche never recovered.

Despite the destruction raining down on them, the people of Clarke tried to save everyone they could, including the recently deceased. Before the bombing, technology existed that could repair and revive those placed quickly within cryogenic suspension at the point of death. Although this capability was lost along with the capital, it was hoped that relief would come and at least some of the dead could be saved. This, of course, did not happen but over time the hope of healing and revival became an obsession and finally a religion.

The practice of freezing the dead was replaced with a rather macabre form of preservation in which the deceased is interred in a monolith of carbon. These dull-black blocks are used as building materials in the cities of Clarke. Their dour appearance creates a grim and oppressive form of architecture which is only intensified by knowledge of what lies within them.

The process of preservation is controlled by a hierarchy of priests known as psychopomps. This translates as ‘soul guides’ and refers to the fate of the soul in both life and death. The stated aim of the psychopomps is to preserve each and every member of Clarke’s society for the Day of Healing, which will be brought about by the rediscovery of technologies lost in the bombardment of Clarke. The Day of Healing concept probably had a fairly limited and secular meaning at the beginning, in that there were practical limits on who could be revived even

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when the technology was available. However, today’s society on Clarke generally believes that everyone can be brought back – perhaps even the dusty dead of the offworld colonies.

The gloomy, death-obsessed religion of Clarke pervades all aspects of society and is genuinely believed by most of the population. The psychopomps are thus not only priests and advisors, they are also the world’s political and economic leaders. This can make interacting with the government of Clarke a sobering experience for Travellers; local metaphors and figures of speech are mostly concerned with death; contracts have strange religious overtones, and dealings are conducted in gloomy and oppressive surroundings.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this obsession with death and preservation, Clarke actually has a quite low Law Level. The citizens are generally well-behaved and abide by the rules of civilised behaviour without much need for law enforcement. It has been unkindly suggested that the people of Clarke are simply too depressed to cause trouble, but the reality is that their religion implies consequences beyond death. This is sufficient to keep most people from straying too far from the accepted norms.

Although the psychopomps’ goal is to bring about the Day of Healing by reconstructing old technologies, little progress has been made. There are archaeological projects digging through the radioactive wreckage of the old capital and various offworld assistance projects but, on the whole, these are underfunded and progress has been extremely slow for many years. Cynics might observe that the psychopomps risk losing their position if they actually succeed in their mission, but it is equally likely that Clarke simply cannot break out of its present mid-tech-backwater state for lack of money. The cost of rebuilding even part of the original technological base would be astronomical, and Clarke does not have sufficient income.

Today, the population of around 80 million dwells in several dispersed cities built mainly out of grim monoliths containing the waiting dead. Cities are noticeably ‘hard’ in terms of resistance to attack; buildings are shaped and positioned to deflect blasts and spaced to prevent a nuclear strike eliminating all key infrastructure. Reserves of food and medical supplies are maintained in most settlements, even though there is no apparent or immediate threat.

Clarke's dense atmosphere is still tainted by the bombardment, and some parts of its ecosphere never recovered. There are large barren areas, and contaminated material from the bombing sites has been carried worldwide by currents in Clarke's extensive oceans. Water for farming and drinking is carefully filtered and processed, but there are concerns that the world is still slowly dying. Far from preserving the populace for the Day of Healing, it may be that the psychopomps and their religion are doing no more than staving off the inevitable.

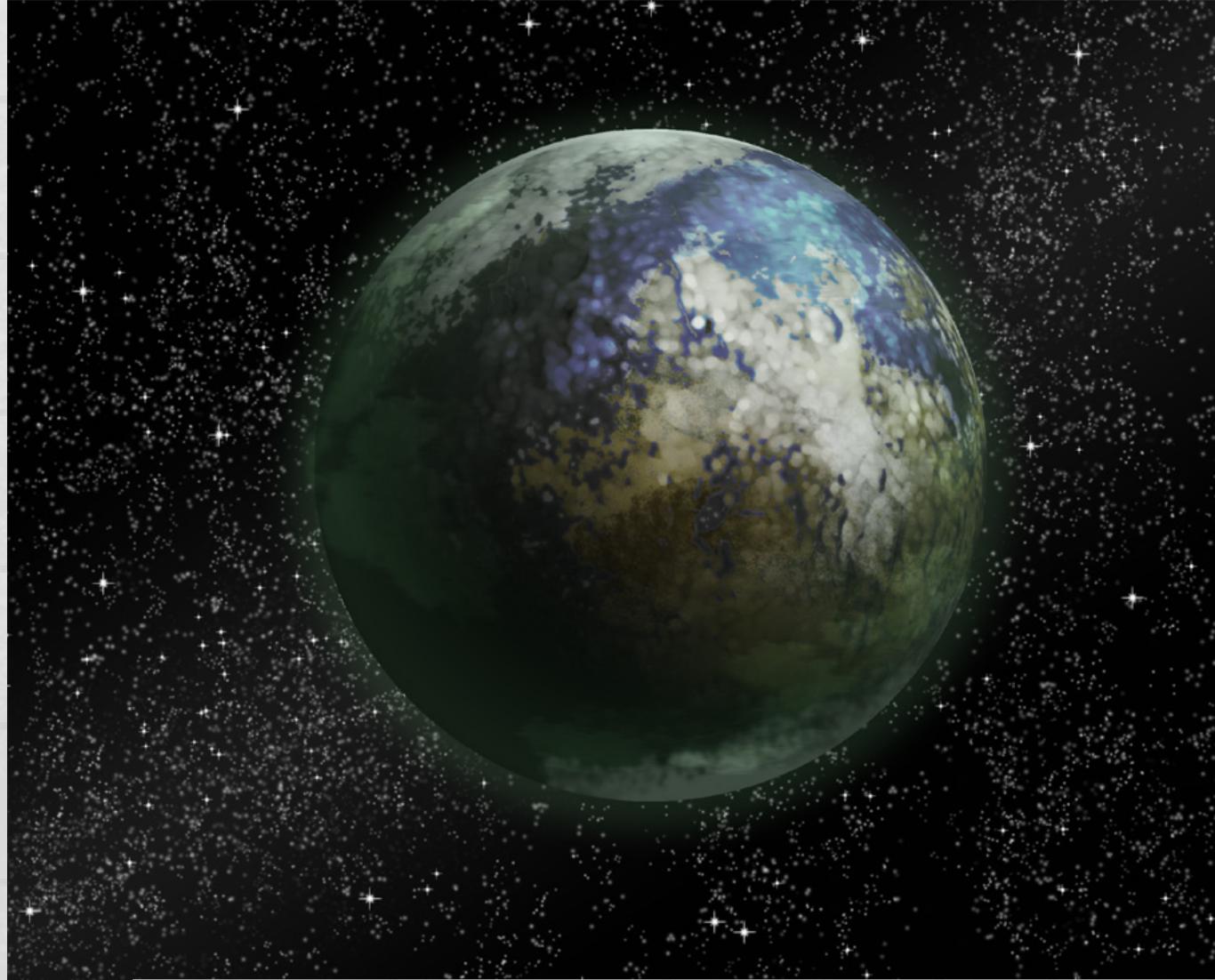
PIRACY IN THE CLARKE SYSTEM

There is a lot of traffic around Clarke's highport, mainly small ships that provide excellent targets for pirates. Of course, there is also a reasonable level of protection offered by the system's defence boats. Away from the port region, there are few good prospects. Belter ships offer a fairly poor return if pirates are only concerned

with stealing cargo. Those willing to murder crews and chop ships up for spare parts can make more money, but that activity tends to provoke a more robust response from authorities.

There is salvage to be had in the wrecked offworld colonies, though the people of Clarke would consider this desecration of graves unless a scavenging operation were properly sanctioned and accompanied by a preservation team. Any equipment salvaged would be very old and might have already been cannibalised in an effort to survive after the attacks. Troves have reportedly been found, however, and there have occasionally been reports of battles between rival scavenging gangs in the distant offworld colonies.

There is also the possibility that the outsystem contains some kind of refuelling outpost. An ice asteroid or a comet could provide enough fuel for many ships and, once located and plotted, it would not be hard to jump straight to. Finding such a refuelling station would be a difficult undertaking, however.



CHAPTER - THREE

BLUE



The Blue system provides a jump-2 link from Arunisiir and Exocet to the Sindalian Main by way of Torpol and Marduk, or towards the Aslan Hierate by way of Clarke or Torpol. This gives it a strategic importance out of all proportion to its population or economic power. Blue is a location of interest to the Third Imperium and receives flag-showing visits from Imperial warships on a fairly frequent basis.

A full Imperial anti-piracy task force recently passed through the Blue system, consisting of a light carrier and several destroyers. This force would be modest by warfighting standards but vastly outgunned any pirate threat it encountered. The final destination of the task force was not disclosed of course, but it seems likely it was searching for pirate bases. During the task force's two-week stay in the Blue system, its senior officers went planetside on several occasions, suggesting negotiations with the world government were in progress.

It is not clear what the Imperial Navy would want with Blue in terms of its economic strength – which is laughable – but the possibility exists that a forward base of operations is being sought. Political leaders elsewhere in the region are beginning to take notice as this rumour spreads. This is partially because such an undertaking usually brings in a great deal of Credits for the government hosting the base, and partly because an Imperial squadron based in this area might alter the local balance of power. Not everyone wants that.

THE BLUE SYSTEM

The Blue system orbits a hot F9V (Yellow-White) main sequence star along with twelve terrestrial (rocky) planets and two gas giants. The government of Blue lacks the capability to project power over much of the mainworld, let alone the star system, so all areas beyond the starport are considered ungoverned. By convention, the world government is within its rights to consider any part of the mainworld's surface as its sovereign territory, but there is no practical means – military, political or legal – to enforce any such claim.

By the same conventions, a world government that cannot enforce its laws elsewhere in the star system cannot claim ownership of any resources or other objects located there. To all intents and purposes the Blue system is thus open territory. In some ways this has actually been good for the economy of Blue.

There are small settlements on several of the planets and gas giant moons in the Blue system. Some are transient camps set up by mining and prospecting concerns; one or two belong to Aslan ihatel groups. These usually start out as staging posts for raids or landgrabs elsewhere, but occasionally grow into a viable colony. This is a concern for anyone who does not want to see Aslan expansion into the region, since whenever a toehold is established, it is hard to dislodge without causing conflict with the parent clan.

The usual recourse is negotiation and a certain amount of bribery-from-a-position-of-strength. That position does not exist here. The upshot of this is that a couple of gas giant moons and part of a rockball world are now Aslan territory. In and of itself this is not of any great consequence, but the possession of a secure base allows deeper and stronger incursions to be made. There are those who see the Aslan endlessly crumbling away a cliff face (and occasionally smashing part of it out of the way) to creep deeper and deeper into human territory.

This presence may be one reason for Imperial interest in the Blue system. Another is the existence of Bulhai Freeport. This is an independent facility located on one of the moons of Bulhai, the system's outer gas giant. It is a fairly modest installation with a supporting population of around twenty thousand people, but is growing every year. The freeport is, as its name suggests, a completely independent spaceport where all manner of goods and services are available. This is an obvious place for a pirate haven but the operators run a legal business. Just barely legal in some cases, but within the body of interstellar law.

Bulhai Freeport is a place where items restricted elsewhere are traded openly, including high-end electronics fits for starships and military grade weaponry. The port operators take great care to ensure the components they sell and fit are not stolen from pirated ships, and thus far no legal challenge to their activities has been successful. The existence and expansion of the port is of concern to several local and major powers, however, and has caused great alarm among the rulers of Blue.

As yet, Bulhai attracts only small and rather disreputable vessels, but as time goes on it may come to rival the main starport at Blue. The loss of income from interstellar trade would be catastrophic to the world's economy. As a result, the government has implemented a sort of second-hand attempt to take control of its home system. The population are by inclination insular and generally unconcerned with wider happenings, but the rulers must be. Thus, a unified law enforcement service has been formed, mainly from offworlders, to police the starport and any outlying settlements that desire it.

A surprisingly large number of these settlements have agreed to join the project. Most small settlements have no proper facilities to deal with offenders; if the authorities at the starport want to take responsibility then that is in everyone's interest. The enforcement service currently operates a handful of armed small craft for customs work and policing of the system's spacelanes, and the government on Blue is now attempting to use this capability to show that it can indeed enforce its laws across the system.

The implications of this are complex. It may be that Blue is trying to stake a clear claim to all of its home system, though this would only be useful if coupled with a vast increase in military capability the world cannot possibly achieve on its own. The creation of an Imperial forward base would provide this capability in the form of a navy friendly to Blue and willing to recognise its territorial claims. This would threaten the existence (or independence at least) of Bulhai Freeport, creating a conflict that might have all manner of results.

BLUE HIGHPORT

Blue's orbital Highport is old but in reasonably good repair. It was built to replace a previous, much smaller installation. This was set up to support interstellar trade on a temporary basis but became permanent for lack of anything better. This facility became unsafe around

600 and totally unusable about a century later; in the meantime it remained in use, giving rise to a local figure of speech comparing any rickety or ramshackle thing to 'the port at Blue'.

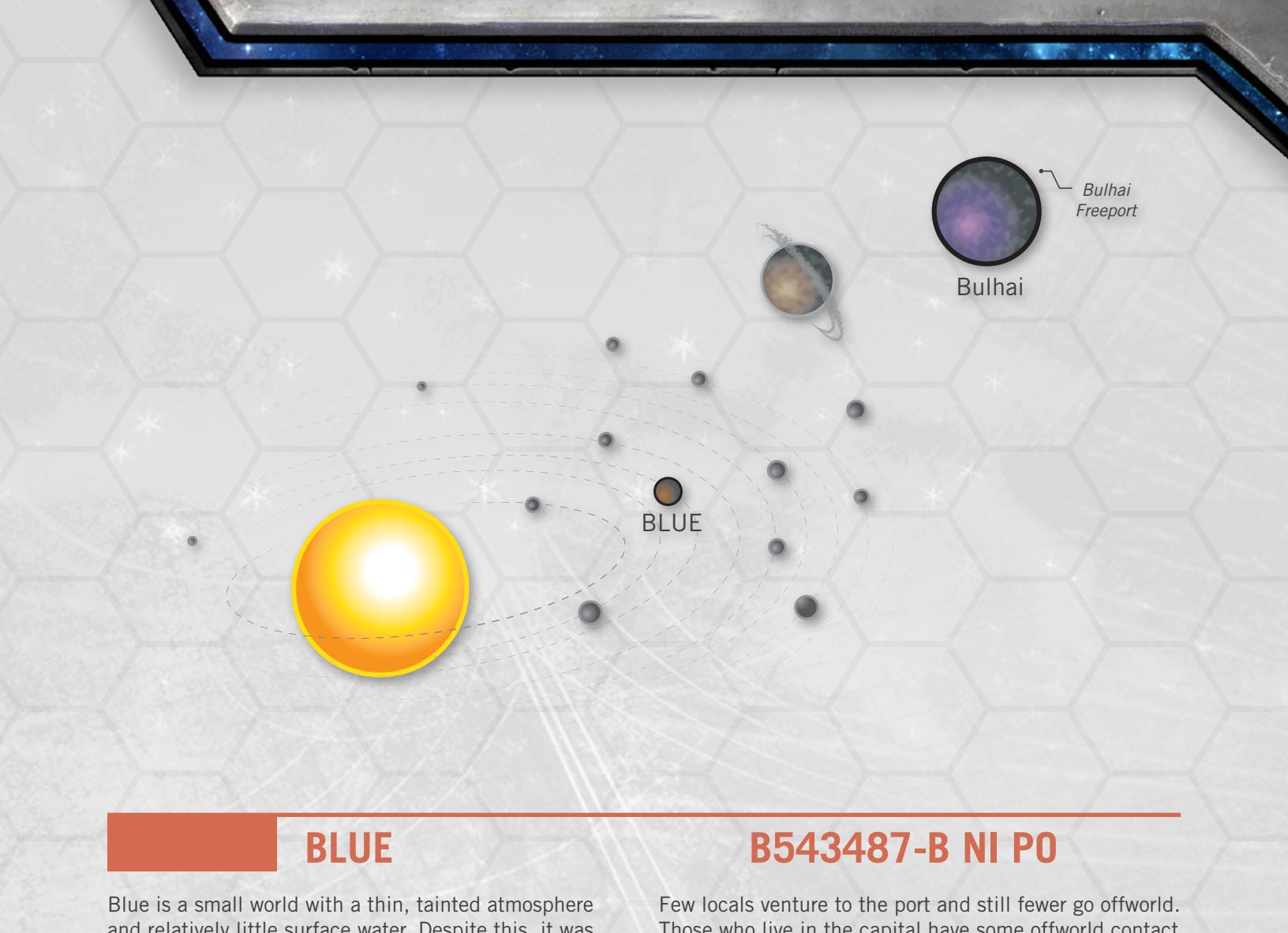
The current facility was built in the 800s and has received only cosmetic upgrades since. It can deliver all the services of a Class B port, but only just. Shipbuilding is limited to small craft, and up until recently very few of those were actually constructed. In recent months, the world government has sunk a considerable amount of investment into a programme to produce small, cheap fighters. Some of these are destined for the unified enforcement service but most go to the export market.

There are those who question the wisdom of marketing cheap combat craft, but the government of Blue maintains that it sells only to legitimate clients such as governments, shipping corporations and interstellar concerns with assets to protect. The behaviour of some of these 'legitimate' clients can be questionable, of course, but on the whole, Blue's fighters contribute to stability in the region.

Overall, the port is run independently from the mainworld, with most jobs done by contractors from all over the region. This gives Blue Highport a cosmopolitan feel but also a rather bland one. There is little local flavour; bars and restaurants tend to be franchises or obvious copies of them, and everything from food to décor and even the layout of rooms is boringly familiar. A few locals do take jobs at the port, but for the most part it is a distant thing to them, a source of revenue for the government and little else.

The port is considered an important asset by the world government, not least since it brings in most of the world's income. The small system-policing squadron is backed up by a much larger force of fighters, many of which are locally produced. This force is crewed by mercenaries, usually former members of another world's armed forces or Imperial personnel, and is assigned several Imperial officers as advisors and training facilitators.

The port sees a considerable amount of local and long-range traffic, and has a modest speculative cargo marketplace. Although it lacks the vibrancy of Torpol's planetside pleasure ports, Blue Highport is comfortable and pleasant to visit. There is a good profit to be made here, and the only real downside is that it is all a little bland.



BLUE

Blue is a small world with a thin, tainted atmosphere and relatively little surface water. Despite this, it was once an important world in the Sindalian Empire. Its deserts were irrigated to create grasslands and forests, and a few vestiges of these artificial greenlands can still be found. The world was home to a high-tech society whose population enjoyed an extremely high standard of living as a result of their wealth. However, this prosperity came at a price.

Blue forced its way to the forefront of the Sindalian economy by plundering its resources in a brutally efficient manner. Many of the artificial parklands were built on filled-in open-cast mines of gigantic proportions, and it is claimed that the Killai Depression is actually a colossal mine or system of mines that were only partially filled. Be that as it may, the end result is that today Blue has very few accessible resources and maintains its very modest industrial base by importing raw materials.

The population of some seventy thousand mostly live in the capital, which is located close to the downport. A small startown serves the downport but, like the highport, is staffed mainly by contracted offworlders.

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Few locals venture to the port and still fewer go offworld. Those who live in the capital have some offworld contact or at least are reminded that the wider universe still exists, but people of the smaller outlying communities generally look inward rather than at the stars.

The population is dependent on offworld trade. Without raw materials and Credits coming in through the interstellar trade routes they would not be able to maintain their Tech Level 10 lifestyles and would rapidly fall back to a subsistence economy. As it is, a large segment of the populace is free to pursue whatever interests they have, working in light occupations to maintain a high standard of living.

Art and religion are the two main focuses of society on Blue. Sometimes they are intertwined, sometimes far apart. There is no unified religion; a wide range of faiths are practiced on Blue. This is generally amicable – indeed, there are several societies that exist to foster contact between different faiths, and it is not uncommon for leaders of different religions to be invited to debate an issue or engage in what has been termed a ‘preach-off’. Debating the merits of art is another activity that has become almost a spectator sport.

Life on Blue is subject to quite complex and firmly-enforced laws, and offworlders who visit sometimes fall foul of rules about the use or even the precise definition of certain words. Profanity is officially proscribed, and with so many religions present this can be something of a minefield. Swearing by a god or belief system is unacceptable except where it is customary within that religion, and then only by adherents of that faith. It is thus possible to witness a member of a particular faith hurling a torrent of curses at his gods, and then to be fined for repeating one of the phrases he used.

Profanity fines are typically small and used to fund charitable works as a sort of governmental swear box. This has led to another curious local custom – large-scale public profanity as a means of raising funds for good works. Although baffling to outsiders, and frowned upon by several of the religions, ‘cussing for charity’ events are not infrequent.

Away from the cluster of settlements around the capital, Blue is officially uninhabited. There are a few outback settlements too remote to be considered part of the official world population but are essentially ‘people of Blue’. Most of the non-resident population is unwanted. These include contingents of Aslan ihathei who have set up camps well away from human areas and begun to expand.

Rumours persist that there is a psionics institute somewhere on Blue, but then there are also rumours of hidden pirate bases, an Ancients site, and a hidden underground city that has survived since the days of the Sindalian Empire.

The world government is concerned about the presence of ihathei and other interlopers but lacks the resources to do much about it, and the population as a whole does not care. That may change if new arrivals start to encroach on human territory but, for now, life goes on as it always has.

PIRACY IN THE BLUE SYSTEM

The region around the highport sees a lot of traffic but is a hazardous prospect for an attack. This is not just due to the presence of fighters and other defences; significant disruption of the interstellar trade routes is likely to trigger an Imperial response. However, the occasional plundering of a small merchant craft is unlikely to produce any response beyond a bounty placed upon the pirate crew.

The rest of the system has some traffic and little law enforcement, though it is possible to run into one of the unified service craft. These do not usually visit Bulhai Freeport, but occasionally a goodwill and cooperation mission is launched. These tend to be rather strained and unproductive and, as a rule, the freeport looks after its own affairs. Ships that use it tend to be small but do carry valuable cargoes, making this a possibility for opportunistic piracy that will hopefully not trigger a large-scale response.

