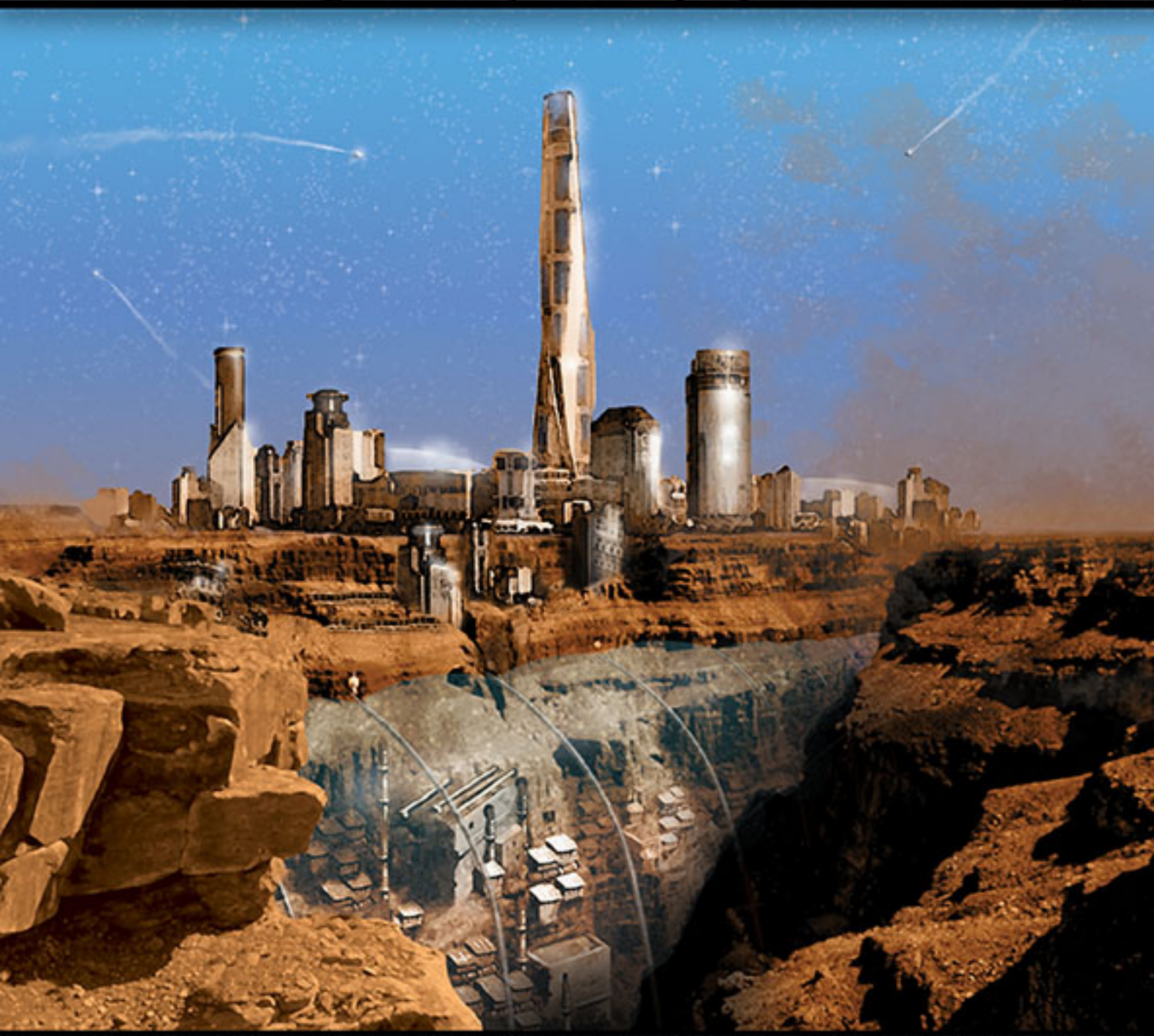


TRAVELLER

PIRATES OF DRINAX: THE THEEV CLUSTER



SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE IN THE FAR FUTURE

TRAVELLER

PIRATES OF DRINAX: THE THEEV CLUSTER

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
VUME	5
THEEV	8
PALINDROME	14

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INTRODUCTION

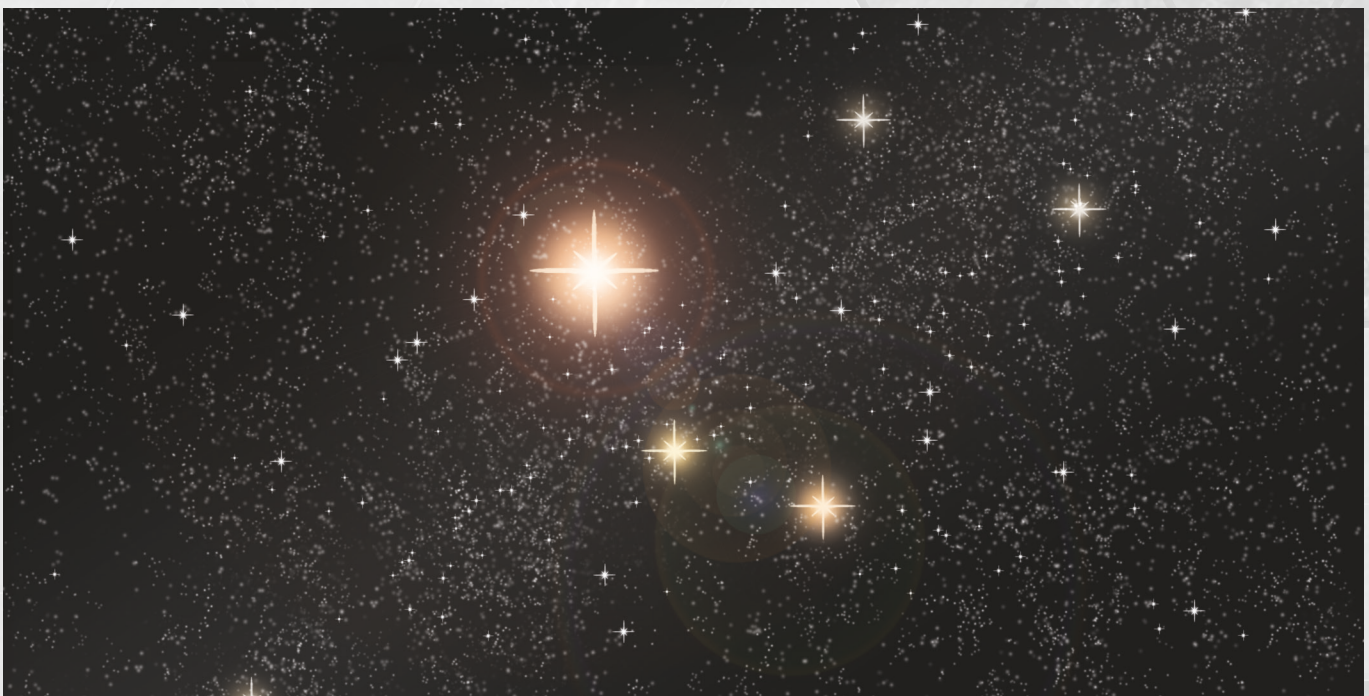
The Theev Cluster is a group of three star systems located in the centre of Sindal subsector. The cluster is astrographically significant as it provides a jump-3 link between the Sindalian Main and Imperial space. In the days of the Sindalian Empire the cluster was an important thoroughfare for high-jump traffic in and out of the capital at what is now called Noricum. It dwindled in importance after the fall of the empire, though during the expansion of trade in the region a few hundred years ago there were plans to once again make the 'Three Central Worlds' as they are known a new hub for traffic.

That plan did work reasonably well for a while, but on the whole the longer but safer route through the Wildeman, Torpol and Marduk clusters eclipsed the 'Theev transit' in volume of trade. This was mainly due to the ability of jump-2 ships to make the longer transit, allowing more cargo to be carried for the same hull volume, albeit at the price of longer transit times. The low populations of the three central worlds, and the subsequent lack of trade in their systems, was also a barrier to large-scale exploitation.

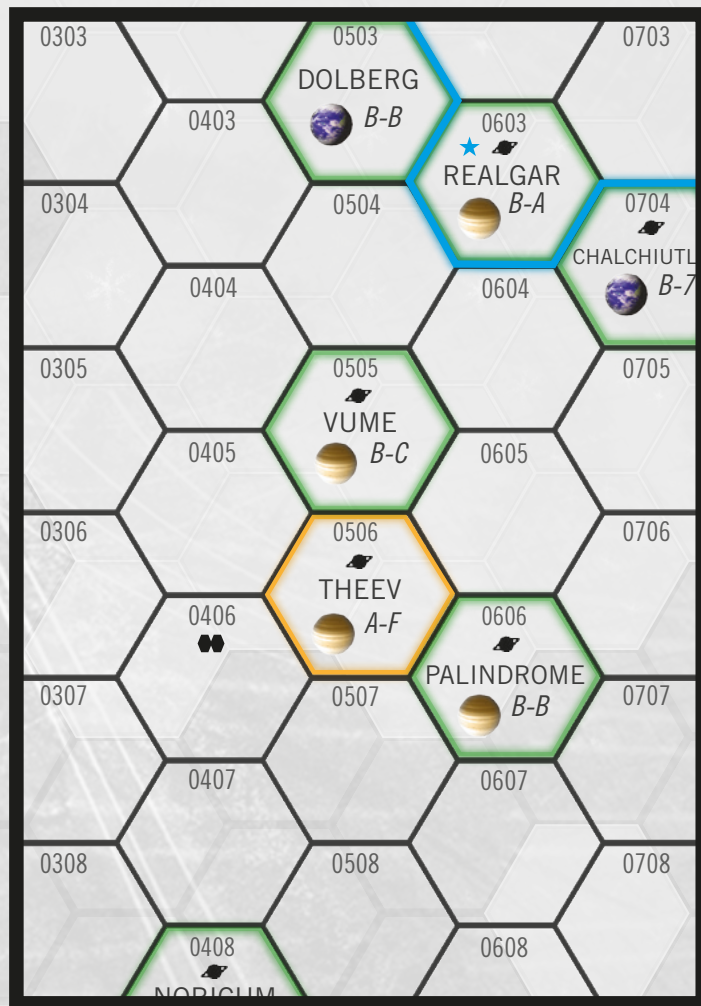
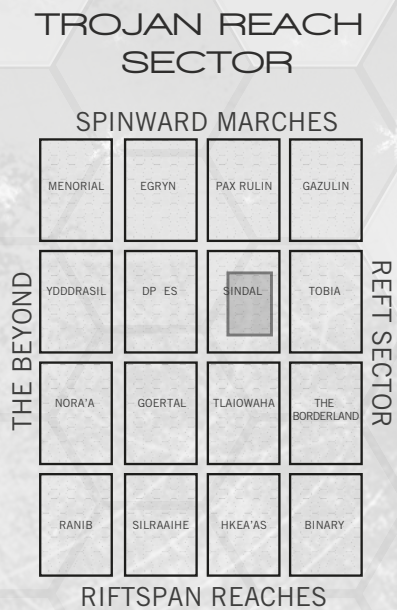
Today, the fast (i.e. jump-3) transit across the subsector normally goes via Vume and Salif, then on to Tyr in Dpres subsector. Relatively few vessels make this run due to the expense of maintaining a jump-3 trade fleet and the dangers associated with transiting through the central worlds, but high-speed cargoes are still pushed through aboard well-armed merchant ships.

The Theev Cluster is notorious as a 'piracy hotspot' and has been swept on many occasions by the Imperial Navy. Naval vessels are deployed to the cluster on a not-too-infrequent basis; typically these are old destroyer escorts, though there is a real effort underway to get some more impressive and modern vessels assigned to the base at Realgar. From there they will be able to show the Imperial flag in its true glory among the worlds of the cluster. This is not likely to happen any time soon.

The attitude of the cluster's population is generally anti-Imperial. This is not extreme enough to manifest as open hostility but there is a deep suspicion of all things Imperial throughout the cluster which makes it difficult to place intelligence-gathering agents or even merchant brokers on the worlds or at the starports of the region.



PARTIAL MAP OF THE SINDAL SUBSECTOR



- Gas Giant
- Secure System
- Amber Zone
- B-6* Starport Class & Tech Lvl
- Imperial Border
- Planet (Dry)
- Fuel Dump
- X-Boat Route
- Planet (Water Present)
- Imperial Navel Base

Name	Location	Bases	Profile	Trade codes	Travel Codes	Gas Gaints
Theev	0506		A434500-E	Na Ni Ht	A	G
Vume	0505		B100477-C	Ni Va An		G
Palindrome	0606		B43334-B	Po Ni Lo		G

THE IMPERIAL NAVY

The Imperium's resources are stretched thin in Trojan Reach sector, as they are almost everywhere, and most of the naval assets available at the Realgar naval base are tasked with commerce protection in the Imperial systems of Realgar, Albe and Cordillon, and the trans-border systems of Dolberg and Chalchiutlicue. These systems see considerable pirate activity, and keeping 'internal' trade safe is a high priority for the navy.

The pirate lords of Theev are well aware they have an Imperial Navy base, albeit a small one containing only a few patrol assets, right on their doorstep and encourage raids that keep the navy looking elsewhere.

Most of the vessels sent out from the base at Realgar are tied up in protecting commerce through Vume or making long sweeps out into the Sindalian Main. Maintaining a presence of just one or two ships on the Sindalian Main absorbs numerous vessels due to the long transit times required, and attempts to collect a reserve for special missions – such as hunting for pirate bases – tend to be disrupted by commanders of convoys heading up the Main. With standing orders to cooperate with such missions, Realgar's commanders routinely lose several of their vessels for months on end whenever a multi-ship expedition is launched to the Florian League.

As a result, there are few resources available for special missions such as pirate-hunting in the central cluster, and in any case the navy has been ordered to tread carefully in the region. There is not much chance of alienating the central worlds sufficiently that they side with the Aslan Hierate, but the Imperium cannot risk local worlds becoming sympathetic to Aslan ihatei and allowing them to pass through towards Imperial space or establish a foothold in the cluster. If more resources become available the navy may be able to take a tougher stance but for now its ability to project power in the Theev Cluster is severely limited.

This is not coincidental. The generally anti-Imperial stance of the region's populace is fostered by the pirate lords, and raiding close to home is generally discouraged. Prospects of a profitable raid are better elsewhere anyway, so whilst the Theev Cluster is known as a piracy hotspot it does not stand out as much as might be expected. With the navy kept busy elsewhere and little concrete information to justify a major anti-piracy operation Theev has managed to stay in business despite the fact that the Imperial Navy lives next door. How long this situation can last remains to be seen.



VUME

As far as Imperial authorities go, the Vume system is the most important of the three within the Theev Cluster. It is also the least anti-Imperial in outlook, but it is still not a welcoming place. Most of the traffic through the orbital starport is jump-3 ships out of Realgar or Salif, with some jump-2 traffic on an out-and-back basis from other worlds along the Imperial border. Internal trade within the cluster is fairly low in volume, though it was much higher before the rise in piracy of recent years.

THE VUME SYSTEM

Vume's primary is a K7 II; an orange giant star. Its size and high luminosity make it a useful astronavigational reference point. It is prone to the occasional large solar flare, which throws out a great deal of radiation and other dangerous emissions. The star has expanded over the past few million years and is now many times its original size. It is likely the star destroyed its inner planets, making it impossible to tell whether there ever was a habitable world in the system. It is possible that some of the current terrestrial (rocky) planets in the system were once gas giants whose atmospheres were burned away leaving only a rocky core. Alternatively, some planets might have once been gas giant moons. Displaced by the changing gravitational balance in the system these moons became worlds, albeit uninviting ones.

The system contains ten terrestrial planets, none of them life-bearing, three gas giants and two planetoid belts. Of these, only Vume is known to be inhabited – and then only after a fashion. The system's rockball worlds and planetoids are sometimes picked over by prospectors and miners, but for the most part the only activity in the system is traffic in and out of the highport.

Vume is considered to be a likely location for one or more pirate bases. Its many remote planetoids and rockball worlds could hide quite large settlements which would be unlikely to ever be discovered without a detailed and systematic search. Imperial patrol and scout vessels sometimes scan a few planetoids or rockballs for signs of habitation, but there are no records of anything ever being found, and resources are insufficient for a proper survey.

VUME HIGHPORT

Vume Highport, like many others in the region, was built by the General Development Corporation (GeDeCo) to facilitate trade throughout the region. It was then put up for sale but no buyer emerged, so today it is run as a wholly-owned subsidiary of GeDeCo. A secondary goal of the port was to act as a base for exploration of an alien complex found on Vume, which the port orbits.

The port is entirely orbital, inasmuch as the 'groundside' facility on Vume is not owned by GeDeCo and is not considered to be part of the port. As to the planetside population, they have no share or stake in the orbital port and generally little involvement with it.

The highport is quite large, if a little run-down, and geared towards supporting large, long-range, high-jump vessels rather than smaller local ships. The port has extensive recreation facilities and makes a considerable amount of money from the crews and passengers of Imperial ships passing through. There is little trade or commerce done at the port; most of its revenue comes from services provided directly to passing vessels.

The general anti-Imperial attitude of the region is not as obvious at Vume Highport. There is at least a veneer of civility, which is necessary to getting Imperials to part with their Credits. However, the passing ships are seen as cash-cows and their crews as targets to be milked of every Credit possible rather than as possible friends or allies. This creates an atmosphere that initially can seem almost excessively (and artificially) friendly, after which it becomes apparent that the whole thing is a façade. The pretence is generally kept up even when the recipient makes it obvious they know they are being conned, making a visit to Vume a sometimes bizarre and often very irritating experience.

When the highport was built, it was provided with a fairly potent local defence squadron which has become inoperable over the years. Funds to repair and refit ships were never available, but the rise of piracy in the region made it necessary to create a replacement of some sort. The result was a rather ramshackle defensive setup, operated by trigger-happy mercenaries who have been fired upon by apparently innocuous ships far too often to take any chances whatsoever.

The docking bays that once held neat rows of system defence boats and fighters are now mostly empty. Those that are filled typically contain very old craft, kept flying by cannibalising others of their class, or are home to converted vessels. Many of these are broken-down old free traders and small merchant ships, their jump drives sold off for whatever spare-parts value remained. These craft at least have plenty of room for boarding parties.

A rag-tag collection of armed small craft is also employed, backed up by the highport's armament. This consists mostly of missile racks and beam turrets taken from scrapped warships, but does include a couple of particle accelerator bays salvaged from an old Imperial destroyer. These are widely acknowledged as the reason no pirate fleet has ever successfully plundered or taken over Vume station – a couple have tried – and are considered the heart of the port's defences.

In addition to attacks on shipping using Vume's highport, ambitious pirate bands have occasionally tried to take over the station itself. The approach that worked best was a 'Trojan horse' attack from ships docked at the port, which resulted in extensive gunfire within the port facility. Those that tried to simply shoot their way in fared less well. These incidents, along with the generally high level of piracy and lawlessness in the area, have resulted in a steady drain on the mercenaries protecting the port and thus contributed to an in-your-face, deal-with-it-or-get-shot attitude on the part of the patrols outside the port and its security personnel within.

VUME

B100477 C NI VA AN

Vume is a very small rockball planet, with no atmosphere and no water; in fact, it has little of anything except rock, and not a huge amount of that. It is the mainworld of the system by virtue of the fact that it is the only body known to be inhabited, and because the highport was built in orbit above it.

Vume was chosen as the orbital highport location rather than one of the other rockballs and moons in the system for two reasons. One is that it orbits quite far out from the system's primary, making solar flare activity and radiation less of a problem. It is quite unusual for a mainworld to be located in the outsystem, but Vume is not a typical star system. Its true inner system was swallowed up long ago by the expanding star, leaving only a collection of scorched rockballs as the new 'inner system'. These are too inimical to be much use.

With the usual choices out of the question, the decision of where to locate the port could have been made on

an arbitrary basis. However, the discovery of alien ruins on one of the worlds in the system was the deciding factor – a port in orbit over the world of Vume would be a useful base for exploration of the ruins.

It is not known which species built what is now known as 'Vume Station'. The location is officially listed as an Ancients site, but whether these are the same Ancients who built other structures and eradicated themselves a few hundred thousand years ago is an open question. Since the site is named Vume Station, some new arrivals in the system expect the port itself to be an Ancients site, which can lead to a certain amount of misunderstanding and additional opportunities to fleece Travellers.

The 'station' is in fact on and partially under the planetary surface. It is known as Vume Station simply because early researchers assumed it was some kind of scientific outpost or way station. Its extent was not at that time known.

There is some evidence that Vume once had a different orbit. Whether its current path is the result of natural rearrangement caused by the expanding star or some deliberate means is a matter for speculation. What is known is that the structure known as Vume Station was built long after the star entered its bright-giant phase, and by some unknown alien race.

A fairly large population moved into Vume Station when it was discovered, some to stake a territorial claim, others simply to study it. These people eventually became the system's only 'indigenous' population, and are now incapable of living anywhere else. This is due to a bacterial infection that radically altered their brain chemistry as well as some metabolic functions. The result is that there are now four groups, totalling about ten thousand people, living in different parts of the station. Each was affected in different ways.

The four groups' thought processes were so radically altered by the infection that they cannot comprehend the words or actions of any other group – nor outsiders in most cases – even though they speak more or less the same language. The same words or deeds are supported by and interpreted in the light of completely different thought processes that cause members of other groups to simply not understand them. Violence between groups is uncommon, since the station is very large and they have occupied widely separated parts of it, but it has happened. Outsiders have also been attacked, sometimes after long periods of peaceful interaction.

Large segments of the station are derelict, and these are for the most part airless and dead. However, there are pockets that can still support life, powered by ancient

machinery that keeps functioning by unknown means. Both living and dead sections could be sources of great wealth to those capable of exploiting them. Something as simple as salvaging and scrapping components from the station could be lucrative, and finding working alien devices would set a band of Travellers up for life.

However, there is always the danger of infection either whilst working in the station or when handling items removed from it. Illicit salvage operations have occasionally led to disease outbreaks – unlicensed scrapper crews are not known for their attention to decontamination regulations – and salvage from Vume Station is now treated with suspicion. That does not prevent expeditions from penetrating deep into the underground parts of the city from time to time.

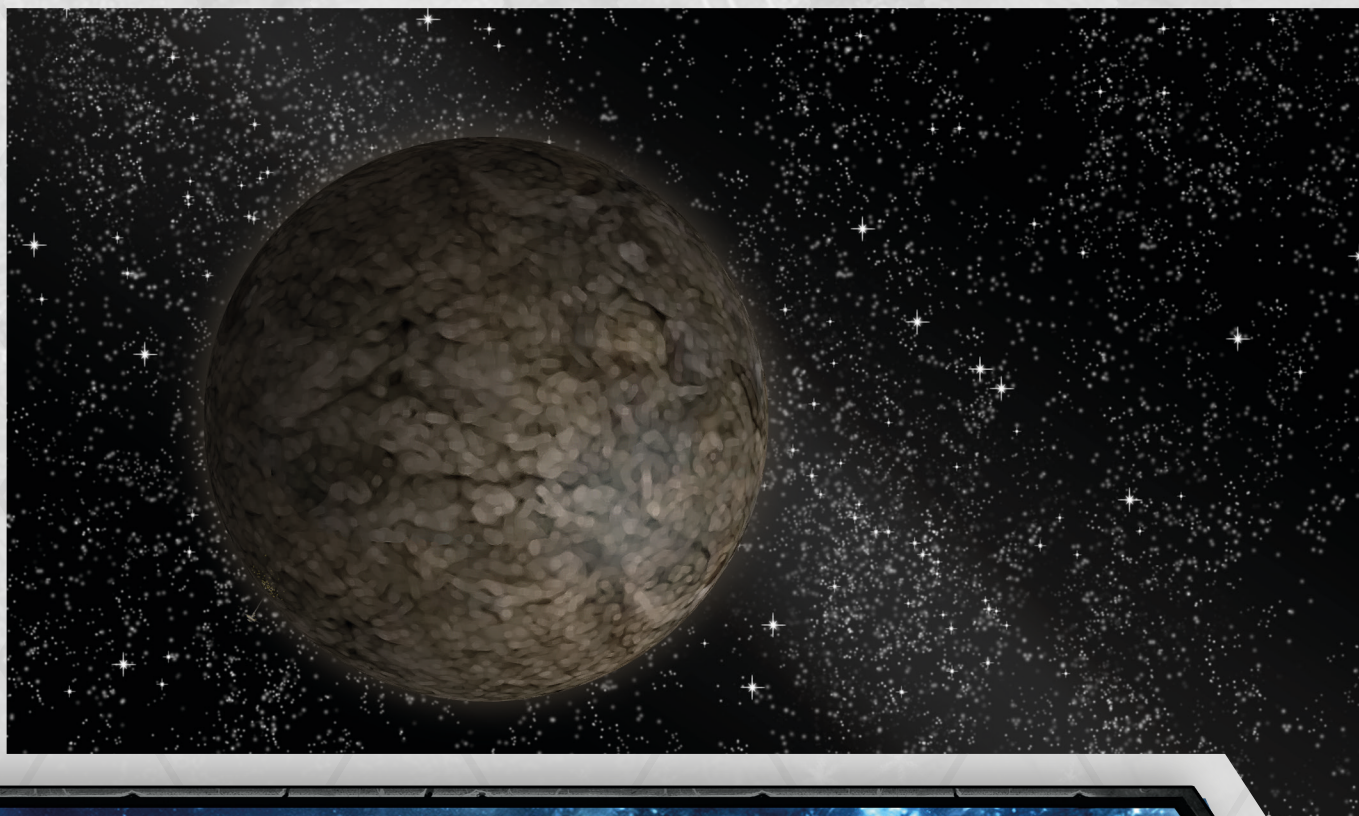
Some of these expeditions return with wild tales of habitable areas with animals, plants and even people in them, or vast hauls of valuables. Cynics have observed that if expeditions really did find something they would hardly advertise the fact. It is also widely known that most expeditions do not return from Vume Station. Early reports from some parties entering the station have included accounts of finding the remains of previous explorers, with no real clues to how they died. Often the expedition goes silent soon afterward.

If there is any truth to these stories at all, then the question arises of why the 'indigenous' population does not seem to be harmed. If the inhabitants of Vume Station know the answer they are completely incapable of explaining it, and perhaps even of comprehending the question.

PIRACY IN THE VUME SYSTEM

There is relatively little pirate activity in the Vume system, largely for lack of suitable targets. The jump-2 and jump-3 freighters that come in from Imperial space tend to be well armed and too big for a casual raid, though occasionally a pirate fleet will attempt to take one of these ships. That is discouraged, on the whole, by cooler heads among the pirate leaders since it will likely cause the Imperials to put more ships into the cluster. No pirate lord wants an Imperial cruiser sitting overhead, even if he is not its target. Smaller bands, hoping to make a name for themselves or who do not have an eye to the long-term prospects, might make a play for one of these big ships or even the port itself.

Salvaging Vume Station is a possibility for some pirate and adventurer bands. The place has a bad reputation though; few have ever come out with enough to justify their losses. The general bad fortune of expeditions into the station, and disease outbreaks that have followed some of the successful operations, have given rise to tales of 'cursed treasure' in Vume Station. A certain mystique now surrounds the place, spawning ever more distorted tales of misadventure and disaster. Half the pirates in the cluster know someone who met an untimely end in 'that accused place', and the other half know who it really happened to. How many of these tales still contain any truth is open to speculation.



THEEV

Theev lies at the centre of the cluster, and could provide a jump-3 link from the Imperial side of the subsector to the Sindalian Main in the same manner as Vume. In fact it did so, long before the Third Imperium existed. In those days Noricum was Sindal and the heart of an empire, so Theev was an important link to worlds on the far side of the jump-3 gap. Currently, since the only ports on the Sindalian side of the gap are Salif (which can just as easily be reached from Vume) and Noricum (which is mostly wasteland), Theev is of lesser importance as a jump-3 link.

When the General Development Corporation began building new starports to open up trade in the region, Theev was chosen as a primary site. Investment was considerable, and for a time Theev even boasted a significant economy. It was expected that large numbers of workers would stay and become colonists once the starport was built, and inducements were offered to those willing to settle. Some did, but there was insufficient uptake to justify the investments made by GeDeCo and the population never reached the level required to create a viable industrial base.

Thus Theev became a backwater, bypassed by long-range trade ships and capable of only small-scale industrial activity. Like many such places, it went through some hard times and entered a downward spiral that was not halted by a second wave of investment. The planetary community is known to be lawless and dangerous, whilst the port is much safer but not really worth visiting for most trade ships.

THE THEEV SYSTEM

Theev's primary is a G0 V (yellow main-sequence) star, which is orbited by four gas giants and three planetoid belts as well as nine terrestrial (rocky) planets. None of the latter are known to be permanently inhabited, though small mining settlements have at times been set up on a temporary basis.

In the days of the Sindalian Empire, the Theev system was an important transit point and, inevitably, acquired a population. This was mostly concentrated on the mainworld, close to the centre of economic activity, but numerous communities and even small cities grew up all across the system. These were abandoned long ago, and for the most part are now empty, eerie shells picked clean by scavengers. There are rumours that some of these cities still contain wealth waiting to be found, or that pirates, smugglers and Aslan ihatei use them as bases.

Every now and then a hopeful ship crew will go looking for one of these lost treasure troves, and even more rarely an Imperial warship will be spotted in orbit above one of the outsystem planets. These vessels are more than likely looking for ihatei or pirates, to both the amusement and consternation of the pirate lords on Theev. Other than this, there is very little in-system trade, and only a few ships use the highport en route from Palindrome to Vume.



THE SKULL

The highport was constructed by tunnelling into a moonlet, which was given a minimal manoeuvre capability and accelerated into a geostationary orbit. This can only be maintained by occasional course corrections, requiring the drive system be maintained in working order. Without it, The Skull (as this moonlet is known due to its appearance from a distance) would gradually fall into a more stable orbit whose eccentricity might make the port less useful. There is a possibility that the port-orbit might decay to the point where it plunged into Theev's surface, but this is unlikely on any time frame measured in centuries.

The highport is known by the same nickname as the planetoid it occupies, requiring context to indicate which is being spoken of. Large sections of the tunnel complex are disused, at least officially. Although sealed off by pressure doors and forgotten about these areas are still (mostly) airtight and could be used as storage or even secret living spaces. It is more than likely some are, though any habitation on more than a very small scale would require a self-contained life support system, otherwise the drain on the port's main system would be obvious and the existence of any secret enclave would be revealed. Life support equipment and power systems are not hard to obtain of course, especially for those willing to take them from starships in acts of piracy.

The functional part of the highport is clean and businesslike, though obviously not new. There is a distinct anti-Imperial slant to the local culture, but not as pronounced as in some other areas. The port's workers and businesses will happily take Imperial Credits and even apply a veneer of civility to the transaction. There is little to buy or sell much of the time, however, though a number of mercenary forces have offices at the highport and will facilitate trade in small arms and support weapons as a sideline to their business of actually using them.

The port's shipyard can construct vessels up to 2000 tons or so, but typically specialises in overhauls and repairs of small merchant craft. This is partially a legitimate business – ironically perhaps, many merchant captains will come to Theev to get their ships upgraded or repaired after a pirate attack has damaged them – and partially a front for converting merchant ships to less legal operations. The port can build custom ships, which may be overt corsairs or, more commonly, disguised pirates or smugglers that closely resemble innocent merchants.

The port also does modest business in spares and components, but takes care to only supply obviously stolen parts to those who will not object to having them. The last thing Theev needs is a law-abiding merchant

captain telling the authorities where he got his bargain-basement upgraded weapons fit in return for not going to jail.

Law enforcement at The Skull seems very light-touch, at least for those careful not to cause offence. There are few security officers to be seen, and those that are around seem to serve mainly as a point-of-contact or a reminder to obey the rules of civilised behaviour. Often they will do no more than approach people who are being rowdy or acting suspiciously and point out their conduct is verging upon the unacceptable.

Those that do not take the hint are dealt with quietly and efficiently by the Widows, black-robed individuals who typically hand out only one sentence – death. Occasionally a Widow may issue a final warning, but more often an all-or-nothing approach is taken. Offenders are simply killed and dumped out of an airlock or into a recycling station. There is a 'sentences handed out' update section in the port's datanet, but often the perpetrator/victim is not identified. The attitude of the port operators is that those who obey the rules are perfectly safe and those too ignorant to figure out what happens if you do not – or too wilfully stupid to keep their noses clean – will get what is coming to them. The end result is a quiet and orderly port, and that is all that matters.

The surface of The Skull has many bunkers housing missile bays and turrets. These are coordinated from heavily fortified control rooms, giving port operators the ability to blast anything that enters local space or tries to proceed to the downport without permission. What happens beyond the immediate environs of the highport is of no concern to the port operators, but they vigorously enforce their control of local space and seem to have missiles to spare.

Some ships are permitted to go directly to the downport, but these must have clearance codes or will be fired upon – often without any attempt to contact them. There is no such thing as a 'warning shot' from The Skull either; ships arriving in the vicinity are instructed that they must land at the highport or present a valid clearance code for the downport. As far as the missile gunners are concerned, anyone who does not take the hint is fair game.

Clearance to visit the downport is rarely given to ships belonging to outsiders, and individuals who request it will find themselves stalled for some time. It is possible to get clearance to go planetside, especially if the new arrival knows the system or has contacts, but outsiders are discouraged from visiting the planetary surface by a combination of bureaucracy and offers to sort out whatever business they have by proxy.

THEEV

Theev is a dry world with a very thin atmosphere, not unlike Mars in the Sol system. It has water, but is present as ice or exists as muddy slurry in low-lying areas rather than seas and oceans. Away from the giant mudpits that pass for bodies of water on Theev the landscape is arid, rocky and dusty.

Dust is a major factor on Theev. It permeates everything and makes overland travel treacherous – though this would only be a problem if there was anywhere to actually go. Soft areas of dust look much the same as solid ground, making landings dangerous, and where dust meets water the result is particularly unappetising.

With little life above the single-cellular level, Theev's biosphere is virtually non-existent. There has never been indigenous life on this harsh world, though people lived there in quite large numbers during the reign of the Sindalian Empire. Some of the cities were bombed, some succumbed to plagues or other disasters, and starvation claimed the lives of most survivors. Those that could get away left Theev and settled elsewhere.

Traces of those cities can still be seen here and there, though most have been buried under centuries of dust. With little wind or other natural causes of wear, tall buildings that were not destroyed by artificial means stood for centuries before finally collapsing. Eventually gravity brings them all down, other than a few stumps that look little different to dust-covered rock outcrops found everywhere.

All of the known cities have been scavenged of course, though shells of lower floors might offer some shelter. There are rumours of hidden settlements on Theev, as well as near-intact cities that might contain treasures of the former empire. Few take such stories seriously; similar tales are told everywhere and almost never have any truth to them.

The only settlement on Theev is Blacksand, the world's capital and downport. Blacksand is built in a maze of canyons, from which skyscrapers extend high into the dark sky. The upper levels are quite different in character from the Lower City, and are linked by sealed walkways. It is possible to land small craft atop some of the skyscrapers, and all have grav vehicle ports. Thus there is really no need for most visitors to enter the Lower City, and many would not want to.

Blacksand's downport is not a typical design, with landing field and terminal buildings. Instead it is dispersed, with many landing bays of various sizes linked by a maze of underground passages. Each bay is covered by clamshell doors that both conceal the craft within and keep out the worst of the world's dust. The commercial section of the port, where offworlders are usually directed, has a regular grav vehicle service up to the central skyscraper complex. Other parts of the port are privately owned and off-limits to anyone without clearance.

Most visitors ascend to the skyscrapers as soon as possible, since this is where the world's business is conducted. At least, business that appears legitimate is conducted there; what goes on in the Lower City is a different matter. New arrivals are briefed (politely threatened is perhaps a better phrase) by one or more black-robed Widows before entering the Upper City. They are told in no uncertain terms that whilst Theev has no formal body of law the Upper City is subject to what is called the Law of the Lords.

The Widows of Blacksand

The Widows are the law enforcement of this lawless world. No-one is sure how many there are – black-robed, hooded figures can be seen on every street, but are all of them genetically augmented assassins? The Widows are all linked by cybernetic implants; it is debatable whether they are individuals or a single entity that occupies multiple bodies. They enforce the Laws with perfect lethality.



The Law of the Lords comes down to a complete intolerance of anything that disturbs the peace of the Upper City. Violence and thievery might get perpetrators dumped in the Lower City, if they are lucky, but is commonly punished by ‘summary disappearance’. The whole of the Upper City is subject to the Law of the Lords, and is a very tranquil place. Parts of the Lower City, marked by red flags, are also subject to this law. Elsewhere, the Law of the Streets prevails. This is a single, simple rule – possession of a weapon that can breach the environmental seals on the settlements is punishable by death. Anything else is completely unregulated.

THE UPPER CITY

The Upper City resembles the business district of any high-class starport. It is clean, well-run and comfortable without being opulent or tacky. Well-dressed businesspeople meet and make deals with local and offworld concerns, and everything has a strong feeling of respectability and civilisation. Some of the business being conducted is indeed legitimate, but many of these meetings concern piracy, murder and various forms of large-scale violence. Nothing is said openly in the Upper City; euphemisms and polite fictions are used to maintain the illusion of legitimacy even when arranging genocide.

Most visitors from the Imperium gravitate to the Grand Hotel, which occupies one of the largest buildings on Theev. It has its own shuttle landing area on the roof and sufficient entertainment facilities that guests do not really need to go anywhere else. The Grand Hotel has a special arrangement with the Imperial Navy; on the rare occasions a naval ship passes through the system the hotel provides a ‘shoreside liberty package’ to crewmembers at a very steep discount. This is presented as a courtesy to the navy, which keeps the spacelanes safe and thus enables places like the Grand Hotel to make a profit, but it also helps the Lords of Theev impede any investigation that might be conducted. Hotel staff are adept at making sure crews remain distracted and unable to obtain much in the way of useful information.

There are numerous other hotels in the Upper City of course, each with their own character. Some are also the dwellings of the Lords of Theev, who typically occupy a few floors as their own private preserve and run the rest of the building as a profit-making concern. In some cases, a hotel forms part of a skyscraper, with the remainder either made up of living quarters for workers or offices for businesses. Living standards are good in these communities, and those who cannot afford the high prices – or who offend their overlords – risk being evicted.

Blacksand Widow

SPECIES		GENDER		AGE	
Human		Female		16 – 4 terms (vatgrown)	
TRAITS					
-					
STR	10	INT	7	SKILLS	
DEX	14	EDU	10	Athletics (dexterity) 2, Deception 1, Diplomat 0, Electronics (comms) 1, Flyer (grav) 2, Gun Combat (energy) 3, Gun Combat (slug) 3, Investigate 2, Medic 1, Melee (unarmed) 3, Persuade 1, Steward 1, Streetwise 2	
END	12	SOC	9		
EQUIPMENT					

Playing the Widows:

- Never say a word; just smile like light glinting off a razor-edged knife.



There is no social safety net in the Upper City; those who cannot afford to live there have only one option other than trying to survive within the Lower City. Asharden Camp is a sort of refugee village on the edge of the Upper City. It is filled with hopefuls who want to earn a place in the Upper City – or find their way back in – as well as those struggling to avoid being consigned to the Lower City. Not surprisingly perhaps, it is a good recruiting ground for desperate people.

There are plenty of desperadoes in the Lower City as well, of course, but those in the camp may still have something to lose, which can make them easier to control. They may also have skills not found in the rough-and-ready Lower City, as well as the ability to fit into the polite and (relatively) tranquil society of the Upper City. Assassins, spies and the like are often recruited here, on the promise of a better life in the skyscrapers above.

Within the Upper City there are various districts and zones. The most notorious of these is the Cliff District, where most of the mercenaries and arms traders are headquartered. It is commonly said in Blacksand that if you want to hire a bunch of thugs you can do so in any Lower City bar, but if you want trained mercenaries the Cliff District is the place to go. There are some highly skilled and reputable mercenaries for hire in the Cliff District, as well as various war criminals and professional psychopaths. The businesses located there will also source or manufacture weapons of various sorts, including weapons of mass destruction.

The Industrial Zone is an area around the base of several skyscrapers, where most of the world's heavy industry is located. It is close to the downport, and also has offices for various manufacturing companies. Among these is Kallos Shipyards, which builds craft at the orbital highport but sells some components from its yards on-planet. Kallos serves as a clearing house for pirated ship components. As a rule, legitimate or hard-to-trace components are sold at the highport to anyone who comes through, whilst illegal parts (such as warship systems or parts of a ship that could be traced to pirate activity) are brought to the surface of Theev where investigation is far less likely.

THE LOWER CITY

The Lower City is a tangled mess of alleys, corridors and even tunnels built in the canyon bottoms. Some areas are underground, mainly where a passage has been forced between one canyon and another, and later some additional chambers have been added. Other parts are made from disabled space vessels. Most of the Lower City is essentially a ramshackle town

with an environmentally sealed roof over it. The city is subdivided sufficiently that a breach will not kill everyone, but breaching the outer skin – or having a weapon that can do so – is punishable by death. Indeed, this is the only external law imposed on the Lower City. Apart from this, the place is officially lawless.

However, no society can survive without some sort of rules or code of conduct, and in the Lower City there are numerous groups willing to impose their own code upon others. Sections of the city are run by gangs or warlords, others have what amounts to a neighbourhood watch. All areas are very rough-and-ready. Nobody cares if you steal from someone they do not know, or if you kill someone in the next street. However, everyone reacts to threats or actions that harm them directly, and the usual reaction is violence. Getting roughed up is considered a lucky escape in the Lower City; many people consider it simpler just to kill those that offend them.

Essentially, law and order in the Lower City, such as it is, comes down to 'take care of yourself; nobody will help you unless it's in their interests. If you become a threat to someone or a group, they will deal with you if they can.' In some areas of the city it is considered to be in the interests of local businesses or residents to enforce some kind of law, and in these areas the city is not so much safer for innocents as more dangerous for wrongdoers. Motivations for these enforcers are almost entirely self-centred – it is easier to conduct business if there are no robberies and gunfights going on outside.

Sometimes a building will be 'red flagged', which indicates that it is subject to the Law of the Lords. This is enforced by the Widows. Elsewhere the Widows will eliminate anyone who threatens the environmental integrity of the city, and occasionally others for reasons they do not discuss, but do not otherwise intervene in the affairs of the Lower City.

A large section on the fringe of the city is given over to wrecked starships and spacecraft. Known as the Scrapheap, this area is home to a small population who live in the wrecks and dismantle them for sale to anyone willing to pay for potentially stolen or damaged components. There are other purveyors of starship components elsewhere in the city, but the Scrapheap is a good place to find rock-bottom prices... for a reason.

The House Without Questions is another curiosity of the Lower City. It takes people in and looks after them, no questions asked, providing they do not make themselves unwelcome. Its denizens will also quote a price for any task requested of them, providing it is physically possible. If the fee is paid, the task will be accomplished. It is not wise to ask how, and in any case no answers will be furnished.

The majority of the Lower City consists of dingy residences, workshops, bars and marketplaces where anything and everything is for sale. High-end mercenaries and professionals in various fields tend to maintain offices in the Upper City, but there are many who would prefer to maintain a low profile and work out of some bar or noodle shop in a back alley. There are also numerous street gangs, most of which are little more than small-time thugs who will prey upon those they think are weaker than themselves. Some style themselves 'blood gangs'; others have different names. All are willing to kill and injure people for their property and even their organs.

For those that like blood sports, the Blood Pit is an arena where all manner of fights are staged. Gangs, individual combats, battles against or between exotic animals...all of it can be found in the Blood Pit, but then the same could be said for the streets of the Lower City.

THE PIRATE LORDS

The most influential people in Blacksand are the Pirate Lords. Not all of them are pirates but all are connected in some way with piracy. These lords cannot truly be called the rulers of Blacksand, since that would imply they control it and they do not. Instead they preside over the chaos and violence, profiting from it whilst maintaining a safe physical and metaphorical distance. The Pirate Lords each have extensive territory in the Upper City and The Skull, and many also have holdings offworld. Some, but not all, also have assets in the Lower City. These tend to be defended by well-armed cut-throats, and the vengeance of the Pirate Lords is sufficiently savage that most street gangs will not mess with them.

Most of the Pirate Lords maintain a veneer of civilisation, surrounding themselves with uniformed guards and servants and dwelling in high-class accommodation. Others style themselves as warriors, and live in what looks more like mercenary barracks, or as legitimate merchant spacers. The identities of the Pirate Lords are not all known; some are very mysterious whilst others use a lower-ranking follower as a 'blind' and manipulate events from behind the scenes. Assassination and outright violence are not uncommon between the Pirate Lords, making deception and anonymity a useful survival tool.

The lords have a modest industrial base available, but even combined it is not enough to make Theev a major economic player. The world's main exports

are violence and robbery, and most of its imports are stolen. However, the Pirate Lords are aware they need a legitimate front to operate. Many have investments in businesses such as merchant lines, or buy and sell interstellar cargoes in the manner of a broker. The ability to target pirates against ships carrying the cargoes of rivals, or manipulate a market by making a particular item scarce, has enabled several of the Pirate Lords to become very wealthy through apparently legitimate means.

Not all pirates operating out of Theev are closely associated with the Lords; indeed, most are not. Most of the lords command several vessels (at least) and have other semi-independents who do their bidding. The remainder are independents who – for the most part – know better than to cross the Pirate Lords. Large fleets can be assembled, but highly organised operations requiring more than a few ships are difficult to put together. One rule that the Pirate Lords do enforce is that raiding cruises and plundering expeditions must be carried out well away from Theev itself, with only occasional exceptions. Minor independents are often intimidated into making attacks in dangerous systems (i.e. places where the Imperial Navy is likely to respond) in order to keep the navy looking elsewhere.

This is one of the ways that the Pirate Lords protect themselves against intervention; they make sure other systems get highlighted as hotspots or that attacks are sufficiently common to draw in Imperial vessels and tie down part of an already limited pool of assets. The other way Theev manages to remain in business is through GeDeCo involvement. The corporation's influence is considerable, and could be used to draw or even direct Imperial attention elsewhere.

It is not entirely clear what the megacorporation gains from its association with Theev, but there are several possibilities. Theev gives GeDeCo the ability to harm its rivals by using piracy against them, or influence markets by cutting off supplies of certain goods. Access to illegal military and naval hardware is another possibility. More optimistic observers might conclude that Theev is being used to balance out the powerplays between the Imperium and Aslan Hierate. This is a true possibility, as is the suggestion that perhaps GeDeCo wants to bring about the return of the Sindalian Empire. However, the most likely – if prosaic – explanation is that Theev is an asset that can be used to increase GeDeCo's profits or protect its interests at need. In other words, Theev is a tool that can be used by GeDeCo in any way it pleases.

PALINDROME

Astrographically, Palindrome occupies a similar position to Vume, in that it could provide a jump-3 link across the centre of the subsector. However, due to social and economic factors it is less important. Whilst it can be reached from several worlds on the 'Imperial' side of the subsector, Palindrome is within jump-3 of only Borite and Noricum, both of which have virtually no economy and only the most basic of port facilities. Anywhere you can get to via Palindrome – that is worth visiting at all – can be accessed by some other route.

Not surprisingly, Palindrome is a backwater. It is occasionally used as a transit point for jump-4 Imperial warships transiting across to the Sindalian Main, but these do not bring in much revenue for the port. Indeed, most of the system's modest income is derived from jump-3 freighters travelling from the Imperium to sell goods, which then enter the small economy of the local cluster or hauled across to the Sindalian Main by the few ships capable of making such a long transit.

Among these vessels are a small flotilla of jump-2 capable traders whose fuel tankage has been doubled at the expense of cargo space. These vessels plod laboriously back and forth to Palindrome, usually from Thebus but sometimes via Marduk. Although the trip takes two weeks and requires a slightly hazardous deep-space jump, it is usually worth it since Imperial goods sell well in the lower-tech markets of the Sindalian Main.

THE PALINDROME SYSTEM

Palindrome's primary is a K7 V, an orange main sequence star. Its rather sparse planetary system includes two gas giants and three rocky planets including Palindrome itself. A distant M1 V (red main sequence) star also orbits the system's primary but is not known to have any planetary bodies of its own.

The system was inhabited in the heyday of the Sindalian Empire, but was either abandoned or the population died out after the fall of the empire. Although the most habitable of the three mainworlds in the cluster, Palindrome was too remote to survive for long without a major interstellar economy to support it. Had the world possessed a slightly thicker atmosphere and featured

more life on its surface, civilisation might have survived at some level in the long years between the collapse of the Sindalian Empire and the coming of the Third Imperium. It was not to be, however, and now all that remains of the original habitation is long-buried rubble and the occasional blast crater.

HIGHPORT

Palindrome's highport is one of the 'central three' built by GeDeCo to facilitate and foster trade between Imperial worlds in Tobia subsector and the Sindalian Main. It was the least successful of these ventures, and today is in a terrible state.

Although officially listed as a Class B port, and still claiming to have the facilities of one, Palindrome Highport is mostly abandoned. Cannibalisation and salvage operations have kept the core of the orbital station operational, at the cost of turning the rest into little more than a framework of girders. An ambitious project is currently underway to remove some of these reduced-to-a-framework sections and reposition them where they are less of a hazard to incoming ships. Given the limited resources available, this is a long job and will probably result in sections of the station simply being cut away and 'bumped' so that they drift off into deep space.

The operable part of the port is run-down and very limited in the services it can offer, but the docks and cargo-handling facilities are still functional. These bring in the only income the port receives and, as such, are vital to its survival. Jump-3 freighters from the Imperium unload bulk cargoes here, which are broken up into smaller lots to be auctioned among local ship operators. Most of these goods find their way across to the Sindalian Main by way of the two-jump-2 flotilla; the remainder is picked up by local ships and distributed throughout the Theev Cluster.

The port is defended mostly by its reputation and lack of suitable targets. Since the port is associated with a former pirate who still has connections, it is considered a bad place to raid even among those ignorant as to why those who dare to make an attack tend to meet an unpleasant fate sooner or later.

Ships that use the port tend to be well-armed. The jump-2 traders who make the run from Thebus are particularly well aware of what they may run into, and tend to be prepared for it. Unfortunately perhaps, these vessels are used as a cover for similar ships making the same transit in and out of the Theev Cluster, but for piratical purposes. These captains can cite reasons why their ships are heavily armed and carry additional security crewmembers, though they are truly the problem rather than the solution.

The jump-3 ships coming in from the Imperium are also well defended. The region is notorious for piracy, and few captains are unaware of the dangers. Occasionally these vessels or the jump-2 flotilla will end up protecting the highport or other shipping against attack. It is generally assumed that the presence of well-armed merchant craft has proved an effective deterrent to piracy, and this is at least partially true.

There is an anti-Imperial attitude at the port, and several obvious reasons for it. The port was built to facilitate Imperial trade that never came, and is now struggling to avoid total collapse. There are also many tales (some of them true) of Imperial injustices and abandonment of the people in the region to Aslan encroachment. The atmosphere is rude-barely-tolerant; Imperial merchants and agencies alike have failed to obtain much of a toehold.

This attitude is in part genuine, but also fed by deliberate propaganda from the Pirate Lords of Theev. Imperials visiting Palindrome's highport will encounter open hostility (but not violence) and locals who act like they are doing visitors a favour by taking their Credits. This situation suits the ends of Theev, and is unlikely to change.



PALINDROME

Palindrome is not a very inviting world, with a very thin atmosphere and little surface water. That said, it is the most habitable of the cluster's mainworlds. Palindrome has a biosphere of sorts, though it is neither rich nor diverse. Most life is plant-based, typically low creeping plants whose thick undergrowth shelters the world's few primitive land animals.

The one settlement on the surface of Palindrome is Astrogo, personal fief of the self-styled Lady Yemar, a former pirate who was badly injured in a raid. Exposure to a bioweapon left her with severe medical needs which at present can only be met on Theev. She settled on Palindrome, investing a fortune gained in a lifetime of raiding, and has managed to attract about five thousand followers, employees and general hangers-on.

Astrogo is a domed, climate-controlled environment whose inhabitants rarely need to go outside. Those who do are typically either downport workers or farmers. The latter mostly control robotic agricultural equipment from comfortable workstations but do sometimes have to go outside. Many consider this a great imposition and grumble about it to anyone who will listen.

This attitude is not uncommon on Palindrome. The world has a solid but small TL12 base and a high standard of living for its inhabitants. Although there is insufficient industry to manufacture much in the way of exports, life is generally comfortable and safe. Most residents are insulated from the outside universe and quite happy that way. Some inhabitants have a wider and less contented world-view. Many of these are Yemar's former pirate associates who make up the world's ruling elite, its police and military forces, and control most of its wealth.

A modest income is produced by trade through the highport; although Lady Yemar is smart enough not to sink money into the ramshackle port itself; instead she buys and sells shares in cargoes passing through, as do many of her supporters. This trade is typically virtual, with Astrogo residents purchasing part of a cargo and receiving an equivalent proportion of the sale price without ever taking physical possession of it. Most cargoes traded in this manner remain at the highport, and the traders never see them.

Although Astrogo has little industry, it does have a thriving weapons market. Palindrome is a long way to go for a custom handgun, but some individuals will visit just for the weapons fair. Others seek to purchase hard-to-get (i.e. illegal) electronic components such as missile guidance systems and military-grade shipboard sensors. Some of these items are produced in small volumes on-planet, others are obtained from a variety of sources.

Palindrome's on-planet marketplace also has a variety of 'speciality goods' for sale. These are sometimes the result of piracy, though much of what is on sale is actually legitimate. Those who do not know who to ask and where to look will find only legal items, some of questionable taste, for sale. However, pirate cargoes are often cleared through Astrogo; those with the right contacts can buy and sell there.

Palindrome's people are less openly anti-Imperial than those at the highport, largely because they are insulated from the anti-Imperial propaganda as well as everything else. There are numerous fugitives from Imperial justice living at Astrogo, and Yemar herself does not want intelligence agents or investigators gaining a foothold in her town. However, adventurers, traders, and Travellers who happen to be from the Imperium will encounter relatively little prejudice. The people of Astrogo dislike the Imperium as a distant, vague concept. Individuals who are not flashing a badge or wearing a uniform are taken on their own merits.

PIRACY

Palindrome is a dangerous place to make a pirate attack. The ships that come here tend to be well-armed and those who attack them often turn up destroyed as a warning to others. Piracy is quite low in the system, since there is little in-system or local trade to attack. There is another reason too; a lot of pirate vessels transit through Palindrome from Thebus, pretending to be part of the two-jump-2 flotilla. Others come to Astrogo for the markets. There is thus always a danger of attacking a pirate vessel which will be well-armed, ready for a fight, and vengeful if defeated.