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*Spinward Marches
System Guide 2
Flexos*

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TRAVELLER²⁰
Science-Fiction Adventure in the Far Future

SPINWARD MARCHES SYSTEM GUIDE 2: FLEXOS

CREDITS

District Commissioner
Martin J. Dougherty

Colonial Administrator
William Andersen

System Survey Commander
Eric O'Dell

Scout Service Planetary Surveyors
Eric O'Dell
Michael Taylor

Xenobiology Expert
Jason 'Flynn' Kemp

Planetary and Interstellar Cartographers
Shane McLean
Eric O'Dell

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System Guide 2 is set in the Spinward Marches of Official Traveller Universe, in the period just after the end of the Fifth Frontier War. As such it is compatible with either the official Hard Times – Collapse – Recovery – New Era timeline or an alternate wherein the assassination of Emperor Strephon does not occur.

Avenger Enterprises can be contacted by email at:
avenger.enterprises@virgin.net

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INTRODUCTION

Flexos is an backwater world whose vast deserts, exotic atmosphere, primitive starport, low population, and inconvenient location make it an unlikely stop except for ships plying the jump-2 route from Tarkine and Noctocol to Walston and the Bowman belt. The planet does have some undeveloped potential, however, in the form of its fluid oceans and unique plant life, and it is well-known in the xenobiology departments of universities in the Spinward Marches for the extensive ruins left by a long-extinct primitive race.

Flexos 0403 E5A1422-6 FI Lo Ni 610 M1 V M2 D (Non-Aligned)

SYSTEM OVERVIEW

Flexos orbits a contact binary pair consisting of an M1 primary and a small M2 dwarf, known collectively by the inhabitants of Flexos as Girehredh, a Darrian word meaning “brothers”. With the exception of Flexos, which was named by the IISS officer who first charted the system for the Imperium, all of the bodies in the system are named in the te-Zlodh language of the Darrian colonists; Flexos itself is known locally in the same language as Yihly, but the local name is largely ignored outside the system. There are no planetoid belts and a single large gas giant, Bagihmeh. There are six other rocky planets in the system, along with eleven decent-sized moons, some of which have small populations of miners and prospectors. Only Flexos lies within the small habitable zone of its old, dim suns.

Orbit		Name	UPP	Remarks
Primary		Girehredh	M1 V	M2 D in close orbit
0		Flexos (Yihly)	E5A1422-6	
	6	Rerihld	YS00000-5	
	20	Dinetas	H202231-5	
1		Nilungedh-Obhekeny	Y101114-5	
2		Gihlabhanih	H100365-5	
3		Bagihmeh	LGG	
	3	Kanamihnehp	Y400000-5	
	4	Zem	Y231000-5	
	7	Narihdea	Y300000-5	
	40	Reren	Y400212-5	TTC encampment
4		Dizeneh	Y627000-5	
	5	Dabeh	Y200000-5	
5		Leyr	Y200000-5	
	6	Behrelihdr	YS00000-5	
	25	Yuldehngg-Thildas	FS00362-5	Flexian monitoring post
	35	Zdeyr	YS00000-5	
6		Gugh	H401263-5	
	6	Ldeh	Y310000-5	

NILUNGEDH-OBHEKENY

Named for the Rorrian philosophers whose teachings led to the colonization of the system, Nilungedh-Obhekeny is a small icy rock whose high albedo makes it the brightest object in the night sky of Flexos. Several decades ago, it was the scene of a spectacular mineral strike, but the vein played itself out very quickly and the only remaining inhabitants are a small group of die-hard prospectors hoping for a repeat.

GIHLABHANIH

Gihlabhanih is another small world with scattered deposits of heavy metals, including lanthanum. It hosts a permanent population of independent miners under the direct administration of the government of Flexos, which derives a modest profit from licensing fees and supply concessions.

BAGIHMEH

Bagihmeh is the system's sole gas giant. Most ships passing through the system stop here to skim fuel, as Flexos' fluid oceans and lack of refuelling facilities make it an uninviting stop for travellers bound elsewhere. Bagihmeh's four moons have been surveyed recently for use as a class C starport, funded by the Trexalon Technical Consortium and intended to refuel and repair ships in their employ. A small team of TTC engineers and surveyors are currently based on the largest moon, Reren, though the most likely site for a starport is the smallest moon, Zem, which has small ice caps ready for exploitation.

Bagihmeh's internal dynamics are quite unusual for a gas giant. At intervals of five to six standard years, the composition of its upper atmosphere changes dramatically for several months as organic molecules are churned up from deep within the atmosphere. The mechanism for this is not well understood, but apparently stems from periodic changes in the thermal activity of the planetary core. During this time, Bagihmeh's faint blue-green bands are swallowed by a chaotic, swirling mass of ruddy clouds. Ships attempting to skim during this time will find their fuel systems contaminated by a sticky, tarry hydrocarbon mixture requiring time-consuming servicing to remove. A radio beacon on Reren broadcasts a warning message during these periods of activity.

DIZENEH

Dizeneh is the largest terrestrial planet in the Flexos system. Situated far from Girehredh, it is a brutally cold and barren world with a thin, tainted atmosphere that is continually regenerated by volcanic activity. In time, it might become an important mining colony, but in the present undeveloped state of the system, the limited capital that is available is directed at investments closer to Flexos. Independent miners who might otherwise be attracted to a geologically active body like Dizeneh lack the resources to penetrate the thick ice sheets that cover more than 70% of the planet's surface, though pirates and smugglers are known to refuel there on occasion.

LEYR

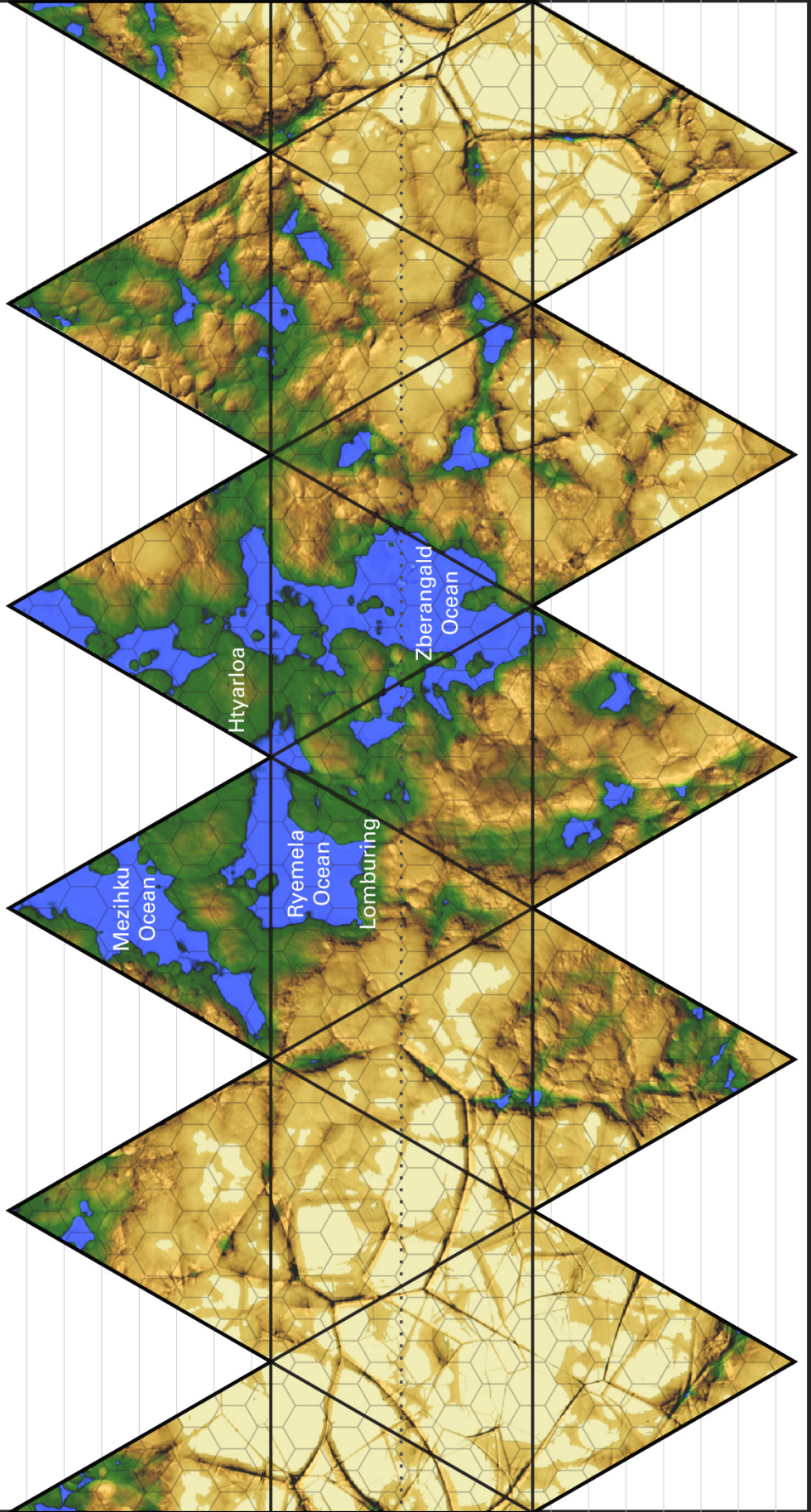
Leyr is an unremarkable rocky world which was almost completely disrupted by a major impact event at some time in the distant past. Substantial portions of its former metallic core have been exposed to the surface and are in the process of being auctioned off by the government of Flexos to various mining concessions. Of its three moons, which may be fragments of the original planet, only Yuldehngg-Thildas is worthy of note, possessing a class F spaceport manned by a sizeable permanent staff. Although the spaceport may support mining operations in the future, it currently services Droyne ships from the Five Sisters subsector who are in the system as a result of the colonization charter granted by Flexos in 1027.

GUGH

Named after the Darrian word for midwinter, Gugh is the outermost planet in the system, home to a small monitoring post operated by the government of Flexos. The monitoring post is, in fact, a salvaged freighter moored at the planet's spartan class H spaceport. Every four months, part of the crew is rotated out and replaced by fresh personnel by a transport based on Flexos. The purpose of the installation is a state secret, but may have to do with increasing piracy in the subsector.

FLEXOS E5A1422-6

Hex Scale: 730km



FLEXOS

Flexos occupies the innermost and only orbit within the system's habitable zone. It is the only body in the system with a self-sustaining population.

PHYSICAL DATA

Flexos is a fairly hospitable planet, all things considered. Its exotic atmosphere, composed mostly of carbon dioxide with a smaller proportion of nitrogen and traces of other gases, is unbreathable by humans but not toxic and serves to keep the planet much warmer than it would otherwise be in a system with such a cool, dim primary. Its 12° axial tilt provides mild seasons, and its dense fluid oceans help to stabilize temperatures in their vicinity. Temperatures are, however, below what humans would consider comfortable, with an average summer temperature of 10° C and an average winter temperature of -23° C in the mid-latitudes. Flexos' small oceans are concentrated in the eastern hemisphere of the planet, and as a consequence, the largely uninhabited western hemisphere suffers much greater temperature extremes. Because tidal interaction with the nearby primary keeps the planetary core molten, Flexos has a magnetic field capable of maintaining its atmosphere and protecting its inhabitants from dangerous radiation.

Flexos' most striking physical feature is its fractured crust. Like many smaller worlds with thick siliceous crusts, there is no tectonic activity, but the pressure of the planet's molten core has created numerous large fissures that stretch across the surface for thousands of kilometers in nearly straight lines. In the eastern hemisphere, where the fissures are most numerous and the crust is thinnest, the activity of liquid water has eroded the lands near the ocean basins and created a hospitable environment for plant life. The rest of the planet, however, is an expanse of high, arid plains, exposed to high winds, dust storms, and extreme temperatures. Some of the fissures in the desert regions contain extensive oases within the shadows of their walls. The dust storms in the deserts, which reach a period of sustained activity during spring in each hemisphere, serve to stimulate plant growth in the lowlands and the oceans by depositing mineral-rich dust upon them.

The oceans of Flexos are remarkable as well. They are quite deep along the undersea fissures, reaching depths of as much as six kilometers, but the bulk of the ocean floor lies at depths of one kilometer or less. The lowest layer of the oceans consists of a thick bituminous sludge, the product of hundreds of millions of years of decaying plant matter reacting with geothermal activity on the ocean floor. Above this is a layer of dense, viscous hydrocarbons that originates entirely in the peculiar plant life of the land surface, washed into the sea by rain. Finally, a thin layer of little more than one hundred meters of liquid water lies on the surface, supersaturated with magnesium sulfate, sodium sulfate, and small amounts of sodium chloride. The thermal mass of the

underlying layers, combined with the low mass of the water layer, ensures that the water layer is quite hot at all times, reaching 82° C near the equator, generating a constant supply of storm clouds to quench the semi-arid lowlands. Although it is not drinkable in its raw form, settlements along the coasts have no difficulty using passive solar power to distill water for drinking and bathing. The few settlements further inland are supplied by ground water.

There are three relatively large oceans on Flexos: the Mezhiku Ocean, which abuts the north polar region; the Ryemela Ocean to the south, around which most of the settlements are arranged; and the Zberangald Ocean, which straddles the equator. There are twenty-seven other smaller seas arranged into three groups, most of which lie in eroded areas where two or more crustal fissures meet. Small lakes and seasonal oases are scattered throughout the bottoms of the fissures, though only a few are found in the arid western hemisphere. Ice forms over parts of the Mezhiku Ocean during winter in the northern hemisphere, and many of the smaller seas freeze to the bottom during winter.

Also typical of planets with relatively thick crusts, magma from Flexos' core is vented by a few large volcanoes of considerable age. The largest of these is Darodapolur, located in the Ryoma highlands to the east of the Mezhiku Ocean. It is surrounded by a complex of smaller volcanoes, many of which are active. Eruptions are seldom violent and tend to be continuous, slow releases of lava instead. Sulfur compounds vented by the volcanoes are the source of the sulfur salts with which the oceans are saturated.

The crustal fissures of Flexos serve as convenient natural borders for the major regions or "cells" of the planet. In the largely uninhabited western highlands where the fissures are most clearly defined, these regions are of little interest to anyone but cartographers, explorers and researchers. In the lowlands around the Ryemela Ocean, where almost all of the population is concentrated, they form actual administrative districts. Three of these account for 95% of the planet's population. The largest of these, on the northeast coast of the Ryemela Ocean is called Htyarloa and is the most sparsely settled, occupied by Aslan farmers with large plantations. It consists of a relatively low central region between two outer regions of rolling hills centering around the barely recognizable remains of two ancient volcanoes. The land is quite rich, and being situated centrally between the three major oceans, it receives regular rainfall. South of Htyarloa, on the southeastern coast, is another agricultural region, consisting of three small cells. Much lower and marshier than Htyarloa, it is somewhat more densely populated, being better suited to smaller farms and the culling of the rather odd local fauna. The majority of the population, however, still lives in Lomburing, a small city located at the edge of the semi-arid highlands beyond the west coast. It is in this less-eroded area that the most interesting and distinct feature of Flexos is plainly visible.

THE LOST CITY OF THE ISOPODS

When the first colonists arrived on Flexos, they settled in the heavily eroded lowlands near the sea. The land there was ideal for farming, or at least as close to ideal as could be found on this dry world, and the desert highlands were largely ignored. Survival was an all-consuming struggle for the first several generations, so it was not until much later that hard-won prosperity made possible luxuries like the idle exploration of the barren continental interior of Flexos. When that exploration finally did begin, the discoveries that they made completely changed the outlook and goals of colonial society.

There are thousands of species of sophonts in charted space. A handful managed to colonize other worlds, while most of the remainder were contacted by spacefaring races before developing high technology. Others, however, became extinct before making it offworld with their own technology or that of others. What the early explorers of Flexos found was that this world was once the home to such a lost race, arguably one of the strangest and most spectacular ever discovered.

Flourishing some three million years before present, the original inhabitants of Flexos were sapient arthropods, vaguely resembling the tiny wood louse isopods that Solomani colonists inadvertently spread throughout Imperial space, but much larger. The aboriginal Flexians were approximately one meter in length, with seven pairs of triply-jointed legs, the front pair of which had been modified to provide sophisticated hand-like structures. They were protected—from what, no one knows—by a ten-segmented carapace whose edges were ringed with sharp spines. Based on evidence recovered from excavations of their extensive mausoleums, they neither needed nor wore clothing, but did decorate their carapaces with paint and among what must have been their ruling class, gemstones and finely detailed metalwork. The full extent of their technical sophistication is not yet known, their metal tools having mostly corroded away in the millions of years since their extinction, but archaeological evidence strongly suggests they had achieved TL 3.

The thing that makes the original Flexians so remarkable, however, is the planetwide city that they built deep below the surface of the desert. Apparently using a related species -- some experts believe it may have been their own larvae -- as tireless drones, the Flexians hewed a city from the living rock, beginning at an average depth of fifty meters and extending beneath the entire usable surface of the planet. In between the living and working spaces, they equipped it with a sophisticated system of aqueducts, sewer, and food transport tunnels. Although these have collapsed in many places, and all of the near-surface chambers have been eroded to varying degrees by wind, water, and surface

spalling, vast areas of the upper levels are still in good condition, stretching for hundreds and sometimes thousands of uninterrupted kilometers beneath the high desert plains.

The discovery of the upper levels of the city was regarded as a matter of great importance by the early colonists. Although the aboriginal isopods were much smaller than humans, they had tended to build large chambers which were then subdivided by floors and walls constructed from the waste rock produced by the original excavation. In many chambers, these subsidiary divisions had long since collapsed, and removing them from the remainder was simply a matter of knocking them down and carting the loose rock to the surface using the same passages that the isopods themselves had used to dump waste rock in great piles on the surface. The various aqueducts and other utility tunnels were easily reused and repurposed by the colonists to carry their own water and sewage, as well as electrical conduits, fiber optic communication cables, and air ducts. Most importantly, it was easy to seal sections of the city off from the outside so that a human-breathable atmosphere could be maintained inside. The large agricultural chambers in which the aborigines had presumably farmed fungus provided convenient locations for fusion powerplants and for the colonists' own hydroponic and aquaculture agricultural systems. The potential of Flexos to host a population in the billions fired the imaginations of colonial leaders.

As the colonists pushed deeper into the aboriginal city, they discovered that when the isopods had run out of room to expand outward, they had tunneled deeper into the planet. Exploring the depths took considerably more effort, as the collapse of isolated sections of the upper level had permitted wind-borne dust to infiltrate the tunnel complex, along with silt carried by the infrequent but torrential desert rains. Over the course of three million years, almost all of the lower levels had been completely filled with sediment. As with the initial exploration of the upper levels, the first probes into the depths were driven by idle curiosity. And like those first discoveries, the second round of discoveries shook colonial society.

The walls of the upper levels had long been eroded by spalling, obliterating all fine details and leaving a rough surface. The walls of the lower levels, however, had been protected by sediment and so were spared the fate of the upper levels. Exposing these, the colonists discovered inscriptions of mind-boggling complexity. While some walls consisted solely of text, most contained both text and illustrations, the majority of which were complicated diagrams. Some of these were recognizeably astronomical and calendrical in nature, but the bulk of them appear to be religious or metaphysical, and all of them, to human eyes, were aesthetically pleasing. In the subsequent wave of excavations that took place all over the planet, it was determined that the metaphysical texts and diagrams varied widely from region to region, and often from chamber to chamber, while more prosaic subject matters were more or less uniform throughout the global city.

The study and export of isopod artifacts soon became a substantial component of the local economy, and has since driven efforts to excavate deeper and deeper levels of the city. Most tunnels run no deeper than a few hundred meters, but some areas, which may have been major population centers, extend more than a kilometer downward.

The cause of the extinction of the isopods is not known. So far, no evidence of warfare has been discovered in the ruins. Many theories have been proposed, ranging from epidemics to climate change to overpopulation, but the small size of the Flexian scientific community and the lack of funding for more comprehensive exploration has so far hindered the search for answers.

SOCIO-POLITICAL DATA

Flexos has a population of around 60,000 permanent inhabitants, of whom 90% are humans of Darrian extraction. The remaining 10% are Darrian Aslan of the Arlyukhtistaokhte clan. The original settlers came mostly from Rorre and Mire, all of them followers of the Rorrian philosophers Nilungedh and Obhekeny, who sought a middle way between the enforced primitivism of Rorre and the uncontrolled technological change of the major Darrian worlds, naming the world Yihly, or “moderation”. As is the case back in the Darrian Confederation, the Aslan are fully-integrated and accepted members of society. Most of them live in the farmlands of Htyarloa and the bulk of the remainder form the nucleus of the local defense force.

Although Flexos is not an official Darrian colony—ideology would have prevented that in any event—it has received unofficial support from the confederation over the years, mostly in the form of fusion power plants and second-hand ships that cannot be manufactured locally. For its part, the government of Flexos maintains missions on several confederation worlds aimed at recruiting new settlers. Since the discovery of the isopod city and its ready-made housing, a more concerted effort has been made to encourage immigration. Since the world’s low population makes it vulnerable to outside domination, there is broad public support for welcoming more settlers, but there is still disagreement about the ideal immigration rate, with one faction wanting to increase the population as quickly as possible and the other faction wanting a more moderate rate to ensure that the colony’s ideals are not diluted by a sudden influx of newcomers. Both factions agree, however, that a much larger population is a desirable goal; only the time frame is in dispute. The Darrian Confederation, for its part, is quietly exploring possibilities for expansion to the rimward and spinward, and Flexos might eventually be a foil against Imperial expansion if not a future member of the confederation.

The local law level is quite low. Portable energy weapons are restricted to the small permanent military, but all citizens are part of the reserve militia and are in possession of small arms

in whose use they are well-trained. In the absence of any threats beyond occasional pirate raids, the militia functions mostly as a local police force, with members on active duty being rotated regularly to avoid corruption. Off-world visitors, on the other hand, can expect to be held to much more stringent standards as far as weapons possession is concerned. Without special permission from the local government, possession by visitors of any weapons at all within urban areas is strictly prohibited, and light arms only are permitted in the countryside.

The government of Flexos is a participatory democracy, in line with the doctrines of Nilungedh and Obhekeny. An elected council makes legislative initiatives which are voted upon by the general public in monthly referenda. While there is no provision for initiatives originating from the public, the council is quite large and new members are elected every year. There is also a permanent managerial bureaucracy, appointed by the council to an indefinite term and approved by the electorate. This executive group works much like a city commission, overseeing the day-to-day work of running the colony. Because it is subject to recall at six-month intervals, it is obliged to work by popular consensus, but in actual practice, contentious issues tend to be handled behind the scenes.

The current chief executive of Flexos is Zos Nyaderemond, the latest popular leader in a long line of prominent members of a family which was among the original wave of colonists. Charming and charismatic, he is also pragmatic to a fault, which has led him to make decisions of dubious morality in the effort to keep the colony thriving in the face of considerable outside pressure. Nyaderemond has carefully balanced the competing interests of his unofficial Darrian patrons, the increasing interest of the Imperium in Flexos and the other worlds of District 268, and the schemes of the Trexalon Technical Consortium to harass Imperial interests. So far, he has been very successful in playing them against each other. He has permitted the TTC to begin initial work in constructing a covert starport in the outer system and turning a blind eye to piracy in exchange for money and equipment, while simultaneously courting the Imperium and passing along useful bits of information to naval observers. He has deftly maintained the illusion that Flexos could be the vanguard of Darrian expansion to the rimward despite his conviction that Imperial annexation is all but inevitable, welcome or not. As the covert conflict between Trexalon and the Imperium has heated up, however, it is increasingly obvious that the balancing act cannot go on forever, and Nyaderemond’s current problem is to figure out whom to betray and in what order to avoid retaliation at the hands of the losers before the winners can take full control.

The Aslan population, as the core of the Flexian military, is more closely involved in Nyaderemond’s machinations than most of his fellow humans. Since the earliest days of the colony, the Arlyukhtistaokhte clan has been given a near

monopoly on agricultural production in exchange for their military might. While the number of Aslan, like the number of humans, is currently quite small, nearly a quarter of them spend most of their time actively serving as internal security forces and as officers in Flexos' tiny planetary navy, a heterogenous collection of ships salvaged, purchased, and captured over the years. As a consequence, the influence of the clan leadership on the executive levels of the local government is disproportionately high. While they are certainly not malicious and consider themselves members in good standing of Flexian society, the government is occasionally forced into making concessions to clan interests that might not always be in the interests of the colony as a whole.

ECONOMIC DATA

For the first two centuries after the initial colonization, Flexos was purely a subsistence economy, struggling to wrest a living from the land and making up for shortfalls with the meager subsidies it received from its supporters in the Darrian Confederation. As prospectors and smugglers moved in with the increasing development of District 268, the government wisely pursued a policy of tolerating virtually any activity in the system as long as a modest concession fee was paid. Since Flexos was the only world in the system where visitors could conveniently rest and repair their ships, paying the concession fees was generally a worthwhile investment. Later, as a trio of surplus system defense boats became available to the colonists, the holdouts were convinced to pay the fees as well.

Over the last fifty years, the local economy has become quite diversified for such a small colony. Flexos has been blessed by a long series of far-sighted leaders, gifted with both pragmatism and cunning, who have vigorously explored every possibility for economic growth within the bounds of their original communitarian philosophy. The discovery of the isopod city made the creation of new settlements a simple and inexpensive affair, and also opened up opportunities for tourism. While the recent war has made travel in these backwater regions dicier than usual, a few thousand tourists a year, mostly Darrian, have begun arriving for tours of the ruins. The carved walls of the ruins themselves have become something of a local commodity, and while all pieces are carefully photographed for scientific purposes and the best pieces are barred from export, the prices paid by collectors in other parts of the Spinward Marches represent a considerable contribution to the small local economy. A small but growing presence of researchers from various Imperial and Darrian universities also provides a boost for the Flexians, both for local merchants and in the form of free advertising for the antiquities export market.

It is hoped that research into the impressive local plant life (see below) will eventually become a major source of revenue, either as a legitimate market in medicines and spices, or else as a source of black market entertainment

drugs to Imperial markets. The chemical and mineral wealth of Flexos' odd seas has not even begun to be explored. In both cases, travellers with the appropriate skills can find ready employ with the promise of royalties from the local government.

The past five years have seen an influx of cash from dubious sources. As the government plays the competing regional powers against each other, it has accepted large bribes (by local standards) from a number of parties with conflicting goals. While the government has all but resigned itself to eventual Imperial annexation, it is eager to have some clout when the time comes and certainly to avoid the domination of lesser powers in the meantime. In order to accomplish this, it has been taking bigger risks than before in order to secure development funds, arms, and fresh bodies. At the same time, smugglers and privateers have been becoming bolder themselves, and the government is keen to exploit them while it still can in hopes that it will have the might to defend itself against them once Flexos becomes a worthwhile target for raiding parties. In these areas, too, there is ample opportunity for appropriately equipped offworlders to find employment.

MILITARY DATA

As might be expected, Flexos doesn't have much of a military. Its populace is organized into a militia composed of all able-bodied adults, but in actual practice, the militia amounts to an effective police force but not much of an army. It is capable of fending off small raiding parties, but a well-equipped mercenary unit would have little difficulty seizing anything it liked. So far, Flexos' main defense has been that it doesn't have much worth stealing.

The formal military of Flexos consists mostly of Aslan troops from the farming district of Htyarloa and number some 1200 men, with an additional 800 or so in reserve. These troops are moderately well-equipped and trained, and can be expected to carry a good stock of infantry arms from TL 10 to 12, mostly purchased from travelling smugglers. Transport is primarily by air/raft, along with a handful of well-worn grav tanks, any or none of which may be fully operational at any time. Despite their relative isolation from the human population, they are trusted and well-liked by the citizenry, and their high morale and motivation does a great deal to compensate for their lack of advanced weaponry. The relatively pacifistic populace dotes on them as brave and noble defenders of the colonial cause, and Aslan being Aslan, the troops eat it up.

In recent years, the government has been able to obtain three aging system defense boats, a battered Gazelle-class close escort, a couple of cutters for in-system travel, and a small fleet of far traders owned by privateer captains under long term contracts to shuttle trade goods and colonists to and from the Darrian Confederation and the Five Sisters subsector. All of these ships can be expected to engage

would-be troublemakers. All but the SDBs and the Gazelle are under orders to avoid contact with superior forces. The crews of the dedicated combat vessels are a mix of humans and Aslan; the captains are Aslan in every case.

FLORA AND FAUNA

Flexos is entirely devoid of any higher animal life. With the exception of insects, all of the local fauna consists of a few species small arthropods that bear a more than passing resemblance to the larger isopods that once ruled the planet. It is suspected that one or another of these animals might be the worker drones the isopods used to build their city, but unless future excavations reveal more about their construction methods, this will remain an open question. It is nonetheless the case that several of the arthropod species do dig or at least enlarge burrows in solid rock by eating plants containing corrosive juices and regurgitating the acids inside their nest sites. One of these species, a small animal capable of rolling itself into a defensive ball about the size of a grapefruit, is docile and easily tamed, making it a popular pet among the local children, though its habit of raiding garbage and chewing its way into food stores makes it somewhat less well-liked by the adult population.

The oceans are also devoid of much life beyond bacteria and simple colonial organisms, owing to the high temperature and salinity of the water layer. The long lakes and oases in the fissures of the deserts are cooler but even more inimical to life in their chemical constituents. There has been interest in recent years in importing oxygen-producing algae suited to local conditions, but the disruption of the Fifth Frontier War has so far prevented any progress on that front. It is speculated that there may be life in the thick organic sludge layers below the water, but here too the lack of proper equipment has prevented further investigation.

Where Flexian biology really shines, however, is in its flora. Most local plants are small succulents, seldom growing larger than a medium-sized bush, but the number of species is vast. Complicating a survey of Flexos' botanical inventory is the fact that most native plants are unusually adaptable to their environment, so a single species can take very different forms according to local conditions of moisture, light, and soil composition. This trait has made them a subject of considerable amateur interest among the colonists, and the regular meetings of small botanical clubs are one of the more common social events in the capital and its suburbs. Another reason, less publicized, for the popularity of botanical clubs is that many plants contain psychoactive substances. A dozen or so of these have been subjected to enough amateur experimentation that they have become common recreational drugs. As none have thus far been a source of addiction or disruption, and all of them are easily enough grown to discourage commercial trade, the government has been content to ignore them for the time being. The government is, however, very interested in the wide variety of novel compounds found in various species, some of which

may have valuable medical uses, and its actively attempting to recruit researchers from the Darrian Confederation and the Imperium. One plant which has been the subject of intense study contains alkaloids which resemble precursors to both anagathics and psi drugs.

The majority of the succulents have adapted to the semi-arid environment of the mid-altitudes by having a high oil content. Some of these oils are richly aromatic, and others have been adopted into the local cuisine as spices. The export opportunities for these plants are also the subject of government interest, mostly under the supervision of the Aslan agricultural monopoly. Virtually all of them are useful sources of protein and fiber if the oils are first cooked out of them. More than a few visitors passing through the planet have discovered this after the fact: consuming them raw typically causes severe intestinal discomfort.

A couple of exotic plants deserve further mention. One species, called by the te-zlodh name dihdaghar, is a migratory plant. Shaped something like a Terran tumbleweed, the dihdaghar begins life in the northwest portion of the lowlands and shortly thereafter detaches its roots from the ground and blows with the summer winds to the south. When it reaches the southernmost extreme of its journey, it takes to root again and rides out the winter in the mild southern climate. When spring returns and the winds shift to the north, it releases spores which are borne back to its northern origin before the parent plant dies. Flexos' other remarkable plant, and the one that is probably most immediately noticeable to travellers, is the zihlihtom or tetrahedron tree. The zihlihtom grows to enormous size in the relatively low local gravity, reaching heights of 120 to 160 meters in a mature specimen. Its upper foliage is broad and spreading, serving not only to collect the dim sunlight but also to channel rain to its roots. In order to anchor itself against the winds of the frequent summer storms, it grows three secondary trunks from a point midway up the primary trunk back downwards into the ground. Once these have grown strong enough to support the tree, the lower half of the primary trunk dries out and eventually rots away, leaving the upper half perched on a tetrahedral base. They are much loved by the urban population; the city of Lomburing is built in and around an especially magnificent grove of zihlihtoms. Because they are extraordinarily efficient at extracting moisture from the soil, however, they have been largely wiped out in the vicinity of the Aslan farmlands.

LIFE ON FLEXOS

As might be expected from such a small colony, even one attempting to grow as earnestly as Flexos, daily life moves along at a rather slow pace, excepting perhaps the commercial center of Lomburing, where the hustle and bustle of government and innumerable small commercial outfits fill the days, if not the nights. Central Lomburing is stately and attractive, built in the archaic Darrian style favored on Rorre using stone blocks salvaged from the isopod ruins. Few buildings exceed two or three stories. The main roads are wide thoroughfares with ample room for both pedestrians and vehicles, while the secondary alleyways are narrow and winding, reserved for pedestrians only. There are five main public squares, used for gatherings and market days, framed by the massive triple trunks of some particularly large tetrahedron trees. The residential districts are neat and orderly, consisting mainly of long, low group houses, reflecting the communal bent of colonial society. Individual dwellings can also be found, mostly around the edges of town and are with few exceptions quite modest.

During the summer, the streets are full of pedestrians clad in traditional Darrian cool weather clothing—the highs seldom exceed 10° C—and wearing the ubiquitous electrolysis masks that extract oxygen from Flexos' predominately carbon dioxide atmosphere. During summer storms and the harsh winters, most traffic takes place in tunnels under the street. In the outlying areas, the tunnels are still ad hoc affairs, secure against collapse but usually only wide enough for two people to walk abreast. Nearer to the center of the city, they have been expanded into a more formal system, well-lit and large enough to accommodate electric vehicles.

Upper Lomburing, which lies at the edge of the desert inside the chambers of the isopod city, is where most new settlement is taking place. The approach to the upper city winds through a badly ruined section of the ancient city, where erosion has stripped away the roofs and only tumbled walls remain. The entrance to the city is protected by a large airlock which opens into an impressively large chamber that may have served as a public meeting place millions of years ago. Like most of the upper layers of the isopod city, the wall reliefs have long since spalled away, but in all such areas in Upper Lomburing, they have been replaced with lovely frescoes depicting scenes from the colonists' homeworlds and the history of the colony. Despite the lack of natural light, there is a long waiting list for colonists to move into the new underground settlements where the air is reasonably warm even in winter and the chambers have been sealed to retain an oxygen atmosphere breathable without masks. The ongoing excavation of the lower levels, chiefly intended to open up new living space, is a source of great interest to the inhabitants who line up on leisure days to see the newly-exposed reliefs and to speculate on their meaning. Amateur exploration of undeveloped areas is both tolerated and encouraged, but only by colonists carrying one of a limited

number of available tracking devices, a measure instituted by the local government after a party of young people was lost. Visitors are also permitted to wander through the ruins, but as with practically everything else visitors may do on Flexos, the payment of a modest fee is expected.

There are a number of smaller settlements up and down the coast, most of which are devoted to small-scale mineral extraction and specialized agriculture not included in the Aslan monopoly. Most of these number fewer than a hundred souls, and while they have grown somewhat suspicious of outsiders in their relative isolation, they are friendly enough if they are treated well. Travellers not familiar with Darrian society may be surprised to find that the inhabitants of these small settlements are no less well educated than their urban counterparts.

Across the Ryemela Ocean in Htyarloa, reachable by air/raft or the occasional harvest barge, are the vast plantations maintained by the Aslan Arlyukhtistaokhte clan. Descended from Aslan long since assimilated into Darrian society, the Aslan of Htyarloa are nowhere near as volatile as their original lhatei ancestors, but neither have they become humans, so travellers should treat them with the usual caution accorded to Aslan. They are not generally well-disposed to offworlders, there being few legitimate reasons for them to visit, but good conduct and plenty of flattery can usually convince the overseers of individual parcels of land to permit visits of a few days. Most crops are grown here in greenhouses using hydroponics, but there also exist large plantings of native species that have proven export potential, as well as smaller experimental plantings. The labor is provided mostly by juvenile Aslan males and human workers from across the ocean, while the female Aslan oversee the whole affair. Following the communal model of the human-dominated west, most Htyarloans live in communal longhouses and dine together at midday and in the evenings. This is about the only time a visitor is likely to see more than a handful of adult Aslan males. Inquiries into their activities are not encouraged, and will be met with an intentionally vague answer about their role in the Flexian military.

Visitors will in general find Flexians everywhere to be gracious hosts once they have established that they are present on legitimate business. As is the case with many small colonies, virtually everyone expects a tip for any service rendered, but this is seldom more than a credit or two, and larger tips will usually be politely refused. Failure to tip will not incur any hostility, but word travels fast in a small colony, and stingy visitors may suddenly find themselves lost, carrying their own bags and unable to get directions. The local government is especially solicitous if they suspect that travellers may bring new business opportunities, legal or otherwise, but the increasingly delicate political situation in the subsector means that travellers with unscrupulous lines of work will have to be discreet if they wish to gain employment with the government.

ADVENTURE SEEDS

The following adventure seeds can be used to set up quick adventures in the Flexos system.

1. RATS IN THE WALLS

Following a series of collapses in an area of new excavation at the edge of Upper Lomburing, residents have reported hearing sounds of activity in the undeveloped chambers. This was initially written off as paranoid imagination, but equipment lodged in the debris has shown signs of damage and tampering subsequent to the collapses, and possessions left outside of the pressurized areas have mysteriously disappeared. Parties of locals have reluctantly explored the surrounding areas, but have found no sign of intruders. What they did encounter was a sound like rats scurrying in the walls, at times disturbingly loud, as if there were thousands or tens of thousands of animals nearby. The residents are now thoroughly spooked, and the government has been unable to convince anyone else to venture into the area. Visiting travellers, if they are interested, will be offered a modest sum to check the situation out. Before they can set out, however, a party of locals will go missing. A search party, composed of both locals and the players, will comb the nearer chambers before finding the missing party, dead and partially skeletonized.

Having firmly retreated behind sealed airlocks, the locals will leave the players to their own devices. A careful search in the area in which the locals' bodies were found will reveal small piles of fresh scat nearby consisting of numerous small pellets. If the party has any IR sensing equipment, they will notice faint localized hotspots on some walls and currents of warmer air coming from further out into the underground city. In the absence of such equipment, they will notice tracks in the thick dust on the floors. Should they elect to examine the area around the original collapse, they will notice that the walls appear to have been weakened from within by a series of small tunnels. Throughout, they will hear the occasional sound of "rats in the walls", but will be unable to determine their source.

Following the clues and working downwards deeper into the lower levels, they will eventually come to a ledge overlooking one of the larger chambers. Down below, they will see hundreds of thousands of the small arthropods the local children keep as pets, but instead of behaving as individual scavengers, they will be endlessly circling several arthropods of the same basic form but much larger—200kg or so. If they are patient, a queen, larger still, will emerge from a side tunnel to deposit eggs. The eggs will be quickly gathered up by the small arthropods who will then follow the larger animals into other side tunnels, presumably leading to the incubation chambers. If the party makes any noise, however, the queen will retreat into her tunnel with remarkable speed

and the large drones will see the party and, with no visible motion or audible signal, direct the swarm of small arthropods to attack. Should the players managed to shoot one of the drones, the small animals under its control will immediately become confused and harmless. There are too many drones to kill at once, however, and the players will be obliged to make a hurried retreat still deeper into the darkness of the ancient city to regroup.

The small arthropods are individually fairly harmless, but their sheer number means that their bites can still be deadly. They are unable to bite through substantial armor, but the acids they exude for boring through rock can eventually wear through even battle dress. The larger drones are sufficiently massive to deliver significant blows through charging.

Should the players survive and successfully exterminate the remaining drones, they will be rewarded handsomely as they will have inadvertently discovered not only how the normally harmless arthropods breed, but also that that they can be directed to work in an organized fashion and burrow through rock at the command of the drones and therefore were probably used by the ancient isopods to build their city. (If any of the players has any telepathic ability, the psionic nature of the control will be immediately evident.) If the players managed to kill all of the drones before killing the queen, they will discover that she is unable to control the smaller animals directly, and is by herself quite harmless.

2. A VIAL OF PRECIOUS OIL

Prior to embarking on this adventure, the referee should hand a stack of forty 3x5 notecards to each player. On twenty of them, the players should write down things that their characters think about, including things that they have not mentioned to the other players. On the other twenty, they should write down their character's feelings and intentions about the other characters. Each card should be marked with the name of the character. The referee should exhort the players to be completely honest, misleading them if necessary into thinking that the information will be used in designing future adventures. The cards should then be put away in a manner that suggests they will not be used at this time.

The party is hired to escort a Flexian cargo ship bound for Darrian. There has been much piracy of late, and the cargo is particularly valuable, consisting of thousands of samples of oils gathered from the planet's rich plant life, much of which may have significant medicinal uses. The recipients on Darrian are scientists who will analyze the chemical contents of the oils and evaluate their commercial potential.

The ship being escorted has a Jump-2 drive, so the planned route will pass from Flexos to Bowman and thence to Asteltine, Debarre, Ator, and finally Darrian. The stopovers at Bowman and Asteltine will be uneventful, but at Debarre, the freighter will emerge from jump more than twelve hours before its escort and will not be in evidence. Its transponder signal will eventually be detected originating from the spaceport, a large, corporate-run affair that is effectively unanswerable to Debarre's tiny population. The party will have no trouble finding the distraught captain and crew of the freighter waiting in the starport lounge. They inform the party that the ship has been impounded because of minor violations of an extremely vague set of local regulations. It is obviously a shakedown, but it is well within the ability of the party to pay the modest fine to get the ship out of impoundment.

When they attempt to make the payment, the starport authorities insist that the deadline for payment has passed, and although this is plainly not the case, and when the party or the freighter's captain complains, they are informed that under local regulations, all ships under impoundment are subject to sale to the highest bidder at any time, and that nice Zhodani gentleman over there has offered 50 MCr for the ship and, of course, its cargo. The freighter captain is obviously quite upset, but says nothing, and the Zhodani purchaser isn't saying anything either. The party does manage to determine that the actual cash is currently en route on a Zhodani Consulate vessel due to arrive in a few days.

The freighter captain, if he is not hustled off by the adventurers first, takes them to a hotel room he has rented and tells them about the real significance of the cargo. It is indeed carrying the essential oil samples specified on the cargo manifest, but the medicinal significance of some of them was grossly understated. One of the oils, some thirty liters of which are in the cargo hold, has profound psionic effects. Its exact nature isn't fully understood yet, but in testing conducted on Flexos, it produced startling telepathic effects in those exposed to it. (The Flexians are primarily interested in the oil as a means of strengthening their communal society.) The Zhodani Consulate, which of course watches the Darrian Confederation and its colonies very closely, obviously has an agent on Flexos who found out about the oil and sent word back to his superiors to arrange for an interception. The Zhodani are plainly worried about the availability of a drug that could render its psionic nobles as transparent to the lower classes as the lower classes are currently transparent to the nobles. The captain produces a small box from inside his coat, opens it, and reveals a vial of the oil in question. All is not lost, he assures the party, if we can get this to Darrian. Obviously, though, it would be best to somehow get the rest of the cargo so that the Zhodani cannot use it to develop countermeasures.

Then the vial slips from his hand and falls to the floor, shattering into a million pieces. The oil is highly volatile, and in a few moments, it has completely evaporated, filling the room with a rich herbal smell, something like oranges. The referee should then retrieve the notecards.

Combining them with notecards he has previously written up for the freighter captain and any other crewmembers who were present in the room, he hands each player a card written by another player, informing them that the telepathic effect has begun to take hold. They can, at random intervals, hear each other's thoughts, but not those of people they encounter later who have not been exposed to the oil, excepting of course an actual psionic using deliberate telepathy.

The effects of the oil will last for 2D6 hours. At intervals determined by the referee, new cards are handed to each player. They can be randomly selected, or the referee can look through them and select individual cards to maximize their dramatic (or comic) effect. Provided the party does not turn on itself, they will soon discover that while receiving the information on the cards is semi-random, they can intentionally communicate to each other telepathically at will. This will give them a decided tactical advantage when it comes to stealing the cargo from the freighter—it is a mere 250kg box—or stealing the ship itself.

If the party succeeds in rescuing the cargo, whether they complete their mission or steal the cargo for themselves and go looking for a buyer is, of course, up to them.

3. INTO THE DEPTHS

A team of University of Mora researchers performing an excavation deep in the interior of the vast Flexian desert has managed to dig through several levels of the isopod city to find still more levels that have not been clogged by sediment. The players are initially hired to perform a minor transport errand, carrying several tons of neatly labelled and boxed artifacts that have been recovered from chambers that have not been seen by living beings in over three million years. These are all possibly interesting, depending on the creativity of the referee and the temperament of the players, but none of them are of any immediate practical use.

The party will be just about to close the cargo doors on their ship and head back to the researchers' base camp in Lomburing when a member of the excavation team comes running out and pleads for help. Another researcher has fallen down a winding shaft and has injured himself. He is unable to use a rope to climb back up due to his injuries, so the adventurers will have to climb down after him.

Upon descending the shaft, which is actually quite manageable, the party finds the injured researcher with a broken arm lying at the edge of an exceptionally large chamber. It is circular, nearly five hundred meters in diameter, and it is ringed with a series of rising steps that may have been seating for the original inhabitants. The dome-shaped ceiling is exquisitely decorated with a map of the night sky, superimposed on which is a complex diagram that may have been intended to represent some kind of astronomical theory or religious doctrine. In the center of the room, where one might expect a stage to be is a circular hole fifty meters in diameter.

After helping the injured researcher to the surface and tending to his injuries, some of the other researchers want the adventurers to help them perform an initial search of the newly discovered chamber. The team leader radios back to Lomburing and receives authorization to pay the adventurers a reasonable sum for a few days of work.

Upon returning to the chamber, it is observed that the central hole is a shaft for a spiral staircase leading well out of sight into the lower darkness. The steps are uncomfortably small, being intended for the numerous tiny feet of the aboriginal inhabitants, but they are hewn out of the granite walls of the shaft and are quite sturdy. Lights shined into the shaft do not reveal the bottom, and small stones dropped into the shaft simply disappear. If the party drops a larger stone, it will be heard to make a faint impact after an impressively long time, and timing the interval reveals the bottom to be more than a kilometer below.

What happens next is entirely up to the referee. Side tunnels lead away from the shaft at regular intervals, revealing deeper and deeper layers of the ancient city. This area was probably

one of the major population centers and may possibly have been the isopod capital. There will be residential areas of many small chambers; long ducts for carrying food, water, and waste; gigantic chambers of unknown purposes; and artifacts and carvings whose purposes can only be guessed at. Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that Flexos was a dead world during the era of the Ancients, whose suspected homeworld is only a few parsecs away, and in the 2.7 million years between the extinction of the isopods and the rise of the Ancients, there may have been other interlopers who passed through the system and stayed for awhile. Some of them might still be there. It may even turn out that the isopods themselves are not entirely extinct.

4. MORE SECRETS OF THE ANCIENTS

That no official survey has turned up evidence of Ancient outposts on such an interesting world in a region of space that apparently once teemed with Ancient activity would be more puzzling if there had been more thorough surveys. The various researchers and academics on Flexos consider it a given that someday evidence of Ancient activity will eventually turn up. At present, the only signs of the Ancients are an increasing number of their Droyne descendants who have been granted a colonization charter by the Flexian government in return for various services both overt and covert. The charter gives the Droyne settlers exclusive rights to a group of water-rich fissures on the far side of the planet and the crustal plate whose boundaries they define. They have few duties to the central government beyond the payment of modest taxes and periodic reports on immigration and settlement activity in their area.

It is one of their semi-annual reports that leads the government to post a contract for freelance investigators to perform an on-site followup. It appears that the main Droyne settlement has abruptly moved two hundred kilometers southwest along one of the fissures under their control. This is, of course, perfectly within their rights, but the Droyne officials have been curiously unwilling to provide any details as to why they made the move, and nothing the Flexian government knows about the original site gives them any reason to believe it was unsuitable. The investigators will be charged with interviewing the Droyne settlers and exploring the original settlement site.

Upon their arrival at the new settlement, the party will find the Droyne to be gracious hosts in their own odd way, and they will answer any questions put to them truthfully—unless it concerns the reasons for their move. Those questions they will refuse to answer entirely, except to very vaguely note that the site was not suitable for them. The new settlement is a bit of a shambles, especially for Droyne, and it is immediately evident that the move was quite precipitous and not at all well-planned.

A search of the original settlement site will confirm this. Nothing particularly valuable has been left behind, but a handful of portable buildings and minor equipment in good condition has been abandoned to the elements. There are no signs of violence, but no shortage of signs of a hasty departure. Well-marked paths will readily lead the investigators to the entrances to the underground portions of the settlement inside the old isopod city. There is no indication of anything out of the ordinary here, either, unless they choose to carefully examine the outer limits of the colonists' excavations. There they will find a hastily-erected barrier blocking access to a series of chambers containing artifacts of obviously Ancient origin. Evidently, the Droyne's notoriously superstitious fear

of their own ancient past has been at work here, and the colonists moved simply to be away from the artifacts.

The referee should feel free to invent whatever interesting and inscrutable artifacts he likes here. The overwhelming majority of the artifacts are sensors of various sorts, some of which are still in working condition, but they will require considerable effort to determine their function, much less how to operate them. And while the Flexian government will certainly be interested in examining the artifacts, there is as yet no law controlling them as there is with isopod artifacts, so the investigators' claim to them will go unchallenged if they make one. However, the investigators will find one artifact that the government is sure to want, and its legal status will be sufficiently fuzzy that there will be plenty of opportunities for scheming on all sides: the Ancient site is apparently the remnant of a research installation studying the remains of the isopod civilization, and one document was left behind. The document is a rectangular block of some sort of grey metal with the typical discolored areas that the Ancients used for controls. A little experimentation will show that it is capable of displaying two- and three-dimensional images of the carved texts of the isopods, a fair number of which are accompanied by what may be explanatory texts, notes, and perhaps even translations in the Ancient language.

The modern Droyne language spoken in the Spinward Marches, of course, is still reasonably closely related to the old Ancient language, and there are said to be Droyne scholars who can read at least some of it. Finding one willing to cooperate would be a mission in itself, but one which the Flexian government would be more than willing to bankroll.

5. THE MYSTERIES OF THE OASES

As might be expected on a planet as sparsely populated as Flexos, most of the surface has been explored only by satellite and by occasional atmospheric overflights while the main settlements have been busy with simple survival. Either at the instigation of a patron or on their own initiative, the party will find plenty of opportunities to explore the terra incognita of Flexos.

The most obvious subjects of interest will be the many oases scattered all over the planet. The minor seas and lakes to the south and east of the main oceans have received some attention already as possible sites for new agricultural settlements, but nowhere has a thorough survey been made on foot. Although none have been sighted thus far, it is entirely possible that large animals still exist somewhere out there, and there have been unconfirmed sightings of all sorts of interesting and unlikely things. Of course, such tales can be found on every frontier world, but for every hundred such tales, a handful turn out to have bases in fact. One of the most persistent of these stories concerns extremely large beetle-like animals around the minor seas in the western polar region.

The polar regions themselves are almost completely unexplored, and with good reason. The northern polar region is partly covered by a small, permanent ice cap which expands over the northern seas during the winter, and much of the land is scoured by forbidding glaciers and whipped by harsh, cold winds. The southern polar region, by contrast, is an high desert unrelieved by the water-bearing fissures that make the equatorial deserts passable for explorers. Neither is the sort of place many people would go voluntarily, and both are therefore the sorts of places that properly equipped people might be expected to hide or, at the very least, prospect for resources neglected by the soft-living people of the settlements.

The fissures dividing the desert highlands are also potential sources of interesting adventures. The largest of them, kilometers deep and tens of kilometers wide, contain water and vegetation visible from orbit. If any of the fissure oases turned out to have a good supply of potable water, it would be of immediate interest to the settlers and, if the players have earned the trust and gratitude of the local government, they might be able to stake profitable claims on land that could be resold to settlers. These oases have also been isolated from each other for millions of years, so the local flora and fauna will be unique in each location. The slumping of the fissure walls will have exposed many levels of the isopod city, providing access to areas that could not be reached from the plateau above without substantial digging. The smaller fissures will be especially challenging to adventurers. While the bigger fissures can easily admit vehicles much larger

than scout ships, the smaller fissures are in some cases too narrow to admit much more than an air/raft, and occasionally not even that. Despite their narrowness, many of them are just as deep as the main fissures, and in the event of trouble, opportunities for escape are few and far between.

Finally, the desert plains themselves have not received much attention from explorers. Satellite surveys show structures resembling ancient roads and canals, and larger structures which have in most cases turned out to be mounds of rock dumped by the ancient isopods as they built their global city. Not every such structure has been examined, and there are most likely more than a few surprises waiting for future explorers.

6. MIDWINTER RESCUE

information about the sensor array being constructed on Gugh.

Gugh, the outermost planet in the Flexos system, is home to a government installation whose purpose is secret, but which is widely believed to be a monitoring station set up in response to increasing piracy in the area. The Aslan crew live in a salvaged 300-dton freighter with a non-functional jump drive and a dodgy maneuver drive which is usually capable, under dire circumstances, of eeking out 1G acceleration. Normally, the crew is rotated out every four months by a cutter sent from Flexos. This time, however, the cutter's drives failed en route, and it is now drifting rapidly out of the system. As the rest of the tiny Flexian navy is currently responding to piracy on the other side of the system, the players are hired by Zos Nyaderemond to intercept the cutter, effect repairs if possible and rescue the crew if not, and then proceed to Gugh to ensure the crew rotation takes place safely. The players are warned that while there is no reason to expect trouble, they should be prepared for trouble nonetheless.

Tracking the cutter will present no problem. The crew is alarmed by their predicament but in otherwise good condition, and their communications systems are fully operational. The mission looks like it will be a slam dunk until another ship appears on the scanner on an intercept course with the cutter. It does not respond to attempts to hail it, and the long-range scanner indicates that it is probably a Vargr corsair. It reaches the cutter twelve hours ahead of the party, at which point communications with the cutter are lost. Less than an hour later, the corsair races away towards Gugh. There is still no response from the cutter. If the players continue on their course to the cutter—ground control on Flexos will insist on it—they will find it moderately damaged and entirely empty. A short range scan will fail to detect the crew; they have presumably been taken prisoner instead of being spaced. If any of the party has skill in electronics or engineering, they will recognize the spare parts aboard the cutter as belonging to a rather large long-range sensor array.

Approaching Gugh, the party can expect the Vargr corsair, most of whose crew is busy attacking the station on foot, to lift off and intercept the party's ship. If the corsair can be disabled and captured, there may be survivors from the cutter crew still on board. Once the corsair is disabled or destroyed, the party will find a pitched battle going on around the station. The Vargr will have failed to dislodge the station's Aslan defenders, though they have managed to damage the station itself. If the party's ship is sufficiently large and well-armed and not too badly damaged by the encounter with the corsair, the Vargr will almost certainly surrender once it becomes clear that they are outgunned. If not, the players will be obliged to land and fight them on the ground. If victory is achieved, there will be a great deal of work available for the players, helping the station crew restore life support and recovering the cutter and its cargo. Flexian authorities will offer respectable bonuses for any assistance the players can offer at this point. In so doing, they might obtain valuable

7. A SHIP OF THEIR OWN

A mercenary party, once it has gained the trust of Zos Nyaderemond, will find themselves offered more delicate missions. In this case, it has come to the attention of the government that the Trexalon Technical Consortium has apparently decided to abandon their secret starport project in the outer system and to construct one clandestinely on Flexos itself. Construction has proceeded rapidly with prefabricated parts, and there are now basic refueling and repair facilities inside one of the fissures on the far side of the planet. This has in fact been permitted to proceed since its discovery in hopes that the facility can be captured intact and with no great expense on the part of the locals. Unfortunately, as the new port has approached completion, privateers in the employ of the TTC have landed two former Sworld Worlds 1000-dton cruisers at the site to provide protection. Crewmen from the cruisers have been staying in lower Lomburing for the past week, carousing in the tourist taverns and generally making a nuisance of themselves while trying to recruit new crew members. Nyaderemond offers to hire the party to sign up with the privateers and disable the ships and the new starport's security systems. If the party is not large enough to seize the starport by itself, an Aslan company disguised as offworld Ihatei will be standing by to provide backup. If the party successfully seizes the port and its two ships, they are to take one of the ships to a prearranged buyer on Mire, and upon their return with the money, Nyaderemond will sign the remaining ship over to the party provided they agree to serve in a system security role for the following year. If the party is unsuccessful, or if they in any way reveal that they are in the employ of the Flexian government, Nyaderemond will be too busy dealing with the political and military backlash to pay the party.

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