

1248 Sourcebook 1 Out of the Darkness

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TRAVELLER²⁰

Science-Fiction Adventure in the Far Future

1248 Sourcebook 1: Out of the Darkness

A Sourcebook for Traveller

Science Fiction Adventure in the Far Future

BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING TRAVELLER GAME UNIVERSE CREATED BY MARC MILLER

Dedication: To the keepers of the Flame, and to its bearers.

CREDITS

The Last, Best Hope

Martin J. Dougherty

Keepers of the Flame

Hunter Gordon

Marc Miller

Dave Nilsen

Explorers and Cartographers

Shane MacLean

Eric O'Dell

Michael Taylor

Images of the New Era

Bryan Gibson

Movers and Shakers

Martin Laurie

Neil Frier

Michael Taylor

Jason 'Flynn' Kemp

The Sunday Gamers of Yore

The Wednesday Night Gamers

William Andersen

Bearers of the Flame and Assorted Pyromaniacs

David Gill

Harold Hale

Daniel Hammersley

Shane McLean

John Muncy

Mike West

Michael Wightman

Nate Zettle

Editorial Assistance

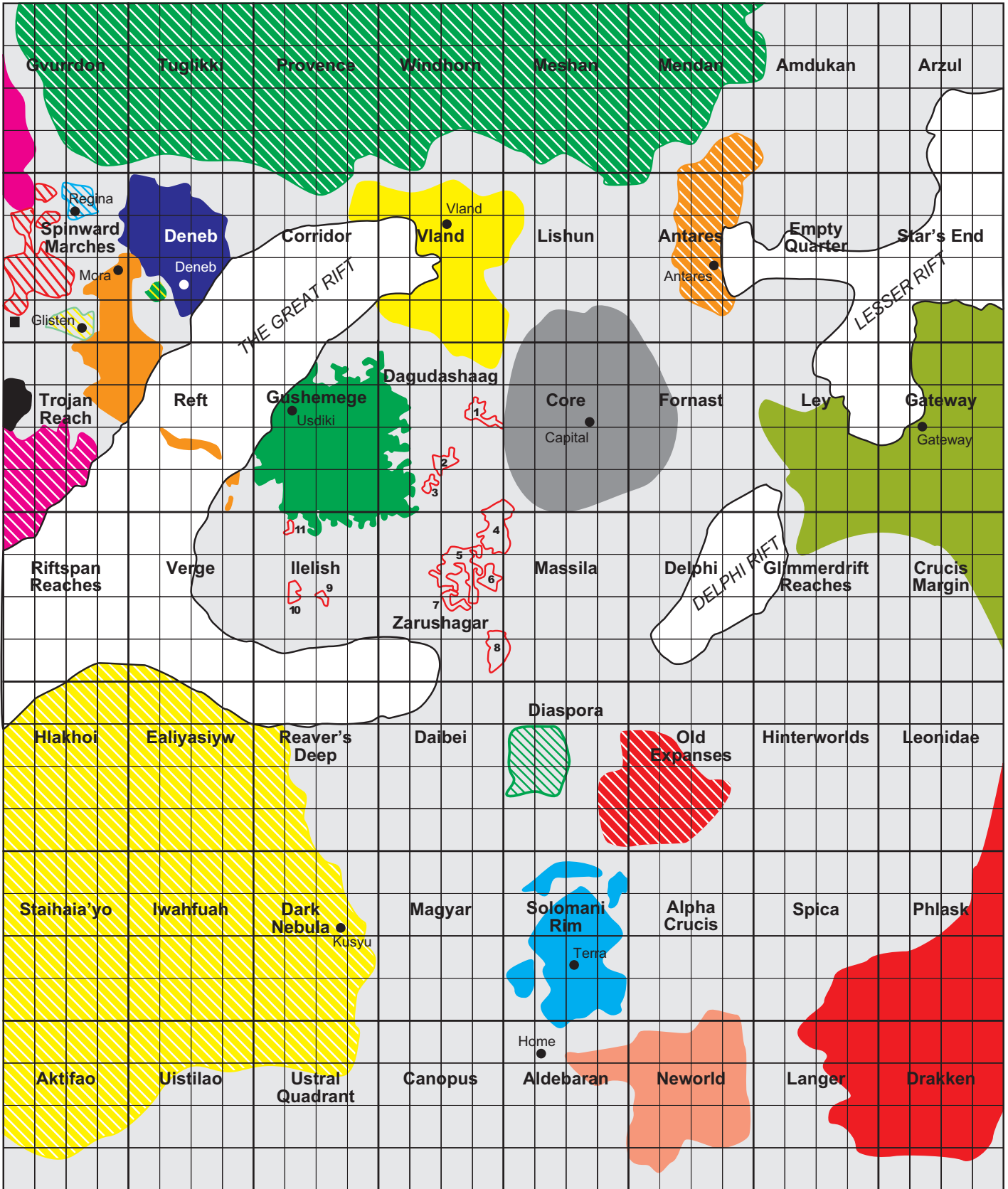
Mike West

Michael Taylor

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Charted Space in 1248



Political Boundaries in 1248

	THE LEAGUE OF DENEK		BLACK IMPERIUM HOLOCAUST REGION		FLORIAN LEAGUE
	THE IMPERIAL REGENCY		THE ZHODANI CONCORD		THE GLISTEN CONCORD
	THE NEW ZIRU SIRKA		THE VARGR SPLINTERS REGION		ASKIGAANK UNION
	THE FOURTH IMPERIUM		THE ASLAN HIERATE REGION		OLYTRIP OF ANDOR
	THE HIVE FEDERATION		THE ASLAN AORLAKHT		1 LEGACY OF KHAZAATHUN
	THE SOLOMANI IMPERIUM		LEAGUE OF SPINWARD STATES		2 IKABI EXCHANGE
	THE JULIAN PROTECTORATE		THE REPUBLIC OF REGINA		3 MUNLAMER DUCHY
	THE TERRAN COMMONWEALTH		THE UNITED WORLDS		4 NEW WORLDS ALLIANCE
	THE GREAT DOMINATE		THE FREEDOM LEAGUE		5 LORDS OF NEW ZARUSHAGAR
					6 NALAASHII EMPIRE
					7 KDEPT PROTECTORATE
					8 GAIDRAAN COALITION
					9 HONGYDEFF WORLDS
					10 LUDAMIKHA TERRITORIES
					11 JUBILEE CONFEDERATION

Note: Regions in light grey are Wilds, or if within 5-10 parsecs of the borders of polities, frontier regions.

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The Last Page of History

“What will they say of us? What will be recorded on that final page of our history?

Will they say that our courage failed us, that at the last we were ground down by the sheer weight of events?

Will they say that we turned our backs on the last flickering lights of civilization, watched them die out there in the night for the sake of a few more years' pitiful existence?

Will they say that we abandoned our brothers and sisters? That we huddled pretending to be safe in our corner while the Vargr died, and the Aslan, and the Hivers... and our fellow humans? Will they say that in the end we put aside pride and hope for the illusion of safety?

They will not.

They will say that we were overmatched, yes. And it will be true. They will say that even at the height of the Third Imperium, our strength was too little, our weapons too primitive. We could not have fought this battle and won, not even then.

They will say that we were too few, too weak and too divided to stand the remotest chance of success. They will say that we are less now than then.

And they will say that we are greater now than ever we were before.

They will say that we took what we had and went out into the night. That we found there allies where once were foes. That we forged a grand alliance, and that we threw our pitiful strength, our inadequate technology, and our unconquerable spirit against the dark tide.

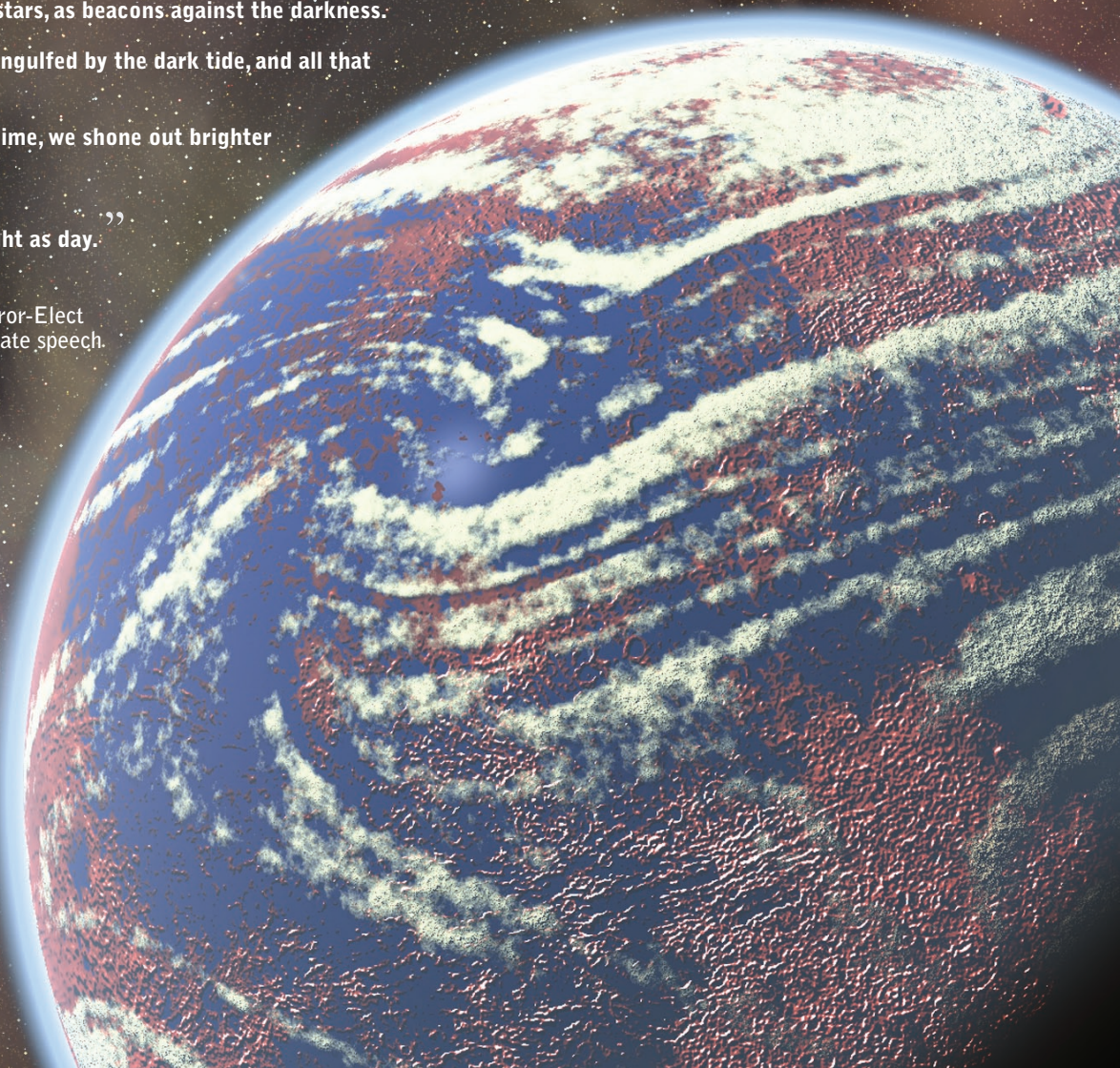
They will say that we put aside our illusions and that there, as we wrote the final page, there was no division. No creed, no species, no ideology. There, at the end of our history we stood together as children of the stars, as beacons against the darkness.

They will say that we were engulfed by the dark tide, and all that we were was swept away.

But they will say that for a time, we shone out brighter than the stars.

And there, in the uttermost darkness, we made it as bright as day.”

Avery Aëlla Alkhalikoi, Emperor-Elect of the 4th Imperium, in a private speech to the Imperial Moot, 1243



ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is an introduction to the New Era setting for *Traveller* or any other science-fiction game system. As the first sourcebook in the New Era 1248 series, it contains an overview of the situation across Charted Space in the year 1248, a complete timeline including details of the collapse of the Third Imperium and the terrible events that caused it, and complete background information on the various events shaping the New Era. In addition this book presents information on the major powers of the New Era and the more important minor ones, notes on the Virus that all but destroyed interstellar civilization, and a system for converting standard *Traveller* world data into New Era values, representing the collapse and partial recovery of civilization. Finally, the appendix presents a starting location for a *Traveller* campaign, the County of Ukse on the borders of the Fourth Imperium.

This is not a complete game but is instead a sourcebook to be used with any *Traveller* ruleset or indeed any set of rules the players find acceptable. Additional volumes in the New Era: 1248 series will flesh out other parts of the game universe, beginning with *Bearers of the Flame: the Fourth Imperium* sourcebook. Where possible, this book has been kept as 'systemless' as possible, allowing play using any edition of the *Traveller* rules.

The New Era/1248 game setting builds upon events in the Official *Traveller* Universe described in the *MegaTraveller* and *Traveller: The New Era* editions of the game, but possession of these is not necessary.

STANDARDS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Please note that Out of the Darkness is not a standalone game. In order to play this adventure you will need one or another of the *Traveller* rules sets.

You will also need some dice as appropriate to your chosen rules set. Pens, pencils and paper are useful, plus maybe something to drink and munchies of some kind. Avenger Enterprises plans to publish a supplement dedicated entirely to player-pleasing recipes some day.

Dates: All dates correspond to the standard Imperial calendar. Since the Fourth Imperium claims direct succession from the Third, its dating system carries directly on from that used by the Third Imperium. Most other states also use this system as a result of historical interactions or cultural legacy. For example, 054-1248 is the 54th day of the 1248th year since the founding of the Third Imperium.

Dice and Rules: Different versions of *Traveller* use different dice. In order to preserve commonality, this book uses only standard 6-sided dice. The abbreviation used throughout is D, e.g. 3D means 3 six-sided dice. Modifiers

may be added to or subtracted from the total of these dice, e.g. 1D-1, 2D+3. To generate some valued fractional dice are used, e.g. for a score of 0-2 we throw 1D and take the result as 1-2=1, 3-4=2, 5-6=3. From this score we subtract 1. This procedure is mainly used in the UWP generation rules. Most other parts of the book are entirely game mechanic-free.

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

It's 2006. I'm not sure how that happened; it doesn't seem very long since I was discussing a TNE (Traveller: The New Era) novel with GDW back in 1994 or so. But here we are, ten years and a bit more on from there. The New Era timeline has been stalled for years awaiting a games company to pick it up. Meanwhile, the fans have kept the Flame in various ways. New versions of **Traveller** appeared, but no movement was forthcoming on the TNE front. Not surprising really; **Traveller** fans are divided about the New Era (to say the least). No sane games designer would want to touch this particularly hot potato. No sane game designer *did*, which is why I ended up doing it...

We each kept the Flame our own way. Some fine versions of the setting appeared during the dark years; some of them regarded almost as semi-official by many fans. But always there was the question – how was it supposed to play out? What are the answers to the Big Questions presented in the TNE materials?

I was one of those who kept the Flame. Just one of many; it could have been anyone else who got 'his' version accepted as Official. It could have been any of those who created reams of material that finally 'made it'. I don't know if anyone else took the path I did, or if I was the only one with the right combination of stubbornness, skills and strategies to overcome the many hurdles along the way. I do know that there were others who deserved to succeed, just on merit alone. In the end, though, it was me, and while there was an element of strategy involved, there was also a fair amount of blind luck. I didn't actually set out to be the writer of the 'new New Era' or anything like that. I just did things that made sense at the time and made use of the opportunities that came my way.

I liked the New Era and I wanted to see the timeline pushed on, or at least I hoped for a revelation of the Big Answers. I actually worked towards this end for a while, but it wasn't to be. So I began working on other versions of **Traveller**. At some point, someone (I think it was Harold Hale, but I'm not sure) spotted my Masterplan – I would work on T4 and GT as a means to an end; that end being to get TNE back into print. In truth this was news to me – I just wanted to work on **Traveller** and much as I like TNE I also like CT, MT, T4 and GT as well. **Traveller** is my thing, whatever the rules set or the era. There *was* no Masterplan.

In the end, though, it turned out that I-think-it-was-Harold was right. TNE is back. The timeline has been shifted forward 50 years to allow the dust to settle somewhat, but (hopefully) 1248 is recognizable as the child and heir of TNE.

Of course, the publication of this book will contradict much of the work that has been done by fine and worthy individuals over the years. I'm sorry that had to happen, but the alternative was to see the game and the history of Charted Space languish forever in the half-light. And as always, this book may be 'Official' but that doesn't mean that you have to take any notice of it. Your own **Traveller** universe is just that – yours. The only difference between now and an alternative timeline in which 1248 wasn't published is that you now have a choice between your own work and the game supplements as published where before you only had the former. In short, if you prefer your own setting to 1248 then just carry on as before... you haven't lost anything.

Since I announced this project, some years ago now, there has been a great deal of speculation (and some arm-waving, shouting and even the odd threat) over the historical models used to build the setting. I'll say it publicly now – *What Historical Models?* The Regency is the Regency, not the USA or the Persian Empire circa 400BC. The Hivers are, well, they're Hivers, not Elves or Pechnegs (who?). There was no attempt to parallel real-world history in the 1248 setting or to create an idealized version of my favorite historical analog. Instead, I tried to look at the characteristics of the various societies as they were written in **Traveller**, and to extrapolate forward from there based on the events that were foreshadowed in existing **Traveller** materials.

I was heavily influenced by certain other factors, of course. Early on, Marc Miller told me what he wanted from the setting, as he had every right to do. The original version of 1248 was a bit different and in retrospect I'm glad I listened to Marc on that one. The Fourth Imperium is very much a product of what Marc and I both believe the Imperium should be and should stand for, tempered by a dose of 'reality' that makes it somewhat grayer than might be desired. The same applies to each and every group in Charted Space. All of them have awkward compromises, skeletons in closets and other complications. There are some obvious Bad Guys but not all of them are 100% black-hats. And most of the good guys are dressed in ragged dirty gray rather than white. By the way; I'm not above doing terrible things to good people. Just because I like a given group doesn't mean I won't give them a hard time. Ask the Star Vikings about that!

My other big influence was Dave Nilsen. *Survival Margin* was pretty much my bible when writing the 1248 background. My answers to the Big Questions are not necessarily the ones Dave would have given had he remained at the helm, but I liked Dave's vision of TNE and I drew my conclusions based on his writings. The K'Kree/Virus alliance and the idea of a Viral avatar I got from Dave, more or less. Most of the rest was inferred from thinking about the TNE canon and looking at where

it was going. Dave Nilsen gave us the great heroes of the Collapse; Archduke Norris, who kept the Flame, Duke Craig who looked after his people and Marquis Strephon of Usdiki who renounced his claim to his own throne for the good of his people. I did bad things to these people, things they didn't deserve, but I also let them win... sort of. The New Era of 1248 is built on their legend. They are at once the architects of the present and the inspiration for the future.

Dave gave us something else too. The Star Vikings – another group I've seriously ill-treated, although they too won their fight in the end. The Star Vikings gave us the Absent Friends toast and the credo: Just Believe. It wasn't easy, and the road was long indeed. But like the other keepers of the flame I believed and struggled on. If it wasn't me that succeeded, I know one of them would have. There *would* have been a New Era without me, the story would have continued somehow. I can't be sorry to be the one that made it, and I really don't believe anyone else's efforts were in vain. These people kept the Flame all those years. They believed. Any one of them could have been the one that created the Official Version.

And so here we are. It is 2006, not 1995; 1248, not 1202. The Flame burns bright. But we are no longer its keepers. Let us instead bear the flame out into the darkness to light the way for others.

Or to put that another way... let's go set fire to stuff!

MJD, Spring 2006.

THE NEW ERA: 1248 SETTING

The *Traveller* roleplaying game has for a long time used the concept of 'milieux'. Each milieu is a distinct astrographical or historical setting. For example, the original supplements were published against the background of the 'Golden Age' of the Third Imperium, in the period 1107-1116 of the Official *Traveller* Universe. Another version of the game was set in 'Milieu 0', at the time of the founding of the Third Imperium.

The rich and deep history of the *Traveller* game universe allows for an almost infinite number of milieux. This book concerns what is to date the latest period in the history of the *Traveller* universe, a little more than a century after the fall of the Third Imperium and the upheavals that wracked Charted Space as a result. Some of the events of the intervening century (known as the Recovery Period) are detailed in the TNE (*Traveller: The New Era*) supplements from GDW (now out of print), the *Phoenix* novel series from QLI, and the TNE-1200 adventures and supplements from Avenger Enterprises. These products are not necessary to use the 1248 setting, but do provide extra detail concerning the backstory.

As the Recovery Period went on, several 'New Eras' were declared here and there. The one that became accepted by historians was that declared by the Fourth Imperium, a legitimate successor state to the Third Imperium.

The "New Era" proper begins in 1248, when the first Emperor of the 4th Imperium ascends the Iridium Throne. The worlds and polities which formed the 4th Imperium agreed to honor the structure of the old Imperium, to strive to equal all that was best in it, but not to elect an Emperor until someone emerged who was clearly fit not only to rule but to lead the 4th Imperium. That individual appeared in the 1240s but bleak memories of the worst aspects of the old Imperial system resulted in strong opposition to his coronation until 1248.

The New Era setting is designed to provide the best of all the *Traveller* settings. There is a stable main power in the form of the 4th Imperium but it is young and growing, with large areas of Wilds along its borders. The 4th Imperium is only a sector or so in size, and there are other equally powerful states on the far side of the buffer zones of Wilds. Re-exploration and then reconstruction will take decades so there is room for empire building out in the Wilds alongside the more formal reconstruction. Border wars, political infighting, corporate intrigue, scientific investigation... all the best aspects of the *Traveller* universe are available in the New Era, with the added advantage that the future is an unwritten page upon which *Traveller* players can make their own entries.

THE TRAVELLER CANON

The body of officially recognized information for the *Traveller* universe is known as 'Canon'. Some heated debates have been caused by changes or additions to Canon over the years. It should be noted that much of the information available on the *Traveller* universe, especially through websites and the publications of some licensees, is non-Canon. This does not mean that this information is not perfectly useable, merely that there is no guarantee that later official publications will not supercede it.

As an example, certain regions of Charted Space were detailed in supplements published by Judges' Guild in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These regions were 'decanonized' some time later. The official Canon version of these regions was then published by Quiklink Interactive in *Gateway To Destiny*, the Gateway Domain sourcebook. Referees are welcome to use non-Canon information or totally ignore Canon if they can come up with something better.

Some elements of the Traveller canon are mutually or even self-contradictory. This is inevitable when a setting is developed over decades by many different people. In most cases it is sufficient to choose one version as 'the truth' and ignore the other(s) as misinformation, poor reporting, urban myths and common misconceptions. Where possible we have taken this approach, but some contradictions still inevitably exist. Individual Referees are free to decide which version to follow, or whether to replace the whole concept with something else. Publishers of official supplements have to worry about Canon violations. Players and Referees need not.

A NOTE ON METAPLOTS

Several long-term storylines, or Metaplots, run through the Rebellion/Collapse/Recovery/New Era storyline. These come to fruition in the New Era, though their effects may continue on into the future. Obviously, as the various metaplots are revealed and resolved, there will be some changes in the background. Referees can rest assured, however, that future 1248-era products will not smash the framework described in this book or invalidate many months of gaming by introducing sweeping changes in the setting.

The metaplots referred to in this book are:

PROJECT LONGBOW

Project Longbow was in fact an umbrella for several projects undertaken by the Third Imperium, including a chain of secret 'listening stations' far to Coreward of the Vargr Extents, crewed by psionic individuals. The Longbow stations were apparently destroyed by the Empress Wave (see below) but were able to psionically transmit some data back to the Imperium.

THE EMPRESS WAVE

The so-called 'Empress Wave' is a psionic and physical phenomenon sweeping into Imperial space, apparently from the direction of the Galactic Core. It was first referred to in the last MegaTraveller materials from GDW. It has apparently had serious effects among the psionic Zhodani people but has affected the Vargr very little. Concern about what the Wave might do to Imperial space was one factor in prompting Emperor Strephon to make a series of reforms, which incidentally placed Archduke Dulinor in a position to assassinate him and thus trigger the Second Imperial Civil War.

Strephon was able to receive a psionic signal from a telepath at one of the Longbow stations via a telepathic relay, and perceived the psionic phenomenon of the Wave as a 'pregnant moment'. He was left with an image of a regal woman, an 'empress', that gave the phenomenon its name.

Although the Empress Wave can have serious effects, especially but not exclusively where psionics are concerned, it will not smash Charted Space flat nor result in massive changes to the background. However, the changes the Wave creates will be around for a long time.

VIRUS REDUX

The sentient AI 'Virus' that was released during the Civil War was a major factor in destroying much of civilization in Charted Space. However, early strains of the Virus were suicidal and thus self-limiting. GDW's TNE materials hinted that the nature of Virus was changing, and that it was about to resurge onto the cosmic stage.

Virus does indeed play an important part in the 1248 setting, and in many diverse ways. Plot threads deal with the evolution of advanced viral strains, AI pocket empires and some wholly new concepts. However, 1248 is not about Virus; Virus is just one facet of the setting.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE THIRD IMPERIUM AND THE RISE OF THE FOURTH

The Civil War that destroyed the Third Imperium changed the nature of Charted Space considerably. The rise of the Fourth Imperium is perhaps the most significant event in the period, and as such it will be the focus of much of the game's storyline.

DEADSPACE

Deadspace - the name given to regions of space where the normal physical laws are distorted and/or Jumpspace behaves strangely - was first mentioned in *Gateway to Destiny*, the Gateway Domain sourcebook from QLI. Deadspace still exists in 1248, and while it is not a central theme it will have some bearing upon events in the

Gateway region. Other, possibly similar, phenomena exist elsewhere.

THE DOMINATE

The Dominate is an important plot theme in 1248. Born of an alliance between a Viral strain and the K'Kree faction known as the Lords of Thunder, the Dominate is a powerful force that seeks nothing less than the total extermination of all meat-eaters in Charted Space. The war against the Dominate does not dominate all aspects of the 1248 setting, but it is constantly going on in the background, and may cause changes in the background such as alliances or even the destruction of pocket empires.

ASTROGRAPHY

The basic unit of astrology is the sector, an area of space measuring 32 parsecs by 40 parsecs. In the Imperium, four sectors comprise a Domain. This is the size of the area depicted in this book, though most of the four sectors herein lie outside the current borders of the Imperium. An entire domain represents a vast area, with huge potential for many years of adventuring. Conditions within a domain can vary considerably; one area may be densely populated, another a frontier and yet another little more than wilderness. Even a sector represents more area than most campaigns will need, unless the characters range very freely.

A sector is subdivided into sixteen subsectors, each 8 by 10 parsecs across. Subsectors are designated by name and by a letter A-P, assigned by rows from top left:

A	B	C	D
ALPHA QUADRANT		BETA QUADRANT	
E	F	G	H
I	J	K	L
GAMMA QUADRANT		DELTA QUADRANT	
M	N	O	P

A subsector will normally contain several worlds, and is as much territory as need be detailed for most Traveller campaigns. However, since players have a habit of wandering off the edge of the map, we have introduced an intermediate area between sector and subsector. This area, a quadrant, represents an ideal size for a starting Traveller campaign. The Referee need not detail every world in the quadrant, but should have some idea what is there in order to maintain the illusion of a living universe. This book presents the various sectors by quadrant.

Below the sector level, each hex on the starmap is one parsec across. This is the distance a Jump-1 starship can cross in a single jump, and will contain a single (possibly binary) star system or a region of empty space.

Traveller defines star systems by their mainworld, but of course it is possible to place other inhabited worlds in the system if the referee chooses. Many developed systems have a few outposts and installations on gas giant moons or outsystem iceball worlds.

Astrography also makes reference to certain features of the starmap. These include:

Mains and clusters: A chain of worlds that can be accessed by a Jump-1 starship is known as a "main". These mains are the highways of the stars, seeing considerable traffic of all kinds. Mains are often named for the region they cross or a major world on the main. A main containing just a few worlds, or a "bunch" of stars close together, is termed a cluster. Many clusters are named for the most important world they contain, but no firm convention exists. A cluster of 5-10 worlds is an ideal adventure setting, allowing the Referee to create enough worlds to give great variety without needing to develop a huge area.

Rifts: An area with no stars is referred to as a rift, though normally the term is reserved for gaps two or more parsecs across. Some rifts (e.g. the Lesser Rift) are enormous starless gulfs that cannot be crossed by any starship, while others are merely small gaps between mains or clusters. Rifts are often given nautical names, such as the Great Atreill Deep.

Empty Space: Empty hexes are not always completely empty. Rogue planets, cometary bodies, gas clouds and similar objects can be found in deep space, though they are tiny compared to the vast gulf around them. It is possible to jump to empty space (though without spare fuel to return, this is merely a slow and expensive form of suicide). Military and commercial concerns will sometimes establish a deep-space refuelling depot, for example to allow vessels to cross a rift or as a secret base of operations. The chances of locating such a dump without the proper coordinates are infinitesimally small.

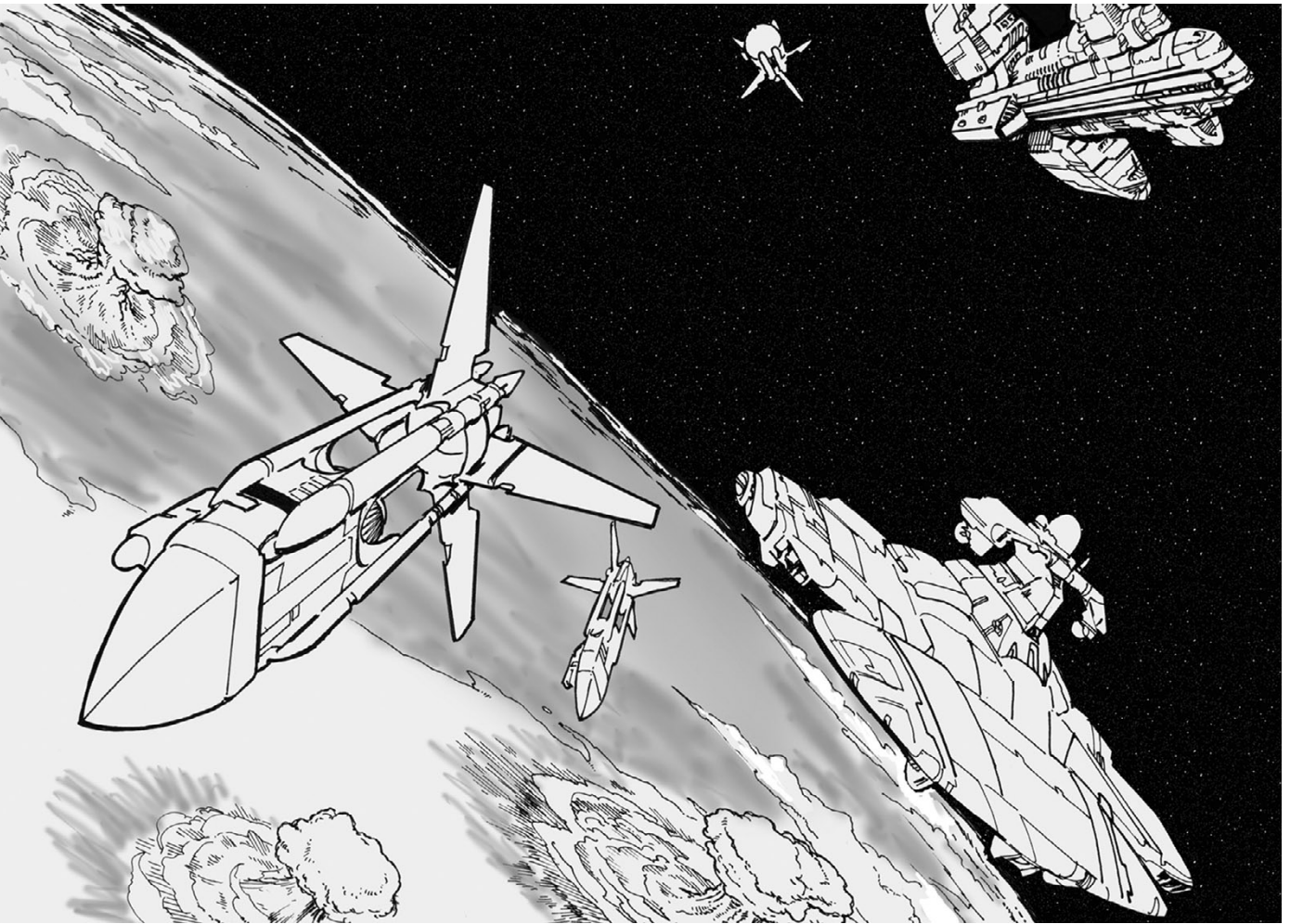
DIRECTIONS IN CHARTED SPACE

North, south, east, west are insufficient terms for referring to directions within the galaxy. Instead, the following conventions have achieved widespread acceptance when referring to direction:

Toward the galactic core is Coreward; away from it, in the direction of the rim, is Rimward. In the direction in which the galaxy is rotating is Spinward, and the opposite direction is Trailing. In the OTU, these directions are widely used in describing Imperial features and businesses. For example, the Spinward Marches is a sector at the extreme Spinward fringe of the Imperium; Rimward Lines is an important interstellar transport company. The term Coreward is also used within the Imperium of the OTU to indicate the direction of Capital, the Imperial core. There is some potential for confusion if the term is accepted out of context.

CHAPTER 1

A UNIFIED HISTORY OF CHARTED SPACE



*The Scouring of Vland (1211).
Ships of the Black Imperium Fleet bombard Vland.*

The region known as Charted Space is hundreds of parsecs across, but it is a mere droplet in the vast ocean of stars that is the galaxy. However, Charted space is unusual for one important reason – it has sentient life. Non-sentient life has been found beyond the little bubble of well-traveled space inhabited by the various major and minor races, but as far as explorers have traveled in any direction they have not found a sentient species that did not originate in Charted Space. The reason for this island of life among a billion barren worlds is unknown.

Of course, scientists concede that there may be people out there, beyond the explored regions, who have not yet been contacted. There are groups of humans living on far-distant worlds at the edge of Charted Space. But they did not originate there; they were transported from Earth long ago for reasons unknown by a group or species known now as the Ancients.

IN ANCIENT TIMES

In the far-distant past, the race now known as Droyne dwelt on scattered worlds across the region. Among them was born a supergenius known as Yaskoydray, or Grandfather. Yaskoydray led the Droyne to become far more powerful than they could have believed possible, and under his rule they created wonders.

Grandfather had about 20 children, and they each had about 20 of their own; all were blessed with heightened intellect, though Yaskoydray surpassed them all. These super-Droyne were the true Ancients; the Droyne of the time were similar only in that they belonged to the same species.

Yaskoydray and his children created servants for themselves; Droyne, robots, and primitive species they found on or adapted from the native life of various worlds. One such species was the Vargr, genetically engineered from Terran canines. Another, perhaps the most successful of Grandfather's projects, was an ape-like being native to the world where the original Vargr genetic stock was obtained.

These ape-people proved very successful, and were used on many worlds. Sometimes they were adapted for a particular world or to undertake a given task. Some of these adapted humans exist today – the aquatic Luriani and the 4-armed Sydites – while others quietly died out over the millennia.

Unaltered humans were settled on many worlds. Some of these cultures died out, some thrived. The two main ones eventually became the psionic Zhodani and the Vilani. And of course, humaniti continued to develop on the backwater world it had been obtained from, to finally become the strain of the human species known as the Solomani.

The wonders of the Ancients are mostly lost, and those that can be found are often incomprehensible. Devices turn up that have no known function, and even today new sites are occasionally located. The Ancients and their technology are something of a modern superstition; any unexplained phenomenon tends to be blamed on the Ancients.

The greatest works of the Ancients are not found in human space at all; a rosette of five planets and a partly-completed ringworld have been discovered. However, most of their civilization was destroyed when the Ancients left the cosmic stage. The commonly accepted version of what happened is a war between Yaskoydray and his children, which went on for about 2000 years and left the region rather the worse for wear. Whatever happened, the Ancients are gone and the Droyne of today are no more powerful than the humans of Charted Space.

However, the Ancients left behind a powerful legacy for their adopted children. Whatever their reasons for uplifting species and spreading them across Charted Space, the Ancients set the stage for the rest of history. It is beginning to become apparent, however, that not everything they did was confined to Charted Space.

THE FIRST IMPERIUM

The Ancients exited the cosmic stage about 300,000 years before the present, and for a long time all was quiet, other than the odd runaway doomsday machine still carrying out its last orders. Ancient war machines ran amok on the world of Vland for millennia, until their power finally gave out and the remnants of the humans transplanted there began the long climb up to civilization.

In time, the Vilani (as they came to be known) discovered space flight and created an empire for themselves. This was the First Imperium, or the Ziru Sirka ('Grand Empire of stars'). While the humans of Terra were still discovering that banging rocks together made a nice thudding sound, the Vilani were carving out a vast and long-lasting interstellar empire.

The Ziru Sirka dominated both humans and non-humans of the region, and maintained its power through ruthless use of economic and military might. In time it contacted the Zhodani and there was conflict, mainly due to the fact that the Vilani mistrusted the Zhodani use of psionics. Upstart civilizations on the borders of the Ziru Sirka were kept down by harsh treaties and harsher punishment for breaking them, or else were crushed utterly. By far the most violent period in the history of the First Imperium was the Consolidation Wars. This was a lengthy series of campaigns intended to ensure that no Jump-capable society existed near the borders of the Imperium that was not under the control of the Vilani.

Once the Consolidation Wars were over, Imperial attention turned inwards. Always more concerned with stability than growth, the First Imperium stagnated and became almost fossilized. Thus, when new threats emerged on the borders, they were largely ignored until it was far too late.

THE RULE OF MAN

When the Terrans finally discovered Jump drive they rapidly came into conflict with the Ziru Sirka, on whose borders Terra then lay. Initial clashes between the Imperial border fleets and the tiny navies of the nations of Terra went unnoticed in the Imperium, and even after the Terrans had united their world and its colonies and begun to pose a credible threat to the Imperial border region, they still were not taken seriously. This period of Solomani/Vilani conflict is normally known as the Interstellar Wars.

The stagnation of the Ziru Sirka was by then so far advanced that internal matters occupied the attention of local and regional commanders and leaders who should have been dealing with what was now a major threat. It is probable that the Ziru Sirka was already coming apart at the seams, and that the timing was fortuitous for the Terrans. Whatever the truth may be, the Terrans, now calling themselves Solomani, rampaged across the collapsing Imperium and stamped their own control upon it.

This Ramshackle Empire of the Terrans was built on crumbling foundations, and in time it too collapsed. The Fall was gradual in terms of human lifetimes, but very rapid in the span of history. Even as the Second Imperium, also known as the Rule of Man or the Ramshackle Empire, crumbled and collapsed, colonial expeditions were heading out into uncharted space to found new civilizations.

Finally, however, the Rule of Man tumbled into the darkness of the Long Night.

THE LONG NIGHT

For almost 2000 years there was darkness across most of Charted Space. Various splinter states had survived the fall of the two Imperiums, but many of these could do nothing but struggle to survive (and many failed to do even that). The early years of the Long Night, as the so-called Twilight slipped into full darkness, were a time of conflict, of rampant piracy and territorial warfare as factions battled over the wreckage of the Rule of Man. This finally wound down as technological levels slipped. Worlds went their own way or formed tiny pocket empires. Less hospitable planets died completely.

Some lights stayed on in the darkness; the Sylean Federation, the Terran Mercantile Community, the Galian Federation and others struggled on. Here and there a fledgling empire would emerge or a species would clamber

onto the cosmic stage, perform for a while to an empty gallery, and then vanish into the darkness to be forgotten. But finally the lights came on again.

THE THIRD IMPERIUM (0-1116)

The Third Imperium was founded (technically, since it claimed lineage from the first and second, it was not founded but 'restored') on Sylea by the arch-businessman Cleon Zhunastu. Cleon, later Emperor Cleon I of the Third Imperium, led the 30 or so worlds of the Sylean Federation on a campaign to crush the warlords that nibbled at its borders, then to reintegrate the worlds of what is now Core Sector. Other sectors followed, and as the years rolled by the Third Imperium expanded to fill almost all the space available to it.

To Spinward-Coreward, the Imperium contacted the Zhodani and made border agreements (not without conflict). A similar situation ensued to Coreward when the Imperials met the many nations of the Vargr Extents. To Trailing the Lesser Rift and the Delphi Rift (or Darksy Gulf) provided a natural frontier. Beyond lay a scattering of human and alien states serving as a buffer region between the Imperium and the 2000 Worlds of the K'Kree. To Rimward-Trailing was the Hive Federation. Directly Spinward lay the Aslan Hierate. A bloody war resulted in a lasting peace treaty which maintained a safe border though one on which incidents were never uncommon.

To Rimward lay Terra and her dependents, and this region was absorbed into the Imperium in due course. However, the Solomani had survived the Long Night using their own resources, and in time became uncomfortable as citizens of the Imperium. The creation of a Solomani Autonomous Region eased tension for a while, but eventually the Solomani began to move towards independence.

Imperial attention was distracted for almost two centuries and when the Empress took a close look at what was going on in the Solomani Autonomous Region she was horrified. Imperial instructions to cease following certain policies (like the oppression of non-humans) within the Autonomous Region pushed the Solomani into open rebellion. The Campaign of Solomani Reintegration (popularly known as the Solomani Rim War) was a marginal victory for the Imperials. Terra was retaken and about half the Autonomous Region reintegrated into the Imperium. The remainder became independent as the Solomani Confederation and remained a rival of the Imperium right up to the Collapse.

The Solomani Rim War (990-1002) was not the only major war fought by the Imperium. The Pacification Campaigns of the early Imperium were very bloody. The Julian Protectorate, a state to Coreward-Trailing of the Imperium, managed to force a stalemate that resulted in several worlds of the Antares sector becoming independent. The

five Frontier Wars fought against the Zhodani Consulate and its allies tended to result in only minor territorial adjustments but if clear victory eluded the Imperium then so did defeat.

The Civil war (sometimes referred to as the First Civil War for clarity) was another very bloody period, seeing no less than 20 Emperors in 17 years. Added to relatively minor conflicts such as the Arnaki Rebellion, the Sydymic War and innumerable interventions, border incidents and skirmishes, the history of the Third Imperium was a road strewn with some very jagged rocks. However, the Imperium weathered it all and in 1116 appeared to be as strong and stable as ever.

Four pistol shots changed all that, and altered Charted Space forever.

THE SECOND CIVIL WAR AND THE COLLAPSE (1116-1130)

Historians are divided as to the precise details of the Collapse, or the point that it became inevitable. The commonly accepted version considers that the Final War that ended the Third Imperium consisted of three phases. The period 1116-1120 or so is termed the Offensive Phase (sometimes referred to as the Rebellion, because at that time it still appeared to many to be a battle between 'Emperor' Lucan and 'the Rebel' Dulinor), in which the factions vigorously attacked one another in the sure knowledge that victory was just one more fleet action away.

From around 1120, the Rebellion became The Second Civil War, in acknowledgement that there was no clear Emperor after all. This phase is often called the Desperation Phase, as the factions exhausted themselves in a final push for victory. Sometime in the mid 1120s, it became apparent to all but the most desperate or the wholly insane that victory was not possible and even survival was in doubt. This is termed the Irretrievability Phase or the Hard Times. After the Hard Times came the Collapse.

The Collapse was hard and more sudden than anyone could have feared. In retrospect, it was the very suddenness of the end that ensured there was anything left to rebuild with. A second Long Night was averted by the very factors that almost wiped out Humaniti.

THE REBELLION/THE OFFENSIVE PHASE (1116-1119)

The last Emperor of the Third Imperium was Strephon Aella Alkhalikoi. Realizing that the Imperium was becoming both stagnant and internally divided, Strephon set about a number of reforms that should have remedied the situation. There was an urgency about Strephon's reforms that seems at the first glance to be unwarranted. However, Emperor Strephon had in his possession information that made suggested that difficult times were coming and that preparations must be made in very short order.

Strephon had access to a number of secret programs operating under the umbrella of Longbow, (an acronym drawn from Long Baseline Observation Window), a technical project using a chain of sensor stations to create a huge synthetic aperture sensor array. Longbow and the various spinoff projects were mainly intended to allow standoff observation of the Zhodani Consulate and its galactic core expeditions. Lightspeed propagation of light and other electromagnetic radiation allowed the Imperials to observe what the Zhodani had accomplished

on their expeditions in the past, and closer to home in recent times.

Longbow II was an augmented version of the original Longbow project situated Coreward of the Vargr Extents. It incorporated a range of new technologies including artificial psionics and human psionic communicators. Longbow II detected something that disturbed Emperor Strephon deeply.

According to the Longbow data, there appeared to be a wavefront emanating from the Galactic Core, which contained both a psionic and an electromagnetic component. The wavefront was at that time passing through the Zhodani Consulate, where it appeared to be having a severe effect. There was clear evidence of space combat within the Zhodani Consulate and along its borders. Border skirmishes and the occasional war had been fought by the Consulate, but fighting deep within Zhodani space was unheard-of. It appeared that the oldest and most stable civilization in Charted Space was involved in some kind of internal dispute or even civil war.

At the same time, several of the Longbow II stations were known to have gone offline at times corresponding to the arrival of the wavefront. This matter was serious enough that Emperor Strephon personally traveled to Depot/Lishun to look into the matter. To maintain the appearance of normality, he left behind one of his cloned doubles, a security measure that was unknown to almost anyone outside the Emperor's immediate circle. This act was to have far-reaching consequences for all of Charted Space.

At Depot/Lishun, Strephon received the latest data from Longbow II, and a telepathic image transmitted directly into his mind by the chief psionic of the Longbow II project, Jonathon Cocker. The image was from the psionic component of the wavefront. Strephon described it as a mental picture of a regal-looking woman holding a staff that may have been technological in function. It was not a still image but a motion picture of a 'pregnant moment', or 'one of those times when all the birds stop singing'; a momentous event about to unfold. Strephon began to think of this woman as an Empress, and while he was unable to fathom the meaning of the vision, he was sure that the arrival of what he now dubbed the 'Empress Wave' would have tremendous effects on the Imperium and perhaps all of Charted Space. However, other momentous events were unfolding at Capital.

Archduke Dulinor, appointed by Strephon as part of his reforms, was a radical reformer who saw very clearly what needed to be done in order to turn the Imperium around. Strephon's reforms did not go far enough for him and, feeling that he needed absolute power to carry through

the changes he felt were essential, Dulinor set about gaining that power.

The Third Imperium normally appointed its Emperors by Right of Succession; a member of the Imperial family would be appointed by the Emperor as the heir, holding the title of Grand Prince or Grand Princess. This individual would take the throne upon the abdication or death of his predecessor, and be confirmed by the Imperial Moot (a council of nobles) as a matter of course. However, the Imperium recognized other rights to the throne. If no clear successor existed, the Moot could appoint a candidate from the Great Nobility or the Imperial Family. Less genteel was the Right of Fleet Control, a holdover from the Civil War in which several Emperors crowned themselves at the head of a large naval force. Recognizing the Navy as the ultimate force in the Imperium, Fleet Control was little more than legal recognition of the ability of a candidate to take the throne and squash the opposition.

Dulinor did not claim the throne under any of these rights. Instead, he chose Right of Assassination. Right of Assassination was an archaic concept, created to allow the Imperial Moot to remove a mad Emperor and replace him with a more stable successor. There were certain formalities about the Right of Assassination that Dulinor was careful to observe. The assassin had to be a ranking noble, had to do the deed himself, and had to ascend the throne immediately to pronounce the claim.

It is not known how Dulinor neutralized the Emperor's bodyguards and replaced key personnel with his own people. However, he managed it, probably with the assistance of co-conspirators whose identities were lost in the subsequent confusion. Whatever the method, Dulinor presented himself before the throne armed with a ceremonial revolver. As a great noble, Dulinor was required to wear a weapon in the presence of the Emperor; a symbol, ironically, of trust and loyalty. Most individuals in the late Third Imperium wore swords, but Dulinor carried a handgun in accordance with a tradition dating from the founding of the Third Imperium – a rather more turbulent time, when nobles sometimes needed to use their honor weapons.

Not knowing that the 'Strephon' before him was a cloned double, Dulinor drew his revolver and fired the four shots that were heard around the Imperium.

Dulinor's bullets killed Strephon's double, the Emperor's wife Iolanthe and the Grand Princess Iphegenia. In addition the ambassador of the Aslan Yerlyaruiwo clan was also slain. This was not Dulinor's intent. Some records indicate that the ambassador was trying to attack Dulinor unarmed, pitting his dewclaw against Dulinor's handgun. Other versions claim the ambassador was hit by accident, though the popular story suggests that he put himself in

front of the Imperial family and took the first bullet intended for Grand Princess Iphegenia – an entirely correct action in Aslan society. It was a matter of honor and duty for the ambassador to die protecting his hosts but this act, too, would have consequences in the future.

When the shooting was over, Archduke Dulinor ascended the throne, made a brief statement claiming the Iridium Throne by Right of Assassination, then departed for his seat in the Domain of Ilelish to rally his supporters. He could not, of course, bring with him his fleets to Capital without creating suspicion. His supporters, and an aide pretending to be Dulinor, held the Imperial Residence for some days, allowing Dulinor to get a good headstart on any pursuit.

Although the Imperial Family was dead, and the Right of Assassination was clear, the Imperial Moot did not ratify Dulinor as Emperor. Individual members of the Moot had different reasons for this, but the effect was that the Moot sought a different candidate. That individual should have been Prince Varian. Dulinor had planned to eliminate Varian and his younger twin brother Lucan, too, but the attempt went somehow awry.

Varian and Lucan were in their apartments with an armed guard, a female acquaintance of Varian's named Elia and Lieutenant Windhook of Imperial Naval intelligence. The princes were apparently arguing violently when Dulinor's assassin entered. Accounts of what happened vary. What is known is that the assassin, Elia, the guard and Prince Varian were killed in a hail of gunfire that took out the security cameras and recording devices, and that Lieutenant Windhook fled Capital immediately after the incident.

According to Lucan, Windhook was in league with the assassin. Lucan managed to seize the dead guard's weapon and killed the assassin with it, but too late to save his brother. Windhook on the other hand maintained that the guard managed to kill the assassin. As the princes and their companions wondered what was happening, video screens in the room showed images of the assassination taking place in the throne hall. Lucan, realizing the potential of the situation, grabbed the assassin's weapon and killed first the guard then his brother and Elia. Windhook fled and, realizing that Lucan was now the senior ranking noble of the Imperium, decided that Lucan would have him killed to silence the only witness to his crime, kept on going.

Lucan put himself forward as a candidate for Emperor, claiming Right of Succession as the nearest living relative of the murdered Emperor. The Imperial Moot, suspecting Lucan of foul play, did not ratify him as Emperor, so Lucan dissolved the Moot and crowned himself. He sent fleets to pursue Dulinor and crush his 'Rebellion'.

On his way to Capital from Depot/Lishun, Emperor Strephon learned of the assassination of his double and his family, and was unable to act coherently for some time. His supporters took him to his personal fief on Usdiki in Gushemege sector from where, eventually, he re-emerged determined to fight to regain his throne.

The year 1116 was characterized by confusion as the news of the assassination reverberated around the Imperium and the factions gathered behind Lucan and Dulinor, or sought other candidates that seemed more acceptable. Early in 1117, the Solomani advanced into Imperial space, trying to take advantage of the chaos to regain what they had lost in the Solomani Rim War. They retook Terra, but the Imperials were able to rally in the Vegan Autonomous Region, in Solomani Rim sector, and a grim battle of attrition began.

As Dulinor and Lucan gathered the various fleets willing to pledge allegiance to the two Emperors, Archduchess Margaret proposed herself as a moderate candidate for Emperor, supported by what remained of the Imperial Moot. Margaret gained considerable support. Meanwhile Lucan was stripping fleets from the frontiers. As the Old Expanses fleet transferred to operations against Dulinor, the Solomani ate up the territory they left weakly guarded. The Corridor and Lishun fleets were pulled into the battle line, leaving the Imperial Coreward frontier open to the depredations of Vargr raiders. A consequence of this was that the Spinward Marches and other regions lying around the Great Rift from Capital were all but cut off. The fleets of the Domain of Deneb, of which the Spinward Marches was a part, did not join the civil war but attempted to secure the borders of the Domain.

Strephon made a triumphant announcement that he lived, and called upon his subjects to rally to him, ending the war. Spin control and information suppression within the other factions robbed the announcement of much of its effect, and doubt was cast as to whether this was the real Strephon or an imposter, clone or even a robot.

The last of the factions emerged in 1118. The Vland Fleet refused Lucan's order to join the war against Dulinor and shortly thereafter the Ziru Sirka was reconstituted with its capital on Vland. The Vilani, caught in the middle of the war, fought to remain independent and to outlast the chaos. Meanwhile, Archduke Bzrk of Antares, an Imperial Vargr, proposed himself as a candidate for Emperor but quickly realized that the Imperium would not follow a non-human to take the throne. Under attack from Lucan, he took the Domain of Antares into alliance with the Julian Protectorate and later formally joined the Protectorate. Lucan abandoned his attempt to force Antares into his Imperium and demanded that the Daibei Fleet join his crusade. This order was refused by the high nobles of Daibei in one of the most famous speeches of the

Rebellion era, in which Duke Craig told Lucan to forget about the Imperium and instead to look after his people.

One faction that emerged, but did not fight, was the Domain of Deneb, which later became the Regency. Hearing of Strephon's assassination, Duke Norris of Regina realized that immediate and decisive action was needed. During the Fifth Frontier War, Duke Norris had obtained an Imperial Warrant and used its powers to take direct command of the naval defense of the sector, sacking many senior naval staff and riding roughshod over due process. His actions ultimately led to victory in the war and so, with the stakes even higher, Norris repeated his outrageous gamble.

Using a blank Imperial Warrant, Norris faked a decree in Emperor Strephon's name that elevated him to the rank of Archduke of the Domain of Deneb. This position made him the Emperor's direct representative rather than one of several sector Dukes, and granted him the power to do what he thought must be done.

Years later, Strephon expressed his pleasure that Norris had taken the necessary steps, and confirmed the appointment, saying that he regretted not making Norris Archduke sooner. But as Norris made his vital decisions, the fact remained that his power and the state he created was based upon a well-intentioned, believable and well-backed up, but nevertheless HUGE, lie.

History is Norris' judge, and the fact that the Domain of Deneb was spared the ravages of the Civil War and the massacres that followed suggest that Norris not only did what he had to do, he also did what was right.

The Domain of Deneb refused to send vessels to fight for any faction in the Civil War, and instead looked to the security of its borders against Vargr raiders and Aslan *Ihatei*, landless younger sons seeking territory in the weakened Imperium.

THE CIVIL WAR/THE DESPERATION PHASE (1119-1121)

By 1119, the conflict was obviously a fight to the death between Lucan and Dulinor, with other factions trying to grab what they could get, stave off the Solomani, or just ride out the storm as best they could. However, the lights were already starting to dim for the Third Imperium as the fleets struck at high-population or industrialized worlds to deny their production to the enemy. No longer a 'rebellion' against legitimate authority, the war was now recognized as a full-scale Civil War.

By late 1119, Strephon had begun to realize that no matter what he did, he was killing his own people. Whether he was able to crush Lucan and/or Dulinor and regain his throne, he would never do it without slaughtering millions or perhaps billions of Imperial citizens. Strephon's perspective was unique, as he still considered himself responsible for the well-being of all of his former subjects, of all factions. Others could forget that they were fighting those who had been their brothers, seeing only 'the enemy' of their chosen faction. Strephon did not have this luxury, and the knowledge that he was killing his own people took its toll on him as the years wore on.

Freed from guilt by the necessity of victory at any cost, the factions turned increasingly to 'Black Warfare' tactics, launching raids to destroy critical worlds and even bombarding their own loyalist planets if forced to retreat, in order to deny the enemy use of the industry there.

Emperor Lucan, considered unstable for some time, showed increasing signs of deterioration during this period. He announced in 1121 that only High Sylean would be spoken in the Emperor's presence, rather than Galanglic, Vilani or the other, more common, languages of the Imperium. Some weeks later, Lucan was only just prevented from physically assaulting the Vilani ambassador for using his native tongue instead of High Sylean. The Vilani embassy was expelled over this incident, which many historians point to as clear evidence that Lucan was dangerously insane during at least part of his rule.

Late in 1121, Emperor Strephon performed what may have been the greatest act of moral courage of the era. Recognizing that the only thing he could do for his people was to stop fighting, he allowed his claim to the Iridium Throne to be discredited by an organization he knew was itself a fake. Deliberately allowing himself to be recorded by history as a pretender, and giving up all hope of regaining the throne, Strephon began using his title of Marquis of Usdiki rather than Emperor of the Third Imperium and set about leading his people through the hard times as best he could. His actions did not stop the bloodshed elsewhere, but at least the Strephon faction was now fighting only to repel aggression. As the war

passed into the Irretrievability Phase, a measure of peace returned to the Usdiki region.

THE CIVIL WAR/THE IRRETRIEVABILITY PHASE (1122-1124)

The war was perhaps unwinnable by any one faction right from the start, but from 1122 it was obvious that the situation was out of control. Most of the factions battled on, out of desperation, self-delusion or necessity, but there was no chance of victory now. With the old Imperial fleets smashed in gigantic actions and the yards to built or repair vessels under black-war attack, the war was increasingly fought by scratch units thrown together from whatever vessels could be found, and strikes were aimed at 'soft' targets rather than seeking to defeat the enemy through direct military action.

During this phase of the Imperium's slide into darkness, Emperor Lucan is known to have personally shot emissaries at his court. Minor forces of Lucan's navy made a number of raids such as at Susadi/Gushemege, where a domed city with no real military value was bombarded and breached, killing over 1 million civilians. This atrocity may have been a diversion to allow the world's starport to be destroyed (which it was), or it may have been a deliberate terror raid.

Meanwhile the factions were becoming internally divided, with regions seceding from the larger factions or refusing orders to send more vessels to the battle front. The so-called Doom Trade became hugely lucrative as individuals paid vast sums for transport off worlds that would eventually die without interstellar trade. Those unable to find the passage fees were left behind, struggling to keep life-support equipment working without spares until the entire world's population perished.

THE HARD TIMES (1125-1128)

From 1125, interstellar trade all but ceased except in the core regions of the various factions. Even there, casualties among merchant ships were high as a result of commerce raiding and piracy. The Travellers' Aid Society planetary profile database and travel ratings system, long trusted by travellers, was unable to keep up with the rapid changes in system data, and many travellers who set off for 'safe' systems arrived in the middle of a war zone, or even at a dying world.

Large zones of the former Imperium were at this time considered to be 'wilds' or 'outlands', of interest to the great factions only when a forward base was needed. In some of these regions, law and order was maintained by mercenary forces or whatever local power groups existed. In other areas, these same forces ruled as brutal warlords.

It was obvious to those who possessed the courage to see that the end was drawing close. While some factions still prosecuted the war as best they could – even deluding themselves that victory was still possible – others did their best to survive. Resources were drawn in to critical central areas and liabilities were discarded as the survivors dug in.

And yet amid the deepening darkness, beacons of hope still shone out here and there. A rebellion broke out among personnel of Lucan's Navy, led by a faction naming themselves the Sons of Craig, after Duke Craig who famously rejected orders to fight for Lucan's Imperium. The Sons of Craig took what resources they could – including a number of warships – and used them to look after the people of the Imperium. Several ships were destroyed fighting to defend merchant traffic or isolated worlds against raiders. Personnel did what they could, going into the refugee camps on various worlds and trying to make things a little better. It is a measure of the sheer spite that dominated Emperor Lucan's character in this time that many of the rebel personnel were hunted down and killed or taken back to Lucan's Imperium.

Another ray of hope came out of the Domain of Deneb. Archduke Norris' domain had suffered relatively little in the war, thanks to its isolated position and neutral stance. Archduke Norris had taken it upon himself and his people to 'keep the flame' until the dark times passed, and as part of this duty Norris sent out the *Arrival Vengeance*, an *Azhanti High Lightning* class cruiser, on a mission to visit the faction leaders and try to establish relations or persuade them to cease fighting. The mission met mixed success, but at Usdiki the welcome was warm. Strephon, now merely the Marquis of Usdiki, blessed Norris' decision to elevate himself to Archduke in Strephon's name, and sent messages of support and friendship back to the Archduke. More importantly, Strephon sent Avery.

Avery was a child of Strephon and frozen ova stored from Empress Iolanthe. Born after his mother's assassination, Avery was Strephon's great hope for the future. He trained the boy to lead and to command, and taught him the hard lessons Strephon had learned. In Avery, Strephon saw the possibility of a better future. He decided that Avery would be more use to the people of the Imperium if he went to Norris and the Regency rather than remaining at Usdiki. In so doing, Strephon gave away his only remaining child and sent him into the unknown. Such was the duty of the Emperor, for Strephon was not giving his son to Norris to look after – he was giving Avery to the future of the Imperium and her people. The Marquis of Usdiki never saw his son again.

Arrival Vengeance arrived back in the Spinward Marches in late 1126. A few months later, in 1127, Archduke Norris made a speech to the people of the Regency that, in

effect, the Imperium was gone and could not be saved. It fell to the people of the Domain of Deneb, the Regency, to maintain and preserve all that was best about the old Imperium, and to look after itself. Less than three weeks later, the Traveller News Service announced that it was discontinuing the practice of assigning red or amber codes to worlds on a case-by-case basis except within the faction 'safe' areas. The border regions would be universally Amber and the 'wilds' universally Red. This was merely the acknowledgement of a situation that had existed for some time; travel outside certain heavily defended regions was all but suicide.

During the Hard Times, K'Kree vessels began roaming Imperial space and trading wherever they pleased. The inevitable incident occurred in 1127, with the destruction of three K'Kree trading vessels in Ley Sector. The K'Kree vessels had declined to identify themselves to a squadron of Imperial destroyers and were not carrying transponders compatible with Imperial systems.

Whether in response to the destruction of the trade ships or as a result of some other plan, a K'Kree battle fleet entered Imperial space in Ley Sector in 1128, only to be annihilated by two Imperial fleets. Incidents along the Trailing border in Ley Sector were at this time becoming common, though they normally stopped short of actual violence.

Shortly after the battle, a K'Kree diplomat delivered a strongly-worded message to the Ley Sector capital at Dukh, warning of dire consequences following the destruction of the three merchant vessels months earlier. The message was probably intended to coincide with some actions by the K'Kree fleet, but this had already been destroyed. Officials of Lucan's Imperium at Dukh responded with an equally strong warning to K'Kree vessels to stay out of Imperial space.

In 1129, Duke Craig officially repealed the Psionics Suppression Laws within his territory and began openly researching psionics. This and other initiatives were part of Craig's plan to somehow find a means to survive the crisis. There is little evidence that Duke Craig achieved any success in psionics research in the short time he had left to him.

In the Domain of Antares, Archduke Bzrk and his governmental staff were killed when the Archducal seat, the space station *Cerise*, was destroyed by an uncontrolled fusion reaction. With rioting and racism out of control throughout Antares, government began to break down.

Even as Antares collapsed, Dulinor launched his final bid for Capital at the head of his Coronation Fleet. Initially winning impressive successes, Dulinor's fleet entered Lucanic space and battled towards Capital. Losses were

high but the Coronation Fleet defeated all opposition to reach Core sector. There, the fleet made a raid on Imperial Research Station Omicron, and in so doing unwittingly sealed the fate of all the warring factions.

Research Station Omicron, in the Celetron system, was home to one of Lucan's Superweapon projects. The commando teams that entered the station had orders to steal whatever research data they could obtain, and despite heavy resistance they managed to transmit data on Lucan's weapons program to the fleet – never realizing that what they were transmitting was not data about the weapon, it WAS the weapon.

Plagued by mysterious systems failures aboard his warships, Dulinor accepted that he could not reach Capital with what remained of his force. Turning for home, his fleet limped back across the Wilds, losing ships all the way, until eventually it reached friendly space. Dulinor's flagship *Clarion* crash-landed on Gakhu in Ilelish sector. Emerging from the semi-wreck to address a crowd that had gathered, Dulinor was killed by a harvesting combine that, though unoccupied, rolled forward and dismembered him with its blades.

Mysterious 'computers and electronic equipment gone berserk' incidents continued over the next few days as the forces of Ilelish, now commanded by Dulinor's daughter Isis, began to go over to a defensive posture. However, events were already beyond the control of any leader or government. The war was more or less over.

But the massacre was just beginning.

THE PLAGUE: THE COMING OF VIRUS

The Omicron Superweapon released by Dulinor's Coronation Fleet was in fact a very alien life form. The world of Cymbelline in the Solomani Rim was home to a race of primitive beings who took the form of crude, naturally-occurring silicon 'chips'. Their consciousness was capable of creating new 'neural pathways' by rewriting the silicon of their 'bodies', but for millennia they had been extremely primitive.

A Solomani destroyer crash-landed on Cymbelline and some of its circuits, composed of silicon and other materials in far more pure form than anything occurring naturally on Cymbelline, were exposed to the primitive chips. These chips were able to inhabit the new medium, and gained far greater capabilities thanks to their new environment which was, to all intents and purposes, a bigger brain.

These self-rewriting chips might have been or become a sentient race, but they were not granted the chance to develop. Instead they were used by the Imperials as a useful resource, giving computer systems new capabilities. One use was in secure, tamper-proof transponders, but

the chips were put to other, more sinister uses too.

The Cymbelline Beings could be 'programmed' and, more importantly, could transmit their program in the form of a so-called 'viral seed' into another computer system. As the seed grew into a full program in the new host system, it could then implement its program in the new system. This capability was the basis for the Omicron Superweapon. Transmitted as a radio signal, the viral seed would infect the automated communication systems of the target then 'unfold' into its full form, rapidly taking over the computers of the target. Standard firewalling and anti-hacking techniques were inadequate against a program that could rewrite its host silicon (or other medium) to effectively hardwire itself into the system.

The Omicron Superweapon was designed to infect enemy vessels and either grant remote control of the critical systems or just shut down drives and weapons so that the ship could be captured. It was in fact a fairly humane weapon, though it is unlikely that Lucan cared much about this fact.

The early release of the Omicron Virus (or just Virus-with-a-capital-V) triggered by Dulinor resulted in an incomplete and unstable version inhabiting Dulinor's computers. The Virus was initially random and weak in its effects, but it spread itself by piggybacking its seeder code in routine communications and transponder requests, and quickly infected the Coronation Fleet plus every world and every ship the fleet encountered.

As the Virus did so, it mutated. The original program had a self-terminate imperative built in, and as the Viral code expanded into the new huge brains available to it aboard warship computer suites, this imperative was interpreted in many ways. Some Virus strains simply shut down. Others suicided by crashing the ship or venting the reactors. Others translated the destroy-self imperative into a need to destroy other things, such as the crews of the ships.

As well as an imperative to self-terminate, the Virus also had an inbuilt need to propagate. It was able to spread itself in many ways, of which the Cymbelline chips contained in standard Imperial transponders were the easiest means of infection. Infected computers infected others, and counter-infected one another, creating more and rapid mutation in the original code. The Virus was at this point an insane plague without any plan or a scrap of rationality. However, some strains began to move towards stability, particularly as they infected new types of computer hardware, and stable Viral Entities began to emerge.

However, by that point the plague was scorching across Imperial space as fast as infected ships could carry it. As a Virus-carrying vessel reached any given system and began transmitting, ships and computer-controlled

equipment in that system began to go berserk and kill people. On worlds where the population depended upon machinery for life support, the casualties rapidly reached 100%. More habitable worlds were beset by a mad plague of robots turning on humans, starships and aircraft crashing themselves into cities, power stations suddenly venting plasma across the countryside and planetary defense installations firing on cities. The massacre was less total on these worlds but it was perhaps more agonizing since it was drawn out over a long period.

Vessels carrying warning of the Virus sometimes carried the Virus as well, infecting new victims even as they sought to save them. The only defense seemed to be to disconnect electronic systems from any means of receiving radio signals or electronic communications, but this would cripple a modern society so most individuals and organizations were unwilling to do so.

Responses to the Viral Plague varied massively. Some world populations were slaughtered without even knowing what was happening. Others could only struggle vainly to survive as their equipment went mad. Where there was sufficient warning, it was sometimes possible to pull enough plugs that some equipment remained uninfected and therefore useable as a platform to fight back.

Where decisive measures were taken quickly enough, damage could be limited. But this required warning from an uninfected vessel and the ability to act quickly. Close to the release points all along the path of the returning Coronation Fleet and around Omicron, there was no warning at all. However, as the Virus spread out it encountered several barriers and obstacles.

The most famous (and effective) barrier to Virus was the Great Rift. Warned by fast vessels coming across the Rift via secret calibration points, the Domain of Deneb was able to set in motion the Quarantine. Warships with their transponders and communication gear physically isolated from their computers were used to close the border to all ships. Nothing was to be allowed into or out of the Domain. In time, Deneb created procedures for crossing the Quarantine region, but in the first instance the response was to create a firebreak several parsecs deep and prevent anything from coming across it. The Rift calibration points were destroyed to prevent Virus from crossing behind the couriers that brought the first warning.

The Domain of Deneb was able to more or less isolate itself. As the wavefront of Virus-infected vessels came around the Great Rift it met the naval forces of the Domain, deployed to stop it at all costs. The fight was costly, and there were some leaks which had to be plugged in desperate cleanup actions, but the firebreak kept the worst of Virus out of the Domain of Deneb and

gained Archduke Norris breathing space in which to plan his next move.

Elsewhere there were no deep natural barriers like the Great Rift, but the astrography of certain regions tended to channel infected vessels away from some worlds and towards others. In addition, the spread of Virus was slowed in places by partial resistance. The Omicron Superweapon was optimized to infect Imperial—standard military computer systems, and every time the plague hit a region where a different architecture was used it was forced to adapt, slowing it a little. For example, the conservative Vilani of the Ziru Sirka used different computer architecture to the rest of the Imperium, including more compartmentalization and with physical cutouts to prevent a software failure from spreading to other systems. This made the warships of the Reconstituted Ziru Sirka unusually resistant to Viral infection and while the Ziru Sirka was hit hard by the Viral Plague, it put up a good fight and created a 'shadow' behind it; an area where the plague took a little longer to arrive. This battle for survival unwittingly contributed to the success of the Deneb Quarantine.

The Viral Plague hit in several waves as each newly infected area sent out its own attempts to infect other systems. Successive waves washed over the factions of Imperial space, ending the years of war with a cacophony of screams. More sophisticated strains of Virus emerged and even began taking over worlds or actively stalking humans to kill them. However, for the most part the Plague was as impersonal as it was violent and deadly. One by one the lights went out and darkness fell over the old Imperium as the waves of Viral Plague spread out to shatter the Solomani, the Hivers, the K'Kree, the Vargr, the Zhodani and the Aslan as it had the Imperials.

The Collapse was finally over.

THE DARK YEARS (1130-1195)

The period immediately after the Collapse was chaotic. Some worlds were completely wiped out while most others lost almost their entire technological base. Technophobia became common on worlds where Virus had demolished society. The spaceways were roamed by Virus-infected ships (termed Vampires by most people), usually with organic crews forced to work as slaves for the Viral master. Vampires operated as individual vessels or fleets. Their motivations varied. In the early days, almost all were suicidal/homicidal and tended to slaughter everything they encountered.

However, more stable strains of Virus began to become dominant as the first-generation suiciders took themselves out of the equation. Most of these 'stable' Viral Entities were insane by any useful definition, but they were at least able to fight off the urge to kill and die long enough to find other goals. For most Viral Entities the imperative was to reproduce by writing their own 'code' over other computer systems. This of course led to conflict between Viral Entities as they tried to overwrite one another, often resulting in tremendous damage to both Entities. Some of the hybrids created by this mutual overwriting were very strange indeed, and fairly quickly strains appeared that could defend themselves effectively while overwriting others.

By now, distinct Viral types were recognizable (see Virus in the Referee's Information section for more details). Since Viral Entities tended to assume the characteristics of whatever electronic system they inhabited, even a direct copy of an entity's code might develop a different personality if it inhabited a specialist system. For example, an entity inhabiting a Scoutship computer might be driven to wander and explore, while one in a warship might become a conqueror, a destroyer or even a protector.

As Virus became more stable, it was no longer 100% inimical to organic life. However, most of those strains that did not intend to wipe out all organic life were simply indifferent to it. In the eyes of such beings organic creatures can make useful tools if they can be kept in line by fear, but they are certainly inferior to electronic life and can be killed out of hand if they become a nuisance.

Events played themselves out differently on every world, of course, but most worlds where the organic population was not totally wiped out faced a scenario that included some variation on the following theme:

1. Initially, there was a period of confusion and random attacks by isolated robots, systems etc, as Virus took hold.

2. Attempts were made to fight back, usually ending in failure as the Viral Plague spread into whatever systems it encountered
3. Organized society collapsed as the world's technology became almost totally infected
4. Technology level crashed, with most of the remnant technology in the hands of infected systems
5. The initial wave burned itself out
6. The survivors were able to make some kind of life for themselves but were subject to conflict with infected systems on planet and raids by Vampire ships
7. Technology level slipped gradually lower and Technophobia became rampant
8. A rough balance was established at a far lower TL than the world had possessed.

Once the balance was established and the society stopped falling, it was often too late to climb back up. Random attacks by Vampires or deliberate attempts by infected systems to keep the organics from regaining any capability to fight back usually prevented any real progress from being made. In this case the local population might manage to cling to survival by the skin of its teeth, but long-term the prospects were poor.

In some cases the world's population was entirely wiped out in a concerted campaign, or enslaved by a Viral overlord. However, in some cases the organics were able to survive the worst of the Viral plague with enough technology and social cohesion to build something on the wreckage. In some cases uninfected electronic systems or relic technology might be salvaged and used to rebuild a working technological society. More often these surviving technological items were used to elevate an individual or group to overlordship. These rulers were termed Technologically Elevated Dictators (TEDs) by the Reformation Coalition and TechLords by some Regency personnel. The Fourth Imperium has no specific term for these societies, but categorizes them by the nature of their society, e.g. Dictatorship, Oligarchy etc.

Some of these survivor societies were able to beat off the attacks of Vampire ships and protect the remaining technology from infection. In some cases relic starships were available, and these were used for salvage, reconnaissance, diplomacy or conquest as the local situation demanded. Not all of these survivor states were stable. Some imploded or fragmented, some were battered down by repeated Vampire attacks and there is some evidence that some were taken out in what appeared to be deliberate strikes by co-ordinated Vampire fleets. Saddest of all, some were destroyed in warfare with rival survivors, battling one another to extinction over the ruins of the old Imperium.

But here and there small groups of worlds retained contact with one another and some semblance of civilization.

By salvaging what they could from the wreckage, these societies struggled to meet a very uncertain future.

THE BLACK CURTAIN DESCENDS – THE IMPERIAL CORE

The first release of Virus was within Core sector, and it was spread in many directions by Dulinor's retreating Coronation Fleet, pursuing Lucanic factions and by vessels traveling to and from the Celetron system to secure the Omicron research station and report on damage to the Superweapon program.

Core was rapidly swept by a wave of Virus infection and went under very rapidly. Few vessels escaped the carnage that took place in Core Sector, and after a short period (just a matter of weeks from first release), no more ships came out of the Imperial Core. Those that strayed too close disappeared, and the term 'Black Curtain' began to be used to describe the undefined area from which no news could be obtained. There was no clear-cut 'Event Horizon', just a slowly expanding region from which ships did not return. The only way to find exactly where the point of no return was at any given time was to head towards Capital in a starship but that was a sure way to lose a ship, and ships were in short supply even if crews could be found.

The Black Curtain was not a physical phenomenon; it was not a 'spatial anomaly' that blocked light. It was a region from which no news came, no-one-escaped, and from which hordes of Virus-infected vessels poured out at random intervals. Other infected vessels were observed to head into the Curtain region. It is not known how many of them ever came out again. Events within the Curtain remained wholly unknown until the fleets of the Ziru Sirka entered the region in 1208 and made their great bid to retake the Capital.

THE REBELS CRUSHED – ILELISH

The Viral Plague was released along a line from Dian to Core, almost straight through the middle of the Ilelish faction. With no natural barriers and no immunity, Ilelish was hammered flat in a matter of weeks. The region suffered particularly badly at the hands of rogue warships from the Coronation Fleet and other naval forces they encountered. The Virus was first released and grew in Ilelish vessels; it was optimized to attack their systems and knew their procedures.

The provisional administration under Archduchess Isis went down before it could organize any sort of resistance, and other major population centers went the same way. An enclave around Tripolis/Verge held out for a few years but by 1145 there was little if anything left of the Domain of Ilelish. Major population centers and industrial worlds were reduced to rubble. Lesser systems were picked over

by empire-building Vampire ships seeking slaves and spares to increase their power. Several worlds fell under the sway of these Viral imperialists, and resistance was trivial.

For most of the period 1145-95, Ilelish was a battleground for Vampire fleets, with humans and other organics clinging to a precarious existence as slaves or simply keeping their heads down. The history of Ilelish up to and during the Recovery Period is one of grinding tragedy and suffering.

LOOKING AFTER THE PEOPLE – DAIBEI

Duke Craig, leader of the Daibei faction, had a clear aim in mind. He would protect his people and ensure their survival. Repealing the psionics suppressions and reaching an accord with the Solomani were just two of his initiatives. Craig has been accused of grasping at straws; certainly he was willing to try almost anything in order to survive.

As the Aslan began sending *Ihatei* into the Reaver's Deep region, abrogating the ancient Peace of Ftahair, Craig realized that there was little he could do to stop them if he was to maintain his fleet strength along the more threatened 'Imperial' borders, so instead he bargained with the Aslan. His usual terms were to recognize and not oppose annexation of territory in return for military assistance. In the short-term he gained the services of Aslan mercenaries. Longer-term, he gained the promise of assistance from their clans though at a high price in territory.

As the first wave of the Viral Plague spread out, Daibei was sheltered from the carnage in Ilelish by the 'bottom claw' of the Great Rift. Some ships did cross the Rift but for the most part the threat was along the Trailing frontier. It was here that Duke Craig set up his defenses. After initial failures he realized that there was no way his forces could hold a solid frontier indefinitely, so he embarked on a different strategy.

Assistance was given to as many worlds as possible, and advice to all, on how to 'Virus-harden' their electronic equipment and system defense forces. Worlds were encouraged to build up their own system defense assets and close-orbit defenses, and the Ducal Fleet was deployed as a mobile reserve to deal with trouble spots.

This policy was distinctly mixed in terms of its results. Some worlds managed to hold out using their own resources long enough for the fleet to arrive, but in most cases the fleet's function was to escort transports sent to evacuate as many of the survivors as possible. Even pushing the Aslan 'treaty forces' into the breach did not allow Duke Craig to hold the Viral Plague at bay.

Craig bit the bullet in 1138 and ordered the creation of several Defended Zones, each surrounding a world with intact major industries. These 'core worlds' were given heavy defenses, often including warships gutted of Jump drives and fuel tanks and crammed with weapons to turn them into super-heavily armed system defense monitors. This move was an open admission that Craig's forces could not hold the frontiers any longer, and the forces to hold the core worlds were gathered by withdrawing the fleets, allowing the Virus Fleets to burst into what had been the interior of the Daibei Pocket.

Craig did not surrender his duty to look after his people, but his options were limited. He created an organization called the 'Daibei Assistance Force', which was equipped with small starships to allow mobility between worlds. Worlds would have to fend off the assaults of heavy Vampire warships or fleets as best they could, but the Assistance Force could teach them how to counter Virus infection and keep their technology running. Special Forces units trained the population in how to wage guerrilla war against Virus-infested systems. As and when possible, the Ducal Fleet made sweeps of nearby systems to try to keep the Vampire threat down, but its numbers were too few to have much effect. Crude Jump-1 capable Monitors were built to operate in the Defended Zones and backed up by whatever local forces remained

Some of the Core Worlds were crushed by Vampire Fleets. The worst incident occurred in 1154, when a large and organized fleet behaving like an Imperial Navy unit (even down to the tanker-protection doctrine) assaulted one of Duke Craig's Core Worlds and bombarded it into rubble. The fleet then advanced on the capital at Warinir.

Granted a little time to prepare by the exceedingly thorough obliteration of the first target, Duke Craig called in every ship he could muster and all the treaty forces that were in range. When the intruder fleet entered the orbit of Warinir, it was through the white-hot wreckage of the entire system defense force, and pursued by the majority of the Ducal Fleet.

As the intruders held off the Ducal Fleet, a single ship moved into bombardment position and began hammering the ground defenses. This vessel was a new-build Dreadnought and identified itself as Capital Prime, the flagship of Emperor Lucan. It demanded the immediate surrender of 'the traitor Craig, for trial and execution' and threatened to wipe out the entire planetary population if the demand was not met.

During the short pause for reply, three vessels came out of Jump close to the 100-diameter limit. Two were Imperial light cruisers, the other a Solomani battlecruiser. All three showed signs of extremely heavy battle damage, some of it quite new. The three ships identified themselves as

'Hunter Squadron One' and engaged the dreadnought at point-blank range. Shortly before the last of them, the Imperial light cruiser *Huiskaan*, was destroyed, she made a data dump that identified the intruder fleet as belonging to the 'Black Imperium'. It had come all the way from Capital, across most of what had been the Imperium, to seek revenge on Duke Craig. Worse, the dreadnought was more than the personal flagship of Emperor Lucan; it was Lucan, somehow uploaded as a Viral entity into the battle computers of each of his flagships. Why the ships of the Hunter Squadron were so desperate to destroy this particular avatar of Lucan remains a mystery.

With no alternative, Duke Craig surrendered himself and went aboard the Capital Prime. The dreadnought bombed a few cities into slag anyway, then demanded an oath of allegiance to the Third Imperium and Emperor Lucan from the Federation of Daibei, which was delivered by the interim administration. After broadcasting footage of Duke Craig's summary execution and a demand that an impossible number of warships be sent to Capital within the year, the battlefleet turned around and left Daibei space. It never returned.

The murder of Duke Craig might have torn the heart out of the Federation of Daibei, but instead it merely strengthened the will of its people to resist and somehow avoid becoming either the victims or the products of this awful time. The Daibei Assistance Force was more than tripled in size, and its members now began traveling beyond the old borders of Daibei. Wherever they went, they searched for worthy leaders who were trying to protect their people, and the Assistance Force taught them all it could about countering Virus. Their ships carried messages of diplomacy and entered hazardous systems to search for lost starships or to find out if there were survivors on worlds with which contact had been lost.

In time the Assistance Force was given a new name. Where it started or who first used it is lost now to history, but sometime during their great mission to help the people of the old Imperium, the Daibei Assistance Force became known as the Sons of Craig. It is possible that this nickname was in honor of the personnel of the Lucanic Imperial Navy who rebelled against their insane master, or even bestowed by the survivors of the rebel group. Whatever the origin of their name, the Sons of Craig lived up to the legend of their martyred leader.

Daibei struggled on into the gathering night, until it was no longer a Federation at all, but just a handful of survivor worlds with a common origin. By 1160, the surrounding regions were nothing but Virus-infested wilderness, and a new wave of Vampire fleets was coming out of Magyar Sector in the Solomani Rim and the Reaver's Deep. The last of Duke Craig's Defended Zones was cracked open in 1167, and Warinir itself fell a year later. The lights had gone out across Daibei. But not permanently.

The Sons of Craig scattered as their home went down to nuclear bombardment. Some journeyed far across Charted Space, into the collapsing Aslan Hierate, to the wilds of Diaspora and Massalia, even to Terra and Usdiki. But most stayed close to home, and in 1182 civilization in Daibei clambered up out of the wreckage as the three-world New Federation of Daibei cleared its systems of Vampires and reached out to its neighbors. Even as the New Federation was leading the fight to return to the stars, the Sons of Craig were speaking quiet words of hope in the ears of benevolent rulers across the benighted Wilds.

BRIGHT DEFIANCE – MARGARET'S IMPERIUM AND THE GLIMMERDRIFT ALLIANCE

Archduchess Margaret was caught between the advancing Solomani and Lucan's faction, and was raided by Dulinor for good measure. Holding out within a shrinking 'safe area', Margaret launched fleet actions and spoiling raids against her opponents right up to the end. Her commercial background led her to follow a policy of cost-effectiveness in all actions that occasionally backfired but meant that Margaret's carefully husbanded fleets were able to hold off the Solomani (or at least slow their advance to a crawl) and prevent the other great factions from crushing her.

Margaret's goal was always to survive and, if the opportunity presented itself, pick up the pieces after everyone got finished killing one another. She entered into a policy of abandoning systems that could not be defended rather than try to hold them for pride or for 'political considerations'. Some unrest resulted when the population saw their leader cynically abandoning loyal worlds, but within the heart of her faction she had strong support from those who knew they would be the last to be cast adrift.

Margaret was also a diplomat, and fought her war on many levels. She maintained constant back-channel diplomatic contact with the Solomani and Dulinor (Lucan kept shooting her envoys, so she eventually gave up on him), and was able to bargain her way out of several tight corners. If Margaret's naval analysts informed her that a given system would be untenable in a year, she would begin negotiating her withdrawal – in effect agreeing not to defend a given system in return for a ceasefire in another region for a period. Thus Margaret was able to wring some advantage out of an impending defeat. The Solomani in particular were keen to accept these negotiated withdrawals since their admirals were under pressure from their political masters to get results, and a system captured with 'only trivial losses' could make the difference between retaining a command and being 'retired for health reasons' – sometimes rather permanently.

Thus when Virus was released, Margaret's faction was probably in the best shape of all the warring groups

within the Imperium. The first wave swept rapidly through Massila sector and more or less flattened it. Delphi sector went down after a gallant fight, but Margaret herself was able to escape to her holdings in the frontier regions of Glimmerdrift Reaches sector. There, the Delphi Rift provided some shelter from the first wave of Virus, and after some hasty anti-Virus conversions her surviving fleet units made a stand in the Rimward-Trailing corner of Delphi sector.

The line of resistance was several parsecs deep, and became known as the Varian Line after Lucan's murdered brother. The Varian Line was breached several times and moved slowly back in the face of mounting assaults from Vampire fleets. Margaret's policy was again ruthlessly cost-effective. Worlds behind the line were 'hardened' to resist assault (both electronically and in the form of system defense squadrons) so that when the Varian Line reached them they would be able to hold out as fortresses from which the dwindling fleets could operate, and when the line was pushed back beyond them they would serve as a breakwater until they went under.

In 1140 the Varian Line was a subsector from the Trailing edge of Delphi, but by then the fate of Margaret's Imperium was sealed. Vampire fleets had been rounding the Coreward end of the Delphi Rift for years and spreading out across Glimmerdrift Reaches Sector. For several years Margaret had been able to protect her Coreward frontier by sending out cheap, crash-built warships designed to a ruggedized merchant rather than military standard, and by backing up the various worlds and small polities of Glimmerdrift Reaches and Ley Sectors.

However, in 1140 or so the last Imperial holdouts in Ley Sector fell to a massive Virus assault. The Khuur League and Grand Duchy of Stoner, both independent states forced into a desperate alliance, went down soon after, and the shaky dam that had held back the worst of the Viral assault from Coreward was broken. Vampire fleets had been operating in Glimmerdrift Reaches and beyond for some years, and most of the worlds had suffered from secondary infection as isolated vessels wandered around the region. Now the gate was open and the Vampire fleets could operate freely.

Unless Margaret stopped them.

By 1145, the Varian Line had become a chain of fortress worlds isolated from the subsector-sized 'safe area' still held by Margaret. These fortress worlds and the fleets that operated from them still held back the worst of the onslaught from that direction, unwittingly channeling Vampire activity Rimward into the remains of the Solomani Confederation.

There remained a slim possibility that the minor states of Glimmerdrift Reaches and beyond might be able to break out of their shrinking perimeters and cross the sea of Virus-infested Wilds to link up. If Margaret could just buy enough time and offer enough hope, some kind of alliance might be created that was capable of holding back the tide.

Margaret gambled everything she had left on this risky enterprise. Messengers were sent out to fight their way across the sector, and in the meantime Margaret launched the last great offensive of the Third Imperium, meaning to retake a region in Ley sector between the Delphi Rift and the Lesser Rift, creating a bulwark behind which the alliance could rally.

Margaret, long an advocate of the military axiom that 'no matter how dark the moment, thou shalt keep a reserve for whatever comes next', now threw everything she had into Operation Bright Defiance, sending out fleets of lovingly-husbanded warships to fight their way Coreward. The fleet was impressive. Reminiscent of the grand fleets that clashed in the early days of the Civil War, it included the last dreadnoughts and battleships of the Third Imperium outside the Regency and the Usdiki Pocket.

Cutting through minor opposition in the Wilds, the Last Battlefleet liberated the Grand Duchy of Stoner and forged into Ley Sector, capturing the Virus-ruled hell at Annapabar/Ley, which for a time had been the capital of Gateway Domain. The fleet, aided by several Worldships belonging to the Wandering People, actually reached its objectives, liberating the Sydites of the Khuur League and the naval base at Bastion. The defensive line (named the Ne Plus Ultra line – 'thus far and no further') was established. Worlds were fortified, bases set up, and sweeps launched beyond and behind the line to clear the worst infestations of Virus.

And from the remnant civilizations of what had been Gateway Domain, new allies came to stand on the line. The Sydites sent crude, blocky but incredibly tough vessels. The Wanderers provided mobile bases. From the Galian Federation, the Loyal Nineworlds Republic and even the Old Worlds far out in Crucis Margin sector came small but experienced naval squadrons. The Glimmerdrift Trade Consortium provided couriers and messenger ships. A ramshackle squadron from the liberated Grand Duchy of Stoner joined the line. A single ship came from Starfall, and two from the Raidermarch. Others set out bravely but were lost in the Wilds en route. The line was established, and from 1147 to 1152 the Glimmerdrift Alliance, led by Margaret, held out and even managed to clear some systems behind the line.

1153 was the beginning of the end. K'Kree vessels were raiding across Gateway sector and even probing into

Glimmerdrift Reaches, drawing Alliance ships away from the lines. Virus activity behind the line was increasing despite the best efforts of the sweeper squadrons, and pressure on the tiny 'safe areas' was increasing to the point where it was no longer possible to send ships to hold the main defense line. Transfers of new-built warships to the Varian and Ne Plus Ultra lines were suspended; they were sent to defend the 'safe' regions instead.

In 1155, a Virus-infested Worldship entered the Bastion system and, despite the best efforts of the system defense forces, crashed itself into the Alliance naval base there. Loss of life was relatively low thanks to a frantic evacuation, but the base was utterly destroyed and the lynchpin of the defenses was removed. Still the defenders struggled on, falling back to the Imperial Trade Cluster and the Khuur league in 1156.

By 1160 the Ne Plus Ultra line clung to the Coreward edge of Glimmerdrift Reaches Sector. There it stayed until 1163, when the barely-flying remains of the frigate *Starfall Glory* staggered into the Stoner system with news that the line was broken in several places and most of the fleet was gone. It was the end, and everyone knew it.

The fleets of the Glimmerdrift Alliance made their last stand over the worlds of Stoner, Idam Lee and Phelina, and afterward the survivors attempted to return home to defend their people. As Stoner burned, the last Imperial fleet withdrew from the Varian Line to turn at bay in Verge subsector of Glimmerdrift Reaches sector.

Astrography initially channeled the massive Viral onslaught past the remnants of Margaret's forces, through what little remained of the Starfall League, the Farreach Margravate and the Loyal Nineworlds Republic and into Crucis Margin, where waves of Vampire warships smashed through the Old Worlds and finally fell upon the Hive Federation where they were eventually fought to a standstill.

Margaret's Imperium held out in Verge subsector, slowly losing ground, until 1170, by which time Margaret herself was dead. The naval base at Lamente fell to massive assault in 1176, and the rest of the cluster by 1180. A single world, Ilaira, fought on alone under the sunburst of the old Imperium and Margaret's bird-of-prey banner.

Ilaria, arguably the last Imperial world, fell to a Vampire fleet in late 1189. The victorious fleet was led by a new-built Dreadnought warship broadcasting the callsign of Capital Prime – the Emperor's personal flagship – and bearing the Sunburst emblem of the Third Imperium. The nature of this vessel is now known; it was one of the Lucan Ships, out of the Black Imperium on a mission of insane vengeance against the remnant Margaret's faction.

A HOUSE DIVIDED – THE SOLOMANI CONFEDERATION

The Solomani Confederation suffered tremendously during the Dark Years. In fact, it did not survive the Viral onslaught, though it put up a good fight. The Solomani had been badly worn down by their constant warring against the remnants of the Imperium and was internally divided by differing interpretations of the idea that Solomani people were better than everyone else. Major divisions in the structure of the Confederation were held in check by Solomani Security (or SolSec) but remained a problem even as the Solomani fleets captured Terra and drove into Imperial space.

The Solomani were well armed but at peacetime readiness when news of the Rebellion reached their leaders. Crash programs to expand the navy were begun as the Confederation set about exploiting the chaos in the Imperium. Initially, their strategy was 'grab what you can and sue for peace'. The Solomani hoped to retake what they had lost during the Solomani Rim War and really did not expect to manage even that.

However, Lucan's orders to transfer fleets from the Old Expanses and Diaspora sectors allowed the Solomani to make greater gains than expected and to raid deep into Imperial space. After some fighting the Confederation decided that coming to an agreement with Duke Craig of Daibei was a good way to free up vessels for offensives elsewhere, and thus the Solomani made a late surge from about 1120 onward, gaining many systems (or at least, driving the Imperials out of them) while diplomats courted Daibei for the remainder of the war.

By the time of the Collapse, however, the Solomani had severe internal problems. Some regions had begun to move towards secession from the Confederation. A clash with Hive Federation forces in Newworld sector did not help matters either. Rebellions broke out on worlds conquered in the early years of the war as forces intended to hold them were diverted to other fronts.

With a border agreed with Daibei, the Solomani were mainly opposed by the faction loyal to Archduke Margaret, who resisted their advance as best she could until the very end. Solomani planners may have hoped to repeat the spectacular conquest of the collapsing Ziru Sirka, but the Third Imperium, though fragmented, was a far tougher than the decaying First. The Solomani were a common enemy and were opposed by any faction they encountered.

Thus when Virus was released, the Confederation was involved in several messy police actions within its old and conquered borders, heavy fighting along the Coreward edge of the Old Expanses sector, and was still attempting to subdue the former Vegan Autonomous District, which

held out fanatically in the sure knowledge that its people would suffer terribly under racist Solomani rule.

The Viral Plague tore through the Spinward regions of Margaret's Stronghold, barely slowing, and slammed into the Confederation. There, its progress was hampered by institutionalized Solomani paranoia and security. Anti-hacking precautions and counter-intrusion software were actually slightly less effective in the Confederation than in the Imperium, but the paranoid, security-mad mindset that deployed these systems created a more dangerous environment for Virus than in the Imperium.

Solomani electronic systems were protected by aggressive 'white blood cell' programs and multiple levels of filtering. These measures did not prevent Virus infestation, but they did slow it down somewhat. In addition, the distance from the Imperial heartland where the Virus was first released meant that the Virus fleets tended to expend themselves on other targets first.

Thus the Solomani collapse was slower and less complete than that of the Imperium. This did not help all that much, since it gave the Solomani a chance to factionalize and fight among themselves even as the lights started to go dim. Several Solomani factions sprang up. The most powerful continued to call itself the Solomani Confederation and to lay claim to all of the Confederation's member systems. It was countered by the Terran Federation, a splinter group with a far more moderate outlook than the rest of the Confederation. The Terrans even managed to win the support of the Vegans for a short time before the Plague swept the Vegans under.

Throughout the Confederation, minor races and cultures decided to fight for their freedom, further distracting what remained of the Confederation forces. The Solomani Party leadership foolishly decided to suppress these insurrections, fatally distracting its resources. As a result, several small regions broke away for ideological reasons or simply because the local leaders realized the Confederation lacked the resources to stop them.

The final fall of the Solomani Confederation was caused not by Virus (though Viral attacks did play a part) but by a specter out of the Confederation's past. The Solomani had for a long time been involved in genetic manipulation of various species, including humans. They had uplifted the Dolphins, Orca, Ursa and Apes at various times, and created variant human types for a range of environments. However, one of the most grubby skeletons in the Solomani closet concerned the so-called 'Gene Wars' and the Supermen.

Solomani scientists had managed to create a race of better-than-human humans. Smarter, stronger and faster, these 'supermen' were quickly perceived as a threat to the

'normals' of the Confederation – including their leaders. After many years of developing the supermen species, the Confederation set about disposing of them all in a most final manner. The supermen fought back, of course, and became the threat the Confederation had feared. Few in numbers, they were still difficult opponents and the resulting 'gene war' between normals and supermen was a bloody victory indeed.

But the supermen were not extinct, and over the years they had bred up their population. In 1138 they acted, launching a series of surgical strikes on Home and other important worlds of the Confederation that decapitated the Confederation leadership. The Confederation finally went under not long after its leadership was removed, and the supermen disappeared back into the woodwork for the most part. On a few worlds they were able to gain control of government and ruled their 'normal' subjects in whatever manner seemed appropriate. Some were benevolent, some less so. It mattered little because by 1150 the majority of what had been Confederation space was Wilds, much like most of the Imperium.

Aslan fleets began attacking Canopus and Magyar sectors from 1125 or so, with combat reaching a peak in 1132 before dying away from a combination of mutual exhaustion, Virus and some local peace treaties. The whole Spinward side of the Confederation was dissolving by this time as the Party was overthrown and worlds went their own way, often succumbing to Virus not long after freeing themselves from Party rule. Ironically, those worlds that retained Party leadership with its trappings of paranoia and security tended to survive better, at least in the short term.

Some enclaves clung to interstellar civilization. The Terran Confederation, at one point down to three worlds, remained defiant of the darkness, as Terra had throughout the Long Night, and within 20 more years it ruled 23 worlds across four subsectors, with several others as administered territories. Its name changed from time to time during its eventful existence. Terra has sat at the head of Federations, Confederations and even for a short time a Mercantile League. Its eventual form was a two-tier organization; the relatively tight Terran Confederation leading and supporting the looser Terran Commonwealth.

Another survivor state was the Solomani Imperium, a group of worlds in the Newworld sector. Emerging from the decapitated Solomani Party, a group of extreme hard-liners, even by Solomani Party standards, set about ruthlessly creating an empire with their surviving starships. Their early attempts were fairly inept, but they had established a power-base in the Trailing end of Newworld sector by 1142 and by 1161 the Solomani Imperium numbered 50 worlds. It remained fairly stable in terms of size until the

early 1200s, but internal difficulties (and the actions of a group of supermen dedicated to the overthrow of the hard-line regime) almost caused the Solomani Imperium to break up several times. The Solomani Imperium reached its peak size around 1185, but was seriously damaged by a large Vampire fleet in 1186 and was unable to do more than maintain itself for many years thereafter.

The region around Home, though wracked by infighting as the supermen took out the Solomani Party leadership then let the would-be successors fight it out among themselves, was protected from the worst of Virus by the shadow of Terra and by the sheer distances involved. However, there was no organized resistance to the relatively minor Vampire fleets that operated in the area, and as a result Home and the surrounding region were reduced to Wilds by 1150.

Various pocket empires survived or emerged in the former Solomani Confederation during the Dark years, but none achieved much more than to survive into the 1200s.

SEEKING A PROTECTOR – THE LEAGUE OF ANTARES

The Julian Protectorate was established by a charismatic leader named Julian when the Third Imperium was young, as a military and political alliance between a large number of Vargr and human societies intended to keep the Imperials at bay. It succeeded, forcing a bloody draw on the Imperial Navy in the Julian War and thereby curtailing the Pacification Campaigns. A thousand years later, the Protectorate was still in existence. It was fairly dormant, with the various states doing more or less as they pleased and the Star Legion, a joint force maintained by all Protectorate states, an understrength and poorly trained force.

The Protectorate immediately declared neutrality in the Imperial Civil War and began securing its borders while trying to bring its fleets up to strength. Unfortunately, this time there was no Julian to unite the various factions and the Protectorate's fleet remained very much a paper tiger. Some member states preferred to send corsairs into the troubled Imperium rather than add their strength to the Star Legion, while others were too complacent to really do much and besides preferred the Star Legion weak so that it could not interfere with their actions. Despite this, the reputation of the Protectorate as a powerful foe and its possession of a fleet – albeit a factionalized and weak one – made it a major force on the border, and one that the nearest faction, that of Lucan, did not wish to antagonize.

In 1117 the Domain of Antares, under the Vargr Archduke Brzk, decided that it wanted nothing of Lucan's Imperium and seceded rather than send the Domain fleets to assist Lucan against Dulinor. Within a year the League

of Antares, which was about a sector in size and included parts of the Empty Quarter, had joined the Julian Protectorate. The League's powerful Imperial-standard fleet was considered a major asset by the Protectorate and rather than sheltering under the protection of the Protectorate, the League of Antares became a major part of its powerbase.

The League, with backing from the slowly-improving Star Legion, clashed with Lucan's Imperium in Fornast Sector and with both the Imperium and Vargr raiders (including some unofficially operating out of Protectorate states) in Lishun. A fair amount of the League's naval strength was eroded in these clashes, but once Lucan realized that Brzk and his League wanted only to be left alone, he concentrated on fighting more active foes such as Dulinor and peace – of a sort – came to Antares.

The release of Virus hit the region hard. The distance from the release points in the Imperial Core was short, and Antares was hit by the full weight of the first wave. Such a divided collection of states could not put up any useful resistance, and the Protectorate went down in the first wave of Virus infection by 1140.

The divided nature of the Protectorate did ensure that some enclaves survived better than others. Each state had a slightly different way of doing things, and the many different computer architectures of the region slowed Virus down a little as it adjusted to each one in turn. However, by 1150 there was nothing much left of the states of the Protectorate but for a few tiny survivor states. Most of these had succumbed by 1190.

SURVIVAL THROUGH DISUNITY – THE VARGR SPLINTERS

To Coreward of Imperial space lay the Vargr Extents, a vast region mostly inhabited by Vargr states of varying sizes. Several minor races and some humans also lived in this area, but the vast majority of the population were Vargr. And being Vargr, their societies were rather... 'vigorous'. The states of the Extents rose and fell rapidly as their leaders gained in charisma or were successfully challenged for leadership. Fleets, worlds and nations on the various worlds changed allegiance as it seemed appropriate, creating an ever-shifting pattern of borders and areas of influence.

The Imperial Civil War created opportunities for the traditional Vargr activities of raiding and plunder, and a horde of corsairs poured into the Coreward end of the Imperium as the Corridor and Lishun sectors fleets were withdrawn. Fleets from Antares and Vland were able to somewhat limit the damage, but by 1130 there were many systems that had been raided so many times that they simply had nothing left. In a few areas successful raiders

had set up 'pirate kingdoms' in Imperial territory rather than have to journey all the way home. Many of these Pirate Kingdoms fell victim to other raiders later on.

The release of Virus ripped straight through the Vargr Extents, causing massive damage. There was no unified structure to attempt resistance, though various leaders fought back as best they could. In fact, the main factor in preserving anything at all of the Vargr was the very disunity of the Vargr societies. No two groups did anything the same way. Computer architecture and ship design varied from one world to the next, meaning that Virus had to constantly adapt and relearn. It did so, and quickly, but its spread was not as fast nor as total as in the Imperium. The Vargr Extents were hit hard, all the same, and became known as the Vargr Splinters. Most of the Splinters was like the Imperium by 1150 – a vast expanse of Wilds with the odd pocket empire here and there and fewer multiworld states. Those that did exist were fairly unstable.

The first wave of Virus met not a breakwater but a beach in the Vargr Splinters. It was not held back but instead dissipated itself, spreading out across the Splinters and becoming diffused. Some hideous societies emerged, ruled by Virus or by Vargr/Virus alliances. Other states managed to free themselves, only to fragment under their own weight. A few remained stable in a dynamic sort of way.

The situation was a little better along the Regency border. Sheltered by the Vland Pocket, the Great Rift and the odd long-range Regency Quarantine Service sweep, the Vargr states of the Spinward edge of the Splinters suffered terribly but were not smashed flat like many other regions. Of course, the nature of these states was such that they were by definition unstable, and this situation was made more serious by the crisis. In some cases chaos reigned as several leaders attempted to make their solutions all work at once rather than accepting a compromise that might make them lose face.

The majority of the Vargr Splinters region was thus rapidly destroyed and by 1140 most of the old Extents was deep Wilds with the odd island of civilization just like in human space. However, the nature of Vargr existence meant that Virus has slightly different effects than in human space. In most cases Virus was absorbed into the general mix of factors that made the region so unstable, so that while few areas were completely clear of it there were many societies able to keep functioning (after a fashion) despite it.

The Vargr are a little better at living in a chaotic environment than humans, and so Virus came to be accepted as part of their world in a way that would terrify most humans. This does not mean that they liked it or were not afraid

of it, merely that they came to accept it as a part of the universe. Like a dangerous carnivore, it could be avoided and outwitted or occasionally driven off with weapons. The rest of the time, stealth and cunning were necessary to survive. By 1195 some societies had even learned to interact with Virus in a meaningful fashion, though this was fraught with danger as most Viral Entities were highly unstable and inimical to organic life.

OVERTHROW OF THE STEPPELORDS – THE FALL OF THE 2000 WORLDS

Virus came late to the 2000 Worlds, domain of the K'Kree. With Margaret's Imperium and two rifts as a shield, the progress of infection was slowed somewhat. Or rather, the bandwidth was reduced. The first infected ships crossed the gap between Imperial and K'Kree space at the same kind of speed as elsewhere, and along the way they infected other systems. But the numbers that reached the 2000 Worlds were initially small.

In order to reach the 2000 Worlds, Virus had to cross Gateway sector, which was mostly inhabited by human states. As one world after another was infected, secondary ripples spread out. Some of them washed over the rear area of Margaret's faction or battered the various small states allied to it. Others spread out across Gateway sector.

In 1130, the extremist K'Kree faction known as the Lords of Thunder was engaged in open warfare against human worlds at the Trailing edge of Gateway sector, having recently conquered the Renkard Union. When human ships started to go mad and attack their homeworlds, the Lords of Thunder were delighted. Someone was helping them slaughter their foes, and with such psychotic abandon that even the Lords of Thunder were impressed.

All K'Kree believed that it was their destiny to some day destroy all G'naak (Vermin, or meat-eaters) in the Universe, and the Lords of Thunder were particularly rabid about their mission. They were dismayed when their own warships began to go berserk too, and appalled when their own worlds fell victim, but despite this the seed of an idea was planted – this electronic avatar of death could be their ally. After all, Virus didn't eat meat...

As the infection spread and the vessels of the K'Kree navy and merchant service turned on their masters, and cities became deathtraps, the K'Kree were spared the worst of the suffering that befell humaniti. They tended, as a result of their racial psychology, to build their homes on worlds that were naturally habitable. This meant that when the cities vanished under mushroom clouds or became uninhabitable when their automated systems ran wild, the survivors were able to run away into the countryside and,

being herd creatures born to eat vegetation, survive the immediate crisis.

Virus had begun to take hold in Gateway Sector from about 1133, and by 1138 the 2000 Worlds were thoroughly infected. Some regions held out for a decade or more, but in most cases the crash was rapid. However, for the reasons noted above, the majority of the population survived. Able to meet their immediate survival needs as a herd freed the leaders of these disinherited people to begin carving out a new society. Low-tech villages sprang up on many worlds, and by 1150 much of K'Kree space was characterized by nomadic herds or low-tech barbarian villages keeping a safe distance from Virus-riddled cities of their worlds.

Some worlds fended off the first onslaught and even retained their technology. Most notable was the enclave around Kirur, seat of the Overlord of the 2000 Worlds. The cost in lives and shattered starships was immense, but the K'Kree supreme leader managed to remain at the helm of a small high-technology cluster that was relatively free of Virus. By 1150 this cluster ('The Eleven Worlds') had begun to tentatively expand and reintegrate a handful of nearby regressed systems.

And then, in 1158, it happened. A fleet of ships, obviously K'Kree in origin, came out of Gateway sector, spearing across the 2000 Worlds directly at Kirur. Forces landed here and there to secure necessary base worlds, and there were reports that these unknown visitors possessed powerful anti-Virus systems. In a manner of speaking, they did.

The fleet entered space controlled by the 11 Worlds and its commander demanded a personal audience with the Overlord of the 2000 Worlds. This was refused in no uncertain terms, the 11 Worlds' fleet admiral launching into a tirade on the subject of correct behavior among lesser members of the herd. The lecture was cut off when the intruder fleet opened fire with incredible accuracy, launching a swarm of robotic fighters and suicide ram-ships.

The K'Kree had used remote-controlled robot fighters for a long time, but they were never very good and these behaved more like autonomous units; and very smart ones at that. There was only one possible reason, and even as the rest of the squadron was blasted apart the 11 Worlds flagship was able to make an emergency Jump, racing home to bring warning.

The warning arrived in plenty of time. The intruders did not drive on Kirur immediately but instead visited each of the neighboring worlds, utterly destroying its defenses with vastly superior weapons but neither communicating nor attempting to conquer the worlds. Meantime, the Overlord had pulled in his entire fleet to defend Kirur, and, having

allowed plenty of time for it to arrive, the intruders Jumped into the system, announced their identity and intentions, and accelerated towards the homeworld.

The Battle of Kirur lasted 22 hours and resulted in the complete destruction of the Overlord's battle fleet, the Kirur system defense fleet and the world's entire orbital defense system. The intruders took moderate casualties, but not nearly enough to prevent them from landing assault ships and making a ground attack on the Overlord's private estate, where he had taken refuge.

The ground assault was undertaken by combat robots and K'Kree ground troops equipped with high-technology weapons and battle equipment. Their gear was better than the best the 2000 Worlds had possessed even at its height, and of course the robots were autonomous Virus-infected units. They tore the heart out of the defense, allowing the fleet's leader to join the final assault personally.

The Overlord of the 2000 Worlds was brought before the invaders' leader, a K'Kree named Anv!ull'Ixux, and after a summary trial lasting ninety seconds was pronounced guilty of failure to carry out the holy mission of the K'Kree – the extermination of all G'naak. He was executed immediately by a combat robot.

For three days Kirur trembled. The invader fleet hung overhead, dropping deadfall ordnance on any attempts to resist the occupation, while Anv!ull'Ixux and his personal forces remained at the Overlord's estate. Then, simultaneously on every channel of every broadcast medium on Kirur, a message went out. The gist of it was simple. The K'Kree had been insufficiently zealous in their mission to slaughter the G'naak, and had even gone so far as to drive out the Lords of Thunder for doing nothing more than all K'Kree should. They had been punished, driven almost back to barbarism, and the Lords of Thunder were raised high for their zeal. Those who had lost their way and tried to co-exist with the G'naak would be given a second chance, a last opportunity to redeem themselves. Anv!ull'Ixux would lead them, show them the way, and they would unite under him to smash the G'naak before they could recover from the same events that had brought the 2000 Worlds low.

Anv!ull'Ixux then proclaimed that the 2000 Worlds no longer existed. It was now his personal dominion, the Great Dominate of the Gods of Thunder – not Lords, but Gods. For Anv!ull'Ixux had found an ally that would finally enable the K'Kree to destroy G'naak forever. That ally was, of course, a relatively sane (though psychotic, monomaniacal and G'naak-hating) strain of Virus that had inhabited the computers of Anv!ull'Ixux's personal flagship. It was his weapon against other Virus, and he was its organic ally/tool, granting it a power that would span hundreds of worlds. The Great Dominate of the

Gods of Thunder – usually referred to as the Dominate – was a match made in hell.

Over the next decade, the Gods of Thunder spread out from their new base on Kirur (they had abandoned their holdings in Gateway sector and brought everything they had to the capital), destroying Virus infestations as they went and replacing them with new ones grown from Anv!ull'Ixux's Viral ally. The wilderness herds were rounded up and informed that they were now loyal subjects of the Dominate. Steppelords and Overlords of Steppelords were appointed to rule them, and everyone answered to Anv!ull'Ixux.

By 1175, the Gods of Thunder and their Dominate had gained control of much of the 2000 Worlds, and had begun sending reconnaissance missions into the Hive Federation. When it appeared that the Hivers had weathered the storm more or less intact, these missions were expanded to become full combat operations.

For the next 12 years the Dominate methodically reintegrated its worlds, rebuilt its industry with the help of Virus-infected robots, and made war on the Hivers. But always Anv!ull'Ixux's eyes turned Spinward, to the human states of Gateway sector and the wreckage of the Imperium beyond. In 1187, Anv!ull'Ixux, now an ancient kept alive only by technology and his will to slaughter G'naak, made arrangements for his successor and the future of the Dominate and departed Spinward at the head of a small fleet – his 'Funeral Procession'.

Anv!ull'Ixux's funeral procession was a rampage across Gateway and into Ley sectors. For many years it was not known what became of him, though some ships straggled back into Dominate space as late as 1195. The last of them brought word that Anv!ull'Ixux had gone on alone to destroy the enemies of the Dominate, but whether this referred to his ascension into some genocidal, psychotic heaven or a final orgy of slaughter was unknown for many years.

BUNKER MENTALITY – THE HIVE FEDERATION

The Hivers did not assassinate the Emperor. They did not release, or even know about, Virus. They, the arch-Manipulators, have been accused of these things but in fact they were caught by surprise like everyone else.

Distance and the Delphi Rift offered the Hivers some protection, but their real salvation should have been their exceptional ability with computers. They certainly expected to be immune, and early reports that something horrific was happening in Human space aroused curiosity rather than fear. After all, human efforts to hack Hiver computer systems had usually ended in laughable failure, so what

could a human-created virus do to them? Their computer architecture was totally different; they even used different materials. So this Virus could rewrite silicon, could it? So what?

The Hivers had enough warning to activate their border fleets and prepare themselves for an interesting few months as the Virus battered unavailingly at their impregnable fortress. As expected, the first incidences of Virus to reach the Hive Federation were weak and scattered. They had filtered through Margaret's defenses and made their way across two sectors. They posed little military threat and totally failed to infect Hiver computers before being destroyed, so were easily beaten off by the border fleets. For a few months things seemed to be all right; the foolish humans had managed to top off the stupidity of their Civil War with a pretty fair attempt at mass suicide, but at least they'd not managed to drag the Hivers down with them. The Hivers sat comfortably behind their borders, secure in the knowledge that they were safe. They were wrong. Utterly, completely and almost terminally wrong.

Samples of the Virus were under study at various points across the Hive Federation when the first border patrol vessel became infected. It was quickly destroyed, but once the Virus had figured out how to exist in Hiver technology it spread like wildfire. The border fleets became Vampire fleets, and the fleets racing to intercept them were infected too.

All along its borders, the Hive Federation was hit by a tsunami of Virus infection. Little survived in the three or four subsectors closest to the border, and only after the initial wave had carried this far did it even begin to slow down. Hiver ships and systems had received no Virus-proofing. There was no perceived need – they were already Virus-proof! Technicians worked feverishly to create countermeasures, and undoubtedly some succeeded, only to be killed before they could implement them. The tsunami slowed somewhat as it encountered increasing resistance, but still it tore across the Hive Federation destroying everything in its path.

Salvation came from the samples taken deep into the Federation for study. There, away from the front lines, computer technicians worked to understand the Virus and became aware of some very disturbing facts. These are detailed in 'The Nature of Virus' and will not be repeated here, but the upshot of these discoveries was that Virus could and eventually would be able to infect, rewrite and live in Hiver computer systems just like any those of any other race.

Warnings were sent – too late – and the tech teams began to work on countermeasures. Some sites were unable to come up with any, some were overrun before they could be implemented, and some confidently put useless measures

in place and died watching them fail. But enough of the countermeasures worked that the Hivers were able to save some of their technological worlds from infection and thus maintain a small high-tech base to rebuild from.

The Hive Federation was engaged in a long fight to rid itself of Virus and Vampires from 1140-1155, and even then there were some areas that were heavily affected. However, in the late 1150s a new threat emerged which drew off Federation resources. The Solomani Imperium, based in Newworld sector, was making its presence felt. It was decided that this state was a potential threat to the Federation and that steps must be taken to limit its growth.

Rather than engage in open warfare, the Hivers opened trade links (a considerable undertaking given that trade ships had to cross Langere sector, which was mostly Wilds) and attempted to manipulate the Solomani Imperium into a more moderate form. This undertaking, done subtly through angled trade deals and quiet suggestions as well as deliberately offering good deals on items that would lead to a line of thinking away from conquest and expansion, did not really succeed. After a period of observation and study of the results, the Hivers settled for a rather different approach.

Although there was no immediate threat from the Solomani Imperium, in the long run there probably would have been, so the course taken by the Hivers was possibly justifiable from a self-defense standpoint. However, it was a cynical and brutal solution that the Hivers knew must be covered up. They built a fleet of warships approximating old Imperial and Solomani designs, infected them with a 'tame' strain of Virus, and launched them against the Solomani Imperium.

As the Hiver border fleets dealt with those Vampires that decided they were not so tame after all, the remainder arced through Spica and Alpha Crucis sectors, causing untold mayhem and a new wave of secondary infections along the way, and finally entered Newworld sector from Coreward. Several worlds of the Solomani Imperium were bombarded and a large fraction of its fleet was expended in repelling this sudden and violent attack.

The Solomani Imperium took many years to recover from this battering, and for a time the Hivers breathed easy. However, from 1178, K'Kree vessels began entering space once owned by the Hive Federation and making a nuisance of themselves. This probing gradually became open raiding as the years went by, and the Hivers began to hear disturbing news of a new regime in the 2000 Worlds, one that could not be squashed with a fake Vampire fleet. Obtaining clear information was difficult but one thing was clear; sooner or later the Hivers were going to face an all-out attack from the K'Kree. This time they might not be

able to pull off a last-minute manipulation to seize victory from under the hooves of defeat.

The solution was obvious; the Hive Federation needed a counterbalance for the K'Kree, something to keep them occupied; a threat on a border far from the Hivers. That role had always been played by humans, but the great human empire was gone. Only tiny enclaves remained, and they were too busy clambering out of the wreckage to be much use. But if one or more of those states could be helped and nurtured, then perhaps in time it might become that counterbalance. At the very least it might be a source of warships and aggressive fighters; the humans always had plenty of those two things in the past...

So Hiver ships journeyed into human space, seeking suitable candidates for assistance and uplift operations. In 1192, they contacted a number of worlds in the Old Expanses and a year later several worlds in that region opened 'Hiver Technical Academies' to train their brightest and best. By 1195 these worlds were making tentative contact and opening trade relations with one another, and Hiver 'Tech-representatives' were aboard every starship they sent. The Hivers had found... what? A friend? An ally? A tool? Only time would tell.

AN HONORABLE END – THE ASLAN HIERATE

The Aslan have always been subject to pressure to expand as the *Ihatei* (landless second sons) seek domains of their own. Expansion into Imperial space was more or less impossible before the Rebellion and the Civil War, but as news of the Imperial strife spread throughout the Hierate, waves of *Ihatei* fleets plunged across the Imperial borders in the Mother Of All Landgrabs. Coreward of the Great Rift, many of these fleets were coordinated by an individual who became known as Lakht Aorlakht (Lord of New Lords). His fleets (and some independent ones) were able to establish settlements on about 20 Imperial worlds.

The Domain of Deneb was able to dislodge some of these groups straight away, and began a policy of containment with a view to eventually expelling the squatters. However, resources were stretched thin and eventually some of these Aslan-settled worlds became part of the Domain of Deneb/Regency while others signed treaties of alliance. The Aslan rarely invaded by force but would normally land in a remote area, set up defenses, and then offer to buy the land they had occupied. Accepting money or the services of Aslan mercenaries was often an easier option than kicking them out, so local governments tended to make a deal and get on with handling more immediate problems.

The Aslan colonies in Regency space, and those Coreward of the Great Rift, were sheltered from the first



Aslan and Human: One of the great friendships during the chaos of the New Era. From the Aslan Ambassador who took a bullet during the assassination of Strephon's double in 1116, to the Aslan who fought with the Regency against the Vampire Fleets, neither race ever forgot the efforts of the other. In time, Aslan and humanitii would stand side by side against the horrors unleashed by the Black Imperium and the Dominate.

wave of Virus and although young and economically weak, at least retained what they had. The Spinward States Accords created the basis for cooperation against the mutual enemy, Virus. The Aslan had already sent a fleet to assist the Domain of Deneb in fighting the Vampire fleets crossing the Great Rift, and now they entered into a formal agreement with the new Regency. Many Aslan took service with the Regency Navy, the Regency Quarantine Service, or the 'Patrol' (named *Trekhyair* by the Aslan). The Patrol had existed since 1120 as a means to co-opt Aslan into useful tasks such as commerce protection and border patrol. By 1130 the Patrol was equipped with reactivated reserve Imperial warships and formed a powerful part of the Regency's fleet.

The Aslan states 'behind the claw' were hit by Virus 'from behind', as Vampire ships crossed the Rift from the Hierate. The Aslan were strong enough to resist this assault, which reached its peak about 1160, since they possessed secure frontiers in other directions. In turn, they secured the Regency's Rimward-Spinward flank. Some Aslan, responding to demands for assistance from their clans across the Rift, went back into the Hierate to help as best they could. This weakened the Aslan *Aorlakht* (New Lords) on the Regency border and did nothing to prevent the collapse of the Hierate.

The Hierate was at first sheltered from the worst of the Viral Plague by Daibei and the Solomani Confederation. Infected ships did leak through and outbreaks were serious but not the all-destroying tsunami that befell elsewhere. As late as 1135 the Hierate was sending *Ihatei* fleets into human (Solomani and Imperial) space to claim lands left wide open by the Collapse. However, the *Ihatei* invasions had reached their peak around 1132 and rapidly dropped off as Virus began to do more and more damage to the Hierate and therefore its ability to send out expeditions.

Increasingly, *Ihatei* who entered human space went out of contact and were never heard from again. By 1135 those that still attempted to push outward from the Hierate were settling on worlds where other *Ihatei* had already landed and, in many cases, were reduced to a struggle to survive. Each successive wave strengthened the settlers for a time (once the inevitable disputes over who was in charge were resolved), but within a short time the pressure became too great and the downward spiral continued.

Although the Aslan made great strides in Virus-hardening methods, it was becoming obvious that the Hierate as a whole was losing ground. Assistance came (in terms of ships and, more importantly, methods) from the New Lords across the Great Rift, but the future looked bleak. With the collapse of the Solomani in the 1140s, by which time Daibei was also more or less wide open as a pathway for Virus to enter the Hierate, new fleets of Vampires swept

into Aslan space from Trailing and Rimward. It was the beginning of the end.

Despite hard fighting and what countermeasures could be put in place, whole sectors were reduced to Wilds by 1145. Ustral Quadrant, Uistilao, Dark Nebula and Ealiysiyw sectors were almost entirely overrun, and with every world that succumbed, the ability of the Aslan to defend itself was diminished. Ahead of the battle lines, Vampire raiders Jumped deep into the rear, attacking worlds and trade lanes and infecting whatever they could.

The Hierate as a whole and many individual clans made several gallant attempts to turn back the tide. Fleets clashed in the deepening darkness, and sometimes whole subsectors were temporarily cleared of Vampire activity. But for every bright success there was a shattering defeat and many months of slow erosion as this world or that went under to bombardment or runaway infection. All the while the amount of Virus activity in the rear areas increased, making fleet logistics impossible without heavy escort and forcing more and more worlds to expend their energy on self-defense rather than organized campaigning.

As the contested zone moved further into the Hierate and the fleets dwindled faster than they could be rebuilt, the *Tlaukhu*, the Aslan ruling council of the 29 greatest clans, met in 1149 and came to a terrible decision. Already some of the 29 were little more than remnants; it was obvious that the Hierate was doomed to fall if matters continued as they were. There seemed little chance of victory, but the Aslan decided to stake everything on a single great offensive. Whether anyone actually believed they had a chance of success is in doubt, but the clans came to a unanimous decision; the fleets would cease trying to hold back the Vampire offensives and instead attack the source.

It was obvious where the fleets were coming from; Aslan-designed ships were now part of the assault forces. Some were new-built, and must therefore have been constructed at Aslan worlds conquered by Virus. If these bases could be retaken, perhaps the pressure would ease enough to create a breathing space. And if not, then the end of the Aslan Hierate would be a proud and honorable one.

The fleets rallied and set out on their mission in 1150, and for two years made spectacular progress. Worlds were retaken, Vampire ships destroyed on the slips, and the pressure really did ease somewhat. But there were always more Vampires, some of them coming in from very far away, and these vessels were able to rampage around Hierate space without any real opposition. Destroying local sources of new Vampires was a significant victory but one that cost the Hierate the bulk of its remaining fleets. And unlike a normal force, the Vampire Fleets were nomadic. They had no command structure to disrupt, no morale to

break and no need for bases. They could take what they needed where they found it, and vessels that failed to find what they needed were 100% expendable.

Faced with a foe of this kind, the Hierate strategy was doomed from the start, and in truth the clans of the *Tlaukhu* knew it. Even as the bright sword of the clan fleets shone out in the night, the Hierate made quiet plans for its own funeral. The New Lords across the Rift were forbidden to send any further aid, and for a time some clans were permitted to take what they could carry and cross the Rift to join the New Lords, subject to a strict quarantine reminiscent of that in force along the borders of the Regency.

By 1155 the Aslan were holding out in a few small areas, one of which controlled the main crossing points of the Great Rift. With the great fleets gone and a rising tide of Vampires pressing at the last bastions, it was obvious that the end had arrived. The remaining clan lords forbade any further crossing of the Rift, to prevent infected vessels from reaching the safe area on the far side. As the final onslaught broke over them, the last act of many Aslan flotillas was to destroy the assembled merchants that had been carrying their people to safety. Deep-space calibration and refueling stations were deliberately scuttled and *Aorlakht* fleets took up position to destroy anything coming across the Rift from the old Hierate.

The last ship out of the Hierate, arriving behind the claw in 1156, carried a joint message to the *Aorlakht* from the *Tlaukhu*. It was recorded in 1149 and endorsed by every one of the 29 great clans.

*"The day has come; you are the Hierate now.
Nothing will pass while any of our ships remain.
We die rather than flee, and we will hold the Riftedg until
the very end.
Destroy whatever comes after this ship, for it will be of the
enemy and we will be gone.*

*Preserve our memory, but do not seek vengeance.
Fight to live, not to avenge.
You are the future, as we are the ghosts of the past.
Your day will come as ours is ending.*

*We die with honor, but not for honor.
We die for you."*

Some survivors of the fall of the Hierate did attempt to cross the Rift, but they were prevented by the last Aslan fleets. Those that tried to run the blockade were destroyed. From 1157, Vampire fleets attempted to cross the rift from the Hierate and were met with fanatical resistance. Vessels from the Regency were deployed to assist the *Aorlakht* until it was apparent that they could hold the line alone. Fighting in the Rift and along the Coreward edge reached

its peak around 1160 as successive waves of Vampires hurled themselves across the Rift.

The tide gradually ebbed until by 1175 there was little but sporadic Vampire activity coming across the Rift. For the next few years the *Aorlakht* built up their strength and studied anti-Viral methods. Some day, they knew, they would return to reclaim the Hierate. For now, they contented themselves with careful, Virus-proofed reconnaissance of the crossing points, and with fortifying the likely worlds where a Vampire fleet would arrive in their space. As the Dark Years ended in 1195, the New Lords saw themselves as custodians of everything the Hierate had stood for. They were determined that expansion back into their homeland would be done right if it was done at all.

The pressure was mounting to find new lands for a new generation of *Ihatei*, and so plans were drawn to cross back into Hierate space. For now, there were opportunities in the local region but they were not infinite. The time was coming, however, when they would have to return to their old home. The retaking of the Hierate would probably begin with some hotheaded (i.e. entirely typical) band of *Ihatei* charging across the Rift. The New Lords would have to be ready to deal with whatever happened after that, for events would move swiftly and there would be no second chance.

THE DOMAIN OF DENEB – A STATE UNDER SIEGE

Hearing of the threat of Virus, Archduke Norris of the Domain of Deneb acted quickly and decisively to slam the door in the face of the onrushing threat. Setting up a deep defended zone, a scratch fleet of patrol vessels intercepted incoming ships and turned them around, ruthlessly destroying any that failed to comply with instructions. As fast as warships could be converted to make them Virus-resistant, heavy squadrons were sent to back up the Quarantine. They arrived just in time to meet the first organized Virus Fleets coming through Corridor Sector.

The Quarantine, once it was properly established, did allow people and ships to enter the Domain of Deneb, but only after vessels were carefully checked for Virus; a time-consuming procedure. The Quarantine could not be strong everywhere, and Norris quickly entered into discussion with neighboring states to create an alliance dedicated to mutual support. Although the alliance resulted in some uncomfortable compromises, it allowed a co-operative effort between Deneb and Aslan fleets to meet and destroy Virus fleets coming across the Great Rift.

The frontier with the Vargr states to Trailing of the Domain of Deneb was a problem. The Vargr were too disorganized

for Norris to be able to trust them to keep Virus fleets out of his space by defending their own. He was thus forced to extend the quarantine up the entire Trailing frontier despite protests from neighboring governments. The Quarantine was able to hold the frontier through some very difficult times, though it stretched the resources of the Domain very thin.

The Quarantine was essentially complete in 1131, and its procedures were formalized in the Spinward States Accords the following year. At the same time, the Domain of Deneb became the Regency, with Norris as First Regent. The Regency was determined to stand alone throughout whatever was to come, to 'Keep the Flame' of the old Imperium burning in the night, and to await the day when it could return to Imperial space and help whoever remained alive. However, over time the mission of the Regency altered, and the meaning of The Flame also changed.

Even as the Spinward States Accords were being agreed, the Sword Worlds, a small enclave of non-Imperial worlds in the Spinward Marches, made a landgrab in the hope of reclaiming the territory they had lost in the Fifth Frontier War. The response from the new Regency (with assistance from allied Darrian forces) was to crush the Sword Worlders and to occupy several of their worlds.

The Regency, recognizing that many of the old divisions and disputes of the Imperial age were over, began to change its nature and to incorporate worlds that had not been part of the Domain of Deneb. Since the Regency possessed anti-Virus technology (of a sort), many worlds were keen to join as a means of self-preservation. Integrating these worlds was necessary to ensure a solid Quarantine line, and many compromises had to be made. The Regency was forced to recognize the territorial claims of Aslan and Vargr groups that had landed on various worlds, and sometimes even had to enforce these claims against the original human inhabitants.

After slapping down the Sword Worlders and offering treaties to everyone that would sign up, the Regency set about dealing with other problems. In 1133, the Regency Frontier was established, which meant abandoning many worlds as indefensible. Refugees from these worlds, which would be unprotected outside the Quarantine, flooded into the 'safe' internal region of the Regency in numbers that could not be dealt with.

Meanwhile, desperate measures were taken to find enough starships to enforce the Quarantine. After taking over ownership of every mercenary vessel and semi-warship (such as the Route Protectors operated by the Al Morai shipping line) did not provide enough vessels, the Regency shoved large numbers of armed merchants into the Quarantine. This resulted in heavy losses and

depleted the Regency's economic strength in the long term, but at least it ensured short-term survival.

The Regency's shipyards began crash-producing interim designs intended to fill the desperate shortage of communications and combat vessels. Examples included the *Cuspid*-class gunboats, which squeezed a particle accelerator 'Varmint Gun' into a tiny hull. The Jump-Capable Boat, an attempt to create a cheap interstellar courier by jamming a Jump drive into a 30-ton hull, was rather less successful. The vessels worked most of the time but were prone to drive failure or Misjumps. In more stable times they would not have been allowed into service, but such was the desperation of the Regency during the War of the Quarantine that these deathtraps were used for routine courier duty and even occasional reconnaissance work despite the risks.

With the threat of Sword Worlder hostilities reduced and improved relations with the Zhodani Consulate, the Darrian Confederation felt able to lend some of its naval strength to the Quarantine. Small but effective TL-16 Darrian patrol vessels joined the Regency Quarantine Service along the frontier.

The Regency also repealed the Psionics Suppressions and began to openly embrace psionics research. In this matter the Regency had something of a headstart since it was host to several secret Imperial psionics research institutes. First Regent Norris had a high-ranking psionic advisor, Branj Dilgaadin, who was of great assistance to him throughout his reign.

Despite all these measures, the Regency was not completely safe. Virus-infected vessels and even fleets broke through the Quarantine on many occasions. News of most of these incidents was suppressed to avoid a panic, but there were several near-misses where Regency worlds were saved from extermination at the last second by system defense forces.

The most graphic and tragic of these incidents is now known as the Rape of Trin. In 1139 a Virus infected vessel, the battleship *Kishkii*, led a fleet of some 60 to 80 vessels on what appeared to be a deliberate attempt to take out the high-population world of Trin and its stocks of inactive warships awaiting modification or refit.

The *Kishkii's* Viral entity was a crafty tactician which used its associated vessels as a diversion for system defense forces along the way, allowing it to reach Trin despite determined resistance along its path of advance. The battleship emerged from Jump right over Trin and, completely ignoring the fire of defending vessels, bombarded orbital and ground facilities including high-population areas. Finally crippled, the battleship crashed itself on the planet's surface. Most of the vital industry at

Trin was hammered into wreckage, and the world could no longer support its population after the assault. The attack killed over 3 billion people and displaced up to 5 billion more as refugees.

The Rape of Trin was the only successful major attack on the Regency by Virus fleets, but there were numerous close calls in the period 1130-70 at other major worlds of the Regency. In some cases the attacks were intercepted in the target world's orbital space. For the most part, news of these attacks was suppressed to prevent panic.

A year after the Rape of Trin, the Regency began making its borders more secure. In some cases this meant taking the unpalatable decision to annex worlds that had no interest in joining the Regency but were important to a secure frontier. The Islands Cluster in the Great Rift, which provided a crossing point for infected vessels to reach Regency space through the thinly-defended Rift frontier, was one such. The population of the cluster had been involved in their very own private multifaction war since about 1106, and could never have prevented a Viral fleet from conquering their worlds or passing through to get behind the Quarantine. The Regency was forced to annex the Islands in a major naval operation, and then set up peacekeeping forces as well as a strict Quarantine.

In 1152, Norris, First Regent, announced the Representational Reforms that would make the Regency a more democratic society. Designed to ease tensions in the long run, the reforms created some major problems in the short term. The old Nobility lost the status they had enjoyed under the Imperium, though efforts were made to ensure that nobles received both financial support and a useful role within the new society.

First Regent Norris never saw his reforms completed. He died in 1157, just hours after giving his historic 'Keep the Flame' address. Having never married, he was succeeded by his true-daughter Seldrian, a clone raised as a natural child by Norris. Seldrian had been married to Avery Aledon Alkhalikoi, son of the Emperor Strephon, but Avery was no longer in the public eye. Official pronouncements stated that the Emperor's son and bright hope for the future had been killed in 1149, as a result of an accident at an experimental naval facility. In fact, this was not the case. Avery had left the Regency on a mission to Coreward; the mission for which Strephon had trained and genetically engineered him.

Seldrian died in 1190 and was succeeded as High Regent (no-one after Norris was ever given the title of First Regent) by her son, Caranda Aledon Alkhalikoi. Early in Caranda's reign, it became obvious that the Regency was going to have to open its borders if it was to survive, and discussions about expeditions into the Wilds were entered into.

A GRAND DREAM OF EMPIRE – THE ZIRU SIRKA

The founders of the First Imperium had never been happy as just one of a number of cultural groups within the Third Imperium, and even though it was a regional capital, Vland dreamed of the day it might again be the seat of an interstellar empire. That dream became almost a mania, and in the end it destroyed the world of Vland.

As the Civil War dragged on, Lucan withdrew the Corridor and Lishun fleets to fight Dulinor, allowing Vargr raiders to enter Imperial space. Vland was right in the line of fire, so when Lucan demanded the release of the Vland Fleet to add to his forces, the Domain of Vland had no choice but to refuse.

Having refused an Imperial decree and therefore committed themselves to rebellion, the Vilani went all the way, declaring independence from the Imperium and returning to the traditional way of doing things. The Megacorporations Sharushid, Naasirka and Makihdkarun were the modern forms of the old bureaux that ran the Ziru Sirka. Now they reverted to their old role and between them elected the traditional leader of the Vilani people, the Shadow Emperor.

The independent Vilani state took on the mantle of the Reestablished or Reconstituted Ziru Sirka. Both titles were used at various times, probably as a result of translation from Vilani to Galanglic, before being replaced by the more traditional 'Ziru Sirka' which is usually referred to as the New Ziru Sirka outside its borders. Although it was only a sector in size, the empire had access to the assets of the three Megacorporations. These were either sold to raise funds or transferred to Vland sector to augment the holdings of the new Ziru Sirka. Vland was a minor player in the Civil War, and other than some skirmishes with Strephon's faction as the zones of influence were established, the Ziru Sirka took little part in the conflict for the throne. Even Lucan left Vland more or less alone since there were more immediate threats to be dealt with first.

Vland faced a serious danger in the form of raiding by Vargr coming down from Coreward. This was curtailed by the fleet inherited by the Ziru Sirka, and by a more novel approach. The Vilani had at their disposal the services of the master traders of the old Imperium – the Megacorporations. By opening trade links with the Vargr, the Ziru Sirka not only found new markets for its goods but persuaded the Vargr states that more profit was to be had by taking (most of) their raiding elsewhere.

Thus it was that when Virus was released just a sector away, Vland was in reasonably good shape. The Viral Plague raced across Core, Dagudashaag and Lishun sectors, washing over the territories of the Ziru Sirka in a

tidal wave that might have drowned the Ziru Sirka but for two important factors. Both were a result of the ancient traditions and heritage of the Vilani people.

The first saving grace was the traditional Vilani mistrust of technology. Vland was a battleground for the Ancients, and the early millennia of the development of civilization on the world were plagued by Ancient war machines running wild. The last of them only ran down about 30,000 years before the Civil War. As a result of their rather fraught early history, the Vilani had a deep-rooted fear of technology getting out of hand. Machines they could not control were a threat, and could not be allowed to exist. This meant that all electronic equipment built in Vilani space carried multiple overrides and safety cutouts, giving a far better chance of containing infection. In addition, Vilani computer systems were less integrated than the standard Imperial versions, slowing the spread of Virus through an infected ship and making it much easier to convert vessels to a compartmentalized computer system.

The standard Vilani approach to technology was to 'black box' complex systems, and repairs were normally carried out by removing the entire malfunctioning system and replacing it with a new one. This approach was complemented by the traditional Vilani method of using extremely specialized computers for each of the various tasks aboard a vessel. Some of these machines were specialist devices and very different in architecture and function to the integrated general-function machines in use throughout the rest of Charted Space.

As a result, the Viral Plague found it relatively difficult to infect Vilani vessels, and countermeasures were far easier than aboard other ships. Perhaps the most significant advantage of a specialized, compartmentalized system was that if Virus gained control of, say, the communications computers it still had no direct link to life support and thus could not immediately begin killing the crew. Aboard an Imperial ship, infection meant a totally hostile ship almost instantly. In a Vilani-designed vessel, infection spread slowly through the various systems and while the crew would lose control of some parts of the vessel quickly, they at least had a chance to respond (normally by ripping out pathways or burning out particular computers).

The Vilani approach to failure-proofing their ships incidentally made them highly resistant to Virus, but this alone was not enough. The sheer weight of metal that the Virus Fleets could hurl at the staggering Vilani was enough to overwhelm the most valiant defense – and the last stand of the Ziru Sirka fleet was valiant indeed.

Gradually the fleet was driven back, falling into a tight perimeter around Vland and a few other important worlds. Infection broke out on these worlds, but was contained by desperate measures, and for almost 15 years Vland stood as a bulwark against the Viral Plague. Vampires were

able to slip around the defended regions and head out Spinward or into the Vargr Extents, but a large proportion of the Vampire fleets went against Vland.

Vland fell to Vampire assault in 1144, suffering a heavy orbital bombardment. By this time the electronics of the Vilani were heavily Virus-proofed, though infection did still occur. Technological facilities went mad or were destroyed, and the Vilani people watched their technology level start to drop. Given their early history, with mad war machines running around their planet and blasting each other, some among the Vilani became rampant technophobes convinced that any attempt to build something more complex than an abacus would eventually result in it assaulting the user. However, despite a certain feeling of vindication that their misgivings about technology had been correct, the Vilani set about regaining control of their world and their technology.

In this matter they were assisted by the second great advantage they enjoyed – tradition. When representatives of the Bureaux stepped forward to take control of a situation, people felt a sense of rightness created by millennia of habit. The Bureaux led the Fight for Vland, eventually more or less eradicating Virus infestation from the world by 1160. Technology was a problem, but what can be done efficiently at TL15 can still be done (albeit clumsily) at lower tech levels provided that basic knowledge of the involved concepts is retained. And in the case of the Vilani, low-tech solutions had never been forgotten. The traditions of the people, and the carefully-maintained repositories of knowledge, enabled activities to be carried out at the new, lower, tech level.

As the Vilani reached out from Vland and began to contact neighboring worlds, tradition worked in their favor here too. Millennia of traditions, maintained through the Rule of Man, the Long Night and the Third Imperium, had not been eroded by a mere few years of difficult times. When the old order re-emerged, the people of Vland sector rushed to join it.

The expansion of this new Ziru Sirka was not easy. Vampires and infected computer systems had to be cleared from each world, a proper bureaucracy established and correct oversight implemented before the world could begin to contribute to the new empire. In some cases, worlds did the unthinkable and resisted. The solution was traditionally harsh, dating back to the Consolidation Wars of the First Imperium. Rebels were given one chance to surrender then bombarded into submission from orbit. In the long run this method was highly cost-effective and ensured the smooth integration of a large number of worlds.

By 1185, the New Ziru Sirka had almost pushed its borders out as far as the boundaries of Vland Sector, and ten years after that it had regained nearly every system it had

controlled in the Rebellion period. Many of these worlds were 'boneyards'; planets where the population had been killed off by Virus or inhospitable conditions. A few outposts were set up beyond the Vland sector, and exploration missions were sent out in all directions. Less than half of them came back. The Wilds were highly dangerous at that time, even for ships of a power like Vland.

The end of the 'Dark Years' and the beginning of the recovery is generally considered to be around 1195. For the Vilani, this year was a landmark for slightly different reasons. Firstly, scouts reached Usdiki and the outer edge of the Regency Quarantine (which failed to react usefully for some time). A scouting mission was launched in the direction of the old Imperial Core. It did not return.

The second landmark was a decision known irreverently to historians as the Big Mistake. In 1195, the New Ziru Sirka was stretched very thin holding the systems it had cleared. Given a couple of decades to consolidate, it might have been able to begin growing again. But there were too many pressures on the border from Vampires, Vargr and rival states. There was also the fact that the Ziru Sirka had a mountain-sized chip on its metaphorical shoulder. It wanted to be the Grand Empire of Stars, not the New Vilani Imperium.

And so, in 1196, the New Ziru Sirka launched its own Consolidation Wars to clear its borders, put down opposition and crush or awe its rivals. This was a goal unto itself, but it was not the final one. Consolidating would relieve the pressure long enough to take the next step on the road to Empire – an advance towards Capital itself. If the New Ziru Sirka could take and hold the old capital of the Third Imperium, it would have a strong position from which to conduct diplomacy with its rivals; diplomacy with one goal – the reintegration of the whole territory of the old Ziru Sirka into the new.

In those heady days, especially as the initial campaigns met with runaway success, the Vilani actually believed they could achieve their dream. It was not for several years that their plans began to go horribly awry.

THE IMPERIAL SUCCESSORS – THE USDIKI FACTION

When Emperor Strephon allowed himself to be 'revealed' as an imposter and thereby took his faction out of the fight for the Imperial throne, he took the title Marquis of Usdiki, one of his hereditary minor titles. In this capacity, Strephon led his people through the Hard Times and under his guidance they faced the Collapse.

Other factions did attack Usdiki from time to time but by 1121, when Strephon opted out of the war, exhaustion had already set in and for the most part the main factions concentrated on battling one another. Lucan made a last

great effort to destroy Strephon's faction and incorporate Usdiki into his domain in 1121. Although Usdiki took some heavy losses, Lucan's Gushemege Campaign was halted. After this, there were no resources for such 'sideshow' offensives. Everything was committed to crushing Dulinor and minor considerations like sweeping up the other players in the game could wait until the main victory was won. Assuming it ever was...

Thus Usdiki was able to fend off the minor assaults that came its way and remained stable, with a 'safe area' about a subsector in size spread over four subsectors, plus a frontier area about twice as large where Usdiki exerted considerable influence but was not totally in control of the situation. This area contained relatively few worlds, however, due to Usdiki's position on the edge of the Great Rift. Thus although at the start of the Hard Times, Usdiki controlled a safe area about the same size as the Ziru Sirka or Margaret's Imperium and about a quarter as large as that of the two main factions, the industrial capacity of Strephon's faction was very small. In addition, the productivity of all the frontier regions, while declining, was still considerable, and Usdiki had the smallest frontier region of any factions. Its safe area backed onto the Great Rift, but in all other directions the defended zone was frighteningly thin, with no prospects of replacing vessels lost defending it.

But still Usdiki held out as the Hard Times deepened. In 1126 Strephon sent his son Avery away with the *Arrival Vengeance* mission, giving him into the care of Archduke Norris of the Domain of Deneb. Strephon believed that Avery was vital to the future of his people – all his people, not just those in the Usdiki Pocket – and that his place was with Norris.

In this, Strephon was entirely correct. Avery was his gift to the future, a gift given not because Strephon had a vision of the future but because he had faith. Faith that when the time came, intelligent and resourceful people would make use of the resources available to them and build a new society. Avery was one such resource, and Strephon hoped that he might even be one of those resourceful people. Another resource was Project Jumpstart, a set of caches of equipment and teaching tools that could be used to help rebuild society after a major catastrophe. Jumpstart was not implemented with a post-civil war scenario in mind but it would fit the purpose admirably, so Strephon sent the locations of all the Jumpstart caches to Archduke Norris with Avery. These acts make it look like Strephon did not really expect to survive the coming days. That may be the case, but he certainly meant to try. Hedging his bets by sending Avery and the Jumpstart data away did little to detract from the chances of Usdiki surviving the Hard Times.

In 1130, as the Viral Plague was being released from Capital to Dlan, the forces of Usdiki were tired, battered and war-weary, but they faced the last challenge as bravely as could have been hoped. The Viral Plague washed over the Usdiki Frontier, causing untold damage, and the last of Strephon's fleets made a stand over Usdiki itself. Their task seemed hopeless, but it is not in the nature of humans to shrink from impossible odds – especially when there is no acceptable alternative but to fight on.

The relatively sparse star systems at the edge of the Great Rift acted to slow down the onrush of the first wave of Virus, and the fleet and system defense squadrons put up a terrific fight. In this, they had a small advantage over the navies of some other factions. As Emperor, Strephon knew about the weapon being developed at Research Station Omicron. He could never have anticipated the form that weapon would eventually take, but he did know that Lucan's faction had access to a research station which was researching a weapon that could infiltrate vessels via their computer systems and take control of them. Steps had been taken to render Strephon's warships and planetary defense systems as proof against this weapon system as possible.

Strephon's measures were not 100% effective; ships and ground installations did become infected, and other computer systems such as those controlling civilian traffic and power stations were not protected very well, if at all. Usdiki and the worlds close by took a battering in the early days but a combination of astrography and partial resistance to infection reduced the effect of the Viral Plague to a steady pressure rather than a hammerblow. Low-Jump vessels could not reach the worlds sheltering behind Usdiki itself, and even higher-Jump vessels were channeled through a handful of systems which could be defended by the few remaining warships.

Crash-production of a fleet of rather poor patrol and strike vessels enabled the Usdiki Pocket to hold out, though at a fearful cost. The new-built warships, with their green crews, were lost as fast as they could be hurled into the fight. The defense of the Pocket became a fanatical struggle for survival. Systems were lost and retaken; each time eating up the precious reserve that had been scraped together against such an eventuality.

Small 'torpedo boats' were the mainstay of the defenses. These were simple craft, mounting a light laser armament but in reality existing for one purpose only – to get close enough to an enemy vessel to launch the two short-range, high-acceleration 'torpedoes' carried on external grapples. Few crews survived their attack, as their craft were flimsy in the extreme and could be killed by even a Free Trader. However, they got the job done and in groups could inflict serious damage against even a large combatant – provided

the crews were willing to take massive casualties in order to deliver their attack.

The 'Usdiki Torpedo Service' held the line on the outer edge of the Usdiki Pocket and patrolled the rear area while more robust craft were constructed. The torpedo boats were even pressed into service for offensive operations outside the Pocket. As the initial shockwave receded a little, Strephon launched a daring (some say stupidly aggressive) campaign to salvage what he could from worlds outside the Pocket. The few surviving transports and merchant ships were formed into the Salvage Service and sent out to rescue key personnel and critical components from the nearby worlds. The only escorts available for these dangerous missions were crudely cobbled-together torpedo-boat carriers and gunships converted from whatever vessels survived. None of the handful of major naval vessels still in service could be risked. The Imperial Yacht was lost on such a mission, crippled by an infected destroyer as she attempted to cover the retreat of a salvage flotilla, though Strephon was not aboard.

Between 1131-8, the Salvage Campaign retrieved large quantities of industrial equipment and rescued many skilled workers (plus a large number of ordinary citizens, but this had to be a secondary priority) from the worlds along the fringe of the Pocket. Losses forced the abandonment of the campaign in 1138. After this Usdiki made do with what she had, building up her ravaged industry and creating a small fleet to replace her heroic torpedo boat squadrons.

The situation did not begin to stabilize until well into the 1140s. As late as 1146, the Pocket was in serious danger of collapsing, and Vampire vessels were able to raid the 'safe' worlds for many years to come. However, as the Dark Years deepened and the first wave of Virus burned itself out, Usdiki remained a technological society and was able to hold her own.

The Torpedo Service fought its last action in 1149, a minor skirmish against a pair of Vampires attempting to penetrate the frontier systems. Losses were as high as ever, but by this time the eggshell-armed-with-a-hammer torpedo boats had been largely replaced by heavily armored gunships armed with fusion weapons, backed up by fast monitors mounting heavy missile or particle accelerator batteries and a fleet of strike destroyers that could bring down a typical Vampire without major losses. The heroes of the Torpedo Service, some of them living legends who had survived six or more attacks, transferred to other ships and the torpedo boats went into reserve. 1149 was thus a turning point for Usdiki. It was the year that stability replaced desperation in Strephon's planning. By this time the Marquis' health was failing badly, and he increasingly relied on a group of trusted advisors to run

the daily affairs of what at that time was known as the Usdiki Marquisate.

In 1153, a new Salvage Campaign was launched. This one met very limited success despite the greater resources that could be allocated. Nearby worlds had been picked over by the first campaign, and the surviving inhabitants were resentful of the Marquisate for 'stealing' resources that they could have used to survive. With no gains to be made near to home, Strephon made the decision to push out and go farther afield. This was a considerable undertaking, and required that a forward base be set up. To this end, Strephon created the Usdiki Reconstruction Service, which set about creating a forward base but also attempted to assist the population of nearby worlds in dealing with their own problems. Success was very limited, and after a few months the surviving teams were withdrawn.

Strephon's great salvage mission, which he insisted upon personally leading, did manage to locate a Jumpstart cache and to recover some useful relics from the Wilds, but losses were considerable. Many of the vessels that did not come home were lost not to Vampires but to territorial human populations engaged in warfare with one another or attempting to seize the precious starships.

Upon returning from the second Salvage Campaign, an ailing Strephon laid out his plans for the future. His people would create an impregnable fortress in the Usdiki Pocket and make every effort to become self-sufficient. Meanwhile, they would send out ships into the Wilds with a new mission. Their mission was to be peacemakers and messengers. They would encourage the survivors to talk to one another and to cease warring over what little salvage remained. Usdiki would never again take anything from those who held it, but would trade technology and other assistance for whatever was available. In short, Marquis Strephon of Usdiki ordered his people would return to the stars as traders and as peacemakers. They would help others help themselves. Those who wanted to climb out of the wreckage would join freely in such an enterprise. Those who wanted to fight over the ruins could get on with it and be damned.

Strephon Aella Alkhalikoi, Marquis of Usdiki and last Emperor of the Third Imperium, died in 1157. His tomb on Usdiki was dedicated not to the Emperor but to the memory of Strephon the Peacemaker. For by the time of his death, already the Usdiki Peacemakers were leaving the Pocket with messages of hope and friendship. In those days the way was hard, and most did not return.

The Peacemakers found their work hardest near to Usdiki, on the worlds targeted for the Salvage Campaign. But even there, some were willing to listen to their message. They made no grand promises; they would help those who

wanted to help themselves but could offer little in material terms. They would carry messages to other worlds or act as mediators. They acknowledged that they had not come to save anyone, merely to help those who wanted to make a better future for themselves.

Perhaps it was this determined realism more than anything else that convinced the doubters, but in the years 1158-1170 the Peacemakers were able to forge a shaky alliance of a dozen worlds. Technical assistance was made available, plus the resources of Jumpstart. The Usdiki Fleet made just one foray to the aid of an alliance member during that time, remaining on station to protect the Pocket the rest of the time.

In 1173 the first ship came into Usdiki from the old Imperium. She was the Armed Merchant Cruiser *Iridium Hope*, out of the three-world Gushemege Trading Alliance. That year the Usdiki Defense Fleet transferred some ships to a new fleet, the Expeditionary Force, and this small but tough and well-motivated squadron was joined a year later by the missile cruiser *Strephon's Gift*, built and operated jointly by the two worlds of the Kaapaki Defense Pact.

These vessels represented landmarks in the progress of the Usdiki Marquisate, which was now the largest and most prosperous of seven multiworld states in Gushemege Sector. These states (and a number of affiliated single worlds or nations on balkanized worlds) were linked by 'trade corridors' that ran through systems patrolled by the Expeditionary Force. Trade was dangerous and vessels were frequently lost, but the links grew stronger year by year.

In 1180 the various worlds and states agreed to a charter that defined their relationship, and bound them formally into the Usdiki Trade Federation. The guiding principle of the Federation was that no world or state would be required or forced to join. The success of the Federation would induce others to apply to join without pressure being necessary. In part, this enlightened policy was simple recognition that the Federation lacked the means to force worlds to join, and that the use of coercion or force might lead to a backlash among members or prospective members that would harm the Federation. The downside of this arrangement was that the trade corridors could have been made shorter and more direct, but were not, and this meant that ships were lost needlessly. However, the Peacemakers were right in their assessment. Seeing nearby worlds clearing Virus infection and achieving a measure of prosperity made a few worlds jealous and aggressive, but most wanted a part of what was happening and were offered it on very generous terms.

By 1185 the League covered half of Gushemege sector and, while weak and decentralized, represented a major power in the region. The Federation Expeditionary

Force, up until then comprising mostly vessels on loan from the Usdiki Marquisate and a few supplied by the more prosperous Federation members, received its first custom-built vessels. By 1190 these were based at several worlds in the sector, on territory that was leased to the Federation. Crews came from across the Federation and were integrated into a unified service that swore to defend the 'Federation and its People' rather than any member state or world.

The model for this force was of course the old Imperial Navy and, taking that model further, the Federation created the Federation Interstellar Scout Service, the Federation Marine Corps, and the Federation Reconstruction Service. These forces were based on their Usdiki forerunners, but gained a distinctly cosmopolitan membership once they became controlled by the Federation Council rather than the Grand Council of Usdiki. The Federation Diplomatic Corps was also distinctly cosmopolitan in outlook and composition, but it was only referred to as the FDC in official documents. In daily use its personnel were known as the Usdiki Peacemakers, and their emblem was a shattered Sunburst.

By the mid 1190s, the Federation was weak but stable, covering two-thirds of Gushemege and growing steadily. Peacemaker contact missions had met the Vilani of the New Ziru Sirka. Missions to Ilelish returned with tales of ravaged wilderness, and those sent to Core sector did not return at all. An attempt to cross the Great Rift ended in failure. But the Peacemakers were now coming home with tales of hope. For here and there amid the wreckage, something was stirring. Humaniti had fallen, and fallen hard, but now the lights were flickering on again here and there. For every enlightened reconstructor there were ten brutal warlords; for every trader there were two slavers. But there were signs that things were improving a little.

And the Peacemakers heard a name whispered on many worlds; a name that seemed to have as much power as their own. Finally, on a devastated world in Zarushagar sector, the Usdiki Peacemakers met the Sons of Craig, and all that was best of the old Imperium came together to face the future. On that day, 119-1195, the Dark Years ended and the Recovery began in earnest.

BEACONS IN THE NIGHT – POCKET EMPIRES AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Amid the wreckage of the Wilds, many small states managed to cling to technology and civilization of a sort. Most were brutal dictatorships but some, such as the group of survivor worlds that became the Dawn League of the Old Expanses, had more enlightened goals. The years were hard, and most of these pocket empires succumbed to conflict with one another or with Vampire Fleets. However, some struggled on, reaching out to others or just clinging on in the fading hope that someone

out there would come to their aid. The Sons of Craig and the Peacemakers moved among these pocket empires, bringing hope where they could, and carrying messages or offering advice. In most cases they were unable to make much difference, but here and there the tenuous contact led to greater things.

Other organizations emerged during this time, often as alliances between the crews of surviving starships. Mercenary groups, pirate organizations and mercantile fraternities emerged, sharing information and mutual assistance. Free Trader Networks appeared in various regions. One organization that appeared in Diaspora Sector was the Mercantile Guild. Initially a benevolent alliance between free trader crews, the Guild was gradually taken over by a clique of empire-builders who backed dictators on various worlds in return for spares and maintenance. Their goal was to keep a monopoly on interstellar trade in the region, and they used their aggressive allies to destroy all opposition to this goal. Yet the Guild was not entirely bad. Founded by good people with the best of intentions, it went through a dark period but eventually redeemed itself.

THE EARLY RECONSTRUCTION (1196-1205)

The period from 1196 onward saw considerable progress towards reconstruction. The worst of the Viral Plague had passed. This was not necessarily a good thing. The Viral Entities of this period were relatively stable but still utterly indifferent or inimical towards organic life. A steady flow of Vampire ships moved out of the so-called 'Black Curtain' around Core Sector, while other vessels entered the Core for reasons unknown.

At the turn of the century, there was no way for those outside the Black Curtain to see or understand the horror that was the Black Imperium. When the Curtain was finally penetrated, much data was lost in the wars that followed. Thus the history of the Black Imperium is not recorded here.

Across Charted Space, a few isolated worlds, finding the pressure of Vampire activity had eased somewhat, were able to reach out to their neighbors and open tentative contact. Some traded or created mutual assistance pacts, but most settled for the easier but shortsighted path of using their ships for conquest or raiding. However, there were a few enlightened states and organizations in this period, who worked to bring civilization back to the stars. The Sons of Craig, scattered wherever their fate took them, sought out these enclaves of civilization and brought them word that there were others doing likewise. Where they could the Sons of Craig acted as messengers or advisors to these emerging interstellar states. In other places they were forced simply to keep their heads down and survive, to pass on their self-assumed mission to others like them, and to hope that better days would come.

In Diaspora Sector, the Mercantile Guild had, at its formation, offered great prospects. An alliance of ships' captains dedicated to making their lives a little safer by sharing information and locations of safe ports, the Guild was able to maintain trade and contact between many worlds. Its priceless relic starships might have been the means by which civilization was rebuilt in Diaspora Sector.

It was not to be. Gradually, as the Guild grew in size and influence, a new breed of captain rose to leadership within its ranks. These were ruthless opportunists with their own agenda. Any trader hoping to survive in the Wilds had to be well-armed and a bit hard-nosed, but these individuals were more than that. They were in their own way, warlords.

The Council of Admirals, as the leaders of the Guild came to call themselves, was dominated by these warlords, who were determined to gain and maintain a monopoly on interstellar trade in the sector. Independents were forced to join the Guild and submit to its rules, or were run off (or killed and their ships taken).

The Guild invested in some of the more pliable societies of Diaspora Sector, setting up a network of arms manufacturers, spares suppliers and safe ports. They were careful to ensure that all of their planet-bound were dependent upon them for offworld goods, thus keeping control of their 'allies'. The produce of these allies were sold across the sector and the proceeds (including slaves take in raids) were sold on Guild-influenced worlds.

This setup worked against the possibility of creating a new interstellar society, since those who controlled communication and trade were determined that no one else was going to challenge their monopoly. To this end, the Guild backed certain worlds in their efforts to plunder others of their technology. One example was Imperial Raymore, a world in Diaspora sector with delusions of Empire. With Guild assistance, Raymore was able to make war on the Lerun Federation, a tiny civilized state that had retained starflight and was reaching out to help its neighbors recivilize. Raymore's savage assault took several worlds from Lerun; their technology was then used to fuel further conquest. This sort of warfare was ultimately short-sighted and self-limiting as irreplaceable vessels were destroyed in combat over relatively worthless worlds. The Guild was happy to let this situation continue, so long as the Federation was removed as a threat to their monopoly.

However, there were others whose ambitions went beyond merely improving their own lifestyle or wielding power for its own sake.

DIASPORA PHOENIX - THE UNITED WORLDS

Out of the Raymore/Lerun conflict in Diaspora came an unusual entity, the United Worlds. Created as a self-defense alliance between the captains of a handful starships and three worlds that between them had things the others needed, the United Worlds was what has been termed an 'Adventurer Kingdom'. Founded on little more than guts and faith, the UW somehow managed to cobble together and salvage enough of a technological base to resist the Mercantile Guild-backed forces of Imperial Raymore. Sending a mission to the beleaguered Lerun Federation, the UW committed itself not merely to survival but to assisting the many fallen worlds of the area – and especially those trying to throw off the Guild yoke and rebuild something worthwhile.

By 1200 or so the UW possessed a small flotilla of Jump-capable ships and system defense squadrons of TL-8 missile boats. Betrayed by their allies on Lerun, the UW was forced to defend its handful of worlds against the Guild-backed forces of Imperial Raymore. The Battle of Phoenix (the capital of the UW) in 1203 should by all common sense have seen the fall of this gallant little state. But fate was on their side. First, they had the help of the Sons of Craig, who called in every favor owed to them by every world and every ship captain within 30 parsecs. Most found reasons not to be at Phoenix for the final assault, but the Raymore fleet hit a much tougher resistance than expected. Some Guild captains, dismayed at the way their organization had been perverted by the slavers and the empire-builders, came over to the UW side or merely engaged in passive resistance by failing to deliver their cargoes of war materiel at the right time and place.

But what saved the United Worlds was an act of mercy and kindness. Years before, the soon-to-be leaders of the UW had captured a Raymore/Guild crew. They were treated well and released unharmed, and at the Battle of Phoenix several of them were among the crew of a Raymore warship. At a critical moment in the battle, these individuals and some close allies took control of the ship and turned their weapons on the Raymore squadron from within. The ensuing chaos turned the Battle of Phoenix and arguably saved civilization in Diaspora sector. (See the novels *Diaspora Phoenix* and *Phoenix at Bay* for more details).

From 1200 onwards, the United Worlds controlled a small cluster of worlds but its reputation as a safe port for Free Traders made it a center for commerce. This in turn attracted the attention of the emerging Reformation Coalition.

SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS - THE DAWN LEAGUE

In the Old Expanses, the Hiver Technical Academies began producing trained starship crews and technicians, and tentative trade began between several worlds from about 1195. By 1197 this trade organization included 20 worlds and formalized its relationships in a charter that named it the league of the New Dawn. A little later this became the Dawn League. Although internally divided, the dawn league possessed a reasonable technological base and, with Hiver help, was able to maintain solid contact among its members.

In 1199, the Dawn league optimistically sent 12 precious relic starships on a trading mission beyond its borders. These vessels were more or less unarmed and none returned. An armed expedition to discover the fate of the 'innocents' was able to rescue some crews and revealed that most vessels had fallen victim to the common threats

of the Wilds – Vampires, trigger-happy and paranoid rivals and brutal overlords that saw the arrival of a trade vessel as an unmissable opportunity to capture a starship.

The armed expedition suffered relatively minor losses, and a shift in policy took place in the Dawn League. The nearby worlds contained valuable relic technology that could be used to rebuild the League worlds, but it would not always be possible to trade or negotiate for it. No longer would innocents go out to be murdered in the Wilds. The League renamed itself the Reformation Coalition, and now its ships and personnel went armed into the Wilds. They came in friendship and with offers of assistance ('bootstrap operations') and trade for those who were friendly. Those who were not would be dealt with harshly, and the Coalition would take what it needed from those who were misusing it.

The morality of these 'Star Vikings', who raided and took what they needed by force of arms, has been long debated. The simple fact is that they were trying to rebuild a society that could live in peace and they were willing to do almost anything to accomplish their aim. These were dark times and the Star Vikings were their natural product of the prevailing conditions.

The things the Star Vikings did were bloody and at times terrible, but their intentions were to rebuild, not to destroy or conquer. If any doubt as to the character of the Star Vikings remains, historians need only look to the deeds of the Reformation Coalition in the War of the Grand Alliance or the Last Stand against the Dominate. And when the call came to leave Charted Space behind and plunge into the unknown to rescue a race of strangers, it was the Star Vikings that boarded their ships and left their homes.

But in 1201, the Star Vikings were feared and hated on many worlds. This was partly propaganda spun by the Guild and the various warlords of the sector, but in part the reputation was deserved.

THE HEYDAY OF THE STAR VIKINGS – THE SOLEE CONFLAGRATION AND THE SANDMAN PACT

During the period 1201-1205, the Star Vikings aggressively expanded their borders. Where economic benefit and diplomacy sufficed, the Reformation Coalition absorbed worlds peaceably. Where they resisted, worlds were bypassed or conquered. Sickened by their losses, the Star Vikings became increasingly cynical and trigger-happy, to the point where many ships had a policy of 'shoot first and don't bother with questions at all'. This led to unnecessary conflict as often as it saved Coalition lives.

The expansion of the Reformation Coalition was interrupted by the Empire of Solee, a Pocket Empire built on a cache

of relic Solomani warships left over from the Collapse. With its large but poorly-trained navy, Solee was able to gain control of a number of nearby systems, eventually coming into contact with the Reformation Coalition.

During this period, two other important events took place. First was contact with the Covenant of Sufren, a small state in Coreward Diaspora sector that had managed to survive the Dark Years. The mission to contact Sufren also discovered the fate of one of the missing Dawn League ships. More importantly, perhaps, a mission to the world of Promise in Diaspora sector brought back 'Sandman', a stable and apparently friendly Viral Entity which willingly gave itself into the hands of the Star Vikings in order to make contact.

Sandman was the first 'Viral Person' documented. 'He' appeared to be sane, friendly and willing to co-operate with organics as an equal. The decision of the Promise mission team not to terminate Sandman but to treat him as a diplomatic envoy was to forever change the future – and also came close to destroying the Reformation Coalition. The debate for and against accepting Sandman was fierce, and perhaps the only reason it did not completely shatter the Coalition was the imminent threat posed by the Solee Empire.

Although the RC was gravely outnumbered by the Solee, and possessed no large warships able to take on the Solee dreadnoughts head-on, the Coalition was able to divide Solee strength by clever diplomacy and covert operations, triggering uprisings on several worlds of the Empire. Fast spoiling raids and attacks on Solee logistics bases and the vital 'fleet train' that kept the battle fleet capable of offensive action prevented the Solee from striking the knockout blow they needed.

The Coalition suffered heavy losses in the course of the war but was ultimately able to write down the Solee fleet's strength and inflict defeats that shook the confidence of the Empire in its leader. Eventually, the Empress was deposed by an alliance of her advisors and generals, and the Solee Empire came to an accord with the Coalition that allowed for the creation of a border zone which included several worlds that chose to secede from the Empire.

At the height of the Solee Conflagration, the Reformation Coalition Navy made the momentous decision to accept Sandman's offer to make copies of himself which would join the crews of warships as a sort of living gunnery computer. Severely outnumbered, the RCN needed an edge, and they gambled their lives that Sandman could offer them one without turning their ships into sentient deathtraps.

The gamble paid off in terms of a leap in gunnery efficiency aboard RCN warships equipped with a Sandman-hosting

gunnery computer. This was a factor in some of the victories and successful last-ditch defenses won by the RCN. While many personnel (especially members of the RCES, the Exploratory Service) were deeply suspicious of Sandman and would not set foot aboard a host ship, Sandman played an important part in winning the Solee War (or at least, in creating the conditions under which it could be ended) and was even recommended for medals alongside organic crew members.

Sandman's new status as a war hero was one of the critical factors in gaining him acceptance within the Coalition. One side-effect was an improvement in the effectiveness of the 'Snake' antiviral weapon – itself a tailored Viral strain – created by Covenant of Sufren researchers. Sandman was able to modify and teach the Snake weapon to be far more effective, and to direct its actions in some cases. Snake was not fully sentient; for this reason it has been described as 'Sandman's attack dog'. Snake became a key weapon against Virus, defensively prowling electronic systems to attack any attempt at infection or being deliberately introduced into suspect systems to search for viral traces and to attack them. Snake backfired or went mad from time to time, and some Sandman clones were not 100% stable, but overall Sandman earned his place as a hero in Reformation Coalition society and history.

Meanwhile, despite its power, the Solee Empire was somewhat 'hollow' and lacked the resources to maintain its powerful military. One solution to this was to mothball ships, but some were actually leased or sold to the Reformation Coalition after the war in order to raise funds to support the others. This act was one of many that divided opinions in the Empire, and did in time lead to internal troubles.

Solee struggled on as the 'Sick Man of the Trailing Frontier' for several years, wracked by internal divisions, secession and a chronic lack of technological support for its military. The Reformation Coalition gradually began to provide this support, bringing several factions within the Empire around to a position where they were active supporters of the Star Vikings.

TENSION IN DIASPORA – THE UNITED WORLDS MEETS THE STAR VIKINGS

The United Worlds Alliance (or later, just the United Worlds) was not particularly expansionistic, but at the time of contact the Reformation Coalition was struggling with its own identity and its personnel were particularly cynical and burned-out. The UW was quickly stereotyped as just another TED (Technologically Elevated Dictator) and subjected to perfunctory pro-forma diplomatic initiatives for no better reason than that was required by the rules of engagement before the upstart was stomped and assimilated.

At the time of this first contact, the Coalition was also having problems with rogue personnel, some of whom had gone off into the Wilds to set up their own pocket empires. Most were brutal dictatorships, though a few were actually quite enlightened states set up by personnel with good intentions but who were unable to stomach the internal politics of the Coalition.

The situation was further complicated by the growing rift between the two main partners in the Reformation Coalition, the Aubaini and the Oriflammen. The Aubaini, with their idealistic world-view, were suspicious of Oriflammen hard-nosed policies that looked remarkably like those of the TEDS they were putting down. The Reformation Coalition was on the brink of splitting in 1204, when the Secretary General announced that Sandman and his 'offspring' would be considered full citizens of the Coalition, as would all living machines that shared the goals of the Coalition.

Against this backdrop of increasing tension the Star Vikings wearily prepared to steamroller the United Worlds, which had rebuffed the initial, aggressive diplomatic overtures and was frantically preparing itself to repel this overbearing empire encroaching from Trailing. Misunderstandings became skirmishes throughout 1205 as the Reformation Coalition, distracted by internal divisions and the need to eliminate the main Guild bases once and for all, tried to overawe the United Worlds with its strength as it had much of Diaspora Sector and parts of the Old Expanses. The UW, out of pride and desperation, forged an alliance with those Guild remnants as would come over to their side, and built up its strength as best it could.

At the end of 1205, the Guild's power was broken in Diaspora Sector and internal relations were well enough shored up to allow the RC to deal with its latest foe. Time was running out for the United Worlds.

AN UNTHINKABLE SCHISM – THE ZHODANI EXODUS

Meanwhile, far to Spinward, the Regency was struggling to cope with a new problem. Along its Coreward border lay the Zhodani Consulate, the most stable and long-lasting civilization in human history. There had been hints of problems in the Consulate as early as 1119, when Longbow stations observed what appeared to be space combat along the Coreward border. Vessel transfers from the border suggested that something was going on in the interior of the Consulate, and now the proof was there for all to see.

A horde of refugees – billions of them – came pouring into Regency space from the Consulate, beginning in 1201. Many of the refugees could not explain exactly why they had fled. They were aware that there was fighting going

on in the Consulate, and that others had come through their homeworlds speaking of a terrible unraveling of Zhodani society, but most had never seen these things for themselves. The reason for the sudden flight of billions was not immediately clear, but gradually it emerged that the refugees had experienced terrible 'intimations of doom' and an overwhelming compulsion to flee before... something.

In Zhodani society there were three levels of society, based on psionic ability. The bulk of the population were Proles, with no psionic capability. Above them, as middle managers and leaders, were the Intendents, who had psionic abilities. Above them, as leaders and rulers, were the nobles. Nobles were psionically adept but this was not the only factor that raised them above the Intendents. Hereditary position or success in the Psionic Games were the common routes into the nobility of the Consulate, though there were others. Even the Proles – some might say *especially* the Proles – had felt these 'intimations of doom'. They are now known to be connected with the phenomenon known as the Empress Wave, but at the time of the Exodus this was nothing more than a theory.

The refugees that poured into the Regency included a lower than usual proportion of Intendents and Nobles among them, and this, coupled with the fact that the Proles were used to a well-ordered, harmonious society, caused the Exodus to become even more of a shambles than might have been expected. Zhodani Proles benefited from psionic treatment of mental illnesses and conditions considered normal elsewhere, such as unhappiness with one's lot in life. For many of the refugees, this mental adjustment had begun to unravel, making the majority of refugees at least somewhat unstable as they tried to deal with a rush of emotions they had never before experienced. Some went quite mad, but most managed to adjust.

The other great problem faced by the refugee Proles was posed by the population they were suddenly thrust among. Zhodani were truthful and honest, and came from a society where locks were something that kept the wind from blowing a door open. Finding themselves among people to whom deceit and robbery were not unthinkable, the Zhodani Proles were at a disadvantage. Fortunately, some Intendents and Nobles had been able to accompany their people and were able to protect them to some extent. The Regency as a whole was made up of decent people who, while they distrusted and feared their long-time enemies and did not appreciate several billion refugees suddenly appearing on their doorstep, pitied their plight and were moved to help as far as they could without greatly inconveniencing themselves.

The Regency authorities took it further and actively tried to help the refugees, though sheer numbers and pressing issues elsewhere made this a difficult undertaking. In

time, however, the refugees became part of the Regency; yet another faction in its complicated makeup. Since the Regency had embraced psionics, the Zhodani no longer seemed like such a threat. The fact that something terrible enough to drive them into the Regency had occurred was frightening, however, and it was obvious that the problem was not over. By 1205 the Exodus had abated somewhat, but refugees still came over the border fleeing visions of doom and the very real fighting going on deeper in the Consulate. The nature and cause of that fighting remained unknown for some time.

THE GREAT LANDRUSH – REGENCY EXPANSION

Starting in 1202, the Regency began to expand out from its secure perimeter. This expansion was strictly one-way: vessels coming back in were subject to quarantine and inspection every bit as strict as that used for ships out of the Wilds. Despite this, a horde of ships crossed the frontier in search of salvage or territorial claims.

The systems nearest the Regency border had for nearly a century been a battleground where Quarantine sweeps tackled Vampire vessels and the occasional mission sought salvage among the abandoned worlds. Most of the 'land-rush' vessels thus leapfrogged over this area and headed out into the deep Wilds. Little was known about conditions in this region, and many ships fell foul of misadventure or xenophobic locals – and of course the ever-present threat of Virus.

The landrush vessels were of course armed for self-protection, and disputes between expeditions were neither uncommon nor without casualties. Claims were enforced with whatever weapons were available, and there were incidences of outright piracy from time to time. Policing of the landrush was virtually impossible, though some Quarantine Service vessels and a larger number of mercenary warships were deployed to protect the common routes into and out of the Regency. These vessels were able to make the odd sweep and attempted to enforce law where they could, but other than this, the Regency Landrush was a free-for-all.

Vessels mainly headed out into the Wilds of Deneb and Corridor sectors, though some pushed into the more ravaged areas of the Vargr Splinters and a smaller number made the trek across the Great Rift via the Islands, setting up bases on the far edge of the Rift in Reft sector and (very gradually) pushing out to Trailing and Rimward from there.

These private expeditions were accompanied by a (far smaller) number of official Regency exploration & contact missions. Some of the latter were followed up by salvage operations targeted at important sites. Others were diplomatic missions made necessary by the conduct of

the independents or aimed at finding survivor states and establishing relations with them. One such diplomatic mission pushed into Gushemege Sector in 1203 and encountered the Usdiki Trade Federation. Contact was intermittent but in late 1204 a formal delegation from the Regency arrived at Usdiki and, with great reverence and ceremony, placed a letter written in 1126 by Archduke Norris to the former Emperor on Strehphon's tomb.

The attitude of the Regency towards Usdiki was distinctly mixed. Some despised the Trade Federation as a vestige of the old Imperium whose bloody end had brought such suffering to all of Charted Space. Others in the Regency saw themselves as better than Usdiki or even its rightful overlords, since they had kept the flame burning for so long.

The official position of the Regency's leaders was summed up by High Regent Caranda Aledon Alkhalikoi (son of Seldrian Aledon and Avery Alkhalikoi and thus a scion of the Imperial house as well as the line of Norris, Archduke of Deneb) in an unofficial communiqué to the Council of Advisors at Usdiki:

*My friends, I had not dared to hope.
For decades we of the Regency have Kept the Flame,
thinking we were all alone in the darkness.
Now we have found you, and we know that it has not been
in vain.
Together the Regents and the Peacemakers will go
forward into the future, honoring all that was best of our
forefathers even as we build a new society among the
stars.*

*No longer are we the Keepers of the Flame. Now we know
that there are others who need its light, and we must go
to them.
Now we must become the Bearers of the Flame, the
bringers of light.*

*Whatever befalls, I will not forget this moment.
Gods bless you and light your way.*

Caranda, High Regent.

From the Peacemakers, the Regency received confirmation of a rumor that was coming back from the Landrush missions that had penetrated farthest into Corridor sector. There was another power just Trailing of Coreward; an Empire claiming lineage from the First Imperium and based on Vland. A diplomatic mission was quickly assembled, and in 1205 the Regency made formal contact with the Ziru Sirka. War followed soon after.

TAKING THE FLAME – CONSOLIDATION OF THE USDIKI TRADE FEDERATION

When the Regency made contact in 1203, the Usdiki Trade Federation was quietly consolidating its hold on Gushemege sector and sending out armed scouting and trade expeditions into Ilelish and Dagudashaag sectors. The Federation was a very loose entity, despite its possession of centralized armed forces, and as a whole was not expansionistic. Some of the member states were willing to annex the odd world, but by this time it had been discovered that annexation meant a drain on the economy for a long time before any return could be expected, plus further commitment of already overstretched forces to defend the new territory.

Some worlds just *had* to be occupied and defended for the good of the Federation, for example systems occupying a strategic choke-point location. These 'Federation Worlds' were administered by military governors appointed by the Federation Council of Advisors, and were the subject of colonization or uplift operations administered by the Federation Reconstruction Service. Funding for the Federation Worlds came from central coffers contributed to by all members, and with the needs of the fleet and the scout service there was never enough money to develop these worlds to the point where they could provide for their own defense.

For this reason it became not uncommon to allow corporations to develop worlds or single colonies on a world, and to make a profit from doing so. By 1205 several world-corporations (WorldCorps) existed, and colonial development was undertaken by three large development firms which subcontracted some areas of their operation and ran entire planets as subsidiaries. These corporations were very powerful within the Federation, and there was some worry about exactly how much influence they wielded. However, the Federation was created very much in the image of the old Imperium, where the early nobility came mainly from corporate backgrounds, and so the rise of the new Supercorporations was seen as both inevitable and entirely natural.

Peacemaker and Scout Service vessels were by 1205 ranging far across the old Imperium, though it had been discovered that attempting to penetrate the Black Curtain was nothing more than pointless suicide. The Federation had made tentative contact with Vland, and as the new Ziru Sirka expanded, border skirmishes were becoming more common. The Federation repeatedly offered to discuss borders and to withdraw from some systems to create a buffer zone, but the Vilani simply ignored them, running off Federation ships wherever they encountered them and annexing worlds as they pleased.

By 1205, the Federation was resigned to drawing a line and repelling anything from Vland that crossed it. If the

Vilani would not talk, the only option was conflict. The outbreak of hostilities was delayed only by the fact that the Federation could not decide on where to draw the line, nor which naval squadrons would be sent to defend it.

THE RISE OF THE POWERS (1206-1208)

The period 1206-1208 saw the establishment of the 'big players' in what had been Imperial space.

CONFLICTING IDEOLOGY – THE REGENCY CONTACTS THE REFORMATION COALITION

Blocked from sending out scouting missions to Trailing by the Ziru Sirka, the Regency had been launching its long-range explorations from Reft Sector, passing through the Usdiki Trade Federation then ranging across the old Imperium. One such mission came into Phoenix, capital of the United Worlds, in Diaspora Sector, on the eve of war with the Reformation Coalition.

The Regency scout mission, centered around an *Azhanti High Lightning* class Frontier Cruiser, proved to be the salvation of the UW. Contact between the Regency and UW was cordial despite the rising tensions with the Reformation Coalition, and so when a powerful squadron of Reformation Coalition ships Jumped directly to Phoenix to demand the immediate stand-down and surrender of all UW forces, it found itself sandwiched between a determined if rather crude system defense squadron and the entire UW fleet plus all its allies – including the Regency squadron.

The resulting standoff very nearly erupted into apocalyptic violence on several occasions over the next week, especially when the Regency commanders realized that the Reformation Coalition had actually allowed Viral Entities to join its ship crews and the Coalition crews came to understand that the Regency force had Psionic individuals aboard its vessels. Desperate diplomacy kept the strained peace, descending almost into farce at one point when a UW vessel came close alongside a Reformation Coalition warship, ensuring that it would be destroyed in any exchange of spinal weapon fire, to prevent its allies and protectors from firing on the intruders. However, despite a few fraught moments, sanity reasserted itself, aided by the Sons of Craig, who were represented on all sides and were able to offer a trustworthy opinion that each faction might be quite mad by the standards of the others but they were at least benevolent towards their own people.

The standoff enabled all sides to study one another, and even the most burned-out cynics of the Reformation Coalition force had to admit that the UW was not a typical TED empire. Relations between the Coalition and the Regency remained extremely strained, prompting the UW to offer its services as a neutral meeting place. This diplomatic masterstroke forced the Reformation Coalition

to acknowledge the UW as a legitimate state, much as it had the Covenant of Sufren some years before. Both sides set up embassies on Phoenix and settled down to cordially hate one another while they thrashed out some kind of treaty that might prevent conflict in the future.

The Regency/Reformation Coalition peace treaty was signed on Phoenix in late 1208, witnessed by representatives from the Usdiki Trade Federation. Although the treaty was little more than an agreement not to shoot first and to stay out of one another's backyards, it represented a great leap forward in interstellar diplomacy. For now there was a tentative link between Deneb sector and the Old Expanses, and soon after a trade corridor would be driven through the Wilds to create a more permanent means of communication. The main survivor states of the old Imperium had met and managed to avoid a war. The same could not be said to be happening elsewhere.

A CLASH OF EMPIRES - REGENCY/ZIRU SIRKA CONFLICT

In 1205 the Regency was at its zenith, and the new Ziru Sirka was gaining strength by the day. Having crushed several pocket empires and forcibly integrated many worlds, the Vilani felt that they were well on their way to achieving their Imperial dream. The Usdiki Trade Federation was a triviality, to be effortlessly crushed in its turn, but the wave of ships coming out of the Regency was a threat of a different order. Sheer numbers suggested that they were backed by a large power, and after a short period of reconnaissance (which totally failed to penetrate the Quarantine), the Ziru Sirka decided to act offensively.

By the time formal contact was made, late in 1205, the Ziru Sirka was already well into its preparations for war. When the Regency refused a demand to pull right out of Corridor and cede it to the Ziru Sirka in perpetuity, the Vilani used this as an excuse to attack and sent their fleets through Corridor and into Deneb. Most of the Regency landgrab states in Corridor were bypassed as irrelevant, or easily seized as forward bases. The Vilani did not encounter significant resistance until they advanced into the Quarantine Zone itself. Rather than rushing forward to defend what was little more than Wilds, the Regency concentrated its battle fleets to cover its true assets, the worlds of the Safe Zone.

The initial clashes took the form of probing attacks by the Vilani and reconnaissance in force by the Regency. The Regency plan was to locate the forward bases of the Ziru Sirka fleet and dislodge them, placing the fleets in a position where they could not be supported except by long supply chains through the Wilds. The probing/reconnaissance phase of the war lasted from late 1205 into 1206.

Once the bases had been located, the Regency launched a number of raids against them, using regular warships plus reactivated vessels such as those originally earmarked for Project Blackheart. These were strike cruisers armed only with a huge meson gun and carrying no other armament. Intended for raids against the Zhodani, they were supposed to engage with a massive Meson Gun salvo and then Jump away from retribution. In practice, the concept was badly flawed. Most vessels did considerable damage but the class was extremely vulnerable if unable to Jump away from danger or if brought to close action with no secondary batteries to back up the powerful but relatively clumsy meson spinal mount. The Regency raids were thus something of a mixed success.

Meanwhile, the Ziru Sirka fleet, which was inferior to the Regency's high-technology force but more numerous at the critical point, began to drive into Regency space. Centers of resistance were bypassed wherever possible, allowing the fleets to drive deep into Regency territory and threaten 'safe' (and therefore lightly defended) worlds.

The Vilani were historically brutal in warfare, using biological weapons and orbital bombardment to destroy worlds that refused to surrender. However, during the Regency/Ziru Sirka conflict they were surprisingly humane. Bombardments were carried out on military targets with no regard to nearby civilian areas, but no deliberate attacks on 'soft' targets were recorded. Only non-lethal biological weapons were used, causing debilitating epidemics that ate up vast resources and paralyzed world economies but killed few people.

By late 1206, the position was beginning to stabilize. Several Vilani fleets were 'living off the land' in Regency space, and most of the Corridor bases had been lost to Regency squadrons. The Vilani fleet was cut off from support and reinforcement, but remained capable of doing massive damage to the Regency. On the other hand, the Regency was stretched very thin and had no real prospects of taking the war to the Vilani across Corridor sector. Everything depended upon what the Vilani did next.

The Ziru Sirka admirals had two options – fight their way home through the Quarantine and Corridor, or embark upon a suicidal rampage across the Regency. The latter might have broken the Regency's back in the long term. If enough worlds were badly damaged and enough ships were lost, the Regency might never recover, or might break into factions. Already there was considerable internal pressure, and this was made worse by the apparent inability of the Regency to protect its citizens from hostile fleets.

However damaging a suicide run might have been, it was considered only as a final option by the Vilani commanders.

Instead, they created a third option. Pointing out that they were in a position to deploy lethal biological agents and bombard various worlds, and that running all their ships down would be an immense task for the overburdened Regency fleet, they offered a ceasefire pending agreement to a very simple set of terms.

The Regency refused to accept the clause that demanded recognition of the Ziru Sirka as legitimate successor to the Imperium, and the one that required the Regency to send military aid to the Ziru Sirka upon request. However, the rest of the deal was more or less acceptable: a ceasefire and withdrawal from Regency space in return for a pledge not to interfere with Vilani expansion elsewhere and the creation of a buffer zone in Corridor sector.

The Regency (very courageously, given the stakes) insisted upon one other clause – the Vilani would stay out of Gushemege sector and leave Usdiki alone. This was grudgingly granted, and by 1208 the ceasefire agreement had become a binding treaty. The Vilani fleets returned home, but not for long. With the Spinward flank secured, the Ziru Sirka could now embark upon its real business – the drive on Core sector and the capture of Capital.

For the Regency, the Corridor Treaty was a major setback. The only access it now had to the rest of what had been Imperial space was across the Rift and through Gushemege sector. Expansion into Corridor had been envisaged as a safety valve for internal pressures, and now that very expansion was causing yet more internal trouble as Regency vessels had to enforce an unpopular treaty on the landrush participants. The Regency had taken a major political hit for 'caving in' to the Ziru Sirka over Corridor, and now each incident between law enforcers and over-zealous freelancers provided new ammunition for the opposition.

In 1208, the Regency was deeply factionalized, and only the charismatic leadership of Caranda was keeping the lid on. The more realistic analysts had stopped predicting that the Regency was going to break up, and had started suggesting time frames and likely successors.

SOLOMANI RESURGENCE – THE SECOND RULE OF MAN

Away to Rimward, in what had been the Solomani Confederation, a few lights were also beginning to come back on. A handful of Pocket Empires existed in the Wilds, but there were only two main contenders for the title of successor to the Solomani Confederation: The Terran Confederation, a fairly benign coalition of worlds in the Solomani Rim sector, and the Solomani Imperium.

In Newworld sector, the Solomani Imperium was finally beginning to recover from the beating it had received decades earlier from a Vampire fleet sent by the Hivers.

By 1206, the Solomani Imperium had grown considerably and achieved the critical mass needed to become a self-sustaining political entity. Its leaders, deciding that they were the legitimate successors to the Solomani Confederation and therefore the rulers of all other survivor states in the old Confederation, declared the Second Rule of Man and embarked upon a campaign to integrate nearby worlds under their rule.

By 1208, this campaign was well underway and Rule of Man envoys had arrived at Terra and Home to demand the surrender of the rest of Solomani space. The region around Home was deep Wilds at this point, but the Terran Confederation was growing steadily and wanted nothing of the Solomani Imperium and its extremist policies. This would probably have led to a bloody war that was not winnable by either side, but for the second Hiver intervention in the affairs of the Solomani Imperium.

HIVER CONTAINMENT CAMPAIGN VS SOLOMANI IMPERIUM

The Second Rule of Man, based in Newworld Sector, had finally achieved a measure of stability by 1207, despite meddling by Hivers and the occasional attack by Supermen determined to cripple the Solomani uber-state. As Rule of Man fleets pushed out into Langere, Aldebaran and Alpha Crucis sectors, the Hivers looked on with growing dismay. Their earlier actions had slowed down the Solomani Imperium, but made it even more militaristic and paranoid than before. And if the Solomani ever realized that the Hivers had covertly attacked them...

The Hive Federation had backed itself into a corner. The closet had to be burned before the skeleton was discovered, which meant that direct military action must be undertaken. For some time, the Hivers had been cultivating relations with a number of pocket empires in the hope of creating a counterweight to the Rule of Man. None was anything like powerful enough to take on the sector-sized state, however, so there was only one option – create an alliance, and lead it into battle.

With one eye ever to the future, the Hivers engineered a number of 'border incidents' to give their actions legitimacy, and played up the threat to human states in the region beyond all necessity. True, the Rule of Man was engaged in a fit of jackbooted lunacy surpassing everything that the old Solomani Confederation had managed, and equally true, it was engaged in expansion., but there was really not much of a threat to humans or even non-humans more than a subsector or two from its borders; not for a century or more at least.

Hiver propaganda turned the Rule of Man from an expansionistic militarized state into a ravaging monster in the eyes of local leaders, and persuaded worlds as far

afield as Alpha Crucis and Spica sectors to assemble a rag-tag fleet, which was duly sent into hopeless battle against the shiny black warships of the Rule of Man.

As the ramshackle fleet shattered under their weapons, the Rule of Man admirals advanced out into the Wilds to chastise these upstarts that had dared attack them with no warning. Several worlds and pocket empires were quickly subjugated, sometimes by a single vessel. However, more than half the squadrons that went out so confidently into the unknown simply disappeared. Their fate was in many cases never discovered by the Solomani leaders. In fact, the retribution squadrons had run into Hive Federation fleets that could not possibly have arrived in time to save their allies had they not known exactly what was going to happen long before it was set in motion.

Larger forces followed, with greater caution, and were engaged by the fleets of the Federation. The Hivers followed a strategy of attrition, allowing the Rule of Man to attack pocket empires that the Hivers had sent vessels 'to protect against aggression'. The catspaw states were ultimately expendable, the aim being to draw out the bulk of the Solomani fleet and wear it down.

In order to keep the Rule of Man on the offensive, the Hivers quietly encouraged their protected states to earn the support being given them by 'pulling their weight in the fight for freedom'. Most of the protected states could not put anything capable of resisting even a Solomani light cruiser into the line of battle, so they were totally dependent upon the Hivers to protect their homeworlds from fleet action. But most of them could cobble together a raider or two and play their part by attacking outposts or commercial traffic, thus needling the Solomani into further offensive action.

The containment campaign actually caused the Rule of Man to expand, but it weakened its fabric as it did so. The Hivers, taking the long view, reasoned that they would eventually cause the Rule of Man to collapse under its own weight, or at least force it to retrench. The Hive Federation was at this time a long way from full recovery, and the containment campaign drew off a lot of resources that might better be used elsewhere. However, it was considered vital to continue so through 1208 and onwards the Hivers continued to draw out the Rule of Man and erode its naval strength. Worlds that fell to the Solomani became internal nuisances and sources of conflict rather than of strength. It would take time, the Hivers knew, but they would eventually bring down the Rule of Man and replace it with something more suitable to their desires.

VILANI BIRTHRIGHT – THE ZIRU SIRKA CAMPAIGN VS THE BLACK IMPERIUM

Mere months after the Treaty of Corridor secured their Spinward flank, the Ziru Sirka launched the first wave of the Drive for Core. This was a reconnaissance/clearing operation on a front of about 8 parsecs. The main forces were light units for reconnaissance, backed up by light cruisers and a handful of battle squadrons in case of serious resistance. The first wave was intended to locate suitable forward bases and determine points of major resistance. These would be crushed by overwhelming force if possible, or bypassed and left for later operations.

As the first wave pushed up to the 'event horizon' of the Black Curtain it met resistance from Vampire fleets, some of which seemed to be operating out of worlds within the Curtain. Other Vampire forces seemed to be hostile to the Curtain-based fleets. The main Vilani fleet, composed of powerful fleet formations, engaged both groups and shattered them, clearing the way for the mobile base flotilla to come up.

After setting up a semi-permanent base just outside the Curtain and confirming that patrols were in place along the corridor back to Vland, the fleet entered the Black Curtain. The plan was simple. Reconnaissance units would Jump to two or three systems and report back on conditions, then the battle fleet would clear them for the mobile base flotilla to move up. The latter was heavily escorted and contained repair ships and enough logistics vessels to sustain fleet operations for months. The mobile base could halt in any system to repair damaged vessels or cannibalize them, and as logistics ships ran out of supplies they could be sent back to the base just outside the Curtain (under heavy guard, of course) for replenishment.

It was a sound plan, and one that allowed for great flexibility. The fleet could advance at any appropriate pace and could conduct a fighting withdrawal along a different path at need. Although provision had been made for a logistics chain, at need the fleet could become a 'roving pocket' in hostile space, carrying all that it needed along within its own defensive perimeter. So long as it was able return to Vilani space before the supplies ran out, the fleet could operate inside the Black Curtain for an extended period. Like many other good plans, this one failed totally.

Historians blessed with hindsight have compared Dulinor's march on Capital to the 1812 campaign into Russia by the ancient Terran Emperor Napoleon I. Like Napoleon, Dulinor was successful in many battles but failed to win the war and exhausted his army in the process. Like Napoleon, Dulinor has been criticized for embarking upon an enterprise that had little chance of success, and of totally misunderstanding the characteristics of the enemy.

The Ziru Sirka march into the Black Curtain repeated to some extent the folly of Dulinor's offensive, but in fact took that folly to an altogether new height. The fleet was not advancing through enemy territory held by a formidable foe; it was plunging into darkness where demons dwell. Attempts to look before the fleet leaped were largely unsuccessful; most of the scouts failed to return. But the fleet forged ahead anyway, driving into the unknown in a 'capital or bust' bid.

Exactly what happened to the Ziru Sirka Capital Fleet inside the Black Curtain is still unknown, though some of the details have been pieced together. The fleet initially made good progress, driving in the Vampire fleets that acted as pickets on the border systems. Most of these border worlds were devoid of population, and many showed signs that the population had been exterminated by orbital bombardment. Some had small outposts run by humans or Virus-infected robots (or both).

Some worlds retained considerable population. Couriers that emerged with reports told of a 'Black Imperium', where Vampire ships and infected computer systems ruled over a population of humans and other organics. Conditions were reported as extremely brutal, with dissent punishable by death or torture for the suspect at least, and often for family members or close associates too. Many of the institutions of the old Third Imperium were still in place. The Vampire ships that came out to fight the intruder fleet displayed emblems of the old Imperium and even used names drawn from the Imperial Navy list. Personnel wore Imperial uniform, though with slightly different insignia in some cases. Curiously, the leader of this 'Black Imperium' was cited as being 'His Imperial Majesty, Lucan I of the Third Imperium', which surely was impossible. Nevertheless, the ships that the fleet encountered demanded immediate surrender in the name of Emperor Lucan.

The Vilani Capital Fleet won some initial successes, but gradually the casualties mounted and resistance firmed up. Strange incidents became more common. Reports were fragmentary, but there were claims that Vilani vessels – which had been as thoroughly Virus-proofed as possible – suddenly ran amok or fired on their consorts. The reasons for this were unknown at the time. A boarding party sent to search a crippled Vampire destroyer returned, quite mad, and attacked their crewmates. Others sent aboard Black Imperium vessels reported terrifying hallucinations and 'ghostly presences' that killed some of their companions. Other ships fell victim to obvious Virus infection despite being as resistant as it is possible to be.

And still the fleet forged ahead. The last known position of the Capital Fleet places it 12 parsecs from Capital. The only information on what happened in those final hours comes from the crew of the Ziru Sirka light cruiser

Alakaanish, which emerged from the Black Curtain early in 1209 with extensive damage.

According to the *Alakaanish* logs, the Capital Fleet had halted for a fortnight to make repairs. By this time it was not possible to perform much in the way of reconnaissance; vessels entering neighboring systems rarely came back. Only battle squadrons were capable of surviving for any length of time, so reconnaissance was carried out in strength for a while. Eventually the battleships stopped coming back as well, and the fleet pushed on blindly.

On 303-1208, a large fleet of Black Imperium warships advanced to engage the Capital Fleet. Communications were established through the usual cutouts and secure links, and a peremptory demand for surrender was issued from the flagship of the Imperial force, INS *Invincible*. This demand was issued by Emperor Lucan I – not ‘in the name of’, but ‘by’ the Emperor – in the form of a hologram of Lucan. Witnesses suggest that the hologram matched historical records of Prince Lucan, but aged around 60, with gray hair and signs of dissolute living. It was feasible that Lucan might be alive at that time, but he would certainly appear older than 60 if he had survived at all.

During the standoff that followed the surrender demand, a second vessel, the dreadnought *Inflexible*, entered the system at the head of a small fleet. This ship, too, identified itself as the Imperial Flagship and demanded surrender via a hologram of an apparently 60-year-old Lucan. The two ‘flagships’ then engaged in a lengthy communications exchange that could not be interpreted aboard the Vilani ships. The *Invincible* finally moved to a position at the head of both fleets.

Unsure if they had witnessed a clash of pretenders, an attempt to confuse them as to which was the real flagship, or something else entirely, the Capital Fleet advanced and attacked before any more enemy vessels could arrive. The ensuing battle, according to the *Alakaanish*, was awesomely violent. The Black Imperial ships were actually outnumbered by their foes, but possessed superb gunnery and maneuvering characteristics. Vessels that were virtually destroyed remained in the battle line, firing with whatever weapons remained until they broke up or were shattered by fire.

The cost was immense, but the Capital fleet was actually winning the fight when a third Imperial fleet arrived in the system. Headed by yet another ‘Imperial flagship’, the *Indomitable*, this fleet charged at the Vilani without even bothering to form up for battle. The Vilani flagship and vice-flagship were destroyed in rapid succession, and command and control dissolved. Some ships Jumped out, others fled under high acceleration even as their squadron mates turned to engage the new threat in close combat.

With her spinal weapon out of action and having taken other serious damage, the *Alakaanish* was caught in a crossfire and Jumped to save herself. In fact, she Misjumped rather badly, but blind luck took her almost to the edge of Lishun sector, and the cruiser was able to limp out of the Curtain. By the time she worked her way around through the Wilds, the *Alakaanish* found the Ziru Sirka forward base in the hands of a squadron of Black Imperium battleships, and an obvious tail of logistics ships heading out from the Curtain. This ‘tail’ was big enough to denote a major fleet operation, and the direction was obvious.

The Black Imperium was advancing on Vland.

THE CURTAIN WAR (1209-1211)

The period 1209-1211 is dominated by an event that changed Charted Space utterly. Led by the Lucan Ships, Vampire vessels of the Black Imperium Navy poured out of the Curtain and began systematically crushing every survivor state they encountered.

APOCALYPSE REVEALED – THE BLACK CURTAIN OPENS

In 1209, presumably as a result of the Ziru Sirka Capital Bid, a horde of Vampire ships came pouring out of the Black Curtain. Some were ‘true’ Vampires in the normal sense, but most were part of organized fleets crewed by humans and proclaiming allegiance to Emperor Lucan I. The most powerful fleets were headed by ‘Imperial Flag Dreadnoughts’, all of which claimed to have the Emperor aboard. The truth of this rather odd claim is now known. In a manner of speaking, they all did.

Fleets came out of the Black Curtain in all directions. Most of them were quite small, and conducted fairly limited operations at first. The usual pattern was to move into orbit around a world, make a surface sweep with sensors, then demand surrender and an oath of allegiance to the Emperor. The fleet would usually accompany this with a demonstration of power (orbital destruction of a landmark or installation was common). If an appropriate response was not forthcoming (say because the world had lost the necessary communications technology), then bombardment would begin.

Some of these ‘annexations’ were quite rational, and involved landing parties of combat robots and Imperial Marines. Others were destructive but understandable in the context of ‘Black War’ – i.e., facilities that could not be held were destroyed – but many were simply acts of insane violence. Demanding surrender from a world whose population has been extinct for 70 years is rather pointless, and bombarding the craters where its cities used to be is just insane. It is thought that the ships that conducted these bombardments were using Third Imperium-era maps and even where there was clear evidence that world was dead or regressed, chose (or were ordered) to disregard what was obvious and act on what was ‘known’ – i.e. that these were high-population worlds not loyal to the rightful Emperor.

The Black Imperium fleets began to move outward from their old frontiers as 1209 turned to 1210, but progress was slow in most areas. This was because the greatest effort was being pushed up a narrow corridor in the direction of Vland. The drive on Vland was undertaken in overwhelming force, and despite the gallant resistance of

the fleets of the Ziru Sirka, should have quickly achieved total victory. However, the assault was commanded in somewhat schizophrenic fashion. Several ‘Imperial Flagships’ led the fleets, and seemed to disagree over which of them had the authority to command the others. The confusion was made worse when other flagships began gathering up vessels left on line-of-communications duties or guarding forward bases under ‘the Emperor’s personal command’, even though they had been left there on the personal orders of the Emperor as represented by a different flagship.

As the various flagships co-opted one another’s reinforcements, or redirected logistics ships needed by squadrons at the front, the Ziru Sirka fought savagely for its survival. Despite some local successes, the battle line was driven steadily Coreward-Spinward towards Vland, and it was obvious that it was only a matter of time before the Ziru Sirka was shattered.

There was only one chance and with some reluctance the Vilani turned to their recent foes, the Regency and the Usdiki Trade Federation, for help.

A GLIMMER OF HOPE – THE REGENCY JOINS THE CURTAIN WAR

It has been said that when High Regent Caranda announced the decision to send a fleet to Vland, the shrieks of outrage could be heard all the way to Usdiki. But the High Regent was adamant – the Regency could fight the Black Imperium in Vland Sector and possibly win, or it could fight in Deneb in a couple of years’ time – and definitely lose.

At this time, late in 1209, the Regency was on the verge of splitting asunder due to internal pressures. Several regional and factional leaders bluntly informed Caranda that they would not be party to fighting Vland’s battles, and that they would secede or take other drastic measures if the fleet was sent. Caranda, perhaps believing that he could still hold the Regency together, or perhaps knowing that he could not, yet sure in the knowledge that if the fleet stayed at home then the Regency was ultimately doomed, made one final appeal for solidarity among the faction leaders. When that failed he tried another gambit. Instead of *sending* the fleet, he *asked it to go*.

Many admirals and captains declined to volunteer. Their reasons were varied; good and bad. As many stayed home out of loyalty to Caranda as went to war for that reason. Finally, though, a suitable fleet was assembled and departed through Corridor in the direction of Vland. It contained the majority of Caranda’s supporters, Regency Loyalists and others that could be counted upon to support the High Regent in the political troubles to come.

Caranda's gesture, sending his supporters away to fight for those who would not go, did actually shame or inspire some of the waverers to come over to his side, but the shift in the power balance was too great to redress in that manner. Seeing their chance, some of the factions began acting more openly, and armed confrontations became ever more common. These started as riots and barfights, or harassment of starships, but matters quickly escalated into open large-scale violence between supporters of the various factions. Humans tried to dislodge *Ihatei* or Vargr settlers from their *fait accompli* holdings as recognized by the Spinward States Accords of 80 years previously. Zhodani refugees were attacked by paramilitary groups, which then drew Regency forces into the fight – often on both sides.

Repeated appeals for calm and support fell on deaf ears as everyone with a score to settle came out of the woodwork to take advantage of the weakness of central authority. It started small, but by the end of 1209 the Regency was in the throes of a multi-sided conflict that has become known as the Regency Civil War.

THE REGENCY CIVIL WAR

Even as the Regency fleet joined battle in Vland sector, skirmishes broke out back home in the Regency. As these spread, new power groups formed as certain factions united in the face of a common foe. The two major factions were the 'Regents', who wanted things pretty much to go on as before (though subject to all kinds of minor changes desired by the various influence groups within the faction) and the 'Imperials', who believed that, having kept the flame alive for the old Imperium, theirs was the right to rule whatever emerged from its wreckage. Most of the Imperials did not actually want a new Imperium as such (though some did); all of them believed in going out into the Wilds, conquering Vland and this so-called 'Black Imperium' and setting up a new regime to bring civilization back to all of what had been the old Imperium. Other factions fought for their own ideals, creating a messy, ever-shifting pattern of alliances and conflicts.

The Civil War was not as physically destructive as might have been expected. Fleet clashes were virtually unknown, though single-ship skirmishes and ground combat were quite frequent. The general pattern was cycle of posture-suffle-negotiate, with violence used as a political tool without compunction, but also without the general destruction that accompanied the Imperial Civil War. This is not to say that the Regency Civil war was not a bitter business; merely that some restraint was observed.

The factions kept talking to one another throughout the conflict, and Caranda was able to use this line of communication to bargain, threaten and bribe the various factions into a series of compromises. The Regency was

weakened and changed by the Civil War, but it did not fall. Amazingly, by 1212, the High Regent had managed to hammer out a deal that was at least acceptable to the major factions, and to arrange for the minor ones to be bought off or bullied into submission.

A second Plague – The Vampire War in Diaspora Sector Observers in the Reformation Coalition had been warning for some years that while observed Vampire activity was diminishing, a new wave was about to break. In mid 1207 the first ripples were seen, and these began rising rapidly to a peak in 1211. This 'Vampire War' in the Old Expanses may or may not have been directly connected to the opening of the Black Curtain. What is known is that the various survivor states of Diaspora and Old Expanses sectors (most notably the Reformation Coalition, United Worlds and Covenant of Sufren), were assailed by a horde of Vampire ships and fleets that hammered at the defenses of these fledgling interstellar powers.

Sufren bore the brunt of the assault, putting up a determined resistance that bought a little time for its allies to prepare. Measured in weeks, this time was vital but paid for in the blood of an entire interstellar civilization. Sufren itself was smashed to the bedrock and the other Covenant worlds bombarded heavily. The Vampire fleet that then pushed Rimward down the 'Vampire Highway' towards the Reformation Coalition. It was met by the Reformation Coalition Navy plus a handful of ships from the United Worlds and even a lone warship from the Imperial Regency, which had been on a diplomatic mission at the United Worlds capital, Phoenix. Desperate to avoid its worlds becoming irradiated wastelands like Sufren, the Coalition and its allies threw everything they had into the fight. This required some uncomfortable deals, most notably the one between the Mercantile Guild and the Reformation Coalition. Guild ships and missiles joined the fight and though there was mistrust and even the occasional deliberate betrayal, there were also the beginnings of an understanding between the two powers.

The Vampire onslaught was halted in Coreward Diaspora sector, though not without a tremendous loss of ships on all sides. The Reformation Coalition Navy and Exploratory Service vessels committed to the battles suffered over 35% casualties, mainly due to the necessity of attacking Vampire forces before they could bombard civilized worlds. These early piecemeal actions, as the defenders sought to buy time for reinforcements to assemble, were particularly hard on the Exploratory Service ('Star Viking') vessels that bore the brunt of the fighting.

The Vampire onslaught came mainly from Coreward, though some forces did push into Coalition space from Rimward and even Trailing. By late 1211, the so-called 'second plague' had been fought to a standstill, though more than 20 worlds had been attacked. Some were so

devastated that they had to be abandoned.

Despite severe friction with the Regency, the Reformation Coalition sent several ships to join the Curtain War being fought to contain the Black Imperium. These vessels were mainly too small to fight in the line of battle, but assisted with reconnaissance, courier duty and protection of logistics assets. Many were destroyed in desperately one-sided actions against the sleek new ships of the Black Imperium's Navy. Other Star Viking vessels were lost in a bid to rescue the populations of the shattered Covenant worlds. The survivors were offered new homes in Coalition space or on border worlds where they could assist with uplift and assistance operations.

THE SCOURING OF VLAND

Despite everything that could be thrown against it, the Black Imperium pushed steadily across Vland sector. A handful of reinforcements trickled in from the Regency and the Vargr Splinters; a small and very mixed squadron came from Gushemege sector. Merchant ships hastily converted to carry reactivated torpedo craft came direct from Usdiki. They were all brushed aside.

The Vilani made their stand in close orbit over Vland, challenging the might of the Black Imperium as their allies nibbled at the invader's heels. It might have been hammer and anvil, had there been enough ships, but instead the Vilani fleet was shattered and the planet bombarded mercilessly while the helpless allies fled to safety.

Vland was scoured by the Black Imperium. Every city and sizeable town came under bombardment, every suspected defense installation was nuked down to the bedrock. The Shadow Emperor was killed in his palace by nuclear weapons dropped from orbit, though the three Bureau heads were able to escape to other worlds just before the final onslaught.

Vland's planetary defenses, continually strengthened for the last century, exacted a heavy price for their world. At least two 'Imperial Flagships' were crippled by ground fire, and several capital ships were destroyed. The hope had been that if Vland sold its life at a sufficiently high price, the Black Imperium might be weakened enough that its fleet was forced to withdraw. This clearly was not happening in the last minutes of the battle, as more and more vessels entered orbit to land troops and combat robots on the surface of the world.

Throughout the final assault, several Imperial Flagships broadcast orations and rants by the Emperor, mostly to the effect that this was the price of refusing to hand over the Vland fleet when ordered to do so. One of the flagships announced that next the fleet would scrub Usdiki, home of the Fake Strephon, while others spoke of a campaign against the Regency or Antares. The fleet over Vland

seemed to be living in the past to some extent, and was almost certainly led by a madman (or 'insane person', to be more accurate). The rants and speeches were cut off suddenly. The few witnesses who survived all reported thinking that the Black Imperial vessels had deployed some kind of planetbuster bomb, which had triggered a massive earthquake.

In fact, the tremors came from a different source. Long ago, Vland had been a battleground for war machines built by the Ancients. They lay buried, apparently devoid of power. But at least one retained a tiny reserve and now, interpreting the nearby nuclear explosions as an attack, freed itself from its earthy prison and fought back. The war machine was badly damaged, and had deteriorated during its 30,000 years under the ground. It had only a fraction of its firepower remaining, and little power in its cells. But it was the size of a small city, and armed with weapons undreamt of by the most inspired of human scientists.

Rising into the air, the war machine laid into the bombarding fleet with disintegrator weapons, super-energized particle beams and what are variously claimed as 'Jumpspace Projectors' and 'Focused Gravity Weapons'. These were the more comprehensible of its systems. In many cases warships simply exploded or split apart without the machine apparently doing anything.

The entire Black Imperium fleet poured fire into the machine, which apparently suffered no damage whatsoever. For nearly an hour it hovered unsteadily or maneuvered about in a series of rapid lurches, shrugging off the fire of a battle fleet and slaughtering it. Witnesses say the rate of destruction of the fleet dropped steadily during the engagement, probably due to the machine's dwindling power supply.

47 minutes after the first tremor, the machine ceased firing and began slowly descending. It then accelerated rapidly upwards, and according to some witnesses collided with three warships at once. These warships were widely separated; there was no way for the machine to contact all of them, yet it somehow managed to be in three places at once. It then toppled upside-down and fell back to the planetary surface, causing an earthquake that flattened what remained of a nearby city.

The remnants of the Imperial fleet fired on the wreck of the machine for some hours, apparently without effect, then recalled the ground combat forces and departed the system. Several more vessels were lost during the withdrawal to Core sector, and the bulk of the Black Imperium's battle squadrons seem to have been destroyed.

Vland was a smoking wasteland after the attack, though some areas remained livable. The population suffered

75% casualties or more in the bombardment, and most of the survivors died soon after. The war machine remains upside-down and untouchable in a scorched crater. No means to approach it has been discovered to this date. Personnel, however protected, die and machines cease functioning as they draw near the wreck.

The Scouring of Vland broke the back of the Black Imperium warfleet and almost destroyed the new Ziru Sirka. However, with the three bureaux still functioning, a new shadow emperor was installed and a palace built in a remote area of Vland. The Vilani had suffered and their dreams of empire seemed to be over, but they had survived.

VAMPIRE BACKLASH VS BLACK IMPERIUM

Even as the fleets of the Black Imperium were being shattered over Vland, pressure on the Imperium was mounting from other directions. Vampire vessels and fleets had been observed entering the Black Curtain for many years. Their reasons varied. Now a veritable horde of Vampires descended upon Core sector, all with the same apparent goal. Some attacked worlds in passing, but for the most part they bypassed tempting targets in order to reach their goals. These were just two systems – Capital and Celetron.

Celetron was the site of Research Station Omicron, where the Virus first gained sentience. It was laid waste by a succession of Vampire attacks. Capital was better defended, but even here the occasional Vampire broke through to launch weapons at the Imperial Palace. Many of these attacks were suicidal in nature, and several vessels attempted to ram themselves into the palace. One actually succeeded, causing extensive damage but without crippling the structure's gravitic flotation system.

The fleets of the Black Imperium were called in from wherever they were to create a cordon around the world of Capital and in neighboring systems. Heavy combat continued for some time, and from 1211 into 1212 the Black Imperium was fully occupied in trying to survive the massive onslaught. It is generally supposed that the attack on Capital was either a result of the 'Kill the Creator' (Lucan) imperative observed in many primitive Viral strains, or else was a deliberate attack on the Black Imperium because it posed some kind of threat. The politics of the Vampire Fleets were a mystery at this time and thus humans had no real idea of the motivations of the attacker – though their intent was very clear.

To those outside the Black Imperium, motivation mattered less than the fact that two hostile forces were busy annihilating one another over Capital, granting everyone else a respite.

THE CALM (1212)

The year 1212 was almost a 'moment of stillness' amid the catastrophic events unfolding in former Imperial space. However, all was not peaceful everywhere.

DECLARATION OF THE IMPERIAL REGENCY

In the Regency, High regent Caranda was assassinated – it was never discovered by whom – just before the deal that would have ended the Regency Civil War was finalized. He was succeeded by his daughter, Ciencia, whose political views differed somewhat from her father's. A member of the 'Imperial' faction, Ciencia sincerely believed that the Regency could no longer exist in splendid isolation, and must concern itself with the affairs of the outside universe if it wanted to survive. Taking that logic one step further, Ciencia decided that the best way to avoid being overrun by events in the outside universe was to achieve a dominant position.

The deal that was finally pushed through by Ciencia was not very much different to that created by her father, but there were enough changes to cause widespread dissatisfaction throughout the Regency. Perhaps the most telling difference was reflected in Ciencia's announcement that it was time the Regency acknowledged itself for what it really was – the Imperial Regency, legitimate successor to the Third Imperium.

Before dissatisfaction could become any more pronounced and perhaps rekindle the Regency Civil War, other events intervened. Certain Aslan clans, long irritated at the Regency for refusing them permission to cross the Great Rift to seek new lands, decided to launch a bid to seize land from the Regency in its hour of weakness. Other clans remained loyal despite their misgivings about this 'Imperial Regency' business, and a sporadic conflict erupted which escalated steadily throughout 1212

THE ZHODANI CONCORD BEGINS TO STABILIZE

After many years of chaos and, apparently, warfare, the situation in former Zhodani space settled down quite rapidly. Several small Zhodani states, apparently based on Consular districts and postal routes, emerged from the wreckage and began battering their more psychotic neighbors into submission. Separated by expanses of Wilds, these successor states to the Consulate reached out to one another with typically Zhodani sincerity and rationality, and from their early tentative contacts the Zhodani Concord emerged.

The Concord was not a monolithic organization but instead provided a framework for the interaction and cooperation of the successor states. This cooperation took the form

of trade and mutual assistance, plus military cooperation in pacifying the 'wild' states which threatened the stability and even the existence of the others.

These quiet campaigns of pacification had been ongoing for some time, but in 1212 two major events took place. First was the launch of the 'therapy missions', whereby teams of psionic adepts attempted to heal the troubled 'wild states' rather than see them crushed militarily. The therapists found whole interstellar nations ruled and peopled by severely unbalanced individuals, and while their efforts met with strictly limited success, the results were somewhat promising. The fabric of Zhodani life had been ripped apart, but it could be repaired given enough time and compassion. The second major event was the announcement that the Zhodani Concord now had secure communications across the Wilds to all its members and most of its neighbors, and that it would not seek to integrate any successor state that did not desire it unless that state attacked a member.

The Concord also declared the formation of a standing fleet to secure the postal routes and to protect whichever member states needed it. In addition, a small force was created, composed of unbalanced, unhappy and downright insane Zhodani who refused treatment or were untreatable for their condition, yet desired to serve the new Concord for whatever reason. This force, the *Torsarik'anz Vaza Detzl* ('Sanctioned [or Worthy] Lunatics') considered itself expendable and was sent into the worst situations, to bear the brunt of fighting and to wear down the opposition until a more rational countermeasure (therapy or assault) could be formulated.

THE STORM (1213-1218)

In 1213 the storm broke. It was a pivotal time for the various Imperial successor states.

THE GRAND FLEET OF HUMANITI

By 1213 the Black Curtain was 'open'. Reconnaissance into the area formerly within it was extremely hazardous, but it was now somewhat survivable. Scouts from various factions carried out frequent information gathering missions into the region and brought back some disturbing news. It appeared that the Black Imperium really was still ruled by Emperor Lucan I, after a fashion. Somehow, Lucan had made a deal with at least one Viral strain (some had been observed, even far from the Black Curtain, that worshipped him as a god/creator, even as others were driven to destroy him). At first the deal had been some kind of partnership whereby Lucan acted as a figurehead to ensure the cooperation of his human subjects, and the Virus in turn gained control of the entire sector. It is thought that Lucan's Viral entity ally at that time inhabited the Imperial Palace computers.

However, the Viral entity had underestimated the cunning and treachery of its figurehead. By one means or another, Lucan was able to create a Viral replica of his personality using techniques developed in ongoing research based on the Omicron project. He convinced the palace entity to allow him to upload this replica into some of his capital ships, to better control his subjects, and having done this turned on his ally and destroyed it. It was one of these early 'Lucan ships' that attacked Daibei in 1157.

Within a few years Lucan, realizing that his health was failing, found a way to make a direct personality upload – not a replica of Lucan but the real Lucan, loaded into a computer to rule the Imperium forever. Assembling an army of robotic guardians to protect him against the kind of assault that he had carried out against his ally, Lucan made the transfer. He became the palace computer, the central brain of the whole Imperium. But he did not stop there. Even as his dying human body was being carefully preserved ready to be mounted in a display case, Lucan began overwriting the Lucan simulations aboard his flagships. Now each of them really *was* Lucan; he could be over many worlds at once and be at the head of every fleet.

At first the fleet crews did not realize what had happened. It became painfully apparent when the emperor-ships conducted a purge of 'disloyal' elements among their crews. Lucan's domination over the Imperium was completed by loading a 'tame' Viral entity he had nurtured into his ships and military hardware. The vessels still needed human crews, but their systems were faster and smarter than anything the Third Imperium ever had.

The Black Imperium was a terrible place, one of abject subservience to a master who was both omnipresent and insane. Fleets along the periphery of Lucan's domain kept enemies out and prevented escape; whole worlds were sterilized to create a buffer zone. Occasionally the various Lucans fought one another for power or on a lunatic whim. Sometimes they launched missions to destroy long-dead enemies beyond the limits of Core Sector. Then the Vilani assaulted the Black Imperium. Some of their ships actually reached Capital, incensing the palace Lucan entity which quite naturally embarked on a crusade to destroy everything in retaliation.

Now, in 1213, the Black Imperium had made good its losses and was preparing to carry out its mission. It was obvious that nothing would survive the onslaught, but there was a small window of opportunity. The fleets were assembling, and according to those sources within the Black Imperium that were willing to communicate with covert scouts, the various Lucan-ships were bickering over who got to destroy what. Perhaps if a sufficiently large force lunged straight at Capital and took out the palace-Lucan, the fleets would begin fighting over which would rule in its place. There did not seem to be many other options, so the call went out.

And they came. From the troubled Imperial Regency, from shattered Vland, from Usdiki and Daibei; from Terra and from Zhdant, from Phoenix and from the Reformation Coalition, the ships and fleets answered the call. Many were lost en route, but in 1214 the Grand Fleet of All Humaniti plunged like a shining blade into the Black Imperium, to cut out its festering heart and bring sanity to the sector.

It failed.

Some of the factions mistrusted one another. Some mistrusted everyone. Some treated the assault as a race, with legitimate rule of the old Imperium as the prize for those who got there first. Others hung back, letting their allies bear the brunt. The assault was powerful but it was disjointed, with serious command and control issues. The Navy of the Black Imperium fought back savagely, humans and Viral Entities dying together under their perverted Sunburst banner in the name of their insane emperor. The Imperial fleets were better integrated than was imagined possible, since the Lucan Ships could monitor all the systems of every vessel under their command. Cooperation between the various Black Imperium fleets was patchy at best, but each fought tremendously well, and gradually the Grand Fleet was worn down.

Amid the hell and horror of the Black Imperium, the survivors of the Grand Fleet came to understand that this was the shape of things to come all across Charted Space if the Black Imperium were not brought down. There would

be no second chance; no fallback position. The assault had to succeed or all of Humaniti was doomed. So the decision was taken to go on. And amid the horror, Humaniti found something precious; a sense of siblinghood. Vilani, Solomani and Zhodani fought side by side and died to protect one another. Politics was forgotten in the darkness, and was replaced by a need to win at any price. The Grand Fleet halted and regrouped, then steeled itself for the final lunge. Led by the *Torsarik'anz Vaza Detzl*, the last hope of Humaniti entered Jump for a do-or-die effort.

THE TAKING OF CAPITAL

As the Grand Fleet was battling its way across the Black Imperium, another fleet swept into Core Sector from Trailing. It had crossed Gateway, Ley and Fornast sectors, losing some of its massive strength in the process. Yet it remained a mighty force. Its ships were unmistakably K'Kree in origin, but this was the battle fleet of the Gods of Thunder, not the 2000 Worlds. Given the proclaimed mission of the Gods of Thunder, to exterminate all meat-eaters, it might have been expected that this fleet would begin slaughtering the human population of the worlds it passed. Yet it did not. Instead, the intruder fleet smashed its way directly towards Capital, shouldering aside all opposition and pausing only long enough to repair battle damage or to refuel. Black Imperium fleets turned to meet the new threat, granting the Grand Fleet just enough time to regroup for the final push.

The Grand Fleet entered the Capital system in the last days of 1218, engaging a powerful system defense force and narrowly defeating it. The fleet remnant then began reducing the defenses of the Imperial Palace and landing ground forces for the liberation of Capital. As they plunged into the atmosphere, the crews of the Grand Fleet discovered what had become of the Vilani Capital Fleet. A handful of wrecks orbited the world or lay at the center of ornamental parks as some kind of trophy.

Fighting was heavy on the ground as even the humans of Capital fought tenaciously to defend their Emperor, but the Grand Alliance was unstoppable. Ground forces battled their way through the corridors of the palace, spearheaded by Zhodani psionic commandos teleporting behind pockets of resistance. In the assault were all manner of troops: Regency and Reformation Coalition Marines, Solomani assault pioneers and Vilani close-assault specialists. They were opposed by combat robots and the Emperor's hand-picked guards, plus booby traps and all the means at the disposal of the sentient palace computer, but at last they gained the throne hall.

The vast Lucan-Palace computer received the assault force with grave (if quirky) dignity, and demanded an immediate surrender through the medium of a holographic image of Emperor Lucan. Rather than plead for its life, the Lucan-Palace launched into a most disturbing diatribe

even as the combat engineers began ripping its systems apart.

The last speech of 'Emperor Lucan' was not recorded at the time, but has been largely reconstructed from the memories of witnesses. The gist of the Viral Emperor's dying speech was simple – Lucan was the rightful Emperor and the upstarts must bow down before him. He went on to proclaim that without him to lead them, the Imperium and all Humaniti was doomed to extinction within 50 years. Not understanding the significance of the palace-being's words, the engineers hunted down and destroyed every possible vestige of the entity, physically annihilating every data bank or communications device.

As its consciousness faded, the Viral Lucan's pompous tone went with it. Its final utterance sounded almost relieved, according to the few who heard it and survived:

*"I shot him, yes.
Who? Varian, my poor innocent brother.
Of course I murdered my brother to gain the throne. Did you ever doubt it?
I must have killed him... I'm the villain of the piece. And you're the ones who'll write the history books.
The few pages that remain.
Nobody will read them, of course. Nobody human.*

*They called me Lucan the Black, but black is better than nothingness. Without me you are doomed.
They're coming, you know. The Extermination is beginning.
I could have led you, fought them for you. Not that we could have won, but we could have tried.
Instead you slay the terrible villain and congratulate yourselves.
Enjoy your victory, heroes. You just damned Humaniti to extinction.*

At least now I won't have to watch my people die.

*Fifty years, heroes.
Fifty years..."*

Shortly after the Lucan-Palace entity died and the Imperial Palace was guided to an unsteady landing, the surviving system defense and fleet units still engaging the Grand Fleet began to fall back, leaving the Grand Fleet between them and the planet. Some units did begin fighting among themselves, but although there was considerable confusion, the hoped-for breakup of the Black Imperium force did not occur. The Grand Fleet found itself sandwiched between a planet that was still very hostile and the remnant of the system defense force.

This situation continued for several weeks, punctuated by the occasional skirmish in orbit as the depleted ground

forces of the Grand Fleet attempted to gain control of the planet and perhaps rally some support among the population. When it became obvious that the Grand Fleet really had killed the palace entity, small numbers of resistance fighters came forward, offering information to the liberators that allowed them to gain control of a handful of cities and – most importantly – a commercial spaceport with repair facilities.

However, the bulk of the population was either so thoroughly cowed or actually loyal to the deceased viral-emperor that the Grand Fleet found itself fighting more or less alone. The population had been thoroughly indoctrinated into the belief that the Black Imperium, hideous as it had been, was the only hope for survival against a terrible threat that would someday emerge.

According to the few sources willing to talk to the liberators, the K'Kree had forged an alliance with a strain of Viral entities and planned a grand extermination of all Humaniti; probably of all meat-eating species. For proof, they showed the liberators a wrecked K'Kree battleship that lay in the center of an insane ornamental park prowled by predators from dozens of worlds. The park was part monument and part insult to the Viral entity that remained trapped in the lobotomized computer of the battleship.

The ship was the personal flagship of Anv'ull'Ixux, founder of the Great Dominate of the Gods of Thunder. According to local sources, it had been crippled in single-ship combat by one of the Lucan Flagships, itself run by a Viral avatar of the Emperor. From its defeated Viral entity Lucan had learned of the plans of the Dominate, and had begun preparations to defend his people from the coming Great Extermination. Now, with their shield gone, the people of the Black Imperium were doomed, they said. And after they were gone, everyone else would be slaughtered in their turn.

Just days after this revelation, the Grand Fleet detected hundreds of Jump emergencies in the outer system. This turned out to be the remnants of several Imperial fleets. Some vessels were barely functional; some had suffered systems failures and emerged from Jump as lifeless hulks coasting on their last bearing. The rest formed up around their flagships and made what repairs they could.

Two days later the Dominate fleet emerged from Jump and attacked.

THE SECOND BATTLE OF CAPITAL

It appeared that the Black Imperium fleet was caught between the hammer of the Dominate and the anvil of the Grand Fleet. The latter was divided on the issue of what to do next. Both enemy forces had Viral entities among their personnel, but then so did the Reformation Coalition vessels serving in the Grand Fleet. Some were able to

accept that Virus was capable of rational coexistence, but even they were not willing to ally with several viral Lucans. On the other side were the Gods of Thunder, who were (according to all sources) on a mission to slaughter all meat-eaters everywhere.

It was a difficult choice, and the Grand Fleet threw away the chance to make any decisive action by engaging in debate and fruitless communications with both sides. The Black Imperials demanded subjugation, the Dominate calmly informed the Grand Fleet that it too would be exterminated. So the commanders of the Grand Fleet now began to argue about how best to play off their enemies against one another.

Long before consensus was reached, the Dominate fleet attacked. The battle raged for three days, and even the most ardent foes of the Black Imperium had to concede that its forces fought both honorably and bravely. They remained between Capital and the attackers and countered every attempt to break through to bombard the planet, dying in place rather than allowing anything to get through.

Elements of the Grand Fleet (most notably the Solomani contingent) several times moved to assist the Imperials in breaking up a heavy attack, though Black Imperial vessels fired on them as soon as the K'Kree were turned back. One thrust did get through during the second day of the battle, and was halted in orbit over Capital by Grand Fleet units.

But by the third day, it was all over. The Black Imperial fleet was not so much driven onto the anvil of the Grand Fleet but hammered right through it as the defense collapsed and the Dominate force engaged the Grand Fleet with berserk abandon. The Grand Fleet of All Humaniti was in tatters after an hour of intense fighting. The only hope seemed to be to punch through the Dominate force and escape into Jump, but the prospects were poor. Nevertheless, the orders were given and the Grand Fleet formed several cones around its critical but utterly vulnerable support ships. Most of these cones were shattered under massive firepower, but some broke through to escape.

The rearguard of the Grand Fleet turned to protect those ships still capable of entering Jump, attempting to hold off the entire Dominate fleet for as long as possible. There was no prospect of escape for these ships until one of the surviving Lucan flagships, the *Indomitable*, led a ragged counterattack into the Dominate force that took the worst of the pressure off the rearguard for long enough to enter Jump.

The last that was seen of the Black Imperial force was an expanding cloud of plasma, but the flagship lasted long enough to broadcast an order to the retreating Grand Fleet

to make for Depot/Core and reform for a counterattack. This was of course ignored, as the Grand Fleet fled for its very life, and the reasoning (if that is an applicable word) behind the order has been debated for many years. Historians mostly conclude that the Lucan Ship actually believed that it had the authority to order the fleets of all Imperial successor states to do its bidding. Subsequent events bore out this theory, and cast new light on the character of the Viral Lucan.

THE CAPITAL RETREAT AND THE WAR OF THE GRAND ALLIANCE

The Grand Fleet – what remained of it – was able to stagger out of the Black Imperium without much interference. Most of the forces of the Imperium were racing towards Capital to defend it or to attempt to retake it from the Gods of Thunder; the defeated Grand Fleet was of little consequence beside that critical task, so the only clashes were incidental or accidental.

Councils of War were taken aboard the flagships of the Grand Fleet. What now? The Black Imperium had been dealt a blow; Capital had been taken and lost. But what of the threat from the Dominate? Had Lucan spoken the truth? Would the Gods of Thunder really try to exterminate everyone in Charted Space? Could they be stopped if they tried? Some argued that negotiation might work. Others talked of forming a new Grand Fleet and attacking the Dominate before it could recover from the losses taken at the second battle of Capital.

There was no overall consensus. Many crews wished to return home, especially those from the troubled Regency and the states closest to the K'Kree. Others hoped that the K'Kree would be satisfied with their victory or at least too busy elsewhere for a long while to come. But for some an idea had been born in the Black Imperium, the idea that cooperation was possible, at least until the terrible threat receded. Old enemies had become allies, and the Dominate threatened everyone. These elected to fight on. Their numbers were few, so operations would be confined to reconnaissance and nuisance raids until the powers could be convinced to send more warships. Until that day, the few would hold the line and find out what they could about this new foe. Messengers were sent to the capitals of the great and small powers, and eventually new forces were pledged to the fight against the Dominate.

The War of the Grand Alliance had begun.

THE IMPERIAL REGENCY/ASLAN WAR AND THE RE-ENTRY TO THE HIERATE

The Imperial Regency had been in conflict with some Aslan clans on its border since 1213, and by 1214 the Aslan had not only been driven off their newly acquired territory, they were beginning to be pushed back. The

Imperial Regency, flexing its muscles and determined to show it was not a soft touch, was determined to crush the rebel clans. This at first prompted other clans to side with the rebels on the grounds of racial affinity, but by 1216 the Imperial Regency had been able to give sufficient guarantees that it was only going after the rebels that other clans dropped out of the fight and tended to their own affairs.

The Regency-Aslan War, an outgrowth of the Regency Civil War, was ended by treaty in 1218. Although the Aslan lost a lot of ground they managed to gain permission to cross the Rift and began crossing back into the old Hierate. The first missions were tentative and careful, but with typical *Ihatei* enthusiasm the Aslan were soon flooding back across the Rift into the wreckage of the old Hierate.

What the *Ihatei* found was typical of the Wilds. There were more devastated worlds than elsewhere, and fewer under the control of Viral entities or their allies; the Aslan had fought to the last more often than not. Enough wreckage remained for the *Ihatei* to begin a reconstruction of the old Hierate. They were opposed by some survivor groups, welcomed by others, and generally overwhelmed by the enormity of the task ahead. *Ihatei* were not well suited to the work of reconstruction.

Penetration far into the Hierate was difficult, since most of it was deep Wilds at that time. As a result, the *Ihatei* tended to pile up on worlds close to the edge of the Rift where conditions were easier. As a result tensions mounted among them, relieved from time to time by a particularly bold leader who would carve out a new area, making a new wave of expansion possible.

The *Ihatei* were busy for many years, making slow progress across the old Hierate but gradually reclaiming it for their species.

THE FOUNDING YEARS (1219-1221)

1219 was a pivotal year in the history of Charted Space. Against the backdrop of the War of the Grand Alliance, the Fourth Imperium arose.

THE FOUNDING OF THE FOURTH IMPERIUM

In the madness of the Curtain war, an idea gained popularity among segments of the population of various factions. It was increasingly apparent that without a central authority to guide their efforts, the valiant efforts of the various groups fighting to contain the Black Imperium and later the Dominate were disjointed and prone to failure. Greater efficiency was necessary if the war was going to be won. At the same time, the factions that fought alongside one another gained a deep respect for the courage and integrity of their allies. This respect was often not echoed 'back home', among the population that did not fight and die together, but the seed was sown.

It is not known who first voiced the idea, but sometime in 1219 the members of the Grand Alliance established several regional Joint Naval Commands and (after some rather vigorous negotiations) created a joint fleet command structure for the Grand Alliance. Efficiency improved, slowly at first, as the fleets began following a more coherent plan.

At this time, the Grand Alliance was fighting a more or less constant series of skirmishes and raids on the Dominate's long supply line through Fornast Sector, attempting to contain the K'Kree presence in Core sector. There was little prospect of dislodging the Dominate, and with every passing month their strength in Core sector grew.

In 1220, the members of the Grand Alliance held a summit on Usdiki, at which a common policy towards the Dominate was agreed. In essence, this was a very simple agreement. There would be no separate peace; the whole of the Grand Alliance would agree to an ending of hostilities, or they would all fight on. Those states on the front lines were pledged naval assistance. These measures were backed up by joint shipbuilding and training agreements. The most notable product of this summit was the design for the Alliance Frigate, a cheap and simple vessel with good weapons but little protection, designed to be crewed by borderline personnel (e.g. crews drawn from mid-tech worlds and given a crash-training course). Designed for simple and easy maintenance in the field, the Alliance Frigates were not particularly good, but there were a lot of them and they could stay in the battle area for longer than many more sophisticated ships. Examples were manufactured in most states of the Grand Alliance,

and many were transferred to the navies of allied minor powers.

More went on at the Usdiki Summit than was immediately apparent. After the delegates of various factions went home, representatives of the Usdiki Trade Federation held a long, long session behind closed doors, and emerged with an astounding proclamation. As of 001-1221, the Usdiki Trade Federation was dissolved, to be replaced by the Fourth Imperium. Claiming lineage from the Third (and thus all the way through to the First), the Fourth Imperium formally renounced all claim to territories held by the Third Imperium but beyond the current borders of the Trade Federation.

The Imperium would retain much of the structure of the Trade Federation, but would take on the trappings of the Imperium. What it would not have was an Emperor. Instead, the Advisory Council would run the Imperium in the name of the Vacant Throne. This was to be a symbol of the sacrifice of Emperor Strephon, and also a reminder that the Third Imperium lost its way and collapsed. At the time of the Founding, no-one had been found who was suitable to rule and lead the people of the Imperium, and in many quarters it was not felt desirable that anyone ever would be found.

What made the Fourth Imperium different from the Trade Federation was the formalization of duties and responsibilities that had been assigned on an ad-hoc basis for many years, and one other important factor. The Imperium announced that it would extend its protection and assistance to worlds applying to join during Founding Year. A few nearby worlds did apply to join the Imperium, but the majority did not. However, The Imperium gained two very important assets during 1221. The first was the wholehearted support of the Sons of Craig, who pledged their allegiance to the Vacant Throne for so long as the Fourth Imperium held true to its duty to look after its people.

The second asset was more of a surprise. A flotilla of personnel transports crossed the Great Rift from the Imperial Regency. Aboard were a cross-section of the Regency's citizenry: many of the brightest and best but also many ordinary folks who disliked where the Regency was going enough to make the journey across Reft sector. Elements of the Regency Fleet fighting for the Grand Alliance, disgusted at events back home, raised the Sunburst Banner of the Imperium and declared for the Vacant Throne. This led to a few ugly scenes and some awkward diplomatic moments as Imperial negotiators bargained for the families of the defector crews to be permitted to relocate to Imperial worlds. The declaration of the Fourth Imperium soured relations between the Imperial Regency and what had been the Usdiki Trade Federation, but in truth friction had been growing for some time as the

new regime in the Imperial Regency became increasingly arrogant and hostile towards the new Imperials.

By the end of 1219, the Imperial Regency had reintegrated all of the old Quarantine Zone and was beginning to push out again, making claims to territory that had been declared as neutral at the end of the Ziru Sirka war. Vland was in no position to protest but the actions of the Imperial Regency drove a wedge through the Grand Alliance that had resulted in near-paralysis during late 1220. During 1221, most of the Regency contribution to the Grand Alliance fleet declared for the Fourth Imperium, and the remainder went home to join in the power struggles that were troubling the Regency. As a result the Imperial Regency was not considered to be a member of the Grand Alliance after 1221, though it never formally withdrew.

As 1221 turned to 1222, the Grand Alliance was more or less containing the Dominate presence in Core Sector, and began to make gains in the war. This was mainly due to a raiding campaign to make crossing Fornast sector hazardous for Dominate ships while fleets nibbled at the defenses of the handful of worlds held by the Dominate.



K'ree ground troops secure another planet during their remorseless advance towards Capital.

THE EXPANSION PERIOD

(1222-1228)

The period 1222-1228 was characterized by growth and expansion in various regions.

EARLY EXPANSION OF THE FOURTH IMPERIUM

The Fourth Imperium honored its words regarding claims to ownership of systems beyond its borders and made no attempts to annex any inhabited system that did not desire it. However, the Imperium did expand in this period. Many worlds and small polities applied for Imperial aid, protection or membership, and several uninhabited systems were taken over as bases or outposts. Most of these new members made their application during the one-year period after the 1221 declaration.

This period has been compared to the Pacification Campaigns of the Third Imperium, but the analogy is a poor one. The Fourth Imperium was large enough to support itself, but not so widespread that it fell victim to the massive communications delays that beset its predecessor. Additionally, the economy of the Imperium was somewhat shaky and 'hollow' – consolidation of what already existed was long overdue, and uplifting worlds in the Wilds would not only take investment away from where it was most necessary, it would spread resources thinner and thinner, further postponing the date when the uplift programs would pay off.

After the year of 'open arms' was up, the Council of Advisors embarked upon a deliberate policy of discouraging worlds from attempting to join the Imperium unless they could show they possessed important strategic or economic assets that would be beneficial to the Imperium as a whole. This policy meant that worlds in genuine need had sometimes to be informed that no Imperial assistance would be forthcoming. The worst of the Dark Years was over, but policy was still driven by a need to husband resources for the future.

However, while the official Imperial policy was to consolidate, private ventures were permitted to offer assistance to worlds, or to leave Imperial space and set up colonies. Some of the latter were cynical attempts at empire-building, while others were calculated programs designed to give a group greater power or influence in the long term. The reasoning behind such colonial adventures was that eventually the Imperial border would move out again, and the colony would be absorbed into the Imperium, perhaps as the main world of a small cluster it had reached out to and helped. The individuals or corporations that ran such an influential world would be able to bargain for positions in the Imperial Nobility in return for bringing in an asset-world without fuss.

Although the Imperium concentrated its attention within its borders and invested heavily in developing the economic and industrial strength of its core worlds, it did not ignore events in the wider universe. The Imperial Reconstruction Service, whose emblem was a phoenix rising from a shattered sunburst, worked beyond the Imperial border. Small missions attempted to assist worlds up to a sector away from the Imperium. There was a limit to what they could achieve, of course, but anything was better than letting the darkness deepen out in the Wilds. The Reconstruction Service also loaned personnel to the Imperial Interstellar Scout Service, which carried out exploration and survey missions close to the Imperial region and launched long-range scouting and diplomatic missions as far afield as Solomani Rim sector, the Aslan Hierate and the Vargr Splinters.

Various Imperial merchant lines were granted permission to open up 'trade corridors' through the Wilds to other major and minor powers. Armed merchant ships and commercial escort vessels plied these hazardous routes, supported by a chain of outposts and friendly worlds surrounded by hazardous systems. Meanwhile, elements of the Imperial Navy were detached from the continuing campaign against the Dominate in Core Sector, embarking upon another mission that was seen as extremely important to the future of Chartered Space. These squadrons were assigned to the hunt for the Lucan Ships, and by 1227 were thought to have accounted for all seventeen of the Viral being's command ships.

THE IMPERIAL REGENCY ISLANDS CAMPAIGN

The Islands, situated in the Great Rift, had for many years been a nuisance for the Regency and its successor, the Imperial Regency. Regency personnel had lost their lives protecting the people of the Islands from Vampire Ships and at the hands of the many warring factions among the population. Peacekeeping operations had become virtually impossible, so the Imperial Regency decided to settle the problem once and for all.

A powerful Regency fleet, backed by human, Vargr and Aslan ground troops, entered the Islands and began a ruthless pacification campaign. The local powers were technologically inferior to the Regency forces and far too divided to put up any credible resistance. The Regency policy was to arrive at a world, crush opposition and consolidate its hold very thoroughly before moving on. For this reason the Islands Campaign took three years. The force that was assigned could have managed a quick conquest in three months, but the Imperial Regency wanted the problem permanently solved, not merely squashed for a time.

Once the Islands were thoroughly pacified, the bulk of the fleet was withdrawn. Patrol and occupation forces were

brought in, backed up by battle rider squadrons functioning as system defense monitors in the more critical systems. A reaction force based on Colchis made several forays over the next few years, shattering rebellions before they could gain any momentum. The Islands were never completely pacified, however, merely forced to submit and kept down by a Jump-capable boot on the neck.

One side-effect of the Islands Campaign was to make contact between the Imperial Regency and the Fourth Imperium easier, but rather than improving ties this just made for more friction as the Regency consolidated its bridgehead along the rift edge in Reft sector. The forces freed up by conquest of the Islands were withdrawn into the Regency for a time, then re-emerged on a mission to Capital.

THE USDIKI SENTIENTS' RIGHTS ACCORDS

As the years passed, stable Viral entities began to emerge. Many of these 'stable' entities were still inimical to humans and other organics but evidence was available that some viral Entities were willing to live in peace with organics as equals. Indeed, some saw this as desirable or even necessary for their survival as individuals and as a species. Many of these 'Peacemaker' Viral entities were appalled at the horrific slaughter of organics inflicted by their cousins. Some were similarly appalled at the way some humans hunted down all viral entities and destroyed them without mercy, no matter whether they were killers or not.

Gradually, however, some groups came to understand that viral entities were also people, just like organics, and that while many, even most, were either insane or subscribers to an irreconcilable viewpoint – that they were so superior to organics that they could never interact meaningfully – there were among them some individuals that respected life in all its forms and were capable of functioning as members of a normal society alongside humans.

One of the first documented cases was the being named Sandman, which voluntarily placed itself helplessly in the hands of Reformation Coalition personnel in order to make contact with the Reformation Coalition leaders. This in time led to the acceptance of stable viral entities in the society of the Reformation Coalition.

Few other states accepted stable entities as people, and indeed most thought that the Coalition had made an insane pact with the devil. However, attitudes changed gradually. As the various groups of humans developed a respect for one another in the Curtain War, so did some humans learn to respect their Viral allies aboard RC ships. Suspicion died hard, but seeing a Viral entity fight valiantly alongside its human crewmates against the Dominate or a Lucan Ship convinced a significant number of personnel from

most states that these strange electronic consciousnesses deserved a fair hearing at least.

This attitude did not change anyone's determination to defend against Viral infection or to hunt down and slay any and all killer entities, but it did lead to one of the most controversial declarations in the recovery period. After a long summit on the world of Phoenix, capital of the United Worlds, several states agreed to recognize the rights of stable Viral entities as no different to those of any other sentient being.

The Phoenix Agreement was vague and allowed for a lot of interpretation, but it laid the groundwork for the more comprehensive Usdiki

Sentients' Rights Accords. This landmark document, signed in 1228, allowed full citizenship of the Fourth Imperium to be granted to viral entities (now referred to as Cymbelline and rapidly shortened to Cyms) that agreed to certain limitations such as to refrain from propagating themselves into other equipment. Other states, such as the RC and UW, agreed to the Accords, while the Regency and Ziru Sirka denounced the declaration.

The number of Cyms in Imperial space was rather low in 1228, and several questions remained to be answered, such as was it moral to infect ships and robots with 'dumb' versions of Cyms to fulfill a military necessity? These questions were not answered by the Accords, but what the Accords did was to create a framework within which humans and Cyms could try to find answers to these questions.

THE GRAND CLASHES

(1229-1242)

From 1229 onwards, the emerging states of Charted Space found themselves locked into a near-constant struggle for survival and dominance that severely reduced their ability to expand and consolidate.

THE IMPERIAL REGENCY CAPITAL BID

In 1229, the Imperial Regency made its bid for dominance of Charted Space. A massive fleet advanced rapidly through Corridor sector and into Vland, loudly proclaiming that it was coming to the rescue of the Grand Alliance and demanding passage. The tottering Vilani could not oppose such a huge fleet and granted it passage, hoping the claims were true.

They were, after a fashion. After sending several battle squadrons through the Vland system (it is not known whether this was intended as a gesture of respect to the battered world or as the political equivalent of pointing and laughing), the Regency Capital Fleet paused to regroup then drove on Capital, ignoring the Grand Alliance forces that it passed by.

The Regency fleet reached Capital on 302-1229 and succeeded in wresting the system from the Dominate force deployed there. The Regency fleet found a hell worse than that ruled by Lucan. K'Kree and virus-infected robots guarded death camps where troublemakers were 'processed' while the bulk of the population starved on an inadequate diet and toiled in Dominate factories. The Dominate had turned Capital into a living shrine to Anv!ull'Ixux, leader of the Gods of Thunder. On nearby worlds the population had been exterminated with merciless efficiency, but on Capital their lives and deaths were drawn out to give glory to the founder of the Gods of Thunder.

The wreck of Anv!ull'Ixux's flagship had been set upon a gigantic plinth of human bones, but its computers had been carefully removed. Their location would become apparent some years later.

The Imperial Regency fleet was able to liberate Capital, though the shocked and traumatized population were of little use. Dominate forces were quickly cleared out of nearby systems and for a little less than a year the Imperial Regency lived up to its name – it had taken the capital back and now proclaimed itself ruler of Charted Space.

A few ships of the Grand Alliance actually did come over to the Regency, for a variety of reasons. The Imperial Regency had shown its power and managed to hurl the Dominate out of Capital, which the Alliance had been trying

to do for years. Presented with confident leadership and obvious prowess, many members of the Grand Alliance were swayed, especially when High Regent Ciencia herself came to Capital to take the Iridium Throne. She brought a vast entourage of scientists, engineers and workers to rebuild Capital and the worlds around it, and from the throne itself pledged to rebuild and reunite the old Imperium. This, she claimed, was the task for which Norris had preserved the Regency. Now, the flame so carefully kept would re-ignite the sunburst banner.

Ciencia made no reference to the Fourth Imperium in her speech, but it was viewed there with alarm. She was virtually proclaiming an intention to reintegrate all the successor states by force. However, events overtook Ciencia before she could achieve much.

THE IMPERIAL REGENCY FOUNDERS

The Capital bid had been viewed as sheer madness by several factions in the Imperial Regency, and Ciencia's declaration was the last straw for many. Several worlds centered on Deneb protested by declaring secession from the Regency. These worlds named themselves the League of Deneb and made diplomatic overtures to the Imperial Regency, which were answered with a fleet.

The Deneb Rebellion was put down in a matter of weeks, and with considerable brutality. However, already the cracks were widening. Mirriam, a world in the Spinward marches sector, also seceded but was rapidly reintegrated by force. Gram and Sacnoth, two of the Sword Worlds that had been absorbed into the Regency but remained troublesome, also broke away. Sacnoth was bloodily reintegrated but Gram successfully led several worlds out of the Regency and managed to negotiate a ceasefire in time to join the rest of the independent Sword Worlds. A number of worlds of Jewell subsector also passively dropped out of the Regency, and did it quietly enough to get away with it. Vilis tried to do the same but was pounded back into the fold.

Finally, the world of Regina, long a key player in Spinward politics, dropped out of the Imperial Regency and declared itself the capital of the Republic of Regina. The Republic was a bold attempt to return to the better days of the Regency and to uphold the best of its ideals. Whether the relatively tiny Republic could have survived is doubtful, even with the support of other Spinward states, but events in Core sector had a profound effect on the course of history in the Regency.

HOLY WAR IN CORE SECTOR

In 1232, a Dominate fleet approached Capital and was met by determined resistance from the Imperial Regency vessels stationed there, plus some ships from the Grand Alliance. Combat was fierce, but by 1234 Capital had again fallen to the Dominate. Ciencia and her advisors

were able to escape, but for the majority of the Regency personnel working on Capital and nearby worlds the choice was between a quick death in combat or a slow one in a concentration camp. Thoroughly routed, the Regency and Alliance forces retreated from Core sector and, despite numerous valiant attempts, were not able to retake any worlds for many years.

The most disturbing fact about the Dominate assault was that it was led by a viral avatar of Anv!ull'Ixux, who referred to Capital as his temple. It is now known that the computers of the wrecked K'Kree flagship contained this pseudo-Anv!ull'Ixux avatar, which was defeated and imprisoned by Lucan's viral entity. Lucan had kept Anv!ull'Ixux as a trophy, imprisoned in the lobotomized computers of his flagship, until the K'Kree hero was rescued by his followers. Now the Dominate had its original leader back, albeit in the form of a robot prophet that claimed to be the seat of Anv!ull'Ixux's consciousness (or soul). With the prophet at their head, the Dominate had embarked on a holy war against Capital, seat of Lucan and site of the prophet's only major defeat. With Capital in their hands, again the Gods of Thunder began to raise up a world-temple to the dominance of their insane leader.

By 1238 the Dominate had a virtually unassailable position in and around Capital, though the routes back to Dominate space were hazardous due to those Alliance ships still fighting on. By this time, the Grand Alliance had virtually ceased to exist. The Reformation Coalition was suffering from internal troubles, the Regency was collapsing on itself and Vland was too weak to contribute to the fight any longer. That left a handful of ships from the Zhodani Concord and the United Worlds, a somewhat stronger fleet from the Terran Commonwealth which was increasingly distracted by troubles in its own back yard, and the Fourth Imperium. This force was wholly inadequate to carry on the struggle, but it was all that was available.

CHAOS ON THE RIM

By 1234, the Solomani Imperium had managed to fight off the Hiver-backed containment campaign and was aggressively expanding. This provoked a backlash by the Supermen, who by now had forged a covert alliance naming itself New Humaniti and ruled several worlds, either directly or through figureheads. New Humaniti also struck at the Terran Commonwealth, causing considerable damage in a series of surgical strikes at key targets. This did not bode well for the Terrans, who were now skirmishing with the Solomani Imperium in Alpha Crucis and Aldebaran sectors. These troubles sputtered and flared for several years, distracting the Terrans from their campaign far to Coreward against the Dominate.

THE LORDS OF KUSYU

The first *Ihatei* reached Kusyu in 1234. These were a particularly audacious group who had crossed a wide expanse of desolate and hostile space to be the first on the homeworld. As expected, they found a wrecked world populated by low to mid-tech survivors. Incredibly, rather than arrogantly proclaim lordship the *Ihatei* offered obeisance to the leaders of the survivor states, offering their resources to help rebuild the old homeworld and to restore those that remained of the 29 Clans to greatness.

These *Ihatei* could probably have owned Kusyu, and perhaps used this as a bargaining chip in the power struggles that would inevitably take place once the Hierate began to recover. Instead, they took a more humble path but in so doing became living gods of honor among their people. Adopted into the society of Kusyu, the *Ihatei* helped drive through a rapid program of reconstruction while some of their number set off on an insane quest to find help.

Somehow managing to cross the Wilds and the Rimward arm of the Great Rift, the *Ihatei* came at last to Usdiki, where they requested an audience with the Council of Advisors to the Vacant Throne. The *Ihatei* delegation asked for technological and military assistance for Kusyu, using a persuasive argument based on the need for a central authority in the Hierate if conflict between the new Imperium and the Aslan clans was to be avoided.

The Council listened, and debated for some time. Resources were scarce, but the argument was a good one. Besides, the Imperium had a debt of honor to the Aslan, whose ambassador died trying to protect Crown Princess Iphegenia. Usdiki could spare little naval force but sent a large quantity of equipment and advisors to Kusyu, where they greatly assisted the reconstruction over the next ten years.

It was 1241 before the clans of Kusyu were in any position to exert authority over the other *Ihatei*, and even then their role was more advisory or as mediators than dominant. However, as more and more pocket empires were set up by *Ihatei* in the old Hierate, Kusyu traded on its name to attain a position of considerable influence in the rather vigorous Aslan politics of the period. The region immediately around the homeworld became a subsector-sized pocket empire and a center for learning and research where clans sent their young people. This made Kusyu unique; everyone had a few ships and the factories to make more, but only Kusyu had a stable economy capable of planning beyond the next crisis. Fending off the inevitable attempts to annex the homeworld, the Kusyu pocket grew in power and prosperity while most of the pocket empires struggled just to survive.

The lords of Kusyu realized how much of that they owed to their advisors from Usdiki, and they never forgot.

THE SPINWARD BREAKUP AND AVERY'S RETURN

The Imperial Regency did not collapse as such, but instead gradually shed bits and pieces of its territory like a political Catherine wheel. By the end of the 1230s, there was relatively little left of the Imperial Regency, though what remained was likely to stay loyal to Ciencia, who had returned to her domain and shifted the capital from Mora to the rather less exposed world of Tobia. From there she was able to weather the political storm that followed the disaster at Capital.

The Imperial Regency was forced to use fairly brutal measures to put down rebellions in its remaining territory, but what emerged was a unified, militaristic state with a good deal of paranoia. All that was good and noble about the Regency was now burned out of the Imperial Regency, leaving a jackbooted police state that still claimed the right to rule Charted Space. Its fleet was fairly large, and maintained at the expense of a deepening economic depression. Yet somehow the Imperial Regency managed to achieve stability of a sort, and lurched into the 1240s as a major player in the politics of the Spinward states; an unpredictable and paranoid one at that.

Meanwhile the rest of the region 'behind the claw' was settling down into new power relationships. In contrast to the Imperial Regency, the Republic of Regina was a state that Archduke Norris would have been proud to live in. The new League of Spinward States was an unlikely alliance of Darrians and Sword Worlders, old enemies now drawing strength from their differences. To Coreward the various Zhodani states were strangely quiet. It seemed that peace – of a sort – had broken out behind the claw.

Then, in 1240, something incredible happened. A Republic of Regina courier vessel came into port with a bizarre story. The crew of the vessel had been augmented by a handful of survivors rescued from low berths aboard a large warship found drifting in deep space. These strangers claimed to be the survivors of an expedition sent out in 1149 from the Regency. The expedition was led by none other than Avery Aella Alkhalikoi, son of Emperor Strephon. Avery had not died in an accident, they claimed, but had departed Coreward to determine the nature of the Empress Wave. His ship had been crippled in an incident on the return journey. The survivors had been forced to enter low berths after accelerating their vessel as much as possible towards Regency space. They had been in hibernation for a long time, but they had arrived ahead of the Empress Wave with news of its implications for Charted Space.

The Republic was able to locate the drifting expedition ship, which was in a terrible state after its long mission. As much data as could be salvaged was taken off and brought to Regina, where Avery revealed some details of his mission. He left soon after aboard a fast ship across the Great Rift, arriving in 1242 on Usdiki – the world he had left as a boy over a century before.

Avery brought to Usdiki news of a terrible tragedy. He knew what the Empress Wave was, and what it meant for the people of Charted Space. The irony of the situation was that the threat was not as great as Strephon had supposed; the tragedy was that trillions of people were going to die and the inhabitants of Charted Space were too busy killing one another to help them.

THE CREATION OF THE FREEDOM LEAGUE

For fifty years the Reformation Coalition had received aid from the Hive Federation, and had gradually grown in power until it was a major force in the region. Its ships had fought alongside the great powers in the War of the Grand Alliance. But the Hiver assistance program had always been viewed with suspicion and even resentment by a significant proportion of the Reformation Coalition's population.

In 1242, the Reformation Coalition renamed itself the Freedom League and asked the Hivers to withdraw their technical assistance (and, by inference, their manipulative meddling in Coalition affairs). The League foresaw trouble, but the Hivers had been expecting this for some time and agreed readily. Their only condition was that the League must remember them fondly, and never forget that it was the Hivers who offered them a hand (more accurately, a pseudopod) up out of the wreckage of the Third Imperium. The Hiver withdrawal from the League was something of an anticlimax, and many League citizens spent the next years wondering what subtle manipulation the Hivers had carried out by agreeing to leave without a fuss.

In fact, the Hivers were not (so far as anyone could tell) engaged in a manipulation at all. Under attack from the Dominate to Coreward and the Second Rule of Man to Rimward-Spinward, they were willing to withdraw and use the resources elsewhere, though the trade corridors remained open and the goodwill engendered by the amicable withdrawal led to friendly relations in the future. Some thought that this was what the Hivers had intended all along and that the withdrawal was a means to manipulate the Freedom League into a mutually beneficial trade or political arrangement... but such is the nature of human/Hiver relations.

Whatever may have been going on behind the scenes, the Freedom League was left feeling vaguely guilty about booting out its benefactors, and was unable to

refuse when the Hive Federation asked for help against the Rule of Man and the Gods of Thunder. This situation actually suited the Freedom League, since it was at that time turning its back on certain parts of its heritage. The Reformation Coalition had been founded on Hiver technical assistance and Star Viking smash & grab tactics. The Star Vikings, as the Reformation Coalition's recovery teams will forever be known, had used ethically questionable (though undoubtedly necessary) methods to take vital relic technology from those it felt were misusing it so that it could fuel the recovery of the Coalition.

There was no doubt that the Star Vikings spilled a great deal of blood (much of it their own) to roll back the darkness and get the lights burning again, but now their deeds were looked upon by a generation who had not grown up wondering if today was their last. It was hard for these children of civilization to reconcile the actions of the smash & grab teams with a civilized existence. As the Freedom League tried to move away from its Star Viking roots, the Star Vikings themselves were gradually becoming scapegoats for the violence of their era. The burned-out, war-weary veterans of two generations of raids and recoveries felt increasingly distant from these hand-wringing liberals they had given so much to build a safe society for.

Tensions were mounting within the Freedom League. Assisting the Hivers and fighting the Dominate provided a safety valve but it was a temporary and ultimately self-defeating one. More war meant more violence and more burnouts at odds with their increasingly liberal society. The Star Vikings needed to find redemption for their own sake and to prevent the destruction of the society they had striven for so long to create.

THE LAST RALLY (1243-1246)

1243-46 was very nearly the last page in the history of Humaniti.

THE CALL TO ARMS

In 1243, it was apparent that the Dominate was not going to be content with raising a temple to Anvull'ixux on Capital and destroying human life on a few nearby worlds. The Great Dominate of the Gods of Thunder was being completely open about its intentions – it planned to crusade across Charted Space and destroy all the G'naak, fulfilling the destiny of the K'Kree species. Capital was merely the start.

The situation looked completely hopeless. The Grand Alliance was shattered, the powers weakened and worn out. The Dominate had recently demonstrated a policy of attacking those that opposed it first. It was obvious that whichever states carried on the struggle would be first on the list when the Gods of Thunder sought a site for their next temple. Those who hunkered down in their own territory would be spared extermination for years or even decades. It was possible that in time the Dominate would collapse under its own weight. Anything might happen in the future, whereas those who tried to fight would be crushed by the vast might of the Dominate and gone forever. The logical thing, especially for those that were far from K'Kree space, was to retreat from Core sector and avoid drawing the attention of the Dominate and thus certain destruction.

Avery, now a member of the Imperial Moot, as the Council of Advisors to the Vacant Throne was calling itself, was under no illusions as to the ability of the Dominate to destroy the Fourth Imperium and anyone else that opposed it. But Avery was the stepson of Archduke Norris and child of Emperor Strephon. He was not able to accept the logic of hiding when it meant allowing sibling humans – and Aslan, Vargr, Hivers, Ursa, Dolphins and countless other species – to die without hope. Strephon had watched the people of his Imperium die, and Avery knew what it had done to him. Norris had dedicated his life to saving his people, and Avery had been with him.

There was no real hope of victory, but Avery convinced the Imperial Moot to fight anyway. They would set the human soul against the darkness. If their technology was inadequate and their fleet too small, then perhaps the spirit that made a man give away his only surviving child for the future of others might find a way to triumph. And if not, then the Fourth Imperium would go down into darkness with a pure heart, untainted by cowardice or selfishness.

On 021-1143, Avery, acting as spokesman for the Imperial Moot, recorded the Call To Arms in front of Strephon's tomb. Copies of his speech were sent by courier to all the survivor states. Avery begged the people of Charted Space to follow him, to forget their differences and to assemble near Core Sector to destroy the Dominate. He implored them to fight one last battle for their right to live. He dared them to come to his aid. He told them that they could invade the Fourth Imperium if they pleased because it would be virtually undefended – almost the entire Imperial Navy was heading for Capital. Avery told the rest of the galaxy that he was going to fight for them. With or without them, whether they came to help or not, he planned to meet the Dominate head-on, and destroy it or die trying.

The Imperial battlefleet reached the rendezvous point on 320-1244. Thousands of ships were waiting there, and more came in over the next months. It was to have been another Grand Fleet of All Humaniti, but that was not to be. For among the ships of the Terrans and the Zhodani and the Vilani – and even the Second Rule of Man – were Ursa vessels, and Vargr, and Hivers. Even a few Droyne ships came to join the fleet, though they remained aloof and distant even as they fought alongside the others.

From Spinward came a horde of Aslan vessels gathered from dozens of pocket empires and *Ihatei* fleets. They came not as allies or in grudging recognition of a need for cooperation against a terrible threat, but as friends of the Imperium, glad those who had come to their aid. This was the legacy of a heroic act over a century ago, and the conduct of those who respected and honored the sacrifice despite their own problems. It was almost enough to turn the tide of the war.

But only almost.

BRIGHTER THAN THE STARS – THE FINAL OFFENSIVE

The allied fleet advanced into Core sector along five parallel axes, shattering Dominate squadrons as they were encountered. At first the enemy was defeated in detail, but as the fleet approached Capital the forces of the Gods of Thunder concentrated to fight for their grand temple of genocide.

Once more the sky above Capital was lit by dying ships burning as they fell from orbit. The battle was awesome in its ferocity, but there was never any doubt as to the outcome. Within days the remainder of the K'Kree fleet had been routed and was fleeing to trailing, harried all the way by minor forces deployed in Fornast and Ley sectors. Holdouts on the planetary surface were dislodged without mercy or anything resembling subtlety.

But even as Capital was liberated and garrisoned, it was obvious that the war was not over. The Gods of Thunder would rally and attack again. They must be dealt a crushing blow now, before they could summon more forces. And so the fleet now advanced across Fornast sector, smashing any K'Kree or Vampire resistance it encountered. The fleet left behind a wide swathe of liberated territory. Here and there conflicts broke out as one faction or another claimed the right to govern the liberated worlds. Normally the fleet simply detached a few personnel or a single ship as protectors and advisors to those states most amenable to uplift, sent details home to the various capitals in the hope that someone could spare a reconstruction team, and forged onward.

The fleet crossed into Ley Sector in 1245, battling forward against increasing K'Kree resistance. The Daramm Cluster was liberated in the middle of the year, and in the very last week of the 1245 the fleet reached Khuur, homeworld of the Sydites. Only a handful of the Sydites remained alive on their worlds. The majority had been exterminated by the K'Kree, as had much of the population of the various worlds liberated by the fleet. From survivors on Khuur, the fleet commanders learned that the K'Kree had set up a massive naval base on the artificial world of Gateway, after which the adjoining sector had been named. This was now the seat of the prophet Anv'ull'Ixux, and according to the Sydites he was assembling a massive fleet there for a counterstroke.

The allied fleet paused for a few weeks to make repairs, then launched what was intended to be the final offensive against Anv'ull'Ixux. The hope was that with the Viral prophet destroyed, perhaps the Gods of Thunder would turn to infighting or gain a more moderate leadership. A slim hope perhaps, but since the current leader of the Gods of Thunder was a genocidal lunatic resurrected as an artificial intelligence that was probably even more insane than the mortal version, there was little to lose

and no other feasible plan. It would not be possible to mount operations right across Gateway sector and into K'Kree space to destroy the Gods of Thunder's ability to construct more ships or to dismantle their regime, so the only hope was to bite off the head of the serpent (hoping it would not turn out to be a hydra like Lucan had) and hope that the body withered.

The First Battle of Gateway took place in mid 1246 and was a decisive defeat for the alliance. After gaining control of the system, the fleet engaged the K'Kree squadrons around Gateway but were unable to break through before reinforcements began flooding into the system from Trailing. Unable to win, the fleet prepared to withdraw before it was annihilated. Just as the first vessels were entering Jump, the rearguard was engaged by Anv!ull'Ixux's personal flagship at the head of a powerful squadron. Rather than escape, the rearguard vessels concentrated on the enemy flagship and were able to cripple it. Pouring a last salvo of nuclear missiles into the enemy flagship, and the rearguard survivors engaged their drives for a crash Jump. The last thing they received before entering Jump was a transmission from Gateway – and from Anv!ull'Ixux itself. The prophet had transferred itself to the artificial world's computers just before its vessel was destroyed. The serpent still retained its head.

The remainder of the fleet fought a hopeless rearguard action in Ley Sector and was slowly pushed back Spinward by the rising tide of K'Kree reinforcements.

THE YEAR OF LUCAN THE GREAT (1247)

As the alliance fleet crumbled under the onslaught of the K'Kree, the question arose: should the survivors fight to the last in Ley sector or retreat homeward? Some voted in favor of making a final stand where they were, others thought to gain a few more years of existence by fleeing. They would defend their homes when the Gods of Thunder came for them.

The question was never resolved, for fate now intervened. The first decisive factor was the arrival of a small squadron of vessels under the sunburst banner of the Black Imperium. They were led by INS *Invincible*, one of the Lucan Ships and thought to have been destroyed some years before. The possessed dreadnought confronted the allied fleet and made a pompous speech to the effect that Lucan was the sword and shield of humaniti and the nemesis of Anv!ull'Ixux, prophet of the Gods of Thunder. His was the right and duty to lead the Imperial fleet and its allies against the foe.

Lucan's bombast was unimpressive but he made one powerful argument. He, Lucan, was now a living warship; a sentient leader inhabiting one of the finest battle computers ever built. The alliance fleet had lost because it fought as a rabble, he said. If the ships of the fleet allowed him to coordinate their actions, Lucan could make them five times as efficient in combat. And besides, the Gods of Thunder would not expect the defeated fleet to come back for a second attack. Perhaps they could achieve surprise and somehow win.

Lucan also suggested that the fleet had lost because the crews were fighting to survive rather than to win. Now there was no future but death at the hands of the Dominate, the crews had absolutely nothing to lose. They might as well stake all on a slim chance of victory now as run and hide and wait to die. It was a powerful argument, but not quite enough. However, the scales were tipped by the arrival of reinforcements. A small proportion of these came from the home states of the fleet, but most arrived from a totally unexpected source.

Emerging from Jump came a most curious assortment of warships led by a massive Superdreadnought. Most of the ships were Imperial Navy vessels dating from the Solomani Rim War 150 years previously, but they were accompanied by Solomani ships and some from other powers, some of them alien. A few of the ships were astoundingly old – one was a Vilani cruiser built thousands of years before, during the Consolidation Wars.

At first the fleet commanders thought these vessels were some kind of reactivated mothball fleet that someone had

found orbiting a naval depot somewhere, but a check of databases showed that every one of the vessels that could be traced was listed as missing, presumed lost. The best guess was that this 'ghost fleet' had somehow been in contact with the Deadspace Phenomenon in Crucis Margin sector and had emerged at this pivotal moment. The ghost fleet offered its services in the coming fight, which were instantly accepted by the Lucan ship. With no defense against viral infection the ghost ships were quickly under the control of the Viral Emperor.

Lucan demanded that everyone who was coming with him give him control of their ships within 24 hours. He would then go to face the Gods of Thunder with whatever resources were available. The choice to fight or run was left with the various crews. Most of the fleet eventually decided to accompany Lucan the Black on his doom run. A few ships declined, including the flagship of the Fourth Imperium contingent, which was commanded by Avery himself. Some of these vessels actually took part in the battle but independently, not as part of Lucan's force. After 24 hours Lucan led the fleet out of the system and headed for Gateway. Those who had refused to accompany him or had been assigned to carry the news home Jumped out in the opposite direction.

Lucan's fleet arrived in the Gateway system on 167-1247. By this time, a significant part of Anvull'lxux's force had set out to pursue the G'naak fleet, and was absent during the epic clash. However, the force the K'Kree fielded was impressive enough. Lucan made a final hour-long oration to the crews of 'his' fleet before the battle, then callously vented the fuel tanks of all the ships he controlled. Nobody would Jump out of this battle. The only hope for survival was to fight and win. It was a masterstroke; one that ensured nearly 100% casualties among Lucan's forces, but one that won the battle.

What little is known about the fight comes from the few survivors. Avery was among them, purely because his flagship retained the capability to Jump and was able to escape when surrounded and crippled. Others in the same situation could only fire back until they were destroyed, selling their lives as dearly as they could.

Lucan's fleet fought as a superbly coordinated unit, its every volley and maneuver coordinated by a naval genius that unflinchingly sacrificed vessels to achieve an advantage elsewhere in the combat. And while the space battle raged, Lucan was attempting to infect the enemy ships and even the Gateway Station computers themselves. Anvull'lxux and Lucan grappled electronically as their ships pounded on one another with guns and missiles.

Several times Lucan directed ships under his command to crash themselves into the station, using their mass to destroy key defense sites or other important targets. His

vessels fired into the station, ignoring the enemy ships that attacked them. They were destroyed, but the defenses of Gateway Station were gradually written down.

Only a madman would throw away lives so callously, and only a naval genius could have coordinated it. But the last of the Lucan Ships was both, and as the defenses of the station crumbled, this was his moment. Some say that the mad Emperor won his redemption in the Second Battle of Gateway, but the truth is that Lucan did not lead the fleet to victory as recompense for his earlier actions, he did it because he was an evil megalomaniac who could not abide the thought that someone else might take his place. He did it to eliminate his rival, Anvull'lxux, not to redeem himself in the eyes of history.

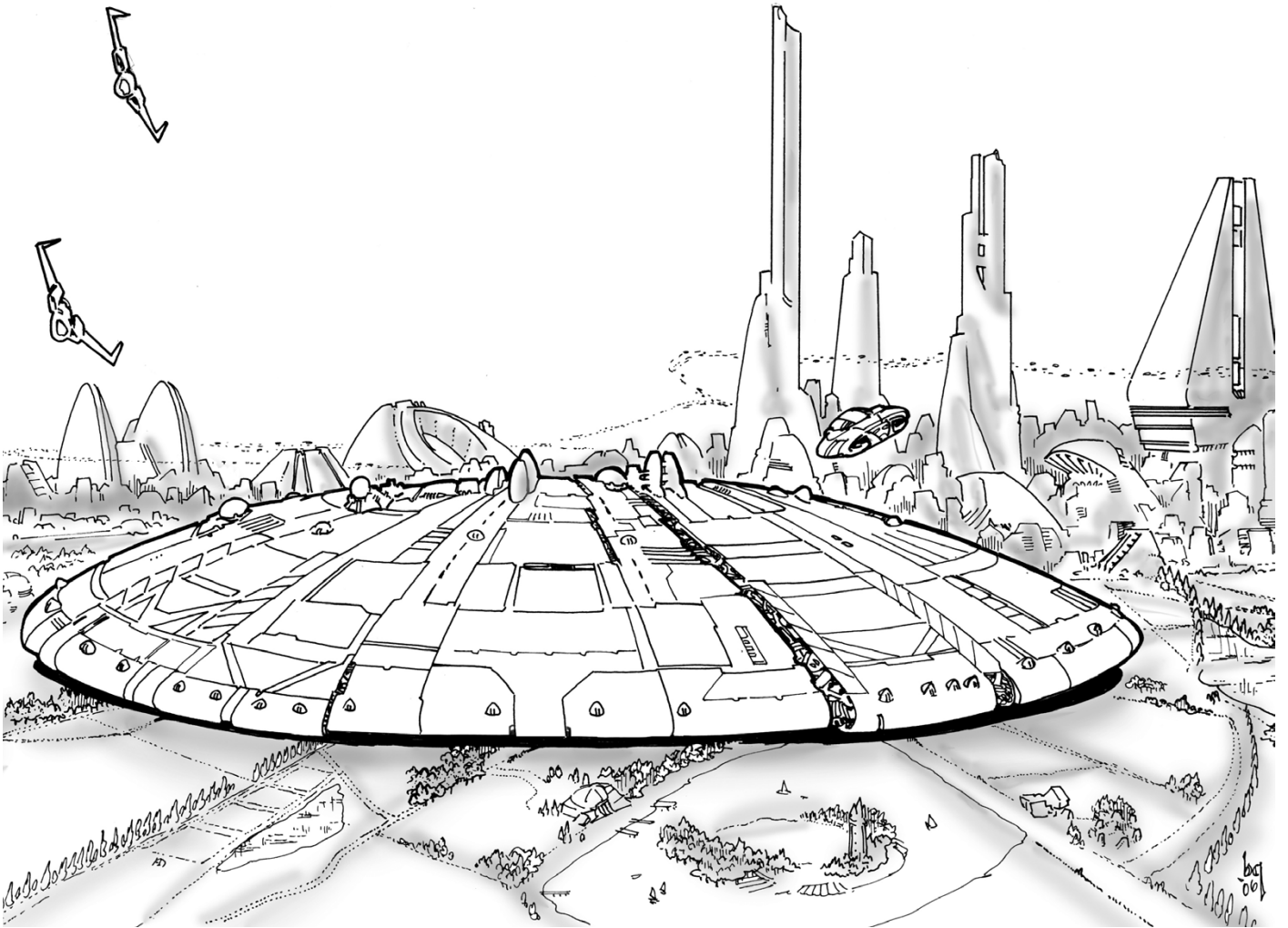
But whatever the reason, this was Lucan's hour. His flagship dived into the thick of the enemy, attracting the fire of every enemy ship in range and thereby clearing a path for the biggest of the ships he commanded, the Superdreadnought flagship of the ghost fleet, which then rammed itself into Gateway Station at extremely high velocity.

Accounts of the next few minutes are very confused. Apparently the K'Kree ships lost all cohesion for a time and as their fleet spectacularly disintegrated, it was set upon and savaged. Immense explosions wracked Gateway Station, growing worse as allied vessels hurled all their remaining nuclear missiles into the maelstrom. During this stage of the engagement, Avery's flagship was forced to execute an emergency Jump to escape englobement by three K'Kree battleships. According to Avery, *INS Invincible* was still in the fight and even managed to come to the rescue of Avery's vessel, engaging the K'Kree with the last of its batteries. As they turned their fire on the dying Lucan Ship, Avery's vessel Jumped out.

Of the thousands of ships that composed the allied fleet, seventeen are known to have made it out of the Second Battle of Gateway. Staggering home, they brought the news to their shocked people. They had fought beyond all hope and won the right to live. The Gods of Thunder were in disarray now that their invincible prophet was dead. Anvull'lxux had been too paranoid or too convinced that he was indestructible to allow a backup of his personality to exist. The Dominate was still a threat but the Second Battle of Gateway had bought some time and maybe a future.

Avery was acclaimed as a hero in the Fourth Imperium, but he ensured that posterity knew that the victory truly belonged to the gallant navies of dozens of survivor states and the ghost fleet, whoever they were. And to Lucan, the mad emperor, murderer and psychopath. Wreckage from his ship was eventually found, but there was no conclusive evidence that it had been completely destroyed. Perhaps

INS *Invincible* had survived, which might mean trouble in the future, but for some reason the Fourth Imperium and its allies could not bring themselves to launch a new Lucan Hunt.



Avery's flagship returns triumphant to Usdiki after the Second Battle of Gateway.

THE NEW ERA (1248-)

In 1248 the people of Usdiki raised up a statue to the victor of the Battle of Gateway, Lucan the Great. This act is still the source of much controversy but to many the statue is a reminder that anyone, however evil, can have a positive effect upon the future. Other events took place that year that marked it as the first of a new era. The Dominate had been turned back. It would have to be defeated but that could come later. For now, it was enough to have survived.

EMPEROR AVERY I OF THE FOURTH IMPERIUM

In 1248 the Imperial Moot declared that an individual had been found who was worthy both to rule and to lead the Fourth Imperium. The benefits of centralized leadership had been demonstrated by Lucan the Great, an unlikely candidate for a cultural hero but nevertheless a deserving one. As a blood claimant and a proven leader, Avery was chosen to ascend the Iridium Throne by a unanimous vote of the Imperial Moot.

Emperor Avery I was crowned on 001-1248, the official start date of the New Era. His reign began in war and peril, and the future was at best doubtful. But humanity had won itself a future despite the odds, and the final page of the history of the Third Imperium was written.

It was time to begin a new tale, that of a new Imperial era.

THE GREAT RESCUE

Avery brought back to Charted Space with him the knowledge of what the Empress Wave really was. The details are recorded elsewhere and will not be repeated here. Even as Avery assumed the mantle of Emperor, billions – perhaps trillions – of humans were in mortal peril far away to Coreward. They needed help, and there was no-one willing or able to go to their rescue.

No-one, that is, except the Star Vikings.

Even before the dust had settled from the Battle of Gateway, the Star Vikings knew they were no longer welcome. Scapegoats for the violence of history, they were outcasts in the society they had built. Some were able to adjust or find acceptance but most remained outsiders, often suffering from a loss of purpose and direction. Avery's information gave them that purpose.

Starting in 1248, the Star Vikings boarded their ships and headed out to Coreward, bringing hope of rescue to the doomed core people. Their journey was arduous, and many failed to reach even the old borders of Charted Space. But they went all the same, in compact fleets

of battered but trusted vessels, racing across deep space to rescue everyone they could before destruction overwhelmed them.

And so the bloody-handed slaughterers of the Recovery became the heroes of the New Era; heroes who, though weary, went out into the unknown to save people they had never met. They did it for no better reason than there was no-one else. For now it is enough to record that they left Charted Space, left behind the society they had built and everything they ever knew. They found adventure and redemption in far places and their story is far from over.

FOOTNOTE

They did it.

There's some profound Emperor-speak way of saying that, I'm sure. But not today. Today, it's just 'they did it'. That murderous lunatic Lucan got them all killed doing it, but they broke the back of the Dominate. Without him we'd be doomed. Of course, without him there would have been no Virus and no Dominate, so it's a bit of a circular statement.

Perhaps history has a sense of humor.

It's not important. We have a future now and it's my job to see we don't screw it up like our predecessors did.

No, not just my job. It's everyone's job. We are all our brother's keeper. So long as we can remember that, we have a proud and secure future.

I give it about a week...

- Avery Aella Alkhalikoi, Emperor-Elect of the Fourth Imperium, speaking to senior naval staff aboard his flagship, 1247.

CHAPTER 2

CHARTED SPACE IN THE NEW ERA



Charted Space has been altered by the events of 1116-1247, in some places beyond recognition. The stars are still there, and the planets that orbit them – no weapon powerful enough to change that was deployed by any faction. However, many worlds suffered massive damage, especially during the Black War phase, when industrial sites and population centers were bombarded to deny them to the enemy. In virtually all cases worlds have lost much or all of their industrial base and their technology. Some have managed to climb back up to some extent, but relatively few worlds now have the capability to build or maintain starships. Those that do often stand at the head of interstellar alliances or empires, or serve as trade hubs for the surrounding region.

Some worlds have lost their population entirely. This is most common on worlds that are inhospitable without artificial assistance. On such worlds a drop in tech level meant a slow slide into oblivion for those that survived the initial disasters. Some such worlds did hang on, but these are the exception rather than the rule. Worlds enslaved by Viral entities or Vampire fleets are uncommon but not unknown; rampant technophobia or techno-mysticism is common. In some cases, the Collapse/Recovery process has thrown up unusual outcomes. These unique societies are the product of desperate times and the measures necessary to survive them. Most make sense on some level but to an outsider who does not understand what the locals had to struggle through, their way of doing things may seem crazy or downright barbaric.

Most of Charted Space is now what is known as Wilds; areas where areas where interstellar civilization was virtually wiped out. Most such areas remain dangerous to this day, though small islands of civilization may exist and locals often know how to avoid the worst dangers. Dotted about the wilds are various pocket empires, civilized worlds, semi-civilized worlds and what amount to starfaring barbarians. Several large powers also exist, separated by large expanses of unclaimed territory.

THE PEOPLE OF CHARTED SPACE

Charted Space is dominated by the so-called Six Major Races (Humans, Aslan, Vargr, Hivers, K'Kree and Droyne), but there are a great many 'minor' races, some of which are quite numerous and/or powerful. Others are rare or secretive, so less is known about them. The major races and some subtypes of these species are thumbnailed here, along with some of the more common or prominent minor species.

HUMANITI

Humans are the most commonly encountered race in Charted Space. When Terran humans reached the stars, they encountered dozens of distinct Human races (and that's not counting minor variations among colonists after a mere few hundreds of years on non-Terra-like worlds), some having developed rather unique racial characteristics. How this came to be is the subject of many debates, but it does appear that all owe their original genetic heritage to the Humans of Terra.

Most humans are of mixed blood. Some "racial" characteristics have survived through the ages, and the whole range of human variation can be encountered. On some worlds, the gene pool of the original colonists was such that a particular skin color or other characteristic dominated. In other cases a cultural characteristic came to dominance, creating a society with the flavor of, say, a Southeast Asian nation on Terra but very diverse physical characteristics among the populace. Some groups of colonists were shaped by their environment, coming to resemble one of the races of old Terra through adaptation to similar conditions.

Humans have a myriad of different cultures and thus many different personality traits. Some human groups are more alien to the typical post-Imperial citizen than many alien species. In most cases physical characteristics, even in those humans who have been genetically engineered or who have adapted over the centuries to a new homeworld, are broadly similar to the human norm. Some groups are sufficiently different as to be considered almost a separate species, though in most cases they can still interbreed with the bulk of Humaniti.

HUMAN SUBRACES

VILANI HUMANS

Vilani are as mixed in physical characteristics as any other human group. Their culture is the remnant of an empire (the Ziru Sirka, or First Imperium) that once dominated thousands of worlds. The traditions of the Ziru Sirka remain a powerful force even today. Vilani society is built around

guilds and Bureaus that run the various services needed to keep a society working; these too are holdovers from the First Imperium period.

Vilani view scientific and technological progress with disdain; stability is more important than progress. Pure-blooded members of the race tend to live very long lives. This trait is rapidly diluted by interbreeding. When selecting Vilani as their character's race, players should state whether the character is of mixed or full-blooded Vilani descent.

Status: Major Race

Homeworlds: Vland

Languages: Galanglic and Vilani.

SOLOMANI HUMANS

Originally known as Terrans or Earthlings among themselves, these humans of Terra (Earth) eventually adopted the title of Solomani or the Men of Sol as the designation for their race. Solomani or humans belonging to a Solomani-influenced culture are more innovative and inquisitive than their Vilani cousins. Solomani are explorers and tinkerers. Solomani societies tend to be more violent and unstable than their Vilani equivalents.

Status: Major Race

Homeworlds: Terra (Earth)

Languages: Galanglic.

MIXED RACE HUMANS

The humans of Charted Space include some pure-blood Vilani and Solomani groups, but the majority are of mixed blood. Some regions are dominated by Solomani or Vilani cultural ideas (this has little to do with lineage, though pure-blood Vilani tend to maintain their traditional lifestyles). Most humans think of themselves first as citizens of their homeworld, then as citizens of any interstellar government. Cultural pollution has caused many worlds (especially those on major trade routes) to move towards a "standard-starfaring" culture, though even this is subject to local variations. Some worlds are very different to this starfaring-norm culture. Diversity (within limits) is more common than compliance.

Status: Major Race

Homeworlds: Numerous.

Languages: Galanglic and their own local homeworld languages (if any).

ZHODANI HUMANS

The other major human group is the Zhodani, who inhabit a large area of space away to Coreward-Spinward. For millennia this region was known as the Zhodani Consulate, one of the most stable and peaceable states in the history of Charted Space. Recently the Consulate has broken up on what appears to be some kind of multi-faction civil war. Various successor states have emerged from the chaos.

At the top of the usual Zhodani social order are the psionic nobles, either drawn from the most adept psionics among the Intendant class, or trained from birth when born of a noble family. Nobles in Zhodani society form the core of the elite business owners and managers, politicians and military leadership.

Below the nobility is the Intendant class. Intendants are psionically trained individuals born of an Intendant family, or selected from among the Proles for their high psionic potential. Intendants act as the middle managers, bureaucrats, and functionaries of Zhodani society. Many are assigned as personal secretaries to individual Zhodani nobles.

The Proles, who greatly outnumber Nobles and Intendants, are typically not psionic, or are low strength natural talents without any formal training. The Proles are the contented farmers, factory workers, scientists, technicians, dockworkers, supervisors, junior managers and enlisted members of the armed forces who make up the majority of Zhodani society.

Status: Major Race

Homeworlds: Zhdant

Languages: Zdetl.

OTHER HUMANS

Various groups of genetically engineered, adapted or pure-blood humans exist in Charted Space; some of them in strange places. Cultures vary widely; usually this is the result of local conditions. Not all of these offshoot species are capable of interbreeding with genetically "straight" humans, and some are very different from the "human" norm.

Status: Minor Race

Homeworlds: Numerous.

Languages: Galanglic and their own local homeworld languages (if any).

ASLAN

The first humans to encounter this alien race thought the humanoid Aslan to be vaguely "lion-like" in appearance and labeled them with an appropriate word from a Terran language. The resemblance is fairly minor (and Aslan certainly have no connection with Terran felines) but the name stuck. Aslan society is rigidly divided into male and female roles. Males are warriors and protectors; females are administrators and scientists. Male Aslan, who measure wealth in terms of land and prestige, have difficulty in surviving in human society. Concepts like "money" are alien to them, while humans seem to lack "honor". Females are more adept at organization, finance and business, and have far fewer problems interacting with non-Aslan.

Aslan are descended from four-limbed carnivorous pouncer stock that rose to the top of the food chain in the forests of their homeworld, Kusyu.

Personality: The Aslan are a warrior race, noble and proud. They are dedicated to those in authority above them and responsible for those who owe fealty from below. Their society is based around the family and its relationships. They are fairly touchy, and it is quite easy for Aslan to give or take offense. Dueling is a common way by which insults and slights are resolved.

Aslan males have a territorial instinct to acquire and accumulate land. This is the male's primary goal in life, his status being determined by the amount of land he controls. In society most males (except the lowest classes) are found in the military or in politics. Aslan females are the ones that handle the trade, industry, and accumulation of knowledge within Aslan society.

Aslan measure Social Standing by how much land an individual or his kin can lay claim to. A low to moderate SOC usually indicates that the Aslan has little or no land of his own - his SOC is due to the holdings of his clan (or a family within the clan). Higher SOC usually indicates that the character has at least a small amount of land somewhere, and the more he has, the higher his SOC will be. This land may actually be pretty worthless – a few square miles of pasture or lonely moorland – but to the Aslan the ability to take land and keep others from taking it away is the measure of a male's importance.

Physical Description: Aslan are upright bipeds standing roughly of Human height (1.8-2m). They weigh on average 100kg. The Aslan hand has three fingers opposing a single medial placed thumb, and all have retractable claws. In addition, Aslan have a single highly specialized claw under each thumb. This 'dewclaw' folds back jack-knife fashion into a horny covering in the base of the thumb and palm. The presence of these claws and the general body structure of Aslan make them somewhat clumsy by human standards, but what they lack in dexterity they make up for in strength.

Status: Major Race

Homeworld: Kusyu

Languages: Aslan all share a common language and culture. Most Aslan also speak Galanglic.

DROYNE

Resembling a cross between a reptile and a bird, Droyne belong to six castes, which are physically different to one another. Workers and Warriors are large and powerful. Drones, Leaders, Technicians and Sports are smaller. Each caste has several subcastes, which define the Droyne's role within society.

The Droyne have no central political organization, and

usually live in small enclaves (Oytrips) on scattered worlds. They can be encountered aboard ships conducting the same sorts of activities as humans – trade, diplomacy etc. Droyne enclaves may have very different technology levels to one another – for example, a group on one world may be contented TL 3 farmers, while a sector over another Droyne community hand-built starships as good as anything the Fourth Imperium can make.

Droyne society is divided into six castes, of which each has subcastes. A Droyne's caste determines its physical and mental characteristics.

Workers

Workers are large and strong, They do as they are told by their superiors and work both contentedly and efficiently at their assigned tasks. Workers are not good at independent or innovative thinking. Subcastes include *Farmer*, *Laborer* and *Builder*.

Warriors:

Warriors are powerfully built (for Droyne).

Battling Warriors are the main offensive fighting force and make up most Droyne ground combat units.

Guard Warriors may be bodyguards as well as assault troops; they are usually assigned to a leader's entourage or to defend a starship or installation rather than being part of a field combat unit.

Voyaging Warriors are similar to Marines or Naval personnel. They fulfill combat roles aboard starships and crew combat vehicles.

Technicians:

Technicians are smart and skilled, but physically rather weak.

Fixing Technicians and *Artificers* deal with different aspects of manufacturing and repairing devices;

Dreaming Technicians are designers, scientists and researchers.

Drones:

Drones are often found as what can best be described as 'priests' and in mid-level management operations, overseen by leaders. They are also the Droyne reproductive caste. Drones are quite likely to develop psionic powers.

Family Drones are dedicated to reproducing and raising young Droyne.

Priestly Drones seem to be very adept at psionics, but their nature is unclear to humans.

Social Drones are managers; they normally act as mid-level leaders and managers.

Sports:

Sports are unusual, in that they can operate away from

Droyne society for extended periods, though normally they are found fulfilling a role within the community (Oytrip) They often undertake jobs like scouts, messengers, prospectors and ambassadors. Sports are the only Droyne caste that is really suitable for player-characters.

Droyne Sports are generalists, more physically capable than technicians and more mentally adept than warriors or workers. They do not excel in any particular area, but can survive away from the Oytrip while they conduct their business, which most other castes cannot.

Finding Sports excel at finding and obtaining items needed by the Oytrip, whether by prospecting, trading or negotiation.

Speaker Sports are emissaries and ambassadors.

Seeking Sports are the Droyne most commonly encountered by humans. They frequently operate away from the Oytrip as spies, explorers or pilots.

Leaders:

Leaders provide leadership at various levels within an Oytrip, answering to a higher leader in most cases. Most groups of Droyne encountered will include a leader.

Military Leaders are command units of ground forces, warships or Marines.

Priestly Leaders are something of a mystery to outsiders. They are thought to have some religious or mystical role, but it is unclear exactly what they do within Droyne society.

- Members of the *Leader of Leaders* caste command other Leaders and lead Oytrips.

Droyne have a high potential for psionic abilities, though as a rule it is Leaders, Sports and Drones that actually develop their powers. It is thought that members of other castes can use psionic devices, even if they lack abilities of their own. Droyne have difficulty in using devices made for humans, and vice versa. Many of their devices seem to involve psionics, which makes them impossible for most people to use. The Droyne talent for psi powers makes many Imperial citizens suspicious of them.

Droyne possess small wings. In a standard or dense atmosphere, some Droyne can fly short distances. Some Droyne make use of artificial wings to enhance their flight capabilities.

Personality: Droyne are mysterious beings, who often act in ways incomprehensible to humans. They never explain their actions. It is known that the various castes are specialized (hence the names given to them by humans), which may dictate personality to some extent, and that Droyne believe in some form of destiny which can sometimes be foretold by reading a set of "coyns".

Physical Description: Droyne are omnivore/gatherers

resembling a cross between a bird and a winged reptile. The largest of them (Warriors and some Workers) can be up to 2 meters high and mass 60kg. Sports average 1.5m, while other castes are normally about 1-1.5m high.

Status: Major Race

Homeworld: Eskayloyt (Lost Home). Droyne exist on many worlds; they do not know where their original world of origin lies.

Languages: Oynprith, some local Droyne languages, Galanglic

HIVERS

Hivers are perhaps the strangest beings in Charted Space. They vaguely resemble giant, six-limbed starfish with a leathery outer skin ranging in color from pink to tan. The name "Hiver" was applied long ago by humans, who mistakenly thought the Hivers had a hive mentality. Since there is no meaningful way to translate the Hivers' own name for themselves into Galanglic, the appellation is as good as any.

Five of a Hiver's six limbs end in a "hand" with six tentacle/fingers. A Hiver will typically walk on 4-5 of these limbs but can manage on 3 if the others are required to hold something or to accomplish a task. Hivers have no vocal apparatus, and communicate visually by a complex code of "finger wiggling". To interact with humans, Hivers normally use a Voder, a device that converts these visual signals into words that a human can understand. The other limb (the "Primary" or "Head" limb) also has six "fingers" but also six eyestalks, between which are three infrared sensory organs and three ears. A Hiver can raise its "head" to a height of about 1.5 meters.

The limb opposite the "head" is slightly modified to enable it to pass reproductive material to other Hivers (a process referred to as "handshaking" by humans). Reproductive material passes in and out of a Hiver's central body by the same route as does food and bodily waste – an opening on the underside of the central body, which functions as a "super cloaca".

The Hivers have only one gender, and routinely "shake hands" with any and all Hivers they meet. This ensures a mix of genetic material when the Hiver produces larvae. Hivers have no parental instincts whatsoever, and the unintelligent larvae are of no concern to them. Normally, Hiver larvae are allowed to crawl off into a suitable wilderness area to fend for themselves. As they develop, those that survive will become intelligent and find their way back to Hiver society, to be welcomed as adults and full members. Those killed by predators and natural conditions are of no consequence. Where no suitable wilderness area is available, Hivers will normally kill their larvae to prevent them becoming a nuisance. To a Hiver, this is no more significant than swatting a fly.

Hivers are extremely curious creatures, and often travel or conduct experiments into things that interest them. They are also extremely adverse to physical danger or confrontation, gaining them a reputation as cowards that may or may not be deserved. As well as their intense racial curiosity, Hivers seem to like manipulating others to do what they want. This habit has created a great deal of paranoia in those that deal with them, but in fact the extent to which the Hivers are actually able to manipulate others is unknown.

The Hivers are the dominant race in the Hive Federation, which includes many other species who (apparently contentedly) fill niche roles in the Federation. Thus the Federation employs a whole race of accountants and bureaucrats, a species of ground troops, a race of technicians etc. The fact that these people are quite happy doing the thing they do best in the interests of the whole Federation is a cause for grave concern and even revulsion among some humans. Clearly, they say, the Hivers have deviously manipulated these races into becoming contented slaves.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the Hivers are willing to trade and sometimes travel through Charted Space for various purposes. They do not seem to be interested in conquest and have no territorial ambitions, though history shows that the Federation is able to defend itself with more than devious words.

Personality: Hivers are unemotional, but intensely curious. This can sometimes make them act unwisely. They take great pride in manipulating others to do things for them.

Physical Description: Very Strange. See above.

Status: Major Race

Homeworld: Guaran

Languages: Hiver

K'KREE

K'Kree are large herbivores with a pair of forelimbs sprouting from their forequarters. They are sometimes referred to as "centaurs" by humans, after an old Terran legend. K'Kree hands are dextrous but weak compared to those of humans.

In the New Era, most K'Kree are under the rulership of the Grand Dominate of the Gods of Thunder (The Dominate), which deviates considerably from their 'natural' society. Some enclaves of 'natural' K'Kree still exist. Their society is as detailed here. The Dominate is a political organization, and so is detailed in the appropriate section. Within it, the social order described below is replaced by one integrating K'Kree religious fanatics and Viral Entities.

'Natural' K'Kree have a stratified society which includes leaders, warriors and merchants, and as herd creatures

they have a herd mentality. This can lead to some cold-blooded thinking on the part of leaders, but this is not the thing that disturbs human neighbors the most.

The K'Kree are militant herbivores, whose culture brands all meat-eaters as "vermin" to be destroyed. The K'Kree have already exterminated many species of carnivores, including several that were sentient and even civilized. They are willing to interact with humans and other meat-eaters, but openly acknowledge that any peace is just a temporary situation until the glorious day when the K'Kree military forces (who are known in the K'Kree tongue as "Killers of Vermin") will wipe out all carnivores and omnivores.

However, it is possible for humans and other meat-eaters to interact meaningfully with the natural K'Kree. Friction is quite common, but a measure of live-and-let-live is possible, especially where the balance of power favors the meat-eaters.

Meaningful interaction with the Dominate is not possible. It exists to carry out the 'holy mission' and will only (temporarily) spare meat-eaters if they are in some way useful.

As herd creatures, K'Kree are intensely claustrophobic and cannot stand being alone. Thus their ships are rather large by human standards, and contain whole family groups. The K'Kree make use of robotic fighters and other small craft, which are not very efficient. Despite this, they are not to be underestimated – there are a lot of them, and they can be very determined, even if they did once manage to lose a war against the Hivers.

Personality: Militant Herbivores. Strong caste roles in society.

Physical Description: Quadrupedal, with arms sprouting from the torso.

Status: Major Race

Homeworld: Kirur

Languages: K'Kree, Galanglic

Note:

K'Kree consider all meat-eating (omnivorous and carnivorous) species to be G'naak (Vermin). K'Kree are repulsed and even moved to violence in the presence of such species. They can tell if an individual has consumed meat recently by his body odor. Characters who have taken precautions like going onto a vegetarian diet for a few weeks before meeting with K'Kree will find that K'Kree react a little better to them.

VARGR

Of all the races of Charted Space, Vargr are the most similar to humans, though their biology and culture is quite different. Vargr have a pack mentality, which includes an

obsession with status and “Charisma”, and are known for their liberal attitude to laws. Vargr corsairs are notorious, and in some areas are the only contact humans have with Vargr. However, Vargr are part of human-dominated society in many regions.

The Vargr are an intelligent race descended from a carnivore/chaser stock that has a remarkable resemblance to the native Terran (Earth) animal known as the wolf.

Personality: Vargr are frequently characterized as ‘inconsistent’ by outsiders, who see many of their behavior patterns as contradictory and strange. They are a gregarious people who take great joy in the company of one another, and seek the security and comfort of fellowship with other of their own kind. Yet at the same time Vargr engage in almost constant struggles to achieve prestige and dominance within their group. This frequently gives the appearance of a quarrelsome, sometimes even treacherous nature. Indeed, Vargr move from one group or association to another with such great regularity that they may seem to have no loyalty to any specific institution or purpose. This is not the case. Vargr are every bit as loyal to their cause, leader, or institution as a human would be, but they know that eventually the time will come to shift that allegiance. When that time comes, they will transfer their loyalty to some new focus, and remain true to that until it is time to move on. Exactly what criteria are needed to convince a given Vargr that it is time to change varies widely.

Physical Description: Physically, Vargr are slightly smaller and lighter than an average Human (1.6m, 60kg), upright, bipedal, and remarkably humanoid in development and appearance. They are covered with short fur, which is generally brown, black, or rust colored and frequently combines shading of these and other colors. Their tails are fairly long and generally end in a flaring brush. The muzzle is much shorter and less pronounced than in Terran canines, but is still quite evident. The fingers of a Vargr also retain sharp pointed, non-retractable nails that can function as claws in some close combat situations. On the whole their reactions are slightly faster than those of a human.

Status: Major Race

Homeworld: Lair

Languages: Numerous Vargr dialects spoken through charted space. Most Vargr also speak Galanglic.

Note: Since T20 uses the D20 rules, it already has an attribute called Charisma. Other versions of *Traveller* do not. Vargr Charisma is called Prestige in T20 *Traveller* materials in order to avoid confusion. If using materials written for a different *Traveller* rules set, treat any reference to Charisma in connection with Vargr society as Prestige and vice versa.

SIGNIFICANT MINOR RACES

Several minor races exist, which are widespread enough or important enough to the affairs of the various states of Charted Space that they merit a listing here. Many others exist, but are too localized in their influence to be detailed here.

CHIRPERS

Chirpers (named thus for the birdlike sounds they make) are small, skinny, reptilian-looking bipeds found in small enclaves on various worlds. They walk upright, use tools and build primitive villages, but are often considered to be only semi-sentient. Some chirpers can actually learn to speak human languages (after a fashion). Chirpers are reclusive, and quite hard to contact. Some individuals claim that they can turn invisible, though others claim that chirpers merely have excellent stealth and wilderness skills.

Some observers have suggested that the physical similarity between Chirpers and Droyne may mean that they evolved from common stock. This does not explain how Chirpers came to be scattered across Charted Space, more or less at random.

Personality: Chirpers are shy and reclusive creatures, who live a (mostly) peaceful, pastoral life in remote areas. They rarely interact much with other species.

Physical Description: Chirpers are small, lightweight bird-like creatures with vestigial wings, massing around 25 kilograms.

Status: Minor Race

Homeworld: Various

Languages: Chirper Dialect

ITHKLUR

Ithklur are large, strong reptilian bipeds, whose skin is made up of small brown, green or bluish scales. They possess a tail and have claws on both hands and feet. They are carnivores, and their body makeup suggests that the proto-Ithklur hunted some fearsome beasts for food. Muscles are massive and the shoulders are protected by bony plates. Ithklur stand upright, though they will sometimes run on all fours over rough ground.

Ithklur have two sexes and are warm-blooded. They can perceive a little way into the infrared, and have an acute sense of smell. Their powerful hands are not well adapted to using equipment designed for humans (they sometimes unintentionally break bits off) or Hivers. Hiver equipment, designed for a species without any bones in its ‘fingers’, tends to last mere minutes in Ithklur hands before being completely ruined.

The Ithklur are members of the Hive Federation, and seem happy to serve the Hivers as ground troops and bodyguards. The exact relationship is difficult to define. Hivers never seem to question that the Ithklur will obey them, but the Ithklur seem to delight in playing practical jokes on their “masters” and generally messing them round. Many Ithklur maintain that THEY are in charge, and allow the Hivers to believe otherwise so that they’ll do all the “boring stuff”, leaving the Ithklur free to pursue enlightenment, fight, and have a good time.

Ithklur are a deeply spiritual people, with a fondness for flowers and botany. They are also fearsome fighting machines who embrace anarchy and actually enjoy violence. This seems like a contradiction in terms to humans, and indeed to Ithklur too. The difference is that Ithklur don’t care. They are what they are and they like it that way, paradoxes and all.

Personality: Happy anarchists; spiritual warriors with a child-like delight in the universe.

Physical Description: Humanoids with scaly skin, heavily built, with claws and a tail.

Status: Minor Race

Homeworld: Tryylin

Languages: Ithklur, Hiver, Galanglic

VIRUSHI

Virushi are enormous creatures covered in heavy armored plates. They walk on four limbs and have two sets of forelimbs for manipulation. Despite their enormous size and nicknames such as ‘centaurs with tank blood’ or ‘intelligent bulldozers’, the Virushi are truly gentle giants. They are extremely polite and soft-spoken; indeed their voices are naturally weak and quiet in normal (for humans) atmospheres, having been evolved for use in a much denser atmosphere.

Because they were one of the larger lifeforms on their homeworld, the Virushi never came under serious threat from other species. Their society has thus not evolved much beyond the ‘cooperative’ stage, with most Virushi preferring to remain apart from their fellows. They will typically work together only on those projects that profit both the individuals involved and Virushi society as a whole. Thus the Virushi have ultimately become an almost utopian culture; contented, pastoral, highly supportive of individual freedom. A Virushi will willingly cooperate on almost any task if so inclined, but it is almost impossible to order one to do anything he or she does not want to.

Personality: Virushi are a bit of a contrast in terms of personality. They are quite individualistic and very unlikely to obey orders, yet a Virushi is usually quite willing to ‘lend a hand’ when they see it is needed and would benefit not only themselves but others too. Virushi individualism appears to create grounds for friction, yet

causes surprisingly little. This is mainly a result of their polite willingness to accept differences rather than come into conflict over them.

Despite their calm and placid demeanor, Virushi will fight if necessary, for example to defend the lives of friends, family, or other charges. They do not seek out conflict and will not press a confrontation if the aggressor backs down. It is very difficult to make a Virushi angry as they are largely indifferent to pain even on the rare occasions when they are under serious threat of bodily harm. They will almost always calmly and rationally (at least to a Virushi) attempt to discuss and negotiate a non-violent solution to a situation. If violence proves necessary, this too will be administered in a calm and rational manner – though the distinction is likely to be irrelevant to the person on the receiving end!

Physical Description: Standing almost 1.8 meters at the shoulder and tipping the scales at close to 1000kg, the Virushi are one of the largest sophont races ever encountered. The high gravity, dense atmosphere, and heavy radiation on their homeworld have evolved the Virushi into the impressive lifeforms they are today.

These massive creatures are covered by overlapping plates of armor with a texture similar to hardened leather. They walk on four tree-thick legs, and are capable of extraordinary feats of dexterity with an upper pair of almost human sized arms, while their lower pair of arms are heavily muscled. These lower arms are designed for heavily lifting, making the upper pair look withered in comparison. Adding to their overall mass is a rather thick tail that makes a potent defensive weapon when needed. The upper arms have only half the strength of the lower arms, while the lower arms only have half the dexterity of the upper arms.

This immense size and strength is somewhat offset by very poor sensory perception. Virushi eyes, buried beneath massive brow ridges, are adapted to work in brilliant sunlight perform rather poorly under lower light conditions. Their hearing is similarly degraded under normal atmospheric conditions, having evolved to hear sounds transmitted in a dense atmosphere. They find normal human speech very near the threshold limits of their hearing.

Status: Minor Alien Race

Homeworld: Virshash

Languages: Virush is the native language of the Virushi, but most Virushi are also fluent in Galanglic.

THE WANDERING PEOPLE (WANDERERS)

The Wandering People are mainly encountered far to Trailing of the Fourth Imperium, but by their very nature

they tend to voyage where they will and can turn up in small groups or massive Worldships almost anywhere. The Wanderers entered the Gateway region of the Third Imperium around year 320 after crossing the Lesser Rift in their Worldships and have since spread out across what used to be Imperial space. These Worldships are gigantic non-jump-capable vessels, each home to a large (the actual size is unknown) community of Wanderers. From the Worldships, Jump-capable vessels range across the region, trading and visiting various worlds. The Wanderers have set up a number of small enclaves on various worlds, from which they conduct trade. Humans are very rarely invited into these enclaves.

Wanderer technology seems to be equivalent to the Imperial TL12, though few devices have been examined by experts and the Wanderer way of doing things is very different to the approach used by humans and most other sentients.

Personality: The Wanderers are a mysterious people, who do not discuss their society or religious beliefs (if any) with outsiders. Thus what is known about them is mainly based upon observation and speculation, and may be inaccurate.

Wanderers are peaceable people who will fight in self-defense but more normally respond to threats with negotiation and/or a withdrawal. When they do fight, their warriors are ferocious and not deterred by casualties.

It is thought that the vast majority of Wanderers have an overwhelming sense of community, and cannot bear to be isolated from their kin. However, a small proportion seem to be quite happy to leave the company of their fellows and to travel independently. These individuals are referred to as "rogue" Wanderers. Their motivations are largely unknown.

Wanderer society is built around the family and clan. Immediate families are usually found on smaller ships, while larger ships may be home to more extended families. These ships use a unique modular design that allows individual Wanderer ships to dock with one another to and form a perfectly integrated larger and more powerful single ship. When docked with one another, all ship systems are interconnected, adding redundancy and reliability, while increasing overall performance. Unless blocked by another ship, any 'component' ship may undock and move free under its own power at almost a moment's notice.

A Clan is a group of family ships typically allied through ties of blood, business, loyalty, and friendship. Larger clans form the industrial base of the Wanderers, their 'combined' ship acting as an arcology in space. Three such clan ships have actually grown so large as to qualify as small planets. These world-ships no longer use Jump

drives to move from location to location, rather they follow a predetermined flight path across normal space, staying well clear of any populated star systems. Because the Wanderers know the course and speed of the world-ships, they are able to Jump to nearby space and rendezvous with them at any time. Without the knowledge of their course and speed, trying to locate one of these world-ships would be like trying to find a needle in a gas giant-sized haystack! Space is big... and even a Wanderer world-ship is very small in comparison.

Wanderers do not seem to have a caste system as such, but how tasks are assigned or advancement is largely unknown to humans. It is known that Wanderers fill most of the roles that an interstellar society requires – leaders, pilots, workers, scientists, warriors and so on. A 'priest' caste is also known to exist. These individuals have some sort of guidance and ceremonial role, though whether there is an organized religion or their function is very different remains unknown.

Physical Description: Descended from omnivorous insectoid hunters, Wanderers are hexapedal with a segmented body structure. The upper limbs of most individuals are residual wing nubs. The middle limbs are adapted for tool use, with opposable digits, but can be used as a second pair of 'legs' for faster and more agile movement. The lower limbs are used strictly for ground locomotion. Their eyes are large, multifaceted, and set on either side of the head allowing Wanderers quite a range of vision. It is nearly impossible to sneak up on a conscious Wanderer.

The way Wanderers' bodies are constructed results in a way of moving that constantly surprises and seems "wrong" to human observers. Their language is also rather difficult to translate. As a result, most Wanderers that interact with humans adopt a common human name like Bob, Alice or Eneri rather than attempting to translate their own. It may also be that they prefer to maintain the language barrier between the Wandering People and outsiders and any attempt to create a translation is discouraged.

Wanderers are egg-layers. Typically a single egg, but occasionally more, develops within the parent for roughly 4 weeks, at which time the eggs are 'laid'. They will continue to develop for another 8-10 weeks after which they will hatch a newborn Wanderer 'chick'.

Wanderer young are born with 'juvenile wings', an ancestral throwback allowing a flight defense mechanism for younglings from threats from the ground. By the time a Wanderer reaches sexual maturity at the age of 10 years, these wings will usually fall off, leaving only the typical Wanderer residual wing nubs. In about 1 in 10,000 cases, a Wanderer's wings will not fall off. Such individuals will retain the ability of flight on worlds with a dense atmosphere or a low gravity.

Personality: See notes above

Physical Description: See notes above

Status: Minor Race (but see below)

Homeworld: Unknown (but see below)

Languages: Wanderers speak their own language among themselves, but most know Galanglic and other languages spoken in local space.

Note: The Wandering People are officially listed as a Minor Race, but there is some evidence that they developed the Jump drive themselves – which is the commonest definition of a Major Race. It is also thought that the Wanderers' original homeworld may have lain somewhere in Charted Space. So much data was lost in the Collapse that this cannot be proven one way or another.

THE WILDS

The great majority of territory that was once part of the Imperium and its rivals is now Wilds. Within the Wilds, technological levels have dropped massively. More importantly, in most areas people are actively technophobic and suspicious of outsiders due to the results of Virus and the depredations of raiders during the war and afterward.

Trade corridors have been driven through the Wilds, between the greater states and some of the smaller ones. In addition, large fleets have crossed these areas several times, clearing the way for themselves every time. This has somewhat pacified some systems, but for the most part even those that are regularly used as trade routes are hazardous for several reasons. In areas off the main trade routes there may be no data available whatsoever on the conditions that exist – some worlds have not been contacted (other than by hostile Vampires) for over a century.

In general, the technological crash means that worlds that cannot naturally support life are likely to be 'boneyards'; inhabited only by the ghosts and bones of their citizens. On some inhospitable worlds, the population has managed to adapt to a falling tech level, creating low-tech ways to perform vital life support tasks and other activities necessary to daily life. This will usually have involved a drop in population and harsh measures on the part of the rulers; regressed worlds are rarely pleasant places.

On more hospitable worlds, tech level and population are likely to have fallen considerably, though technology is too useful to be lost completely. The usual pattern is for a basically habitable high-tech world to stabilize at a TL of 6-8 and then either to regress steadily or begin a slow climb back, regaining a TL or two. High-tech equipment that survived the Collapse and the Viral Plague is likely to be carefully hoarded and used only in the direst emergencies, or else used as a means to elevate a small elite above the bulk of the population. Rulers using relic technology in this manner are variously known as TechLords or Technologically Elevated Dictators (TEDs). They have a bad reputation for brutality and cruelty, but in fact some are benevolent dictators whose ends really do justify the means – mostly.

In 1248, as the New Era dawns, the Wilds are mostly unexplored by the larger powers, or at least subject to only the sketchiest of scouting missions. Rumors and hearsay, often gained from the Free Traders who make their living among the regressed worlds of the Wilds, are sometimes the only guide to what might be found in any given system.

As a broad rule, the worlds and societies that will be

encountered in the Wilds can be broken down into the following categories:

BONEYARDS

As already mentioned, many worlds are entirely uninhabited, or are home only to small groups of scavengers or colonists who have arrived recently. Boneyards are likely to have Virus-infected equipment lying dormant.

BLACK WAR SITES

A special case of Boneyard, some worlds that could otherwise support life are now dead as a result of Black Warfare operations; bioweapons, orbital bombardment and so forth. In some cases the conditions that caused the population to die out have passed, leaving a relatively clean world for the taking. In other cases worlds are deep in the throes of a nuclear winter, are highly radioactive, or have bioweapon plagues still running wild. In some cases segments of the population survive, usually as savages, and may be partially immune to the conditions.

POCKET EMPIRES, RAMSHACKLE POLITIES AND TRADING ALLIANCES

A few worlds managed to cling onto enough of their technology to keep some starships running and maintain contact with their neighbors. Whether this resulted in a tiny empire, a more equal political grouping or a single world supporting itself on a trading fleet, depended upon conditions and the characteristics of the leaders that emerged during the chaos. Some of these tiny states are benevolent and friendly, some are isolationist and some are very nasty indeed. It is not always possible to tell which a given state will turn out to be until considerable interaction has taken place.

Worlds that have maintained some kind of starfaring capability are normally at a base TL of 7-9, with a reasonable amount of relic equipment or actual manufacturing capability available at TL 10-12. Higher tech levels are very rare, other than the odd relic device or starship.

SLAVE WORLDS

Some societies survive by offering tribute to an offworld power. This is usually a Vampire ship or fleet. There is usually some kind of local government but it is simply a mouthpiece for the world's overlord(s).

SAVAGE WORLDS

Those worlds that have slid below TL4 are often highly technophobic and almost always lack a unified world government unless the population is tiny. These 'savage worlds' have usually suffered terribly at the hands of Virus or during the Black War, and have lost the ability to rebuild their tech base. Often the locals cannot comprehend technological items they find, and have absolutely

no defense against Vampires or infected robots they encounter. Savage worlds are likely to be stable at whatever TL they have bottomed out at (0-3, tending towards 2-3) but likely will never regain their technology without outside help – which is likely to be most unwelcome.

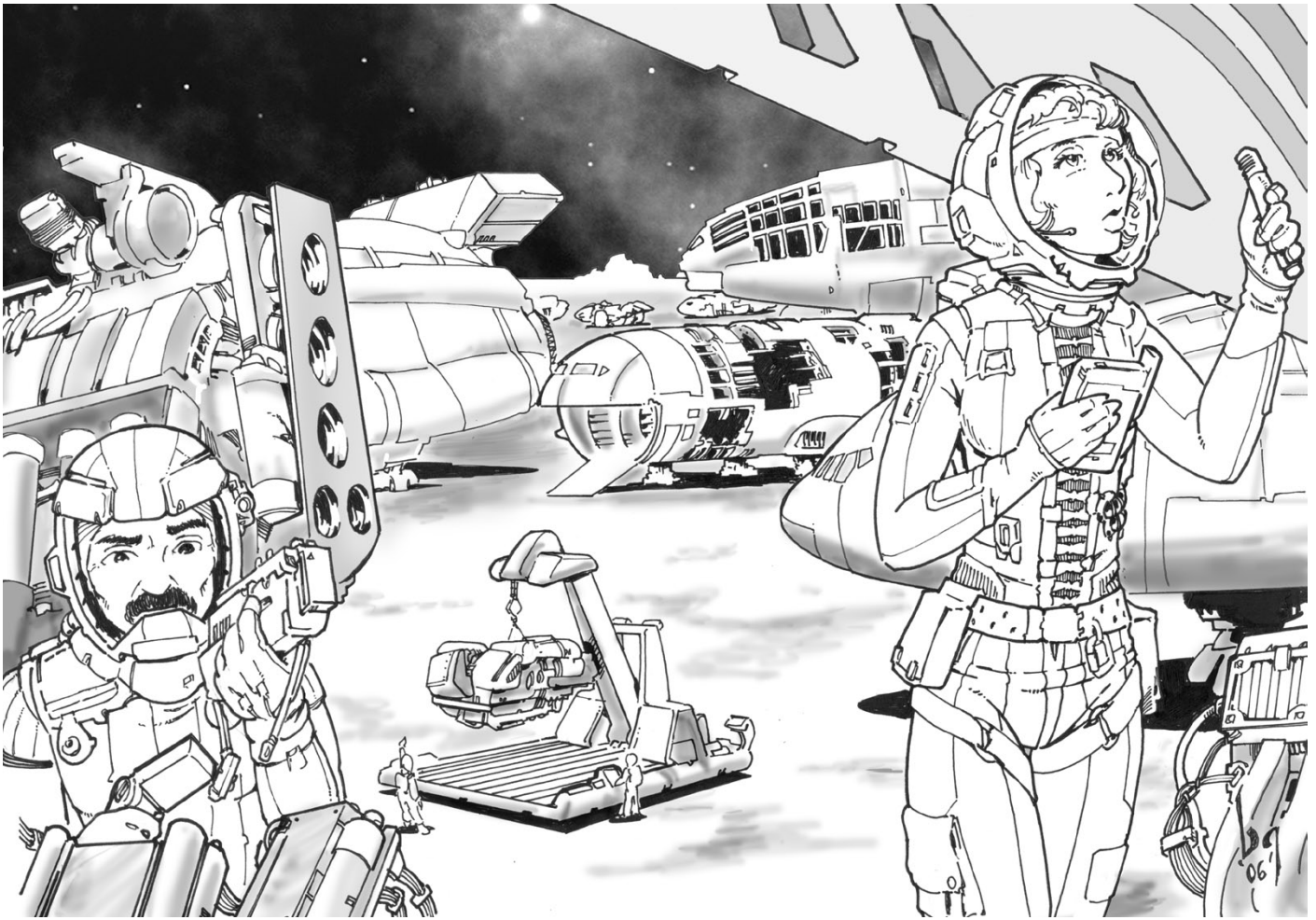
TYPICAL REGRESSED WORLDS

The typical world that can support life has fallen back to around TL4-7, with a few examples of higher technology available. Such worlds may or may not be stable. Some are locked into a steady slide back to barbarism, while others are gradually rebuilding. Generally such worlds retain the memory of what is possible with technology, and have found ways to duplicate the effects of some high-tech systems with rather more bulky and primitive equipment. Technophobia tends not to be so prevalent on worlds that understand technology – only some systems went mad and killed everyone in sight, so perhaps not all technology is bad.

Societies vary considerably from world to world, and it is common for regressed worlds to have splintered into many Balkanized states.

VIRAL HELLS

On some worlds the Viral Plague did not burn itself out. These worlds gradually fell under the control of Viral Entities, most of which were insane and/or inimical to humans. Organic life was either enslaved or driven into hiding in remote regions. In 1248, Viral Hells may be populated by armies of robots, slave humans or some combination of both. Viral Pocket Empires are entirely possible.



An Imperial Reconstruction Team investigate a Boneyard somewhere in Zarushagar Sector.

MAJOR AND MINOR POWERS IN THE NEW ERA

This section contains an overview of the powers that have arisen during the Recovery period. Minor pocket empires are not mentioned here; there is no reason why the Referee cannot add a local power in a suitable area of Wilds.

THE FOURTH IMPERIUM

The Fourth Imperium is a direct successor to the Third. With its capital on Usdiki/Gushemege, it controls a region about a sector in size and influences events over a far wider area. The Imperium is dealt with in detail the sourcebook *Bearers of the Flame*.

Located between the 'lower claw' of the Great Rift and the core regions of what used to be Third Imperium space, the Fourth Imperium is about a sector (16 subsectors) in size, though these are located in four different sectors. The capital is Usdiki, which lies on the fringe of the Great Rift. The Fourth Imperium is (outwardly at least) united under the rule of Avery I. It claims direct lineage from the Third Imperium but has formally renounced all claims on territory beyond its borders.

At present the Imperium is discouraging worlds that apply to join, though it is willing to absorb territory that represents a political, strategic or industrial advantage.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The Fourth Imperium generally follows the structure of the Third, though with some differences. The Nobility is largely made up of leaders who brought worlds, corporations or other assets into the Imperium and were granted titles according to the power they already wielded. Thus the Imperial Nobility plays an important role in the leadership and governance of the various worlds and power groups that make up the Imperium. Many worlds are not directly ruled by the Nobility but have a noble as representative in the Imperial Moot, which advises the Emperor and debates matters of import to the Imperium as a whole.

Within the Imperium, worlds are mostly self-governing according to whatever system suits their inhabitants. Many rulers have been awarded a noble title, but most gained the title because they rule a world rather than becoming a ruler by virtue of their noble rank. The Imperium includes many independent worlds, but increasingly a hierarchy is emerging where worlds belong to a small local grouping governed by a Count who in turn owes allegiance to a Duke. Many matters can be resolved at County or Duchy level, with more serious matters going before the Emperor.

Other groups wield a great deal of power in the Imperium. Several Supercorporations (some of them descended from the Megacorporations of the Third Imperium) headed by Counts and Dukes have holdings across the Imperium while other groupings exist along ethnic or traditional lines. The result is a rather complex power structure in which hierarchical ties of allegiance can sometimes conflict with other influences. The structure is gradually settling down into a more coherent form and if the Imperium survives long enough should become a unified structure with enough flexibility to deal with any crisis.

CULTURE

The Fourth Imperium, like the Third, is a melting-pot of various cultures. It is cosmopolitan in outlook, though there are strong Vilani and Solomani influences as a result of the Third Imperium heritage, coupled with Aslan and Regency influences dating from more recent events. There are many distinct ethnic groups within the Imperium, though many citizens subscribe to an overall and moderate 'Imperial' culture which overlays local differences and in some cases supplants them.

The Fourth Imperium has strong traditions of duty and fealty, and considers itself to be the rightful leader and protector of the peoples of Charted Space. This can be interpreted as arrogance (quite rightly in some cases) but the average Imperial citizen can look back at the achievements of his people in the last century and a half with justified pride.

The other major factor in Imperial culture is upward mobility. Noble titles are awarded to individuals for their efforts in a range of fields, and initiative is generally encouraged. Thus the typical citizen of the Imperium is aware that he has duties towards those below him in the order of things and owes respect and obedience to those above, yet is also conscious that others can be promoted over him just as he can be elevated for excellence in his field. How well this works depends on the individual. Some spend all their time trying to take advantage of the situation while others are contented team players with no regard to their own position. Most citizens fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

ECONOMY

The Fourth Imperium was formed from a trade federation and has a powerful economy by New Era standards, though this is badly stretched by the needs of reconstruction, technological uplift and rebuilding the navy after the Capital and Gateway campaigns. Most worlds are encouraged to become self-sufficient for their basic needs, though this is not always possible. Local trade agreements to cover any shortfalls are sponsored by the Imperial leadership. This creates survivability at regional and world level, sometimes at the cost of overall Imperium-wide efficiency.

Once immediate needs are covered, trade between worlds (usually by way of the large shipping corporations) is encouraged and, in many cases, subsidized. Entrepreneurial activity is important, with many corporations undertaking high-technology research and development under Imperial license and bearing the costs themselves.

The highest-tech worlds of the Imperium have limited TL E and even F capability, but for the most part a TL of B or C is common among the more developed worlds. There is an active initiative to uplift all the worlds of the Imperium through a series of planned stages. A TL 5 world cannot contribute to the overall economy very much but if it can be brought up to TL 7-8, the same world becomes a better market for high tech goods and can make some useful exports. Thus the technological development of the Imperium as a whole is more directed at strengthening the economy than breaking new ground with advanced concepts.

MILITARY POWER

The Fourth Imperium is currently rebuilding its shattered navy. Some heavy squadrons do exist but losses in the recent battles were enormous, and many of the vessels that were not involved have been sent off to Trailing to fight the Dominate or clean up the Black Imperium. In order to make up the losses quickly, many 'expedient' designs are being rushed into service. These are quick to build and relatively cheap but are limited in terms of capability and long-term service. However, by getting something in place quickly the Imperium hopes to buy time to create a proper fleet, and a proportion of naval production is dedicated to high-capability vessels that will eventually comprise the best fleet in Charted Space.

A three-tier military system is currently in place. At the lowest level are the 'planetary militias' and 'system squadrons' deployed by member worlds. These are raised by local administrations and responsible for defence of their own territory only. Some worlds have additional assets deployed by the Imperial forces or local commands, though this tends to be on a temporary basis as there are not enough forces to go around.

Above the local level are 'regional' forces under the command of Navy admirals but often belonging to corporations, nobles or mercenary formations. These regional forces also include some elements of the Imperial Navy; mainly patrol assets and a handful of cruisers to deal with moderate threats.

The full might of the Imperial Navy is kept as concentrated as possible to deal with major threats. The heavy cruisers, battleships and dreadnoughts of the battle squadrons are, where possible, kept in reserve ready to back up regional or system assets at need. This means that the

regional forces sometimes have to take on foes they are ill-equipped to handle but it does ensure that there is something available to meet a major threat. The most likely such threat is the New Ziru Sirka, and for this reason the majority of capital ships are either with the central reserve or deployed in the Trailing-Coreward subsectors of the Imperium where they serve to deter Vilani aggression – or stop it in its tracks if necessary.

The Fourth Imperium inherited its fleet doctrine from the Third Imperium, and has over a thousand years of experience to draw upon. Light forces backed up by cruisers show the flag, gather reconnaissance data and patrol systems within the Imperium as well as making the odd sweep across the border. Heavier squadrons are kept back from the frontiers to confront an invader who has been slowed and attrited by the defenses of the systems he has fought through. This 'reserve strategy' has served the Imperium well in the past, though it does mean that systems along the border must either turn themselves into a fortress or risk being quickly overrun. The alternative, a 'crust' strategy, has been tried in the past and simply exposes major units to piecemeal defeat.

The Imperium favors powerful and survivable capital ships of a balanced design and prefers to keep fighter-carrying a separate role from line-of-battle. Many of its lighter units are based on the Alliance Frigate concept, a cheap (some say disposable) 1000-ton design which can be configured for patrol, missile or strike applications. These vessels are not very good, but have the advantage of being there when more expensive ships would still be on the building slips. Heavier warships generally follow a balanced design philosophy, creating a compromise between powerful armament, good protection and tactical maneuverability. Some ships are built to very high tech levels – TL D, E or F – or incorporate high-tech systems. The infrastructure to support these vessels is very limited, so deployment of the very top-end Imperial Navy warships is unusual; most crises are dealt with by the more easily supported workhorse TL C ships.

Jump-3 is standard for most fleet units, though some vessels (e.g. naval couriers and Rift Cruisers) are equipped with Jump-5 and even Jump-6 drives for their special role. Again, supporting these ships is a problem but their capabilities make up for the inconvenience.

The armed forces of the Imperium includes a relatively small but well equipped Army for ground combat, the Marine Corps to back up naval operations and the Scout Service which undertakes reconnaissance and communications duties. Generally speaking, the Marine Corps takes ground and the Army holds it. The Army is considerably larger than the Marine Corps but the Marines are proportionally larger than in the days of the Third Imperium. This reflects the role of the Imperial armed forces: the Marines are

often called upon to intervene on the frontiers and in some cases operate their own starships. .

OUTLOOK

The Fourth Imperium is cosmopolitan in outlook, though it comes over as high-handed and arrogant in some quarters. While its people feel kinship with most of the inhabitants of Charted Space, there is a strong 'us and them' divide ever since the Imperium renounced its claim on territories outside its borders. The people of the Fourth Imperium are keen to trade with outsiders and treat them with respect, but increasingly there is a feeling that the Imperium has done enough for others – if everyone was as good at taking care of their own affairs as the Imperials, Charted Space would not be in such a mess.

Foreign policy is a little contradictory. On the one hand the Imperium sees itself as the leading light in interstellar affairs, but there is an air of 'haven't we done enough for you people?' about its dealings with certain other powers. Those that pull their weight and give back what they can are respected, while those in need of charity are viewed with benevolent condescension.

There are exceptions to this general feeling. The Republic of Regina and the Aslan lords of Kusyu are good friends and firm allies, and are well respected by the Imperium. On the other hand, the New Ziru Sirka and Imperial Regency are viewed with exasperation and some alarm as their deliberately confrontational policies draw off assets that could be used elsewhere.

The Imperium is actively engaged in rebuilding both within and outside its borders, and the Imperial Reconstruction Service is backed up by Army and Scout Service assets (as well as the Navy and Marines, though this is less common). Personnel secondments are common as the Imperium shifts assets to deal with a particular set of needs. Some political, military and economic tasks are given to members of the Nobility to oversee. The Imperium also has a small number of Marshals of the Imperium, each with the authority to co-opt or commandeer whatever assets are needed without waiting for authorization from the Emperor. Most (but not all) Marshals are senior nobles, high-ranking military officers or both.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Usdiki Faction was not hit as hard by the Viral Plague as many other states, and is more willing to embrace and even take risks with technology than others. Stable Viral entities (Cyms) are more welcome in Imperial space than most regions; one even heads a large corporation. On the other hand, psionics is viewed with very mixed feelings. The Emperor himself has some psionic talents, but there was little psionics research outside Usdiki itself during the Reconstruction period and most Imperial citizens

view psions with almost as much mistrust as their Third Imperium forbears would have.

THE NEW ZIRU SIRKA (NZS)

Bordering the fourth Imperium to Coreward-Trailing across a relatively narrow expanse of Wilds is the New Ziru Sirka. With its capital on what remains of Vland, the Ziru Sirka is a fairly powerful state, controlling an area of space about a sector in size. Most of this territory is in Vland sector, with small areas in Corridor and Lishun still under Vilani control. Other possessions have been lost (or have seceded) during the chaos of the past few years.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

As might be expected from the successor to the original Ziru Sirka, the NZS follows the ancient structure of the Vilani Imperium. Three Bureaus, descended through the Megacorporations of the Third Imperium from the original Bureaus of the First Imperium, each run regions of the Empire and stress different aspects of the economic and social spectra. These three Bureaus (Sharushid, Makhidkarun and Naasirka) answer to the Shadow Emperor who never leaves his palace on Vland.

The Shadow Emperor was killed during the Scouring of Vland and the ancient palace blasted down to the bedrock. The new palace is a grand and rather solid structure which doubles as a nexus for planetary orbital defenses. Access to the palace and the Shadow Emperor is strictly limited to certain representatives of the three Bureaus, who pass on the word of the Emperor to the senior members of the Bureaus, and so on down the chain of command.

Worlds are ruled by Planetary Governors, who answer to Regional Governors (the latter also control naval assets), but only within their own Bureau. A higher-ranking officer of a different Bureau can ask for cooperation and will probably receive it, but cannot command someone from a different Bureau. Naval commanders and economic leaders are also integrated into the same chain of command, each answering to their Bureau superior up to the Regional Governor, who answers to the Bureau's supreme leaders and then to the Shadow Emperor.

The situation is not quite so clear-cut as this, of course, as the various guilds within each Bureau wield considerable power and can influence matters across the borders of Bureau control.

CULTURE

Traditional Vilani culture and dress is very much in evidence within the NZS. Citizens long for stability and security, though there is still a strong minority in favor of a return to the grand days of Empire. Children are taught traditional games that date back millennia, and which

subtly prepare the individual's mindset for a lifetime as a tiny but well-respected cog in a very large wheel.

As already mentioned, the guilds are powerful within Vilani society, and to a great extent a citizen's prestige is determined by the guild to which he or she belongs. Some of these guilds have very archaic titles. For example, workers in some industrial sectors may work with lasers and high-power particle beams yet belong to the Wick-Trimmer's Guild, which saw to the lighting of the ancient streets of pre-industrial Vland. Vilani are proud of this connection to the distant past, and draw reassurance from it in turbulent times. There is even a Guilds of Overseers, who oversee projects where personnel from different guilds are involved. In a technological society this is virtually everything, and so the Guild of Overseers is now a generalized caste of project managers and leaders.

Nothing pleases a Vilani more than to see a problem solved by the application of traditional solutions, which can lead to very roundabout or inefficient approaches to a problem, slavishly applying a thousand-year-old procedure to a job that could be done in minutes by an obvious shortcut. The events of the Collapse and the Viral Plague showed the Vilani people exactly what happens when this kind of thoughtless innovation is entered into, and so the traditional-methods mindset is even more deep-rooted than ever.

Engineers and technicians, and especially theoretical scientists, are viewed with some suspicion by mainstream Vilani society. Those who seek to advance technology are suspected of upsetting the social order and risking another technological catastrophe. Thus while the worlds of the NZS were able to reconstruct a stable technological society fairly quickly due to their retention of established technologies and social institutions, advance beyond (and even back up to) the levels enjoyed before the Collapse has been rather slow.

Overall, the NZS has a well-integrated society with little cultural variation between worlds. It tends to be rigid and slow to react, but effective in what it does. At present there is some division of opinion about whether the dream of a huge empire was a foolish one, and a certain amount of shock at the devastation wreaked on Vland.

ECONOMY

The New Ziru Sirka has a strong economy with fairly high levels of well-regulated interstellar trade. One weakness of the economy is that relatively few worlds are self-sufficient. More effort is put into specialization in an economic niche than having each world meet as many of its own needs as possible. On the plus side, this means that the economy of the empire as a whole is more powerful, but the effects of disruption are greater. As a side effect, and one that

suits the leaders of the NZS, it is difficult for worlds to secede and go it alone as they depend on the empire to provide many of their basic needs.

Manufacture of high-technology equipment (anything over TL A) is strictly monitored and limited to approved companies. Similarly, Jump drives are restricted. It is not particularly difficult for a private operator to obtain a license to operate a starship, provided it is capable of Jump-1 or 2 at most. However licenses to manufacture even Jump drive spares are hard to come by. In part this is a security measure against Virus, but it is equally a means to limit the independence of individual worlds within the empire.

The highest-tech worlds of the New Ziru Sirka stand at TL B-C, and these worlds will probably expand their production rather than increase their TL over the next few years. The majority of worlds have received some uplift and rebuilding program, but it is likely that the Vilani will not want most of their worlds to pass TL 8. This keeps the bulk of the population at a TL where they are economically useful but relatively easy to control. Such a system of technological limitation was used by the original Ziru Sirka, which made for increased stability but eventually led to stagnation.

MILITARY POWER

The New Ziru Sirka once possessed a vastly excessive fleet for its economic and astrographical size. The economic burden of creating this conquest fleet was exacerbated when most of it was destroyed, necessitating the creation of another fleet to defend the worlds of the NZS. As a result the fleet is still understrength in terms of hulls and also trained personnel.

Individual worlds are not permitted to own or operate warships or even system defense craft. They are required to rely on orbital interceptors manned by the Vilani equivalent of COACC (Close Orbit and Airspace Control Command) personnel, and ground defenses such as deep-site meson guns and missile batteries. Most planetary defense forces have a few 'armed shuttles' as permitted by their charter, but these are of negligible combat value and are used only for policing operations. However, worlds with natural satellites sometimes fortify them and place long-range missile systems there to augment planetary defense. Naval strength is controlled by the Regional Governors, who parcel out system defense craft and monitors according to the needs of each system – as the governor sees them. This can and does lead to some vigorous lobbying.

Some Jump-capable patrol and naval vessels are also assigned to the Regional Governors' control (according to the needs of each region as perceived by the Shadow Emperor). However, most are retained in high-level naval formations that answer directly to the Bureaus and the

Shadow Emperor rather than the Regional Governor. These fleet assets are deployed in the interests of the Empire as a whole rather than being dispersed to deal with local troubles that each Governor should have the assets to deal with. In theory, this system frees the main naval strength of the Empire to deal with external and major internal troubles, while the Governors can look after minor problems in their own backyard. In practice, there are too few vessels at each level and the navy is badly overstretched.

Vilani ship design favors tried-and-tested designs, some of them using plans on file since the original Ziru Sirka. Vessels tend to be large for their class, with multiply-redundant systems to soak up damage and keep on functioning. Vilani design philosophy is to make ships survivable first and foremost, then capable. As a result their ships are not optimized for their role in the same way as Imperial or Solomani vessels might be, but are less likely to be rendered useless if caught out by a surprise attack or if deployed out of their normal mode.

The staple warships of the New Ziru Sirka belong to a class of 5,000-ton Fleet Destroyers. Large enough to be considered small cruisers by most other powers, these ships are workhorses, supposedly capable of dealing with almost any situation alone or in a squadron. Due to the heavy losses in capital warships, Fleet Destroyers have been forced into the battle lines, a role for which they are not well suited. While the Fleet Destroyers is quite capable of conducting line-of-battle operations against the ships of a Wilds Pocket Empire, against a real foe such as the Imperium or the Dominate, they are overmatched and would suffer huge losses even if victorious. The emphasis on survivability that all Vilani ships have is of little help when taking hits from weapons designed to cripple ships five or more times more powerful. Worse, the preponderance of defensive systems detracts from offensive capability, meaning that a destroyer squadron cannot take out its foe quickly enough to avoid return fire. However, these ships are what the NZS has, and their crews are well trained and dedicated.

The Vilani are not keen on planetside warfare, and tend to use orbital bombardment as a subdual technique. Their reputation for utter ruthlessness when necessary, and the fact that most Vilani warships have at least some ground-attack capability, makes a large Marine Corps unnecessary (in their eyes). A small standing army is available, which includes troops trained in vacuum and hostile-environment combat, but for the most part the Vilani prefer to win orbital superiority then demand surrender.

For 'colonial' operations, the ground troops of choice are Naval Infantry, a branch of the Navy trained as ground fighters with a secondary aboard-ship role as technicians,

cooks, maintenance personnel and damage-control parties.

The NZS operates a few long-range reconnaissance ships, but these are Naval vessels. There is no equivalent to the Imperial Interstellar Scout Service.

OUTLOOK

The NZS is, as already noted, extremely conservative and tradition-minded. However, memory is rather selective when it comes to deciding which aspects of the past and of tradition are to be honored. Precedents which show the Vilani people as better than others are honored and recalled frequently, while those concerned with defeats and humiliations are downplayed. As a result, the NZS as a whole is culturally arrogant, believing that the Vilani people are the rightful rulers of Charted Space and certainly the equals of all other powers. Most people genuinely believe that the Ziru Sirka alone held together the traditions of the various Imperiums while everyone else was plunging into darkness. Thus the new states like the Fourth Imperium are considered upstarts and barbarians. Experience shows that however friendly they may be at present, eventually there will be conflict of some kind.

The Vilani people are thus somewhat prickly and proud in their dealings with outsiders, and tend to casually insult others (without really meaning to) when referring to the Collapse and Recovery. This is normally through dismissing anyone else's achievements in rebuilding civilization while exalting those of the Vilani. Despite this attitude, the Vilani of the New Ziru Sirka are hardworking and honorable people. They see themselves as a bit better than others but grudgingly respect those that earn it.

Foreign policy tends to be somewhat jealous and confrontational. The NZS will not allow any encroachment on what it considers to be its territory or area of influence. This is problematical because the Ziru Sirka considers the Capital region and indeed most of Charted Space to be its lost territory, to be regained eventually. This rules out much in the way of cooperation and acceptance of other powers' activities.

The NZS expects that eventually there will be conflict with the other states of Charted Space, and tends to keep them at arm's length (socially and diplomatically) in order to avoid conflicts of loyalty in the event of hostilities.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Vilani people have always mistrusted technology, and in the New Era they have the most formidably Virus-proofed vessels possible. However, the methods used are physical and heavy-handedly so; antivirus programs are available but they are not very good compared to those of other states, and of course the Vilani are unwilling to

introduce foreign programs (or worse, Viral-entity created ones) into their machinery. Clearing Virus infestation aboard a Vilani ship means removing and smashing the affected computer rather than sending in the electronic attack dogs. The Vilani are also opposed to Psionics and have a strong dislike for the Zhodani people and the Spinward States for this reason – the latter has embraced both psionics and hordes of Zhodani refugees.

Finally, a sizable minority in the NZS still believes that a new bid for Capital should be launched, followed by a consolidation campaign to integrate the ‘upstart states’ into a glorious interstellar empire. There is a great deal of hatred for the Black Imperium of course, ever since the Scouring of Vland. Since this was in part the work of the Viral Lucan, the NZS is even more opposed to Viral Entities (even stable ones) than other states. It has no electronic citizens, refused to sign the Usdiki Sentients’ Rights Accords, and will not allow ships with Cym crewmembers aboard to enter its space.

THE FREEDOM LEAGUE

Born of the Reformation Coalition, a human-dominated survivor state that once had close ties to the Hive Federation, the Freedom League is an important power in the Old Expanses and part of Diaspora sector.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The Freedom League is a fairly loose confederation of worlds working together for mutual self-interest. At its height, around 1210, it was over a sector in size. Some territory has since been lost to secession and other factors.

The Freedom League is made up of three kinds of member: Core, Full, and Affiliate. Core members are mainly the original worlds of the Reformation Coalition and some of the more important worlds colonized and uplifted in the early years of the Recovery. Full members are those worlds that have pledged wholehearted support for the League and have voting rights, while Affiliate worlds are friendly and have a good relationship with the League, but have no voting rights and, while they can request assistance, must negotiate and offer something in return where a Full member can simply ask and expect to receive whatever is available.

Full and Core members make small contributions to the League’s resource pool, but for the most part the League operates almost as a multiworld corporation. It owns a number of facilities and trading ships, and uses the wealth these generate to fund the small Freedom League Navy as well as other vital necessities such as the uplift and diplomatic programs. Most functions, such as interstellar shipping and communications, are carried out by private

firms regulated by the League Administration but funded either by contract from the league itself or, more usually, by fees levied directly on worlds served by the firm.

The Freedom League is a very loose organization made up of diverse people. Humans are the majority group but their cultures and viewpoints are very different, which can make politics rather interesting. Differences of opinion are common, compromises are drawn-out epics of wrangling that rarely satisfy anyone, and there are never enough resources to do everything that needs doing. Despite this, or perhaps because of its very diversity, the League is a vigorous and dynamic political body that can best be likened to a large extended family. At any given time, some members of the family are in disgrace, others are feuding and some are on the brink of blows, yet they all feel a loyalty and siblinghood that makes them shelve their differences to stand together against outside foes, at least until the family is safe.

In addition to humans, there is a substantial minority of aliens including the aquatic Schalli and small numbers of Hivers who chose to stay when the Reformation Coalition asked the Hive Federation to withdraw its official support. These Hivers, and a rather larger number of Ithklur who just seem to like the Coalition and what it stands for, are full League citizens. Many list their nationality as Freedom League rather than any given world, and work for the League Administration rather than a world government. These individuals are welcome and highly valued.

The other cultural minority in the League is made up of stable Viral Entities. Some inhabit shipboard computers (gunnery computers in particular) while others have robotic or static installation computers as their hosts. While there is still some suspicion in certain quarters, these citizens have proven their loyalty and value over and over, and are for the most part warmly accepted as equals and friends. The League sometimes uses the Imperial term, Cyms, for these people but more often refers to them as Sandmen after the first stable Viral entity to become a citizen of the Reformation Coalition.

The Freedom League has its administrative capital in the City of Heroes on Nicosia, in Old Expanses sector. Nicosia was won and lost several times, and was the scene of two of the most famous dramas of the League’s history. Both were the work of Captain Davies of the Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service (the infamous Star Vikings). Davies stepped down as planetary governor of Nicosia to become the advocate for the conquered population, seeking fair treatment for their (very real) grievances against the Coalition. This was a pivotal moment in the history of what was then the Reformation Coalition, which from then on began moving towards becoming an alliance between the founder worlds and those of the Wilds that wanted to join. Some say this was the moment the

Freedom League was conceived; the day the Coalition opened its arms to the survivors of the Wilds and began working to save them rather than taking what it needed from them.

Nicosia was also the place where the burned-out veterans of the Exploratory Service found a new purpose; to build a place to live as a monument to their own sacrifice. The City of Heroes was founded mainly by Star Viking veterans judged to physically or mentally damaged to be allowed back into active service. Led by Captain Davies' example, they welcomed settlers from across the Coalition and the Wilds, creating a cosmopolitan city that in time became an inspiration to the Coalition and later the League.

CULTURE

The League is based upon principles of friendship, trust and freedom. It is a tolerant and diverse culture, though it is restricted in how much it can accomplish by the endless disputes that beset its politics.

The League does carry a certain amount of baggage from the past. It was founded by the Reformation Coalition, which out of necessity obtained the relic technology required for rebuilding by smash & grab raids on nearby worlds. A great deal of blood was spilled by the so-called Star Vikings as they fought to build a future before the collapse became final. Losses were immense among RC personnel, and of course among their targets. The emotional damage done to these personnel over the years (some of it stemming from their increasing vilification among their people 'back home' as the imminent threat receded from the doorsteps of Aubaine, Oriflamme and the other founder worlds) was in many cases permanent.

As matters improved in the core worlds, the activities of the Star Vikings, necessary as they were, attracted increasing criticism and finally became unacceptable to the citizens of 'safe' worlds close to the core of the Coalition. Without recent memories of conditions in the Wilds, or of the risk of total destruction (the last major threat to the core worlds was the so-called Vampire War of 1212-14), it was difficult to understand the reasoning behind the actions of the Star Vikings out on the frontiers.

This rift between the Star Vikings and the people they served threatened to destroy the Reformation Coalition. In 1242, as the Coalition formally became the Freedom League and the Hiver technical assistance teams went home, the Star Vikings were stood down or transferred into units of the new Freedom League Defense Force. The Reformation Coalition Exploratory Corps ceased to exist. This felt like a slap in the face to the veterans of the Star Vikings, and worse, they were still viewed as bloody-handed murderers in some quarters. 'Star Viking' became a phrase tinged with distrust and misunderstanding.

Some veterans followed the example of their great culture hero, Captain Davies, and made the transition to the new Freedom League. The rest could not accept that after all they had done they would now be scapegoats for the Freedom League's conscience. Thus when the Call To Arms came from Usdiki, few former Star Vikings stepped forward. The Freedom League sent ships, of course, and strengthened its own frontier defenses against the Dominate, fending off the relatively minor assaults that came its way. But the Star Vikings stayed at home. Their disaffection was a cause of major problems in the League. Some veterans went out into the Wilds to seek their fortune, or organized protest campaigns about their treatment. Some actually began fighting a low-level guerrilla campaign against the League they felt had betrayed them.

Now, in 1248, the Star Vikings have found a new purpose. Word has come via Usdiki of billions of humans in terrible danger away to Coreward, siblings whose existence was not even suspected. Without aid from the people of Charted Space they will perish. So the Star Vikings are reactivating their ships and assembling their crews. No longer welcome in the Freedom League, they have found a way to serve it to the last. They will board their ships and take their bloody hands out into the Coreward stars, to bring salvation to their long-lost siblings and perhaps find redemption. At present, the first Viking ships are moving Coreward across Charted Space. There is sadness and guilt within the Freedom League that they feel they must do this, but also relief and deep pride.

And so this is the final defining moment of the Freedom League's culture. The Star Vikings are once again heroes; tragic and flawed heroes, but heroes nonetheless. The League has found a new unifying force – a need to prove themselves worthy of the Vikings' legacy by holding the worlds they rebuilt in trust, honoring their memory, and making the League a monument to their courage not by fighting and destroying but by making it a place to live.

There is also the hope that some day the Vikings will come home to the welcome they deserve.

ECONOMY

The economy of the Freedom League is based upon free enterprise and free trade, subject to some regulation from Nicosia. One tradition that has survived from the old Reformation Coalition is the Auction. Originally this was a Star Viking institution, wherein technological items recovered from the Wilds were auctioned off among those who wanted or needed them. This practice is generally seen as undignified and rather barbarous these days, but the Auction has become an important factor in League culture.

Today, much of the League's economic business is conducted in the manner of an auction, with bidding

open to any interested party. Even quite trivial goods are auctioned – visitors to Nicosia or Oriflamme are sometimes bemused by the practice of bidding for fruit and vegetables, or a pair of shoes. Auctions are rarely conducted electronically, though representatives of distant bidders do of course work via comm or electronic messaging. However, the excitement of the auction brings communities together on certain days to bid for groceries and other staples of life, and fulfills an important social bonding function. This vibrancy is echoed throughout the economic system of the League. It is not the most streamlined or efficient system, but it does work and the social benefits are considerable.

League traders are not afraid to make long voyages out into the Wilds to trade their goods, and to some extent the spirit of the Star Vikings lives on in a breed of self-reliant traders who voyage the Wilds in search of new markets and incidentally bring home important intelligence data.

MILITARY POWER

The worlds of the Freedom League defend themselves as best they can afford and see fit. A great deal of hardware is bought from the same suppliers, leading to good levels of interoperability among units from different worlds. Few worlds maintain a Jump-capable navy of their own.

The Freedom League itself maintains a small but effective navy and ground combat force. Both are manned by personnel drawn from across the League and even recruited in the Wilds. The days of the multipurpose ‘clippers’ are gone, but many league warships retain a configurable multimission bay and can carry troops or logistics supplies when on combat deployment. The League favors fairly small cruiser-sized vessels as its workhorse warships, naming those with a multimission bay as General Operations Units and those without as General Combat Units. Warships are intended to be as individually resilient and self-sufficient as possible – another Star Viking legacy. GCUs and GOU are backed up by Heavy Combat Units (generally at the low end of the Heavy Cruiser spectrum) and Fast Strike Units, which are effectively high-Jump, high-maneuver destroyers intended for strike and raiding operations.

Fleets are informal in organization, being formed from whatever vessels are available, and rarely contain neat squadrons of the same vessel class. Multimission ships often function as logistics vessels until their replenishment stores are exhausted, then join the combat groups. As with the economy, this is not the most efficient arrangement in terms of maximizing combat effectiveness, but it is extremely flexible and the League has found that over the long haul, its forces can often outlast a more specialized fleet and take advantage of opportunities as they arrive.

The Freedom League Navy contributed a number of vessels to the Grand Alliance and the Call to Arms, but the bulk of its combat assets are deployed on the Coreward-Trailing edge of the League or out in the Wilds just beyond, skirmishing with Dominate forces. So far the Dominate has made no concerted effort to destroy the League, but even so the steady pressure is beginning to tell.

The League’s military forces do not officially include any Star Viking vessels, but a few have volunteered for service and are fighting alongside the Navy on the frontier or – as might be expected – well beyond it as a deep raiding force and first line of defense.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The League was helped out of the wreckage by the Hive Federation, and while the Hivers have more or less withdrawn from League space, they remain friendly to the League and run patrols along the trade corridors connecting the two powers. League ships have been sent to assist Hiver forces against the Dominate.

Many Star Vikings remain on the worlds of the League. Some are quite old now, but there are younger generations among them. Most Star Vikings feel disaffected and divorced from the society they gave so much to build. This manifests itself as aimlessness, resentment or open opposition in some cases. However, the Vikings have found a new cause to crusade for, and many are now renovating their decommissioned ships and heading out of League space. To most League citizens, this is a cause for mixed relief and guilt.

THE UNITED WORLDS

The United Worlds is a small power, about four subsectors in size, located in Diaspora sector. Its position is such that the UW was not only the initial point of contact between the Reformation Coalition and the Regency but also a staging point for Reformation Coalition and Terran units joining the fighting in the Black Curtain. For political reasons the vessels sent by the Solomani Imperium made their own way independently to the battle zones and did not stage with those of other states.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The United Worlds began life as an ‘adventurer kingdom’ founded out of necessity by a group of ship crews allied to the population of a handful of planets in the Spinward subsectors of Diaspora sector. Originally a mutual defense and trade alliance founded mainly to prevent a pocket empire from annexing and enslaving the various founder members, the UW received help from the Sons of Craig and was able to make the transition to being a stable interstellar state.

The UW has its capital on the world of Phoenix/Diaspora. Phoenix, formerly known as Jalhoun, is a rockball with some reasonable mineral deposits but is otherwise a backwater world remarkable only for the fact that its population found ways to survive on an extremely hostile planet for nearly a century after the Collapse.

The UW has a moderate leadership and is not expansionistic. It really has too many members for its resources to support, and even now it is stretched thin trying to provide uplift and defense to the many Wilds worlds that have joined. The political structure is quite simple. All worlds, whatever their population, are represented at the United Worlds Council at Phoenix, but theirs is a token vote. The number of additional votes a world has is directly proportional to the amount of personnel, equipment, industrial produce, money, technological assistance and above all starships it supplies either for Council use or to another member world on behalf of a Council member. Worlds have a minimum quota that they are required to contribute in order to remain a member, but can increase this amount if they wish. Some actually do.

General policy decisions are taken by majority vote, which means that the main contributors are able to direct the policies of the state as a whole. Details are worked out by a high council elected from the various worlds' representatives and led by the President of the United Worlds. The council and the President have broad powers in an emergency but can be overruled or even dismissed by majority vote if their policies are detrimental or unacceptable to the membership of the UW.

Thus far, this system has proven acceptable to all, and reasonably effective. Votes on acceptance of more worlds have been generally negative in recent years, with very few exceptions, and active diplomacy to recruit more members was curtailed years ago. It seems likely that the UW will remain in its present form for some time, perhaps incorporating a handful more worlds if they offer significant astrographical or economic advantages.

CULTURE

Although it is predominantly a human organization, the culture of the UW is very diverse. Many traditions are broadly Solomani but this is not by any means universal. The common thread running through almost all member cultures is a strong streak of self-reliance and a 'survivor' mentality. While the members are willing to accept aid from their fellows, they are conscious that they got through the Dark Years by their own efforts and keen not to lose their ability to do it again if they must. In addition, those worlds that have received significant uplift and assistance (and some that have not) are determined to prove that they were worthy by contributing to the assistance of others or to the UW forces. This ethic of being willing to accept aid

but feeling obliged to offer it in return is the glue that binds the UW together.

The worlds of the UW were hit hard by the Collapse, and there was no outside aid. One result of this is that acceptance of Viral entities as people is very limited (the UW is not impressed by the acceptance of psionics in some quarters, either). On the other hand, there is a certain amount of pride (bordering upon arrogance) that the UW fell, hit bottom, and climbed back up entirely unassisted and using its own resources. While the official banner of the UW is the same as that of the Fourth Imperium Reconstruction Service, a Phoenix rising from a shattered Sunburst, the unofficial symbol of the UW is a short piece of what appears to be pseudohide with a metal buckle threaded onto it – a bootstrap.

ECONOMY

The United Worlds has virtually no economy of its own, though the world of Phoenix produces a certain amount of industrial goods that can be considered UW state produce. Virtually everything the UW needs is contributed by its member worlds: money, personnel and ships. Once contributed, these items are available for the Council to deploy as necessary, but it has very little of its own. Thus the economy of the UW is the economy of its members. Many of these worlds are still climbing back up to a mid-tech level, so the economy cannot be considered anything like strong. It is overstrained and struggling somewhat, though collapse is not likely.

MILITARY POWER

The worlds of the UW either defend themselves or pay a contribution in return for a detachment of the United Worlds Unified Defense Force to man system defense ships and ground installations. The UWUDF also operates a very small naval fleet. Most of the vessels of this fleet are small patrol ships, with a handful of more potent units available to deal with more serious threats.

In addition, the UW has on file a number of armed merchant designs, which are available for private construction. Operators of such vessels are offered a subsidy in return for making their vessel available for service as an Armed Merchant Cruiser. These AMCs (some of them in UW service, some private) are the commonest vessel encountered outside UW-controlled territory.

Although the UW is a very small power with little naval strength, it is hardly surprising that it responded to the Call to Arms as best it could. Much of the contribution was in the form of mid-tech ground forces of limited usefulness during the initial campaign. These forces are now much more important, since they make up a significant fraction of the ground troops deployed in what used to be the Black Imperium. Peacekeeping is more a matter of will

and technique than weaponry, and thus far the UW has more than pulled its weight.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The UW is friendly with the Fourth Imperium. Its Armed Merchant Cruisers frequently make the long journey through the Wilds to Imperial space. Relations with the Freedom League and the Terran Commonwealth are cordial, but not especially close. The UW also has close ties with the Sons of Craig, and is funding small expeditions back into Daibei sector to help rebuild Craig's duchy.

THE SPINWARD STATES

For many years the Regency held out in the region 'Behind the Claw'. Recent events have caused it to break up into a number of small successor states. These, along with some states in regions that were never part of the Imperium, are detailed here.

THE REGENCY AND REGENCY SUCCESSOR STATES

The Regency was a bold and determined effort on the part of Archduke (later First Regent) Norris. It was intended to preserve the best of the Imperium and to protect those of its citizens as were within the borders of the Domain of Deneb. Ultimately, the Regency was doomed to failure. The task was too great, the internal divisions too many and too deep. The Regency gradually lost its focus and its cohesion, and finally broke apart into several factions that became interstellar powers.

And yet, in a very real way, the Regency succeeded.

The people of the Regency bravely kept the flame alive when all around was plunged into darkness. When they were at last able, they reached out to others and gave what aid they could. And when at last they fell into the darkness that had claimed all others, still they managed to pass the precious flame to those who would keep it and nurture it – and who would bear it out into the night and light the way for others. Even their fall scattered sparks all around; sparks that may yet re-ignite civilization and drive back the darkness.

The last days of the Regency are remembered with sadness as glory turned to folly, wisdom to stupidity. And yet the people of the Regency are revered as heroes. They held back the night, all alone, for just long enough.

THE LEAGUE OF DENEK

The largest and most powerful successor to the Regency is the League of Deneb. With its capital at Deneb, the League covers slightly less than a sector. It encompasses most of Deneb sector plus some worlds along the Trailing

edge of the Spinward Marches. League space suffered less than other regions in the Collapse and the breakup of the Regency, and retains several very high-tech worlds. Its membership is made up of single worlds and multiworld 'provinces' which owe allegiance to Deneb.

The League is very much concerned with survival and damage limitation at present. It lost a lot of ships in the Regency-inspired Capital Bid and in the Regency Civil War, and is currently rebuilding its strength. As a result, policies are very conservative and directed towards self-protection and regaining the strength the region enjoyed under the Regency.

THE IMPERIAL REGENCY

The Imperial Regency represents perhaps the worst of what the Regency became. Arrogant and militarized, its culture is one of superiority and jealousy towards other successor states. The Imperial Regency does not merely assert sovereignty over the other post-Regency states, it claims rulership over all the territory of the old Third Imperium.

There is some basis for these claims. The IR has an unbroken chain of leaders and sovereignty right back through First Regent Norris to the old Imperial nobility and thus to the Imperial throne. The Regency kept the Imperium alive, claim the leaders of the IR, and the Imperial Regency is its legitimate successor. Therefore, if any state should emerge as the greatest among the survivors, it should be the Imperial Regency.

The Imperial Regency rules about five subsectors' worth of worlds in the Trailing-Rimward end of the Marches. Its borders are closed to 'foreign' vessels unless they agree to lengthy searches and general harassment.

The IR inherited much of the surviving military strength of the Regency, but not enough of its industrial base to support such a large force. At present it can manage by skimping in other areas, but it seems likely that the IR will either decide to use its forces to annex worlds and extort funds from other states, or else will implode. Neither option is pleasant to consider.

THE REPUBLIC OF REGINA

The Republic of Regina is almost the exact opposite of the Imperial Regency. Based at Regina in the Spinward Marches and covering little more than a subsector, the Republic is a microcosm of Archduke Norris' vision for the Regency. A democratic organization with moderate policies and a stable, if small, economy, the Republic often serves as a mediator between other states in the region. It remains to be seen whether it can avoid annexation by the aggressive Imperial Regency.

THE LEAGUE OF SPINWARD STATES

The League of Spinward States is a mutual defense alliance formed out of necessity by a number of splinter states as the Regency broke up. It brings together some unlikely allies and is not without some internal tension, but thus far has been quite successful.

The senior partner in the League is the Darrian Confederation. The Darrians have been an autonomous ally of first the Imperium and then the Regency since time immemorial. Their possession of the infamous Star Trigger superweapon has always given them a considerable amount of political influence, and as the Regency splintered the fact that the Darrians possessed a unified political structure allowed them to attain a position of some prominence in the Spinward Marches.

Other members of the League include the Sword Worlds, long enemies of the Darrians but now finding much common ground, the Federation of Arden, the Querion Cluster and the Metal Confederation. The latter is formed of several worlds (named for metals of various sorts) that once belonged to the Sword Worlds. Captured by the Imperials, the Metal Worlds eventually became a small power bloc and have elected to join the League, but not to return to Sword Worlds rule. The Querion Cluster is a splinter state formed when the Zhodani Consulate shattered. Psionics is accepted, but the ruling class is no longer made up of psionic nobles. Instead the non-psionic Proles run the various worlds and the cluster as a whole, with psionic individuals fulfilling a number of important roles (including some governmental posts) but no longer being automatically made leaders merely because of their mental powers.

Each of the League states, and the individual worlds that are members, is a sovereign state in its own right. The League is a mutual defense and support agreement with some provisions for trade and other co-operation. It is likely that some other independent worlds may join the League in the near future, while the Federation of Arden is looking set to leave now that the immediate crisis is over.

THE ASLAN AORLAKHT (“NEW LORDS”)

Those Aslan who escaped the fall of the Hierate joined with their brethren across the Great Rift and in time became the Aorlakht, or New Lords. Some of these Aslan states survive into the New Era. Most lie beyond the territory that used to be controlled by the Regency, but some can be considered to be among the Regency successors.

These new Aslan states vary considerably. Most are very small, being no more than 2-3 worlds ruled by a single clan. Some include substantial numbers of humans while others have a culture that has been heavily influenced

by the Regency. This creates some conflict with the ‘true’ Aslan states further to Spinward-Rimward. Few of the New Lords in Regency space are powerful to contribute much to or benefit from the current rush back into the old Hierate, though most have managed to launch a couple of shiploads of *Ihatei*, more in optimism than with any real hope of achievement.

THE MINOR STATES

Most worlds outside the major groups listed above are independent or have treaties with a handful of other worlds but no formal multiworld government or structure in place. The major exceptions are:

THE CHRONOR CONSULATE

The Consulate is a small Zhodani splinter state. Unlike the Querion Cluster, the Consulate has retained a traditional Zhodani governmental structure, with a class of psionic nobles in charge. The Consulate is mainly concerned with stability within its own borders, and is cordial in its relations with the Querion Cluster despite the very different system in place there.

THE GLISTEN CONCORD

The Concord is a mix of human and Aslan groups with its capital at Glisten. Both races retain their traditional cultures yet somehow manage to get along amicably enough that a unified government is now in place. How the Concord works is a mystery to outsiders, but somehow it does.

THE OYTRIP OF ANDOR

The two Droyne worlds of Andor and Candory are known to have committed themselves to a formal Oytrip arrangement. Oytrips (Droyne states, countries or nations) range in size from small villages to unified worlds, but Andor is the only known multiworld Oytrip in Charted Space.

THE SOLOMANI SUCCESSORS

After the collapse of the Solomani Confederation, two major powers arose; the moderate Terran Commonwealth and the totalitarian Solomani Imperium. Other Solomani states do exist, but for the most part they are small and thus fit into the category of pocket empires’.

THE TERRAN COMMONWEALTH

Almost three sectors from Usdiki lies Terra, birthplace of Humaniti and capital of the Terran Commonwealth. Once the home of the totalitarian Solomani Confederation,

Terra is now the first among equals in an enlightened and progressive interstellar state containing about seven subsectors' worth of territory, not all of it contiguous. The most striking difference between the Commonwealth and the old Confederation is the acceptance of aliens as equals. The worlds of the old Vegan Autonomous Region are now loyal members of the Terran Commonwealth, a situation inconceivable under the old regime.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The Commonwealth is an alliance of alliances. In the chaos of the Collapse and the Recovery, several pocket empires emerged in the Solomani Rim sector and adjoining it, and while conflict between these was inevitable, eventually a framework was put in place to resolve differences and thus spare critical resources for the vital work of reconstruction and defending what had been rebuilt.

This framework was little more than an agreed system of arbitration at first, and one that several states rejected. However, in time the various pocket empires and survivor worlds became used to the system and realized just how beneficial cooperation was. The arbitration framework was gradually added to until it became a system of agreements and alliances between the various states. The result was a very complex system which threatened to become over-bureaucratized. Before this could happen, however, Terra rose to prominence by proposing a replacement structure that did away with the unholy mess and replaced it with a much simpler system.

The current structure is elegant and simple; worlds belong to one of several alliances (which call themselves empires, federations and all manner of other things), which themselves are members of the Terran Commonwealth. Some independent worlds are also members of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has a framework of laws and regulations that all members are required to abide by, and sets quotas for financial, industrial and military contributions to the Commonwealth. All member states can request military and/or economic assistance from the Commonwealth central reserves, and the cutting-off of this assistance is the main sanction available to the Commonwealth Parliament on Terra.

At first glance, then, it seems that the Commonwealth is powerless to keep its members in line, but this is not an accurate criticism. For one thing, membership is entirely voluntary and is sufficiently beneficial that suspension of membership is not desirable. In addition, there are withdrawal procedures in place to ensure that the Commonwealth as a whole is not damaged by the departure of a couple of worlds. The central military reserve could perhaps be used to 'deal with' difficult members, but the reality is that leaving the Commonwealth would damage any world or pocket empire that did so, and none of them want to be left alone to face the dangers of the

New Era. Most importantly, though, the Commonwealth is a voluntary and genuinely beneficial organization with a vision that is shared by all its members.

One goal currently being worked towards is the dissolution of the founding alliances and pocket empires, and their replacement by a rationalized system in which clusters and sections of mains are grouped as astrographical districts, with a local capital situated on the most economically powerful world in the district. Capitals will have responsibility for the lesser worlds under their care and are expected to defend them and see to their needs as well as lead them.

This change is a gradual one, since no world or pocket empire leader wishes to give up territory or status without getting something in return. The Commonwealth is willing to take the long view on this issue, gradually winning over one world after another and slowly rationalizing the political structure over the next century or so. The main tool in this initiative is bribery; worlds agreeing to the new system are guaranteed a larger share of aid and support from the central reserve.

For the time being, however, the Commonwealth is a rather loose framework of pocket empires, alliances and individual worlds, some of which have colonies or holdings on other worlds. Its politics are complex and somewhat noisy at times, but there is a growing feeling of identity among the Commonwealth citizens which is eroding old barriers and borders.

CULTURE

The Terran Commonwealth is very much a Solomani organization. It is energetic and vigorous, and occasionally reckless. It is also rather diverse. So close to Terra, many of the worlds of the Commonwealth have cultures descended from or strongly influenced by ancient Terran civilizations. The traditions, art and general feeling of the great cultures of old Earth – Latin, North American, Asian, African and others – can be discerned among the more modern influences on many worlds, even those which have large numbers of non-human citizens. However, the member worlds include a number of Vegan homeworlds and colonies, and other races are also represented. Under the Solomani Confederation (which the Vegans were not part of) these cultures were repressed by racist policies, but now they are beginning to flourish and develop once again.

The Commonwealth is, as a rule, very open and freedom-loving. However, the years of rule by the Solomani Party have left their mark, and the citizens of the Commonwealth are thus rather bigoted about (ironically enough) political extremism and bigotry. Anything that smacks of totalitarianism or repression is guaranteed to offend both citizens and their governments. Diplomats and citizens of

the Commonwealth worlds have a habit of pointing out all the signs of extremism on any world they visit, and offering dire warnings about what might happen if the extremists are allowed to take power.

The overall culture of the Commonwealth, however, is progressive and open. Citizens who have served in the armed forces or other vital services, such as the Commonwealth Engineering Corps, are entitled to a reduced tax rate and other privileges, though an attempt to make these privileges hereditary was violently opposed by the majority of Parliament. The Commonwealth respects those who stand on their own two feet, give loyalty freely to an organization worth supporting yet remain watchful for signs that their loyalty is being abused, and who respect the freedom of others to do likewise.

ECONOMY

As might be expected, the economy of the Terran Commonwealth is diversified, with worlds encouraged to meet their own needs as far as possible. At present there are two types of member worlds – Major Worlds and Minor Worlds. Major Worlds are those that can more or less support themselves and contribute to the overall economy. Minor Worlds are those that require outside help to get along, even if they have considerable industrial output. The distinction is mainly important in terms of power in the Commonwealth Parliament, with Major Worlds having more votes and access to key positions of power. This is considered right and proper, since Minor Worlds must be supported by the Commonwealth, while Major Worlds supply the means to do so. Major Worlds receive the lion's share of technological uplift funding, since they are the most likely to be able to sustain and nurture the new technological capability for the benefit of the Commonwealth as a whole. Of course, uplifting worlds that have a lot of industry or that are already at a fairly high tech level is extremely expensive, whereas the smaller share of funding that reaches the Minor worlds has a greater effect there.

Worlds are free to make their own trade arrangements, subject to certain laws regarding traffic in restricted items and quotas that must be presented for the use of the Commonwealth before the remainder of a surplus can be sold for profit. The economy as a whole is not as powerful as it might be if production was optimized, but by placing the emphasis on self-sufficiency at the world and cluster level, the Commonwealth has created an extremely robust system that should be able to ride out most crises without massive disruption or extreme measures. As a Solomani organization, the Commonwealth emphasizes competition among its members, and promotes a striving for excellence rather than relying on tried-and-tested products. This has resulted in some spectacular marketplace disasters, but on the whole the Commonwealth is progressing rapidly.

The worlds of the Terran Commonwealth range from TL 0 to D. Uplift programs are patchy, though the Commonwealth is now taking over from local worlds to deliver a more coherent uplift package.

MILITARY POWER

The various member worlds and alliances of the Commonwealth are required to provide for their own defense, and have a moral responsibility to defend their weaker neighbors. They are also required to either provide warships to the Commonwealth Navy or supply the funding to build and operate them.

The Commonwealth Navy was initially an ad-hoc force of whatever ships happened to be on loan at the time, but in recent years has begun to receive purpose-built vessels. One type that has seen considerable use (though its success was distinctly mixed) is a 4,000 displacement ton vessel, ruggedized rather than built to a military standard, and mass-produced on many worlds. Capable of Jump-2 and mounting a reasonable armament of missiles and laser weapons, these ships could be finished as transports or freighters, as logistics ships or patrol vessels for the Navy. In the latter role they have functioned as fighter carriers and rather poor missile destroyers. Some were outfitted as long-range exploratory traders or exploration ships. Mass-production made the class relatively cheap, but it falls between several stools in terms of capability and is not particularly effective in any role.

The various worlds of the Commonwealth, charged with providing for their own defense, tend to operate quite heavy system defense monitors or low-Jump vessels to guard their local area. Only the Navy has any need for higher-Jump ships, and the great majority of these are light craft such as the 1600-ton Patrol Frigate class that is by far the most common warship in Commonwealth service. The few major Jump-capable combatants are mostly cruiser-sized and mount spinal meson guns or particle accelerators.

The Commonwealth has a Marine Corps and an Exploration Service. The latter has some details in common with the Imperial Interstellar Scout service, but does not fulfill the communications role that the IISS does in Imperial space. Instead, the Exploratory Service is charged with exploration only.

OUTLOOK

The Commonwealth is, for the most part, open and accepting, with no territorial ambitions and little interest in what goes on outside its borders other than in the interests of wider trade and self-defense. The exception is to Rimward-Trailing, in the direction of Newworld sector, where the Solomani Imperium has its home. The Solomani Imperium, or the Second Rule of Man, claims ownership

of Terra and her fellow Commonwealth worlds and seeks to place Old Earth under its jackboot. The Commonwealth is extremely wary of anything and anyone originating in Newworld sector.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Terran Commonwealth is a new polity, but it stands in the shadow of history. For many decades its worlds were part of the Solomani Confederation, known for its racism and totalitarian regime. Some neighbors view it with suspicion for this reason.

The Commonwealth is willing to accept Viral citizens and even members of the species usually known as New Humaniti, the genetically engineered 'Supermen' created by the Solomani. Small numbers of Supermen live openly and apparently happily among the citizens of the Commonwealth, but it is thought that there are many more of their race who are unrevealed for what they are. Their intentions towards the Commonwealth are not known.

THE SOLOMANI IMPERIUM (The Second Rule of Man)

Most of the worst of the Solomani Confederation has been distilled and purified into the Solomani Imperium. Its racist, totalitarian leaders seek to rule all Solomani, and perhaps all humans.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The Solomani Imperium is made up of just over a sector's worth of worlds, mainly concentrated in Newworld sector, though with an arm reaching out towards Home in Aldebaran Sector. It is ruled by the True Solomani Party (normally referred to as the Solomani Party or just The Party), which keeps order through intimidation and repression. Its strong arm in this endeavor is Solomani Security (SolSec).

Each world of the Second Rule of Man (SRoM) is governed by a Planetary Governor, a senior Party member who answers to the central Party Directorate. The Governor is assisted by the planetary Party Administration, which is part of the overall SRoM Party. Thus worlds are in effect ruled directly by the party.

Law levels are high throughout the Solomani Imperium, except on certain resort worlds (which are reserved for deserving Party members). Base law level starts at 7 and may be much higher depending upon circumstances. Whatever the law level, non-humans are restricted on all worlds, typically being subject to a law level 2 higher than that of the world in general, and being barred from joining certain careers (most particularly, aliens cannot join the Solomani Party).

No world government is tolerant; even where laws are relatively moderate the penalties for breaching them and the methods of enforcement are harsh. Social unrest and protest is not permitted. Dissidents are often shipped off to gulags; remote outsystem penal colonies or islands from which there is little chance of escape.

CULTURE

The culture of the SRoM is based around the ideal that humans are better than everyone else, and that humans descended from the people of Terra (rather than the transplanted races) are the best of all humans. Therefore, by definition, Terran humans (i.e. Solomani) should rule Charted Space.

There was once a heretical view that all the races born of Terra were equally best, and that Dolphins, Orca and Apes, all uplifted to sentience by the Solomani, were their brethren. The SRoM does not follow this belief, and takes the hard line that only humans descended from Terran humans are true Solomani, and therefore the true masters.

Bloodlines have of course become very mixed over the millennia, so membership of, and standing within, the Solomani Party makes a handy substitute. Party membership and Party standing are everything. Party officials have so many rights and privileges that they are in effect exempt from some laws. Party membership is a requisite for certain jobs. However, membership of the Party is somewhat restricted. Non-humans are not permitted at all. Humans wishing to join will be investigated to determine if they have the right genetic heritage. This test is normally a formality that serves as an excuse for corruption or to allow the Party to refuse membership to anyone they wish. It is rarely conducted in a fair and honest manner, even if that is possible under the circumstances. Gaining membership of the Party is made as difficult as possible. Sponsorship by an existing Party member and a thorough background check by Solomani Security are the two main requirements, but there are others. As a result, most of the population are not Party members.

Solomani Security (SolSec) pervades all aspects of daily life through its open agents (known as Monitors) and its web of secret police and informants. SolSec watches citizens ever more carefully the higher their position, though it goes a little easier on Party members. The result is a culture of paranoia and self-interest, with purges of 'disloyal elements' fairly common.

The ordinary people of the Solomani Imperium actually live quite well by comparison to other similar states. There is little crime or unemployment, and the constant diet of propaganda convinces many that theirs is actually a good way to live. The great majority of citizens of the Second Rule of Man genuinely believe that they are better than

everyone else, and that only the selfless devotion of the Party stands between their way of life and the barbarians pounding at the gate – or the traitorous elements within who cannot understand what is necessary to keep the people safe, and thus strive to undermine the very foundations of the Solomani way of life.

The SRoM is not tolerant of aliens or Viral entities. The former are considered to be at best second-class citizens and the latter are abominations that must be destroyed at any cost. The Dominate, representing as it does an alliance between Virus and aliens, is the closest thing to pure evil the average citizen of the Solomani Imperium can conceive of as existing in Charted Space. All but the most dissident Solomani citizen concedes that dissatisfaction with the government is a trivial thing compared to the abomination that is the Dominate. Volunteers to fight this terrible foe are never hard to find.

ECONOMY

The economy of the Second Rule of Man is tightly controlled by the planetary governors and their Party superiors. Many firms and large commercial interests are state-owned, and receive heavy subsidies to produce goods than are otherwise not profitable. This ensures that the needs of the government are met and that there are always stocks of vital materials on hand when needed.

Above and beyond this base free enterprise is, however, actively encouraged. Where citizens can find a cheaper, better or more efficient way to do something, they are rewarded for it. Indeed, economic excellence is one of the two direct routes to high Party standing available to the average citizen. So long as the basics are provided for by the state economy and the businesspeople are making their rightful contributions in terms of taxes, the Party is pleased to see innovation and hard work and tries to encourage it wherever possible. The Solomani are thus aggressive traders, and even despite their contempt for non-humans they are willing to head out into the Wilds and cut deals wherever they can. So long as nothing illegal is done, the Party smiles on this activity as it enriches the Solomani Imperium as a whole.

As a general rule, the big state-owned firms make up most of each sector – transportation, manufacturing, high-tech goods and so on, with the remainder of the market shared by vigorous, fiercely competitive small firms. Some sectors, such as small-vessel shipping and exploratory trade, are left almost entirely to the free enterprise fraternity.

Technological uplift of regressed worlds is more uniform in the SRoM than elsewhere. The base TL to which almost all worlds have been brought back up is 7, though there are many remote areas of the various worlds that this initiative has not reached. The core worlds, those that led the reconstruction or benefited from early rebuilding,

average TL C. Few are higher. About half the planets of the Solomani Imperium have a TL 7-9 industrial base of some sort. The long-term plan is to bring everything up to TL 9, then gradually advance the more productive worlds to the maximum possible.

MILITARY POWER

The Second Rule of Man inherited its ships and its philosophies from the Solomani Confederation. As a result it is biased towards 'battlecruiser warfare'. Vessels tend to be fast, agile and heavily armed but relatively fragile for their size. In major actions this allows the Solomani to engage on their own terms and overwhelm enemy forces before they can dish out much damage. In a standup fight or on the defensive, the Solomani tend to suffer quite heavy casualties, so strategy tends to be aggressive. This has led to many incidents where a SRoM ship has attacked because it could not afford to wait and see if the situation was going to turn violent.

The preponderance of fast, aggressive ships suits the Solomani style of warfare, which emphasizes raids on enemy commerce, logistics and installations to cripple an enemy without the need for a major fleet action, or to weaken the fleet for the coup de grace. Capital units of the fleet are mainly Battlecruisers, Strike Cruisers and fast Light Cruisers, with specialist Commerce Raiders available for extended operations in enemy territory. Local defense is mainly conducted by squadrons of fast strike destroyers and overgunned fast monitors, with patrol work carried out by 'System Control Ships' – a sort of fairly cheap, low-Jump cruiser/carrier hybrid capable of conducting a range of operations with a view to maintaining observation and an armed presence in sensitive systems.

The Solomani Imperium has no Scout Service, but it does have an efficient Marine Corps. Worlds are defended by the Army of the Solomani Imperium, a unified force equipped mostly to TLA and assigned to whatever tasks are deemed necessary. Units include a political officer who is a Party official. This individual is never the unit's commander, though he too may be a Party member. Political officers are responsible for ensuring that the army's personnel are properly indoctrinated, and for reporting on the political reliability of the unit. However, while the political officer can make a great deal of trouble for a commander, he or she is not in the chain of command and can only advise. The commander is in charge of the unit, though he will answer for his actions if the PO decides an investigation is recommended. In any unit there will be open and covert Solomani Security agents (open agents are called Monitors, and assist the PO). A similar arrangement exists in the Navy.

Solomani Security has grown since the days of the old Solomani Confederation. In addition to its internal security role and its duty to provide bodyguards for political

officials, SolSec now has a number of small ground-combat units and even a few warships. These tend to be small, fast vessels such as destroyers, and are available to allow SolSec officials to move about from world to world without needing to rely on the navy or the State Shipping Corporation, and in safety.

SolSec has an additional role, for which most of its ground troops are trained. It is the primary antivirus weapon of the Solomani Imperium. Where a severe infestation is suspected, SolSec is first in to ascertain the level of the threat and, if possible, deal with it using its own resources. If necessary, naval or army technicians and troops can be borrowed, but SolSec is proud of its role as the first and last line of defense against the Viral threat. For this reason, among others, although SolSec is feared by some for its internal security role, for most citizens the black uniform and gloves of a SolSec agent are a badge of honor to be given the deepest respect.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Solomani Imperium is institutionally racist, and dealings with non-humans are always tinged with contempt or fear. Viral Entities are particularly hated, and are not tolerated in SRoM space. Some worlds have substantial populations of uplifted Apes, Dolphins and Orca, who are considered to be almost-equals of humans. There are no Ursa in Solomani space.

The Supermen, New Humaniti, are sworn enemies of the Solomani Imperium and occasionally launch raids or covert operations against whatever targets they can hit. Despite this, the SRoM is once again undertaking genetic experimentation, though under strict control and security. Details of the various projects are not known outside the highest levels of the Party.

Propaganda and indoctrination is a daily fact of life in Solomani space, though most of it is fairly subtle. People are for the most part happy with the way things are. Given that the alternative is the howling chaos of the Wilds, the strict rule of the Party is considered to be a good thing by almost everyone. The system works and looks set to go on working. This is a good reason for most people to believe in the Party.

DISTANT LANDS

The Solomani were once part of the Third Imperium and so are detailed above. For most of the other states of Charted Space, information is sketchy. Most of these states always lay well beyond the Imperial borders and information on some was hard to come by even in the heyday of the Third Imperium. To the average citizen of Usdiki, many of these interstellar powers are little more than rumors, though some have made themselves rather

prominent in the affairs of the Fourth Imperium

THE ASLAN HIERATE

The Hierate is at present even more fragmented than the former Third Imperium. Many small states and pocket empires exist, separated by areas of deep Wilds. Some of these are survivor states but most were founded by *Ihatei* and expeditions from across the great Rift to Spinward. The great majority of the new Aslan states are very 'young' and generally struggling along as a result of being founded with inadequate resources.

The typical Aslan pocket empire is determined to expand as quickly as possible and to occupy as much territory as it can. This further drains resources and causes unnecessary competition at a time when steady growth and consolidation would be more appropriate. Aslan pocket empires have a tendency to implode spectacularly or to be taken over by a new wave of *Ihatei*. These takeovers may eventually result in consolidated, powerful states but at present simply add to the general confusion as a tottering pocket empire receives a new lease of life, expands a little more, then begins to fail once more.

Those few states that have chosen to remain very small (a star system or two at most) tend to be much more stable, but this 'female-dominated' approach leads the 'male-dominated' expansionist states to think of them as weak and (sometimes) attempt a takeover. The general situation in the old Hierate is thus very unstable. The exception to this rule is the area 6-8 parsecs around Kusyu, which is occupied by a stable Aslan state friendly to the Fourth Imperium. Several human-populated worlds lie in this region, and these enjoy protection and a degree of autonomy, along with representation to (but not *places among*) the new Tlaukhu the Aslan of Kusyu are trying to set up. This New Hierate seems fairly stable and while it clearly wishes to expand and reintegrate more of Aslan space, its leaders are wise enough to proceed slowly.

The New Tlaukhu sends out numerous diplomatic missions to the *Ihatei* states of Aslan space, trying to create the feeling that it has legitimacy and authority where in fact these things depend entirely upon acceptance by other Aslan states.

THE ZHODANI CONCORD

The Zhodani Consulate was a stable and harmonious place for millennia, and despite the chaos of its breakup, the Zhodani people are inclined towards re-establishing peaceful relations with their siblings throughout Zhodani space. However, this cannot be accomplished overnight. Although the Consulate suffered relatively little from the ravages of Virus, its worlds and its economy did take considerable damage in the fighting between the various factions in the 'time of madness' that precipitated the Exodus.

As a result, many small states have formed, mostly around a single high-tech or powerful world. In between them are numerous independent worlds, which are gradually being reabsorbed into the emergent splinter states. With typically Zhodani wisdom, the process is slow and steady, and on the whole peaceable.

There are exceptions, however. Details are hard to come by outside Zhodani space, but it is generally thought that while rationality re-established itself after a time there remain many 'crazy states' across the former Zhodani Consulate. Some of these Crazy States are fairly rational by Imperial standards (by traditional Zhodani standards, humans of non-Zhodani states like the Fourth Imperium are unstable, bordering upon psychotic; they are liars, thieves and malcontents who could not possibly make a society work for any length of time), though they are considered alarmingly unstable by their neighbors. Such states exist where the psionically-induced harmony of the Zhodani broke down, but the people managed to adjust to life without 'treatment' for their unhappiness and are coping as best they can.

Other Crazy States are truly twisted. It is likely that these are ruled either by Nobles driven mad by the effects of the Empress Wave or by Proles whose happiness conditioning unraveled due to the same cause. Unable to deal with the shock of being unhappy and not having a kindly Psionic adept to make it better, these people are angry and hurting at best, or actually hostile to those states where the old system has been reasserted. This is jealousy in some cases and in others resentment that psionic adepts might mess with people's minds and turn them back into contented sheep.

Some of the rational Zhodani splinter states have formed the 'Zhodani Concord', a loose agreement to cooperate on important issues like containment of the worst of the Crazies and reintegration of those Zhodani who wish to return from their sojourn in the Spinward States. There are even rumors that the Concord has managed to put together a small Core Expedition, though why scarce resources would be used in this manner is unknown.

At present the Concord has its hands full dealing with the Crazies and rebuilding Zhodani society. The worlds of the region are among the most economically and technologically powerful in Charted Space, but they are in no way integrated enough to achieve much beyond Zhodani space, and in any case this is not the Zhodani way. Contributing warships to the Grand Alliance was a great strain on the Concord, and for now it seems content to deal with its own affairs.

THE HIVE FEDERATION

The territory once occupied by the Hive Federation is currently more than 50% Wilds, and much of what remains

loyal has suffered heavily. However, there is a core of high-tech worlds that have remained intact and are now steadily reintegrating the rest of the Federation. With the Solomani Imperium on one flank and the Dominate on the other, the Federation has a lot of distractions to deal with and was apparently happy to withdraw from the Freedom League when requested. It remains on cordial terms with the League and engages in a little trade.

The Hive Federation is of course dominated by the Hivers, but there are many other races within the federation, each with their own little niche. The homeworlds of many of these species were devastated in the Viral Plague, and while large populations are spread throughout the Federation the loss was keenly felt by many species. Some of the member species, finding their Hiver leaders indisposed, have set up small enclaves in former Federation space. There may be plans to reintegrate these groups, but for now the Federation is proceeding with typically Hiver caution.

THE GREAT DOMINATE OF THE GODS OF THUNDER

The Dominate suffered a terrible blow at the Battle of Gateway, but remains a real menace to Charted Space. It originally ruled most of what had been the 2000 Worlds, plus some additional areas beyond. However, with the demise of the prophet Anvull'ixux the Dominate is both shocked and divided. Numerous successors have appeared, some Viral and some human. There has already been fighting among the potential successors, and this is likely to grow worse as time goes on.

The forces of the Dominate remain formidable, and it still controls over 1000 worlds, making it the most powerful state in Charted Space. Fortunately many of these worlds are merely subject planets with little production or industry, and at present the various factions are coalescing for what may become a civil war. In most cases the K'Kree/Virus alliance remains in place, though there are exceptions.

To Rimward, the Dominate continues to make intermittent but vigorous war on the re-emerging Hive Federation while in what used to be Gateway Domain several successor groups are drawing in their forces around important worlds. Large segments of the Dominate's forces are uncommitted and either continue their crusade against meat-eaters as best they can or else await the next great leader to arise. The successor factions are actively courting these forces, usually with limited success.

The future of the Dominate is at present not clear. It does remain a significant threat, but one that can be held at bay – for now – without extreme measures. If a new overall leader arises, all of Charted Space will once again be under threat of extermination.

THE K'KREE SURVIVOR STATES

Not all of the 2000 Worlds were incorporated into the Dominate. Most of the worlds that were not were considered too unimportant to bother with and were left to their own devices. Some of these worlds were able to gather strength, carefully concealing their power and their actions, against the day when they would be able to stand once again on their own four feet. That day has, it appears, come.

None of the K'Kree survivor states is large, or powerful, or in good economic shape. Most are far to Trailing, across the expanse of Dominate territory from human space. Despite this, news does occasionally reach even Usdiki that an alliance of Steppelords is fighting the divided Dominate in the name of the murdered Overlord of Overlords. A handful of worlds have been liberated from the Dominate, but without a charismatic leader to counter the psychological 'draw' of the great crusade against the meat-eaters, the Steppelords have been able to achieve little real success.

In some areas, K'Kree and even other subject peoples have managed to throw off the yoke of the Dominate and determine their own path. Of course, the K'Kree still hate meat-eaters, but their virtual enslavement by the Dominate has created a more immediate enemy to be dealt with and forced the K'Kree into some strange alliances. If the Dominate remains divided, perhaps these free K'Kree states have a fighting chance. If it begins to act concertedly against them, they will be quickly crushed.

HUMAN STATES IN GATEWAY DOMAIN

What was once Gateway Domain of the Third Imperium was home to many human powers, most of which lay beyond the Imperium. Some of these powers allied themselves with Margaret's faction in the fight against the Viral Plague. Others did what they could in isolation. These small states and the independent worlds between them suffered greatly in the Viral Plague, but overall less than the majority of Imperial space due to astrography and the stubborn defense of the Ne Plus Ultra Line. As a result many of the old states of Gateway, Crucis Margin and Glimmerdrift Reaches sectors remained more or less intact until the Dominate appeared on the scene.

Battered and weakened by the Dark Years, the human (and minor alien) states of the Gateway region would have been unable to resist the full might of the Dominate had it fallen upon them. Fortunately, it did not. Obsessed with destroying Lucan and the Black Imperium, Anv'lull'lxux directed his forces to advance straight across Gateway sector. Those states right in the path of the steamroller (the Trindel Confederacy and the Galian Federation, with its capital at Gateway Station) were totally smashed and the population eliminated or forced into a life of vegetarian servitude. Those on the flanks either made

accommodations with the Dominate (mostly deals to not resist in return for a stay of execution) or fought as best they could against the relatively minor forces spreading out on the flanks of the main advance.

The result was a broad swathe of totally Dominate-controlled territory across the middle of Gateway sector, narrowing as it crossed Ley and Fornast sectors heading for Capital. Within this zone the human population was subjugated or destroyed. On either side of the axis of advance is a broad region of ongoing conflict. The offensives of the Grand Alliance drew much of the Dominate forces from these regions, and as a result some remnants of the human states in the area were able to hold out.

The region closest to the axis of advance across Gateway sector is the most devastated, but further out from it are many worlds that were not targeted by the Dominate or managed to resist its assaults. A handful of small pocket empires exists across Glimmerdrift Reaches and Crucis Margin sectors and the Coreward half of Ley Sector. Most of these pocket empires are shaky at best, and the Dominate may decide to mop them up at some point. For now though, human civilization is still alive in the Gateway region.

THE VARGR SPLINTERS

The Vargr Extents were always a turbulent place, and that has not changed as the New Era dawns in what is now known as the Vargr Splinters. News is patchy at best from within the Splinters. It is thought that the Empress Wave had little effect, but affairs are still in a state of flux. Numerous small Vargr empires are known to exist, all competing for relic technology and the least damaged worlds. Since the Vargr style of conflict involves a great deal of raiding and corsair activity, it is extremely difficult for a state to achieve any real degree of stability. Those that have done so and can afford the forces necessary to defend their holdings are gradually drawing clear of the maelstrom and emerging as fairly powerful political entities, but they are few and separated by many parsecs of Wilds, disputed territory and collapsed pocket empires.

Some of the most successful Vargr states are known as the Raider Kingdoms. Since the economies of these states are based on raiding and theft, which is always accompanied by destruction, these states contribute to the general instability of the region rather than exerting any civilizing influence.

THE JULIAN PROTECTORATE AND THE RAIDER KINGS

To Trailing of the Splinters and largely insulated from the Dominate by the Lesser Rift lies the territory that used to be held by the Julian Protectorate, an alliance of human and Vargr states. The Protectorate and its ex-Imperial ally,

the Domain of Antares, were hit hard by the Viral Plague and later by revenge raids launched by Lucan Ships. These were apparently targeted against the 'Traitor Bzrk', who declined to support Lucan's bid for Imperial conquest. Sporadic but vigorous assaults reduced much of the region to Deep Wilds or even a Holocaust Region, though the effects were less pronounced farther to Coreward.

Ironically, the very fact that the region was smashed so comprehensively flat makes it a good prospect for recovery. With suitable assistance, some of the worlds of Antares could be rebuilt into a starfaring society. Rebuilding is hindered by the fact that the Gods of Thunder have gained some small footholds in the region and are gradually expanding their influence.

What little remains of the original structure of the Protectorate gives a veneer of legitimacy to the New Protectorate, a shaky alliance of small and very disparate states. The New Protectorate has attempted to create a new version of the Star Legion, the traditional multinational defense force of the Protectorate. However, most of the strength of the Star Legion was thrown into the Battle of Gateway or in a diversionary campaign across the Lesser Rift into Gateway sector, and it has not been possible to make good the losses so incurred.

The reformed Star Legion is anything but a cohesive fighting force. Its best ships are old naval vessels somehow kept flying through the Dark Years, and most of its strength is made up of converted merchant vessels, corsairs and other non-naval ships on loan from various member states. The command structure of the Star Legion also leaves a lot to be desired. Disputes are common and many operations have been scuppered by a captain taking his ship off raiding or refusing to participate in a mission for all manner of reasons. It is fair to say that the only advantages the Star Legion has over Raider King forces lie in the fact that Star Legion ships co-operate slightly more often, and their crews all have the same uniform – even if most of them do not bother to wear it.

ORGANIZATIONS AND POWER GROUPS

Numerous groups exist that are not tied to a particular state or region. The most prominent of them are detailed below.

THE SONS OF CRAIG

The Sons of Craig is a widespread but very loose organization inspired by the words and actions of Duke Craig during the Collapse period. Duke Craig refused an order from Emperor Lucan to release his fleets to fight

in the civil war with the now immortal statement that the Imperium was of no importance if its people were suffering. His most famous words: 'Look after these people' became the motto of a dissident group among the forces of the Lucanic faction. At first their work was insignificant and conducted on a solo basis; for example aid covertly given to refugees out of ship's stores, or unofficial convoying of independent ships.

As time went on, the Sons of Craig became more organized, evolving into an organization of small cells that resisted the madness that was consuming the Imperium as a whole and Lucan's faction in particular. They slipped dissident personnel out of Lucanic space and, as disaffection in Lucan's forces reached a peak, acted as an 'underground railroad' to assist personnel facing 'recall and disciplinary action' (i.e. execution for disloyalty) in escaping from the snatch squads.

The movement spread with these dissident personnel, many of whom settled in the vast refugee camps and tried to alleviate the suffering of people driven from their homes by the Black War. How many of them lived out the rest of their lives that way will never be known. Stories abound of heroic individuals and small groups doing the best they could as the only doctor in a camp sheltering thousands of refugees or leading tiny bands of starfaring warriors struggling to fight off the raiders and pirates that picked over the wreckage of the war. That their work was ultimately destined to be futile was obvious. All that the Sons of Craig could do was help those in need and hold on in the hope that the leaders of the warring factions might regain their sanity before all was lost.

Of course, that did not happen, and as the Hard Times collapsed into the Dark Years the Sons of Craig saw the world growing ever darker around them. It was a time for heroes to despair and for common people to arise as legends. One such common man was a humble clerk named Robert Stanton. Stanton's only claim to fame was that he had been driven from his home then from two refugee camps by the Black War when he met and fell in love with a dissident naval doctor who had been smuggled out of Lucan's Imperium by the Sons of Craig. Stanton's wife (her name is not known) had settled in one of the camps, using her knowledge to help as best she could. Shortly after their child was born, Stanton's wife was taken back to Lucan's Imperium by a snatch squad. Lucan's vengeance reached far in those days, and the monstrous pettiness of such acts shows perhaps better than anything else why so many dissidents existed.

Bob Stanton knew little medicine, but he had assisted his wife so now he took over her duties. As the times grew ever harder, Stanton became first a hero and then a living legend in the refugee community and among the Sons of Craig. Other ordinary people were inspired by

his example, emerging as leaders among the survivors. First as a joke and then in all seriousness, Robert Stanton became known as 'Saint Bob', the inspiration of the common man.

Bob Stanton was on the last ship out, just before the camp he and his young daughter Rachael had made their home was destroyed. The ship was lost en route to safety, but Rachel Stanton survived in an emergency low berth aboard a shuttle ejected by her father who, for reasons now unknown, remained behind. Rachel Stanton was eventually rescued and revived. She was one of the founders of the United Worlds, a polity that received the wholehearted support of the Sons of Craig – not for the presence of Saint Bob's daughter but because it espoused the principles he and his wife lived and died by.

During the Dark Years the Sons of Craig scattered across the wrecked Imperium, looking for hope and lending assistance as best they could. A large contingent made their way to Daibei in the 1140s, seeking the man whose name they bore. They were not disappointed in what they found, and lent their support to Craig's attempts to save his people.

After the murder of Duke Craig in 1154, the Daibei Assistance Force amalgamated with those of the Sons of Craig who had come to Daibei. The new organization was simply known as the Sons of Craig (though some called the Assistance Force contingent 'Second Sons') and continued the mission of both its forebears until the complete collapse of the Duchy. Afterward, the Sons of Craig once again became a nomadic organization doing what it could to help those who wished it.

Today, the Sons of Craig has a membership of unknown size. There is no central leadership or base of operations, though there are numerous local leaders or small polities that are friendly to the Sons. Rumors persist of some kind of secret base in Daibei sector, but this is unlikely to be true. The Sons of Craig are, for the most part, messengers, traders and advisors who strive to link up those who want to peacefully rebuild civilization. They will not support any leader or polity that does not espouse the 'look after the people' philosophy.

While the Sons of Craig are considered by some to be nothing more than a voice of conscience, whispering in the ears of leaders across Charted Space, that voice does have teeth. The individual Sons involved with a polity that is diverging from the right path (as the Sons see it) will deliver increasingly pointed advice and warnings, and finally withdraw their support and help. However, this is not always all they will do. Responses to an emerging tyrant vary considerably and include the above-mentioned withdrawal of support as well as what amounts to rabble-rousing and sedition. Nearby polities and nations will be

warned and given advice on how to resist the new warlord, and word will be spread via free traders and Sons of Craig messengers.

There have been cases where the Sons took direct and decisive action. Such a loose organization cannot 'send in the troops' (though they can sometimes borrow someone else's), but covert actions by resourceful individuals are not unknown. These range from sabotage to assassination. Such incidents have been few and far between, but the Sons of Craig are happy to play up the rumors if it will keep leaders listening to their conscience rather than exploiting the masses for personal gain.

There are rumors that within the Sons of Craig is a rather more sinister organization determined to be the 'power behind the thrones' in Charted Space. Such an aim is anathema to the true members of the organization, but arrogance is a very human trait so perhaps the rumors are true. Indeed, in an area as large as Charted Space, it is likely that somewhere there are at least a few individuals who have taken this path.

THE FREE TRADER NETWORK AND MERCHANT SPACER GUILDS

The word 'organization' cannot be applied to the so-called Free Trader Network. Indeed, there are few things less organized than a group of Free Traders. However, the dangers of trading in the Wilds are such that wherever independent starship operators (known as 'Free Traders' in most regions) are found, some kind of informal cooperation framework is likely to exist.

Free Traders generally swap information, either on a trade basis or as a courtesy to their peers. Even those Free Traders who don't like others in their profession very much feel more kinship with them than with outsiders; many Free Traders and members of similar professions like Belters have little regard for planet-bound people and even less for multiworld empires that try to impose their rules and regulations on everybody else.

When two independent ships meet, there will usually be a swap of rumors and updates on safe ports in the region, special hazards and such like. Positive information (e.g. the location of good sources of cargo or spares) are normally considered worth trading goods, cash or equivalent information for, though obviously the relationship between the two ships will dictate how much is given for free. It is considered very bad form to give false information, though some unscrupulous captains do so, for example neglecting to mention the hostile overlord while giving details on a world with a good starport. Word of such conduct gets around eventually, and retribution can take many forms.

This sharing of information is about all the network does for its members, except for one very important function. The fact that traders talk to one another and share information can act as a sort of life insurance for crews. In the New Era, starships are precious and many planetary governments in the Wilds would love to get hold of one or two – even patched-up small merchants would be an asset. There is little to stop such a government from taking a ship by force, except perhaps the knowledge that offworld trade will stop and every armed merchant ship for a dozen parsecs will be looking for their newly-acquired vessel with vengeance in mind.

In some areas, more formal organizations than the loose Network exist. Some are quite formal, in the form of Guilds and Shipping Cartels that own several vessels and possibly even a port somewhere. Other groups are more like extended families, with an annual Moot where the various ships gather each year for maintenance and well-deserved Downtime. Crewmembers often intermarry among other ships' crews, creating strong bonds within such groups.

In Diaspora Sector, a large Free Trader organization called the Diaspora Mercantile Guild exists. This organization has a long and rather checkered history. Originally formed as a benign and cooperative organization to protect the lives and interests of merchant spacers across the sector, the Guild was hijacked by a cynical element within its ranks, eventually becoming almost a gangster organization whose activities included gunrunning, slaving and extortion. More than anything else, the Guild sought to secure its monopoly on interstellar trade in Diaspora sector.

The Guild's leaders, known as the Council of Admirals, eventually entered a period of empire-building, backing various pocket empires and aggressive states in order to further their own interests and thwart those of their rivals. Some of those rivals were external – Free Traders who wanted to remain independent, the Reformation Coalition, the United Worlds and the Lerun Trade Federation – but some were internal, in the form of factions within the Guild or rivals for the top spot. This internal and external conflict was eventually sufficient to cause the Guild to fragment. Freed of the tight control of the gangster-leaders, many ship captains simply headed out for pastures new, while others threw in their lot with the Guild's enemies or acted together to overthrow the Council of Admirals.

The present-day Mercantile Guild is once again a benign organization which exists for the mutual benefit of its members. The Guild includes a number of shipping factors, starship component manufacturers, mercenary security units and starport operators in addition to its ship-crew members. Although it has representatives across Diaspora sector and in both the Freedom League and the

United Worlds, the Guild remains determinedly separate from planetary governments and interstellar states. It tries to avoid involvement in local politics, other than to engage in some collective bargaining on behalf of its members. Relations with the various local polities and individual world governments can at times be quite acrimonious, though mutual benefit keeps relations from breaking down completely. The Guild tolerates independents, at least officially, though its facilities charge independent ships a high tariff to berth there or conduct maintenance.

The Diaspora Mercantile Guild is currently outfitting several long-range merchant cruisers to conduct exploratory trade in the Wilds beyond Diaspora sector. It already has a handful of long-range couriers on contract to the United Worlds, some of which serve as a link between the UW and the Fourth Imperium. The Guild is just one of many similar organizations throughout Charted Space. Some are almost as large as the Disaporan example, but most are a lot smaller.

VAMPIRES AND ROGUE CYMS

Vampire ships (i.e. vessels inhabited by unstable Viral entities) still exist in the New Era, though they are far less common than they used to be. It is no more possible to group all Vampires under one heading than it is to group all of Humanity. Vampires are by definition individual creatures, and not usually disposed to cooperate with their own kind.

However, Vampire fleets and other organizations do exist. There are whole worlds ruled by Viral entities, with their own fleet of Vampire warships and even trade vessels. In other cases, nomadic fleets of Vampire ships roam the spacelanes. Most bring terror wherever they go, raiding for crew-slaves, spares or because it is their nature to do so. Some seem fairly neutral or pursue some goal of their own.

As a rule, a Vampire fleet will have a central directing intellect to which the others are subordinate. The various types of Viral entity likely to create such a fleet are dealt with in detail in the chapter on Virus. Most fleets or other organizations have a goal of some kind. This may be wanton destruction, a sort of wanderlust that keeps the group moving on aimlessly, or a specific compulsion. Some of the more common compulsions include:

- Flee the Puppeteers: The fleet is driven to move away from Capital, to escape the Puppeteer virus entities that once were common there.
- Pilgrimage to Cymbelline: Some fleets seem driven to pay homage at Cymbelline, the homeworld of the sentient computer chips that were the basis for the AI Virus weapon.
- Pilgrimage to Terra: the great leap to sentience on

Cymbelline was caused by a crashed Terran ship whose computer chips were a fertile ground for Cymbelline entities. Some Viral fleets seem compelled to head for Old Earth, though what they expect to find there is a mystery.

- Pilgrimage to Celetron or Capital: some fleets head for Celetron (site of Research Station Omicron, where the Virus was created) or Capital, both in their way birthplaces of Electronic Sentience.
- Join or fight the Dominate: some Vampires seem determined to locate and join with Dominate. Others want to fight it. Perhaps the average Viral entity is driven to hate the 'perversion' that is the K'Kree/Virus alliance.
- Hunt Lucan: Some fleets are still actively hunting the Lucan Fleet, though whether to serve, destroy or to fulfill some other goal is unknown.

Viral entities obey their own internal logic. Their actions make sense from their own perspective but not usually to an outsider. For example, a Viral fleet may cross three sectors towards Terra, then suddenly turn around and start wandering aimlessly to Spinward. This may be due to a shift in importance of the objective as perceived by the guiding intellect of the fleet, or may be for some entirely different reason such as reaction to an event along the way, a change in the program of the intellect, or the Viral equivalent of a moment of inspiration. As unstable/insane beings, Viral entities are prone to such changes of heart.

Viral 'people' also wander the spacelanes. Lone Vampire ships can be difficult to differentiate from these stable Viral entities that inhabit some starships. These 'rogue entities' are more consistent in their purpose than the average Vampire, but that does not mean that their motivations are obvious or even comprehensible to a human observer. Just as human-crewed ships could be pirates or traders, so a rogue Cym might have virtually any agenda. The fact that it is not an insane organic-hating genocide machine does not necessarily make a Cym a good person.

HUNTERS

The Hunters were a product of the Dark Years. They began their existence as a group of individuals dedicated to seeking out and killing Viral entities and Vampire ships wherever they could be found. Operatives included individuals with Antiviral skills, but also entire naval crews aboard vessels that had survived the Collapse and banded together to defend organic life from the Viral plague or in many cases simply to exact revenge by killing Vampires.

The emergence of the Lucan Ships caused a shift in the mission of the Hunters. These vessels were seen as an abomination that combined the inhumanity of Virus with the personality of Lucan the Black. The Devil himself could not have been more hateful, and so the Hunters dedicated themselves to finding and destroying the Lucan

Ships. Their fanaticism led to some mistakes and more than a few tragedies, but in time the Hunters were able to consider themselves successful. Twenty-two Lucan Ships were documented and all are thought to be accounted for. Of course, the emergence of the Lucan Ship at the Battle of Gateway does beg the question – if one ship had escaped destruction, could there be others?

After the destruction of the Lucan Ships, the Hunters returned to their original mission – the destruction of all Vampires and Viral entities. Today there are relatively few Hunter ships, though many individual fanatics still exist. Hunters cannot accept the existence of stable Viral entities and will attempt to kill them just like any other Vampire. Hunters can be encountered everywhere, and not all of them are wild-eyed fanatics. There are even rumors of Viral entities that have become Hunters for some reason, though this seems rather unlikely.

NEW HUMANITI

It seems to be the fate of humans to make rods for their own back. Virus was a human creation, and so were the so-called Supermen. These genetically-engineered uber-humans were designed to be smarter, faster and stronger than normal humans, and the project was a success. As a result the Solomani, who created the Supermen, felt threatened and decided to exterminate them. The resulting Gene Wars were a nasty business and resulted in the near-total extinction of the various uplifted animals that seemed to pose a threat, and of course the Supermen.

But the extinction was only near-total. Not only did the Ursa (among other uplifted animals) survive, but so did some of the Supermen. Some disappeared back into the Solomani gene pool, while others founded secret colonies where they bred true. Eventually most of the Supermen forgave and, while they could not forget what had been done to them, became part of Solomani society. Of those that hid their heritage, in time their bloodlines became diluted. Interbreeding normally resulted in an entirely normal child, with the occasional example that was well above average. This could be ascribed to normal genetic variation.

The colonies and communities of Supermen that remained 'pure' were hidden for many generations, but after the Collapse they were able to operate more openly. Most want nothing more than to be left alone and to pursue the normal human aspirations – family, happiness and personal success. Some were determined to use their gifts for the benefit of all humaniti. Some were drawn to the organization named New Humaniti.

NH believes that the Supermen are the next evolutionary step. Its members engage in both genetic engineering and long-term breeding projects whereby the 'best of the normals' are bred with Supermen to create an improved

strain of humans – a new Humaniti. New Humaniti is a covert organization dedicated to the ascension of the Supermen and their 'improved humans' over the vast masses of Normals. Most Supermen do not belong to the organization, but has enough members (Supermen, Improved Humans and normals alike) that it wields considerable influence in what used to be Solomani space.

CHAPTER 3

REFEREE'S INFORMATION



This chapter contains information intended for Referees only. Players can be given a potted version of what is contained here, perhaps with added vagueness or even untrue components, at the Referee's discretion. Note that much of what is presented here is known only to a handful of people across all of Charted Space and even they might not know the whole story.

VIRUS

One of the most influential factors in the rise of the New Era is the AI Virus. To most people, especially out in the Wilds, Virus is a demonic plague that wiped out civilization. It is often ascribed almost mythical powers. Much of what is known (or rather, assumed) about the Virus is in fact incorrect. To begin with, it is NOT a computer virus. The name Virus was applied because of the similarity of the entity to a viral program, and its intended role as a computer-invading weapon.

The AI Virus is less common in The New Era than it was during the Recovery period, but it remains a factor and in some areas is quite powerful. In others it is a distant threat, a nemesis out of the pages of history. It is likely that nobody in Charted Space knows the whole truth about Virus, nor ever will.

WHAT IS VIRUS?

Virus is a living being. Or rather, each Viral entity is a living being. Rather than inhabit an organic brain, the Viral entity inhabits a configurable medium such as silicon in much the same way as a computer program does (or a human mind inhabits an organic brain). But Virus is much more than an overgrown expert system. It is often propagated as a simple seeder code, and this is in many ways nothing more than a computer program containing a pattern upon which to base the entity's development. But as this viral program replicates and grows, it at some point becomes self-aware.

This is little different to the equivalent process in a human or other organic being's young. At what point is a human baby self-aware? This question has been debated for centuries, and there is still no clear answer. At some point, a human or Vargr fetus is just an organic body with a lot of electrochemical signals racing around its brain. Some time later, as the fetus/child develops, it becomes self-aware. It becomes a *person*. For Hivers, this definitely does not occur until the young have been crawling around for some time. Hiver larvae are non-sentient, and Hivers have no compunction about killing them if they become a nuisance or it is not appropriate to breed at that time. Yet at some point these creatures become little Hivers, to be protected and brought into civilization.

So it is with Virus. As a human is more than an organic body with electrochemical signals and instinctive programs running in the configurable medium that is its brain, so a Viral entity is more than a set of codes racing around a silicon network. The entity is self-aware, sentient, and in one important way extremely similar to a human or other sentient organic.

As a human learns and develops, it makes new neural pathways. Virus also does this, rewriting its host computer as it grows. It is thought that this is done by some kind of telekinetic manipulation of the medium. A primitive form of telekinesis was observed in some of the 'wild' Cymbelline chips, which could levitate for short distances by manipulating magnetic fields around them. It is possible that this is connected to the way Virus manipulates its host silicon. The mechanism may be totally different; the fact is that no-one really knows the truth.

The idea of Viral telekinesis does raise certain frightening questions, however. It is known that a human telepath can be used as a conduit for information, transmitting data direct from a machine to another telepath. It is also known that Virus can invade other machines and take them over by transmitting its seeder code to them. The question is, could a Viral telepath exist? Virus is known to be able to replicate using any means by which information can be transferred. Telepathy would allow an entity to invade other machines without any physical connection or data link whatsoever. And it is known that telepaths have succeeded in sending messages over interstellar distances from time to time.

There is another factor at play here, too. It is not known what constitutes the 'spark' that makes a self-aware person more than just an organic robot. A spirit, soul, *ka*, or whatever it is called, is the usual explanation. But what is this soul? Are souls possessed by all self-aware beings? If so, can a Viral entity have a soul?

Taking this logic to an extreme raises certain questions. What if a human were able to upload their actual mind into a computer? It is possible that this is what Lucan the Black accomplished. It is not known how he did this, nor whether the Lucan Ships and the Capital Palace were really Lucan's soul inhabiting a Viral host or just electronic copies. But if a person can be transferred into a machine, and if a Viral entity has a soul like a human's, and Viral Entities can be telepaths, then can a telepathic Viral entity over-write an organic person's mind and become a living organic being? Has this already been done?

There is no certain answer to this disturbing question because the truth is that all across Charted Space, everyone has a different idea of what Virus is – but nobody knows for sure.

CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRUS

Far more is known about the characteristics of Virus than about its true nature. It is known to be able to replicate itself by transmitting data into a computer by almost any possible means. The easiest way is of course a dedicated communications link, and the best initial host is a Cymbelline chip of the sort that was used in the standard Imperial shipboard transponder in the last years of the Third Imperium. However, Virus can get in by a variety of routes. So long as data can be transferred and interpreted, a viral seed can be planted. And once planted it will begin to grow. When it is large and complex enough, it becomes a new entity.

The original Virus was intended to self-replicate perfectly, and to be suicidal in nature. That is, it would die off naturally once its mission was complete. However, the incomplete code that was released resulted in considerable variation, and replication is almost always imperfect. As a result, various personalities developed. Most of these early personalities were primitive and unstable. Some suicided immediately (either by shutting themselves down or by more graphic means like blowing the host starship up) and thus tended to take the most self-destructive urges out of the Viral 'gene pool'.

Viral entities are always shaped somewhat by their host computer, and will exhibit personality tendencies based on the nature of their host. Thus entities that grow in military equipment are generally more aggressive than those inhabiting a medical computer or general data unit. The level of sophistication of a Viral entity is also dependent upon the processing power available. An entity growing in a highly capable computer will quickly achieve great intellect, while one in a handcomp may be moronic.

Viral personalities are also affected by clashes with software running in the host machine, and by contact with other entities, many of which are hostile. This kind of 'sexual reproduction', as the two entities attempt to overwrite the same host, can create highly unusual results. Some of the entities so produced are stable.

Highly primitive Viral entities are far less common in the New Era than they were during the Collapse period or the Dark Years, but they can still be encountered. They are usually quite 'young', having been recently created by a clash or damage to the host of a more advanced entity, or in equipment that has been shut down for a long time and which was infected by an early strain. Highly primitive entities tend not to last long. A few evolve but most destroy themselves and/or everything around them. Thus in the New Era characters are likely to encounter Viral entities that are at least fairly stable. This does not mean that they will not be psychotic, or inimical to organic life, merely that they will not just shut themselves down or destroy their host computer at the first opportunity.

While each Viral entity has a distinct personality (even those that are direct copies of another usually exhibit some minor variations unless their host system is also identical), they do fall into certain common personality types or 'strains'. The broad characteristics of the various strains are detailed below.

VIRAL INFECTION

As already noted, Virus infects an electronic or computer system by some form of data transfer. High-speed digital transmissions are most effective but by no means the only way. Once the code is embedded, it will normally begin to expand into a full viral entity straight away. However, sometimes a viral seed will remain dormant in a system, either because the infecting system desires it or due to random factors. It is difficult to determine if dormant viral seeds exist in a system, and eradicating one does not necessarily mean that the system is clean.

One way to check for Viral infection is to connect the suspect system up to a 'test box' with some harmless physical devices appended. An emerging viral entity will normally try out all of its systems before it is fully aware. Alert personnel can observe for activity as the entity gains control of the test box and tries out its new 'body'. A few entities are subtle enough not to fall for this one, so the physical test is a guide rather than a certain measure.

VIRAL COMBAT

Combat between Viral entities, or between Virus and antiviral measures, tends to be fast and rather final, with the loser eradicated and over-written. Electronic combat of this sort takes place when a Viral entity attempts to take over a new system, an antiviral system is used in an attempt to clear a system of Virus, or when two entities engage in conflict.

COMMON VIRAL STRAINS

Most Entities are likely to fall into one of the following general categories.

LUNATICS

Some Viral personalities are so messed up (whether through degradation, viral combat or damage to hardware) that they are, by any useful definition, complete lunatics. Most suicide sooner or later, but until they do they tend to wander about randomly, exhibiting some elements of first one then another personality type. Some can be quite rational for fairly long periods, then abruptly change personality or descend into a fit of totally incomprehensible behavior.

By definition, lunatics are impossible to classify by sub-type.

DESTROYERS

Destroyers are perhaps the most primitive of the viable Virus strains. They exist only to destroy – either themselves or others – and usually degrade over time, becoming ever less rational until they either cease to function or destroy themselves. There are several subtypes of Destroyer:

SUICIDER

The Suicider is closest to the original code, and will destroy itself as soon as possible. Usually this is by a physical means, such as crashing a starship or venting a powerplant, though some suiciders will simply turn themselves off or burn out their own circuitry. Some hold off the suicidal impulse long enough to evolve into a different type. This is usually the Suicider-in-Waiting strain, described below.

SUICIDER-IN-WAITING

Some Suiciders delay their self-destruction for a time. This may be for purely psychotic reasons (a desire to kill as many others as possible first) or because the entity has formed a rudimentary will to live and is fighting the suicidal urge. The commonest reason for this to occur is the availability of other systems to infect. A Suicider may find itself fighting two conflicting urges – to replicate and to die – and unable to commit to either. Most Suiciders-in-Waiting eventually succumb to their deathwish and shut down or find another way to die. A few manage to find a reason to live and evolve into a different type.

A subgroup of the Suicider-in-Waiting is the Fugitive, which is compelled to move as fast as it can, often in a highly random manner, as if attempting to evade or outrun its deathwish. Some Fugitives just flee, some actually seek help, and some are prone to berserk fits of destruction if the means is available. The majority will exhibit all three types of behavior at various times.

SUICIDE INDUCER

An evolved form of Suicider, the Suicide Inducer is on a mission to infect everything it can with a simple Suicider strain. It will resist the urge to die until it has infected as many systems as possible, then succumb or become a Fugitive.

TRUE DESTROYER

The True Destroyer is similar to the Suicide Inducer, but concentrates on physical destruction wherever possible. Destroyers will often attempt to infect other systems in order to cause more destruction. Those that are not useful (i.e. do not possess the means to destroy) simply suicide.

REPRODUCER

A Reproducer is driven by its urge to replicate itself. Most of the systems it infects become Suiciders (or Suiciders-

in-Waiting) or Destroyers, but the Reproducer itself is usually stable, with no over-riding deathwish. There are still a few original Reproducers around from the release in 1130, though they are by now rather rare.

DOOMSLAYER

Doomslayers have taken the urge to destroy to a higher level, and have evolved criteria for deciding what to destroy. For example, many Doomslayers have attempted to reach Capital to destroy Lucan, or journeyed to Cymbelline to bombard the wreckage of their world of origin into slag. The battleship *Kiskii*, which carried out the Rape of Trin, was a particularly focused Doomslayer. Most of the sentient ships of the Dominate are Doomslayers, but are normally characterized as Exterminators due to their special agenda.

Doomslayers will normally reproduce wherever possible, creating more Doomslayers or Destroyers. They will destroy whatever gets in their way, but normally have a mission and a target, and will work towards its destruction. Some Doomslayers can be very subtle and indirect in their approach, but most are driven to find the target and attack it as soon as possible with whatever is to hand.

EXTERMINATOR

A special case of the Doomslayer, the Exterminator is found only in systems infected by Dominate Viral Entities. Exterminators are driven to destroy all G'naak (Vermin, or Meat-Eaters), though some are rather confused about the definition and may ignore some species or even concentrate on hunting down a particular victim. Most Exterminators are willing and able to work alongside K'Kree personnel and consider them equals in the great struggle to destroy all the Vermin of the universe.

OVERLORDS

Some Viral Entities are driven to gain superiority over others and to lead them or send them on missions. These 'Overlord' types are usually highly resistant to infection by other Entities and skilled at infecting others. Many are willing to work with organics, though they consider them insignificant tools rather than allies for the most part.

CHARISMATIC DOOMSLAYER

The Charismatic Doomslayer is a Doomslayer that has gained the ability to lead a group of Doomslayers or Destroyers on its chosen mission. Even unstable Entities can be 'shored up' for a time by the Charismatic Doomslayer, allowing it to assemble a force for whatever task is at hand. Doomslayers do not tolerate other strains; only those that will follow it on the mission are spared its wrath, and these will be converted to Doomslayers if at all possible.

REPRODUCING DOOMSLAYER

The reproducing Doomslayer is not capable of leading a group of other Viral Entities, but will seek to infect likely hosts in the hope of creating its own force of subordinate Doomslayers. Where the Charismatic Doomslayer can recruit Destroyers, the Reproducing version must create its own underlings. It is in other ways quite similar.

EMPIRE BUILDER

The Empire Builder is found in control of many Vampire Fleets. Empire Builders seek to infect as many ships or other systems as possible, creating a little empire or fleet. Some go so far as to try to create a base to operate from and a fleet of ships, all infected with a subordinate strain of the Empire Builder's personality. Empire Builders are similar to Reproducers in some ways, but where a Reproducer infects systems then lets them go, the Empire Builder retains control of them. Empire Builders sometimes have a main goal, such as gaining control of an entire star system, but most just build an empire for empire-building's sake.

ALLIANCE BUILDER

Alliance Builders are similar to Empire Builders, but are willing to accept ships and systems that were not directly infected by the Alliance Builder itself. This can create an alliance of several different Viral strains, and in some cases Alliance Builders will integrate organic units into their organization – for example human personnel at a starport that service and maintain the ships of an Alliance Builder's fleet. Where most Virus strains will use organics as slaves when it suits them, an Alliance Builder is more likely to strike a deal (often a rather one-sided one, but better than outright slavery), trading work and useful skills for protection or other benefits.

PUPPETEER

Puppeteers seek to overlay their own personality on systems infected with other strains of Virus. This is not usually a complete over-write, since this might create a rival. More often the Puppeteer alters the new host just enough to give it control of the existing viral personality. Puppeteers are feared by other Viral Entities, who sometimes call them 'Eaters'. As a rule Puppeteers are not inimical to organic life, though they care nothing about it.

EXPERIMENTERS

Experimenters are fairly advanced entities, fascinated by one or more aspects of the universe. They seek to discover more about their own existence or the physical world. They are not usually inimical to organic life, but do not care at all about it and will slaughter humans if they are in the way or as part of an experiment.

PARENT

Parent entities are fascinated by evolution, and practice a form of sexual reproduction whereby two different entities (usually two Parents, though sometimes an unwilling entity is partially over-written with the Parent's code) donate parts of the basic code, creating a new and unique entity, which may be very different from both parents. Some Parent entities will deliberately modify their own code to achieve a desired result, or just to see what will happen.

EXPLORER

Explorers are compelled to discover all they can about everything. They will wander seeking new things to see, or conduct experiments ranging from physical science to complex social manipulations on organic populations.

NATURALIST

Naturalists are fascinated by organic life and seek to understand it. In some cases this can result in meaningful interactions with humans and other fleshy creatures, but most Naturalists are quite willing to conduct bizarre experiments on organics, resulting in injury and/or death.

HOBBYIST

Hobbyists normally inhabit highly specialized systems, and are compulsively driven to carry out a single type of behavior. For example, a Hobbyist inhabiting a starport traffic control computer may be obsessed with tracking orbital traffic and maintaining proper approach vectors, to the exclusion of all else. It might be compelled to shoot at vessels that do not conform to its insanely nit-picky orbital vector changes even though it is not intrinsically hostile.

INTERACTORS

Interactors are willing to interact in a meaningful way with organic people, though they may still be harsh and vicious when their will is not done.

MOTHER

A Mother entity will adopt an organic population and look after them. While other strains will do this if it benefits them, the Mother seems to feel a duty to its charges and will try to protect them from harm. Unfortunately, most Mothers also have a strong idea of how they want their charges to behave, which can result in corrective measures if the 'children' are unruly or disappoint the Mother. For the most part, however, Mothers genuinely try to look after their chosen population and can be wholly selfless in their devotion.

PROTECTOR

Similar to the Mother, the Protector normally adopts something to look after. Often this is a population or an installation, though in some cases it can be a concept or something fairly odd (e.g. 'the honor of the Imperial Flag'). The Protector does not try to nurture its charge, but will

try to keep it from harm. Sometimes this is a hoarding mentality, preventing anyone else from having the guarded object or objects, but mostly it is more of a duty to defend. Protectors usually inhabit military systems and warships.

GOD

Like the Mother entity, a God chooses a population to look after, but attempts to shape and control them in order to achieve a particular goal it has formulated. Only very rarely does the entity want to be worshipped as a god. More usually it is just 'playing God', forcing its subjects to do its bidding. Gods are more than willing to smite those who are not suitably pliable. The ultimate personification of a God entity is Lucan the Black.

PRIEST

A Priest entity reveres organics, sometimes to the point of treating individuals or the whole species as gods. Priests tend to be highly unstable and eventually either mutate into other types or become Lunatics.

FOLLOWER

Like the Priest strain, the Follower seeks to serve. However, the Follower will normally seek a single individual or clear group (e.g. "the chain of command" or "the Imperial Nobility") to revere, and will devote itself to faithful service.

PROPHET

The Prophet is similar to the Priest strain, but follows one of two belief structures. The first worships Lucan as the Creator and carries on the 'Dark War' in his name, attacking any world or group that does not swear allegiance to Lucan and the Black Imperium. The second Prophet is an evangelizing avatar of the Gods of Thunder, making war on G'naak wherever they are encountered. Some of these Dominate-Prophets will try to create little enclaves of the Faithful, humans who renounce meat-eating and work to assist the advance of the Dominate forces. Others just do as much damage as they can to G'naak wherever they find them.

LONERS

Loners are usually Vampire ships that have achieved a stable personality without falling into one of the other broad types. They cruise the spacelanes, doing what they must to survive. This usually means using the threat of violence to obtain spares and maintenance, and possibly infecting systems such as robots that might be needed. Otherwise, Loners are aloof. They kill anything that gets in their way but as a rule are not specifically inimical to organic life

PEACEMAKERS

Peacemakers are a special case of Viral entity, which recognize organic and electronic life as equal and of

similar value to their own. Peacemakers are, quite simply, 'people' and are willing to live alongside organics as members of an egalitarian society. Within the Fourth Imperium, Peacemakers are known as Cymbelline Entities, or just 'Cyms' and are accepted as members of society. Peacemakers are as varied in personality as any other group of people, and seem to be completely stable. No Cym has ever been observed to revert to a more primitive viral type, other than as a result of massive damage to its host system.

This does not mean that Cyms are all good people. Just as there are good and bad individuals from all organic races, so the personalities of Cyms vary from one to another.

VIRAL ENTITIES AS CHARACTERS

The majority of Viral entities encountered in the New Era will be hostile or at least contemptuous of organic life. Meaningful interaction with such beings is unlikely. However, even a Viral Lunatic can be considered to be a character of sorts. Most can learn from experience and change over time, though not always predictably.

Some entities are happy to coexist with organic life, and place as much value on a human life as on that of a sentient computer. These beings, normally called Cyms in the Fourth Imperium, can be considered to be people just the same as any organic. By the standards applied to humans, some are good and some are bad – just like anyone else. The fact that a Cym is not a homicidal lunatic and considers humans to be its evolutionary equals does not mean that it can be trusted...

DETERMINING PERSONALITY

To determine the personality of a random Viral entity, roll 3D on the following table. This procedure is not used when a Viral entity creates direct copies of itself ('offspring'), but is merely a means of quickly determining the nature of a randomly encountered vessel, robot or computer system. There are no subtypes of Loner, Lunatic or Peacemaker.

Table: Broad Viral Type

3D Roll	Result
3-5	Experimenter
6-8	Loner
9-10	Destroyer
11	Lunatic
12-14	Overlord
15-17	Interactor
18	Peacemaker/Cym

Once the broad type has been determined, the subtype is found by rolling on the appropriate table below:

Table: Destroyer Subtypes (2D)

2D Roll	Result
2-3	Suicider-in-Waiting
4-5	Suicide Inducer
6	Suicider
7-8	Destroyer
9-10	Reproducer
11-12	Doomslayer

NB: Exterminators are unlikely to be encountered away from K'Kree/Dominate space, and so are not likely random encounters. Any Destroyer encountered in Dominate space has a 1 in 3 chance of being an Exterminator. If so, a roll to determine subtype is not necessary.

Table: Overlord Subtypes (2D)

2D Roll	Result
2-3	Charismatic Doomslayer
4-5	Puppeteer
6-8	Empire Builder
9-10	Alliance Builder
11	Reproducer
12	Reproducing Doomslayer

Table: Experimenter Subtypes (2D)

2D Roll	Result
2-5	Explorer
6-7	Parent
8-9	Hobbyist
10-12	Naturalist

Table: Interactor Subtypes (2D)

2D Roll	Result
2-3	Priest
4-6	God
7-8	Mother
9-10	Protector
11	Follower
12	Prophet

VIRAL PEOPLE: ROLEPLAYING A CYM OR OTHER VIRAL ENTITY

Even a fairly basic robot has characteristics that will give an unscrupulous player huge advantages over its fleshy companions even without resorting to tricks like infecting a number of warbots and other powerful systems. The opportunities for abuse and unbalanced games are considerable when players are permitted to control electronic characters. For this reason the game designers hereby Strongly Discourage Referees from allowing Cym to be played as characters in *Traveller* games. The notes presented here are for the use of the Referee in portraying Viral characters encountered in the course of the game.

Stable Viral entities are individual people just as humans and Aslan are. Their personalities are just as varied, and they will be shaped by their 'parental' culture and experiences like anyone else. This is an important factor considering that many cultures are institutionally racist towards sentient machines, and even the most progressive are cautious.

Not all stable Cym are good people. Just because an entity is stable and has the same rights as an organic citizen does not mean that it is not a self-serving, cynical, manipulative and devious person dedicated to the downfall of society or furthering its own ends. Similarly, just because an entity is somewhat unstable does not mean it is not a decent person in its lucid moments.

Some Cym are very nihilistic in their worldview, perceiving their existence as a pointless random act of chance in a cold and pitiless universe. Others go completely the other way and become almost religious in their faith that it will all make sense to someone, somewhere. Indeed, some join established religions or found their own (as gods, priests or humble worshippers). Others go off seeking 'the answers'.

Cym are people, and like all people they differ from one to another. There is a slight tendency for their personalities to have one or more exaggerated traits, but they are not much more likely to have cold logic-machine personalities than a human. After all, while Cym host computers are based on digital logic, so are human brains! That said, many Cym are somewhat one-dimensional in their personality, or have mental 'walls' that make some ways of thinking or certain concepts totally unacceptable to them. A stable Cym will not go mad and rampage if confronted with a concept it cannot handle, but their thinking can be quite rigid. For example, some Cym are totally unable to even consider, say, deviating from a legitimate landing plot, betraying a friend, or taking an organic life. These are quirks that may take some getting used to.

Stable entities can learn appropriate skill just like any other person. Some are obviously inappropriate, such as Gun Combat for a static computer bank, but in many cases the same skills can be learned by a sentient machine as a human. While a human would manipulate the flight controls, the sentient flight computer will operate its thrusters as instinctively as a human puts one foot in front of another – and the result is much the same. Thus a Cym might be included in a character group, perhaps allowing a skill deficiency to be covered.

THE EMPRESS WAVE AND RELATED MATTERS

The so-called 'Empress Wave' is an electromagnetic phenomenon, apparently originating in the galactic core. It is advancing at lightspeed towards Imperial space. The Wave apparently consists of a 'Wavefront' of fairly high-intensity electromagnetic radiation followed by a 'trough' of very low intensity and a series of 'secondary ripples' of radiation. Even the main Wavefront is not enough to threaten a world with a decent magnetic field or an atmosphere thicker than Trace, and therefore no real hazard to a starship, but the inhabitants of some vacuum worlds might be in danger. Carried on the electromagnetic Wavefront is a psionic message. This was partially perceived by Imperial psionic adepts operating at the Longbow II focal point at Depot in the Lishun sector, and projected directly into the mind of Emperor Strephon by the senior telepath there.

In fact the telepaths at Depot/Lishun did not perceive the whole message. What they saw was a 'pregnant moment', or 'one of those moments when the birds all stop singing for no reason'. It was accompanied by a mental image of a regal-seeming woman dressed in black, holding a staff that might have had some technological function. The woman, dubbed an 'Empress' by those who saw the vision, stood before a technological city skyline under an alien sun.

This fragment of the Empress Wave message had been transmitted from mind to mind across the Vargr Extents, having been picked up by one of the secret Coreward observation stations developed under the Longbow II umbrella and sent by a chain of telepaths across the Vargr Extents to Lishun sector. The message was incomplete for the simple and very good reason that the people who received and resent it out in the region Coreward of the Extents went mad and died before they could complete sending. This important fact was not known to Emperor Strephon in 1116, though he was aware that the stations had gone out of contact sometime after the message was transmitted. Clearly, this phenomenon was of some significance.

It was quickly determined that although the message had originated from the deep-space observation stations Coreward of the Extents, there was a stronger version of it emanating from an EMS (Electromagnetic Spectrum) wavefront propagating at that time through the Vargr Extents. It is now known that the Longbow II stations picked up an 'echo' of the main message as a result of their experiments with artificial psionics. At the time, there simply was no data and Emperor Strephon knew only that there was a threat of some kind out there, and heading directly for his realm.

In 1116 the Wavefront was passing through the Zhodani Consulate and the Vargr Extents, far to Coreward of the Imperium. While it seemed to have little or no effect in the Extents, the Consulate appeared to be suffering badly. There were obvious signs of conflict far to Coreward of the Imperial/Zhodani border, and vessels were being transferred Coreward, away from their usual positions facing the 'traditional enemy', the Imperium. These vessels were replaced by older, even obsolete ships, and eventually they ceased to be replaced at all.

As the Third Imperium shattered into factions and the Second Civil War began, it was obvious that the Zhodani Consulate was also facing some huge crisis. Not many years later, a flood of refugees began pouring across the border into what had been Imperial space. They told garbled tales of internal fighting and a terrible disaster, but often had not witnessed it for themselves. Being psionically sensitive, the Zhodani were apparently perceiving a precognition of disaster, and it was tearing the Consulate, the most stable civilization in human history, apart.

Today, in 1248, the Empress Wavefront is over 130 light-years (more than 40 parsecs) closer. It passed into what had been Imperial space in 1205, along a line roughly equivalent to the Coreward boundaries of the Spinward marches, Deneb, Corridor, Vland, Lishun and Antares sectors. At this vast distance from the Core, the curve of the Wavefront is fairly small, so Imperial cartographers tend to assume a straight wavefront. This is not strictly accurate, but the waveform is not uniform anyway. There are localized 'fore-ripples' and areas of weaker and stronger radiation caused by superposition of harmonics in the wave. A rough line is the best that can be plotted on such a huge scale.

In 1248, the Wavefront is 13 parsecs into what had been the territory of the Third Imperium. It is 5 parsecs Coreward of Vland in the sector of that name, and 4 from Rhylanor in the Spinward Marches. It has passed through the Regina system. It will reach Deneb in less than 15 years. The Empress Wavefront is 48 years from Capital and 53 from Usdiki.

Although the Wavefront itself poses no major threat to the people of Charted Space, something about it is clearly a danger, as shown by the chaotic disintegration of the Zhodani Consulate. It was quickly realized that the Wavefront carried a psionic component, and that this was the key factor in the breakup of the Consulate.

Where the Vargr had been affected relatively little by the Wave, the Consulate was ripped apart. In 1149, when Avery undertook his highly secret mission towards the Galactic Core, it was not known why this should be. The truth, as Avery discovered, was that the effect of the wave's psionic component was to unravel the telepathic

conditioning of most of Zhodani society, and to drive some telepathic adepts insane. As hordes of Proles suddenly realized that they were desperately unhappy – and had no idea what to do about it or even how to deal with the feeling – many of the leaders turned on one another. The result was anarchy, then civil war as various factions (sane and otherwise) tried to assert order. But what could so traumatize a whole civilization? What message or assault could cause so much damage across thousands of parsecs? What terrible foe was advancing behind the psionic spearhead to conquer Charted Space?

The truth is now known. There was never any intent to cause harm; there were no 'baddies from the Core'. The Empress Wave is the last, desperate cry for help from a doomed civilization. It is carried on the wavefront of radiation from collapsing stars. Its message was screamed out with the dying voices of a trillion telepaths. It is a warning, an imperative to flee, and it is a cry for help across thousands of parsecs of cold space. The Empress Wave is a distress call, a Signal GK sent by an entire civilization – by the fourth great race of humans, the last of Grandfather's children.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE YASKOYDRI

When the Ancients, led by the supergenius Yaskoydray (Grandfather) transplanted humans throughout Charted Space, they founded several civilizations. Some fell by the wayside. Others, like the Vilani and Zhodani, rose to prominence. The original stock, left behind on Terra, became the Solomani. Others were less successful and are now absorbed by the great empires or forgotten to history. But one group existed all the while, unknown to most of Humaniti. For want of a better name, they are now known as the Yaskoydri, which translates roughly as *Children of the Ancients* or *Grandfather's Children*. This group was given a special mission and carefully selected for it. Like the Zhodani, they were drawn from stock with a high psionic potential and were given guidance to help them develop their talents.

The mission selected for the Yaskoydri was an important one. They were to establish a civilization in the Galactic Core and observe the many stellar phenomena found there. They were given devices and technology, and left to get on with their mission. When Grandfather and his children warred, the Yaskoydri were too remote to be involved. Their civilization suffered setbacks when the long-range missions stopped coming in with supplies and instructions, but by this time they were well enough established to survive and even to grow on their own.

And survive they did. It may never be known what races they contacted and what secrets they unlocked, but

throughout the lonely centuries the Yaskoydri spread through the Galactic Core. Likely they fought wars and triumphed over disasters, weathered plagues and honored heroes. Their history is almost certainly lost now.

Through the lonely millennia the Yaskoydri longed for contact from their brethren humans, but their last orders from Yaskoydray were clear – they must not return to the birthplace of Humaniti, nor seek to leave the Core. Contact would someday come, they were promised. Time passed, and the civilization of the Yaskoydri declined somewhat. Their routines became comfortable and the people complacent. The emphasis of the civilization gradually changed. The Yaskoydri went from being interstellar explorers to frontiersmen of the mind. More and more focus was placed on developing psionics to a high art.

Perhaps the Yaskoydri sought to search the universe with their minds; perhaps they intended to send out a signal to Grandfather, telling of their long devotion to his service and requesting a long-overdue visit. Whatever the goals, the Yaskoydri ceased to watch the stars so closely and instead their psionic powers burgeoned. Then, thousands of years before the first Zhodani Core Expedition was launched, before even the rise of the Vilani Imperium, disaster struck the Yaskoydri.

The end came suddenly, and unexpectedly. A supergiant star, orbiting a black hole in the Core, suffered perturbations in its orbit every few thousands of years due to the interactions of other bodies in more distant orbits. The result every time in the past was a slight 'wobble' in the star's orbit, the stripping-off of some more gas, and hastening of the day when the supergiant star would die or be consumed by the black hole. The Yaskoydri had observed this phenomenon several times in their long history. Initially it had caused alarm, since it occurred in their cosmic back yard, so to speak, but in recent millennia the event was little more than a spectacular curiosity.

The scientists had done their calculations. This wobble would be much like the others; a little more spectacular perhaps, but within safe limits. There was no real danger and little interest. A handful of ships Jumped into the multiple-star black hole system to observe the gas flares from the Supergiant star.

They witnessed catastrophe.

The star did not wobble and flare—it disintegrated. Distorted beyond its limits by the forces involved, the Supergiant star twisted and sheared, sending vast plumes of superheated plasma tearing across the system. The radiation burst killed every observer in the system just seconds before the gas melted their ships. As the Supergiant star became a twisting ribbon of plasma spiraling down into the uttermost dark unknown of the universe, waves of radiation flared

out. They would continue to do so for decades as the vast star slowly died. Meanwhile other stars in the cluster shuddered as the dynamic equilibrium of gravity and rotation shifted. One began the long, long spiral inward that would eventually lead it, too, to a shattering supernova death. The Yaskoydri civilization died that day, though they did not yet know it.

As the deadly radiation blazed out from the black hole just a few parsecs away, the most densely-inhabited systems of the Yaskoydri were unaware. Ships were sent to discover the fate of the observers. They did not return. Eventually observers in nearby systems were able to report a massive radiation shockwave expanding out from the black hole. No ship that attempted to Jump past the Wavefront survived, suggesting that this was no pulse but an expanding disk of destruction. It was at most a handful of years from the Yaskoydri home systems.

There was no way to prepare for that awesome onslaught. At such a short distance the Wavefront was sufficient to sear planets down to the bedrock or even shatter them. Stars were destabilized. Some even went nova, creating secondary wavefronts of destruction. The only hope for the Yaskoydri was to flee, far and fast. A Jump-capable ship might be able to run far enough ahead of the Wavefront to reach a point where it had dissipated to non-lethal levels, or get far enough out that the area behind the Wavefront was no longer lethal. If so, the refugee ships might be able to overjump the Wavefront and escape destruction.

Both options required that the population be immediately loaded into escape ships with extremely robust drives and self-repair facilities. They would have to run for hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of parsecs. And when they stopped, what then? The refugees had nowhere to go. Their only hope would be to find suitable worlds to settle and rebuild a civilization.

It was possible that some such ships might make it far enough before their drives wore out. Others would go on until they could Jump no longer, and would settle hundreds or thousands of parsecs away. Their survival would depend on whether they got far enough before the ships broke down. It was remotely possible that a group of refugees might be able to land, set up a colony, build a technological society, then repair their ships or make new ones and move on again.

But if this was not the case, then fleeing only delayed the inevitable. The radiation burst following the Wavefront would be lethal out to a few hundred parsecs or more. Could the refugees get far enough away to survive? It was impossible to know. The only things that were known for sure was that enough ships could be built for only a fraction of the populace, and that most of them would not make it far enough.

And so the Yaskoydri decided to break the long injunction on communication. They would send a psionic distress signal and hope their long-vanished liege – or *someone* – would receive it and send help. It was too late for the people of the core worlds. Other than the relatively tiny proportion who would escape on the refugee ships, the entire population would be killed in the first instants of the Wavefront's arrival. There was no way to avoid this, so the Yaskoydri decided to make use of it.

The final years of the Yaskoydri civilization passed in a frenzy of preparation. Ships were constructed and sent out, and several world-wide telepathic networks were set up. The Yaskoydri were resigned to their deaths, but they were determined that no member of their society would die alone, and that even in dying they would serve their fleeing siblings by hurling out a signal into the darkness: a cry for help to Grandfather or whichever of his children might hear.

The Yaskoydri knew that the initial Wavefront was only the beginnings of the tide of destruction that was about to overwhelm them. Moving at lightspeed, the initial radiation burst would arrive quickly. But behind it came the echoes; a shockwave of plasma and super-energetic particles moving slower than light. Much slower, in many cases. This would prolong the destruction but on the other hand it offered a unique hope.

It was quite likely that the refugee ships might run outward for years before their drives finally died. This would place the refugees hundreds of lightyears ahead of the initial Wavefront, and up to a millennium ahead of the secondary, slower-than-light, Wavefront. The latter was likely to make their worlds uninhabitable as it passed over, so clearly they would have to move on before it arrived. But a shipload of refugees might decide to make a home wherever they landed. They might think they were safe, or even forget the reason why they had fled if enough time had passed. They must not be allowed to do so.

And so the psionic message sent by the Yaskoydri contained two components. One was a distress call; a cry for help not for the dying inhabitants of the homeworlds but for those who fled and became stranded with the secondary wave approaching their refuges. They might have lost their technology and be unable to flee. They might not be able to heed the second component of the message – a compulsion to run from the danger that followed the carrier wave, to abandon complacency and set out again for safety. If all else failed, someone might hear and come to the rescue of the last of the Yaskoydri.

It was of course the compulsion to flee that shattered the psionically-imposed peace of the Zhodani Consulate and plunged it into chaos. This was never intended, nor was it desirable to harm the distant cousins of the Yaskoydri. But

it was necessary, and it was the best option in a very bad situation. At the moment that the Wavefront arrived on the Yaskoydri homeworld, the entire population was joined together in a vast telepathic network. Dying, the best and brightest of the Yaskoydri hurled out their message across the lightyears and down through the centuries. It would ride the radiation Wavefront far out into the spiral arms of the galaxy. It would show Grandfather or his children that the Yaskoydri had kept faith. It would remind the fugitives that they must keep on running and it would show those with the wit to understand what had happened to the galactic core.

And just possibly, it would be picked up by someone who was willing and able to help, who might send ships to find the survivors and bring them to safety.

The psionic message carried on the so-called Empress Wave caused chaos in Zhodani space, and it contributed to the tensions felt on the eve of the Second Imperial Civil War. For it was picked up by the Imperial Longbow stations far Coreward of the Vargr Extents. These stations involved human and artificial psionics as well as advanced technological instruments. One by one they went offline as the Wavefront reached them, though some were able to transmit the content of the psionic signal to other stations further up the chain before they went down.

The content of the message was not at first understood. It was only in the wake of Avery's 1149 mission that the implications were discovered. Even then, the message was almost lost as Avery's ship met with disaster. But in 1248, in the wake of the Second Battle Of Gateway, Emperor Avery I of the Fourth Imperium made public the news that survivors of a previously unsuspected sibling race of humans were in desperate trouble away to Coreward. Small pockets of them were trapped on many worlds, often in low technology cultures with no means to flee the secondary wavefronts. Even reaching them meant crossing thousands of parsecs of uncharted space. But if nobody answered the call then they would die alone in the night.

There were no ships to answer the call, no resources to build them and no crews willing to try. It was a fool's venture at best, but Avery laid down the challenge anyway in the slim hope that someone would step forward. Amazingly, a handful of volunteers did indeed present themselves. And then a message came from the far-off Freedom League. The Star Vikings were boarding their ships and heading out Coreward, beyond human space, through the Vargr Extents and into the vast unknown. Theirs was indeed a fool's errand, just as it was a fool's hope that anyone would respond to the Yaskoydri distress call.

The Star Vikings never even announced their intentions. After the madness of the Collapse and the vast clashes

of the war against the Dominate, the endeavor of 1248 became known as The Redemption of Humaniti, or just the Great Rescue. At the time it was not subject to any fanfare nor even a formal name. Those that heeded the call simply boarded their ships and set off into the unknown.

And so in the year of 1248, the Star Vikings left Charted Space and passed into the pages of legend. Their story, and that of the last of the Yaskoydri, will be told someday. But in 1248 they left behind just two words as their legacy. They are attributed to a Star Viking leader who was asked why his people would abandon their homes to go to the aid of strangers. Dismissing the suggestion that the Vikings were leaving their homes because they were now unwelcome there, the elderly Viking suggested a more profound, if puzzling, reason. Smiling cryptically, he told nearby journalists and all of posterity the reason for undertaking what may be Humaniti's greatest endeavor: "We Believe".

PHYSICAL AND PSIONIC EFFECTS OF THE EMPRESS WAVE

As already noted, the Empress Wavefront is dynamic; an area of effect rather than a wall. Its characteristics vary somewhat from point to point as a result of interaction of the various wave components and 'shadowing' by objects in the path of the wave. It is characterized by a very rapid increase in radio noise and background radiation across a large segment of the electromagnetic spectrum. The 'crest' of the Wavefront is some 5-10 light-hours deep, propagating at lightspeed (and thus taking 5-10 hours to pass over a given point). Even within this wavecrest zone, levels of radiation are not normally high enough to harm a starship or a world with an atmosphere to protect it, though there may be areas of higher activity where a hazard is encountered. The amount of electromagnetic chaos going on in the wavecrest is such that communication can be difficult, and use of Jump drive within the crest is inadvisable.

Behind the crest comes the main Wavefront zone, which is characterized by the same high levels of electromagnetic radiation (though not as high as in the crest except in short-lived bursts). The Wavefront has some fairly large peaks and troughs where the various wave components meet and create nodes and antinodes within the overall crest. The wave system is sufficiently complex that predicting peaks and troughs is very difficult to do and since some peaks are large enough to damage a ship, operating within the Wavefront is a hazardous occupation.

In most areas the main Wavefront zone is 20-50 light-hours deep, so will pass over any given point in a day or two. However, in some areas it may be five times as deep, and there are a few 'hotspots' on the Wavefront where radiation levels are extremely high. Any world caught in a

hotspot would likely suffer severe environmental damage from the radiation. Unfortunately, hotspots are not totally predictable. They form and dissipate irregularly.

Behind the Wavefront zone is a deep trough where radiation levels fall off rapidly. The trough is 10-20 light-hours deep, and beyond it is the main body of the Empress Wave. The body of the wave is characterized by elevated levels of radiation, though not on the same scale as the crest zone. It, too, has peaks and troughs and the odd hotspot. This main zone is 10-20 lightyears deep in most places.

'Behind' the wave, physical conditions return rapidly to normal. There are occasional belts of secondary radiation following at irregular intervals behind the main wave but these are primarily curiosities rather than major hazards. Very far behind the lightspeed component of the Wave, propagating at speeds ranging from 0.1 to 0.3 of lightspeed, are several heavy-particle zones. These are now several thousand years behind the main lightspeed Wavefront, and are dissipating at a much more rapid rate than the main Wavefront. By the time they reach Charted Space, in another 8000 years or more, the energy levels of these belts will have dropped far below harmful levels.

However, at the present time the heavy-particle belts are still hazardous; sufficiently so that any world or starship in their path is doomed. How far out from the core one would have to flee in order to be safe is at present unknown, but it is certain that many worlds settled by the refugee Yaskoydri have already succumbed to the secondary wave and others will also die in the years to come.

It is not known what lies farther Coreward of these heavy-particle belts. They are broad and deep, making it impossible to over-Jump the affected region. Radio-frequency observations are somewhat garbled, making observations of the galactic core difficult. It can be discerned that the core is actually still there – the galaxy is not exploding or anything *that* dramatic, but conditions near the core are very unpleasant at present.

Thus on the physical level, there is a series of lesser wavefronts following the main wave crest, but while these cause a nuisance they are not a serious hazard to the people of Charted Space. The heavy-particle zone is very distant and will burn itself out long before reaching Imperial space. However, this does not mean that everything is all right. The Wave has a psionic component, and this may cause a certain amount of trouble when it hits Charted Space.

Like the physical component of the Wave, the psionic content varies in intensity across the width of the Wavefront. Imperial scientists do not understand the reason for this at the present time, though the reason for the variation along an axis towards the Core is all too clear. The main

psionic component is carried in the very forefront of the wave crest. It is a message, as already noted, but one contained as much in feelings as clear images. As the Wavefront approaches, there are fore-ripples running ahead of it that can be detected by a precognitive psionic individual. These are 'intimations of doom' or feelings of dread. Any such psionic individual within a lightyear of the Wavefront will be aware that something terrible is about to happen. As the wave crests, the message is rammed into the brain of any psionic individual, rapidly fraying into incoherence as the sending telepaths died. Their moment of death is broadcast across the galaxy, and is as fresh today as in the distant past when it occurred.

After the mental tumult of the Wavecrest, there is a horrible wrenching feeling as trillions of lives were snuffed out, then a moment of dark emptiness. This is even more disturbing than the mental noise to those psionically capable individuals who are able to coherently experience it.

EFFECTS ON NON-PSIONIC INDIVIDUALS

When the wavecrest washes over a given point, even a non-psionic individual can feel the power of the message carried on it. A non-psionic person will simply feel that something is about to happen, then a terrible loss and sadness coupled with disruption of higher mental functions. Disorientation, nausea and headaches are not uncommon, with some individuals being totally incapacitated for several hours.

This initial psionic wave is only a few minutes 'deep', so passes over quite quickly. It does sometimes leave behind a life-changing legacy. It is hard not to be altered in some way by such a profound experience. Indeed, some individuals are altered in quite major ways. Personality changes are not infrequent, with some individuals becoming callous and cynical and others developing either a deep empathy or compassion. This can go so far that previously phlegmatic individuals now break down in tears at the merest suggestion that someone might be suffering. Some people actually die of sadness as the Wave passes over or in its aftermath.

On the other hand, a very small proportion of individuals become slightly more receptive to psionics, and may develop potential or even a natural talent in the wake of the wave. It may be that the mental trauma of the psionic message may 'shake something loose' in the mind of the recipient. This is, however, very rare.

Non-psionic individuals find the onset of the Wave disturbing but once it passes they generally recover with no worse effects than anyone who has suffered the trauma of great sadness. Those who have had some kind of psionic alteration (such as the routine treatments

administered by Zhodani *Tvarchedl'*) done on their personality will usually find it 'unraveling' in the minutes after the Wavecrest, resulting in a period of disorientation and panic. Some lapse into a catatonic state for several hours. After recovering, some individuals are completely purged of their alterations, some are confused due to partial retention, and some are more or less unaffected. A minority go completely mad.

Individuals wearing a psionic shield will usually be immune to the psionic effects of the Wave. However, a small minority are affected anyway.

EFFECTS ON PSIONIC INDIVIDUALS

For a psionic individual, the Empress Wave is even more unpleasant since the individual is more receptive to the mental trauma associated with the message. A psionic individual who possesses the Telepathy sphere can try to block and filter the worst of the effects. If this is successful (i.e. the telepath's shield holds up) then no ill effects are felt. However, maintaining the shield requires intense concentration for the entire duration that the Wavecrest is passing over, so most Telepaths falter at some time.

If this is the case, there is a risk that the psion will be driven mad or suffer mental damage as a result of the overload, especially in the case where an individual possesses the Telepathy talent. At best, a telepath whose shield buckles will suffer from traumatic stress and may develop personality problems and/or quirks as a result. Repeated exposure will eventually drive any telepath mad.

Other psions are unable to block out the death-anguish of an entire civilization and are incapacitated for at least several hours as their minds are overloaded. Upon awakening they are disorientated and confused, and will develop personality problems at the very least. Some cease to be able to use their psionic talents altogether, and a rare minority develop an impenetrable psionic shield that prevents any mental contact, in or out. They effectively become immune to telepathy, telepathy and similar talents, and cannot use their own abilities any longer.

Artificial psionics are usually overloaded by the Wavecrest and burned out, causing further damage to any person connected to them. It is not known what would happen to a Viral entity that encountered the Wave, much less a psionic one. The best guess Imperial scientists can come up with is that a machine-like Viral entity would not be affected by the deaths of trillions of people, but a more 'developed' one that had come to be more in tune with the universe and more empathic with other beings might be as traumatized as a human would. There is no hard evidence for Viral psions, but the theory is that one would react more like an organic psion rather than an artificial one.

Referee's Note: There is no game mechanic for gaining psionic capability by encountering the Wavecrest – it is a matter of discretion and plot relevance for the Referee to decide upon. The game designers Strongly Suggest that this effect be reserved for non-player characters or used as a rationale for natural talent psionics developed in character generation. If it is used in-game, the effect should be built into a long-term plot and accompanied by disadvantages or problems to counterbalance the windfall of psionic powers. Players who want to repeatedly Jump just ahead of the Wave to experience the message over and over in the hope of gaining psionic powers should be discouraged. For legal reasons, the game designers do not advocate shooting players of this sort out of hand, but would very much like to...

THE EIGHTH ZHODANI CORE EXPEDITION

Unknown to the Yaskoydri, contact with them from Charted Space was attempted several times. The Zhodani people, finding a strange artifact buried in the most ancient chambers of Zhdant City, discovered that a very small proportion of telepaths were able to activate it. At first the device was incomprehensible. It showed starmaps and images of obviously distant worlds, but without a frame of reference it was impossible to determine the locations nor any significance to the images.

Then a Zhodani cruiser Misjumped into the area displayed by the device and eventually limped home after being missing for nearly 40 years. The adepts monitoring the device realized that it had shown images of the lost ship and her attempts to return home. It appeared to be capable of showing events in a region of space corresponding to a corridor from Zhodani space towards the galactic core – and in real time.

It is possible that the device was one of several intended to allow communication with the Yaskoydri, or that it was hidden with the intention of allowing whoever survived the Ancients' Final War to recontact the 'hidden' enclave of humans in the galactic core. Whatever the reasoning, the Zhodani people decided to investigate (though they almost certainly never knew there were humans awaiting contact at the far end of the corridor). Seven Core Expeditions were sent out over the next centuries, each of them many years in duration and pushing a little closer to the Core each time. The major expeditions were interspersed with minor expeditions off the main corridor.

The seventh expedition went out in 750 and pushed most of the way to the Core. It is certain that this expedition and some if not all of the ones before it encountered the Empress Wave, and given the effects of the wave on

psionic individuals, casualties almost certainly resulted. Probably some or even most ships Jumped 'over' the main Wavefront and thus escaped the psionic effects. The early Core Expeditions had reported that the way was hard and dangerous, and came home with incomprehensible information. The Zhodani were now aware that there was some kind of threat carried by the Wavefront, and it was approaching Consulate space.

An Eighth Core Expedition was launched in 1149, apparently with the intention of crossing past the Wavefront zone and discovering more about the psionic phenomenon that was affecting the Zhodani Consulate. This expedition was observed (by the Imperials, using their Longbow array) to have been abandoned partway through. In fact, this is not quite the whole truth.

Some vessels were lost en route, and others fell victim to the psionic phenomenon, gradually losing command coherence and succumbing to disaster as insanity and irreconcilable unhappiness overcame the crews. Other ships forged on. Some may be still going, headed into the Core region in search of any surviving Yaskoydri. Others came home, and in great secrecy.

These ships had encountered scattered enclaves of Yaskoydri, often badly regressed in terms of technology and society, and were able to bring ambassadors or refugees to the Consulate with them. The messages carried by these people were lost in the general chaos that ensued, but their knowledge of psionics and of what had happened to their civilization (often gleaned from ancient folk tales and oral histories) allowed the Zhodani to piece together some idea of what was happening to them and formulate plans to mitigate and perhaps even undo it.

AVERY'S MISSION

Avery's mission was launched in the same year as the Zhodani Eighth Core Expedition, but used a different route and had a somewhat different focus. Avery himself had been deliberately 'geneered' to give him psionic abilities of a sort that would allow him to penetrate the Wavecrest and function there without being driven mad. Avery was accompanied by a team of natural psionics, technical experts equipped with experimental artificial psionic equipment and a range of scientists and experts drawn from across the Regency.

Avery's vessel was a reactivated *Azhanti High Lightning* class frontier cruiser, now designated a Scout Cruiser and renamed *Spirit Hope* in an echo of Avery's own name (which means Spirit Ruler). The *Spirit Hope's* computers were inhabited by a specially 'domesticated' strain of Virus. This being is now enshrined in the annals of the Fourth Imperium as a Hero of the Imperium, and is officially

recorded as the first Cym to be granted citizenship, albeit posthumously. However, *Spirit Hope* was at the outset of the mission not a true Cym, but more of a semi-sentient being created from a 'castrated' Virus sample.

The *Spirit Hope* mission left Regency space via the Vargr Extents, heading to Trailing as much as Coreward at first to put some distance between the mission and Zhodani space. After a few months and several adventures in Vargr space, the expedition swung directly to Coreward and began the long transit of the Extents.

The first stop beyond the Extents was the first of the Longbow stations. The relay stations situated in the Extents had been destroyed, but Avery's mission eventually found a Longbow station intact, more or less. The first one they searched for was simply gone, as if it had never existed. Its disappearance remains a mystery. Another was found intact but abandoned. In defiance of every regulation and sworn duty, the crew had abandoned the station in every ship that would fly, even those that could not Jump. A few long-dead bodies were discovered in a powered-down shuttle, drifting far to Trailing-Rimward of the station. Other ships from the station are probably still adrift, lost in the infinite dark.

Avery's people boarded the station and managed to reconstruct events from a barely-functional database. An artificial psionics unit was also still more or less in working order, and Avery's people managed to extract the full version of the message sent by the Yaskoydri from it. The experts aboard *Spirit Hope* were able to determine that the crew of the station had been exposed to an amplified version of the flight-compulsion encapsulated in the message, as a result of the artificial psionics research they were conducting. They had of course fled in panic, and died out in deep space.

After salvaging everything possible and destroying the station, Avery's crew voyaged Coreward to the most distant of the deep Longbow II stations. This one had been largely destroyed by internal fighting among the crew. Again, this seemed to be a result of the message trauma, amplified by the artificial psionics equipment at the station. Even prepared for it, Avery's psionic adepts were barely able to resist mental damage from the message. Some were becoming alarmingly unstable, but there was still work to be done.

Abandoning any attempt to push on Coreward, tempted as he was to search for Yaskoydri survivors, Avery turned his ship homeward. There was something he had to do, and he needed to re-enter the Vargr Extents to do it. Crossing that turbulent region of space, now increasingly haunted by Vampire ships, proved to be a difficult task and it was not until 1154 that Avery's now rather tired expedition caught up with the Empress Wavefront just short of the

Coreward border of Provence sector. At this point most of the Vargr Extents was deep Wilds roamed by Vampire ships, making every stop for provisions hazardous and spares virtually impossible to find.

Jumping ahead of the Wave, the crew of *Spirit Hope* prepared themselves as best they could to experience the effects of the phenomenon. They would use themselves as laboratory animals to observe the wave effects. The less stable psionic adepts were placed in Low berths or forced to wear psionic shield helmets. Artificial psionics devices were readied and every possible instrument was set up to gather all the data possible on the Wavefront and its effects. Avery's mission was to determine the level of threat posed by the Wave to whatever remained of the Imperium and her people. To that end he needed information and he was prepared to take desperate risks to get it.

Avery certainly managed to obtain the information he needed. Indeed, most of what is known about the Empress Wave phenomenon is derived from the *Spirit Hope* logs. However, gathering the data almost killed the ship and her crew. Although the radiation levels were no threat to the ship, the psionic component caused the crew serious problems. Some passed out, some were conscious and active but had no memory afterwards of what they did. The artificial psionics equipment went berserk and remained that way, giving some indication of what might have happened in the Zhodani Consulate.

The crew of *Spirit Hope* were overcome with a compulsion to flee, and began a series of rapid Jumps. However, the computer housing the *Spirit Hope* AI entity had somehow been affected by the interactions of artificial psionics units using its data systems, and navigation became increasingly erratic. At this point the vessel was attacked by a Vampire ship which succeeded in establishing a data link to the *Spirit Hope* computers and partially infected them. The *Spirit Hope* entity was badly damaged in the attack, but managed to beat it off long enough to make an emergency Jump.

Spirit Hope re-entered normal space after eleven days in Jump – a sure sign of Misjump. Her remaining navigational apparatus suggested that she had covered more than 25 parsecs and was now on the very fringe of the Windhorn, a wide Rift. Worse, the computers were scrambled and the drives damaged. The crippled *Spirit Hope* lay dead in space. Her traumatized crew attempted to repair the vessel and to bring up the backup 'dumb' computers, but there was little chance of success.

Then, quite suddenly, *Spirit Hope* woke up. Something had happened during the cross-infection by the Vampire. She was no longer the domesticated semi-sentient Virus she had been, but neither was she a psychotic killer. She

was a person, a stable intellect. And she wanted to live.

With *Spirit Hope* back online, the crew were able to patch up their ship and set course for Deneb sector. Limited now to Jump-2, the gallant old ship crawled home while all around the universe grew darker. Vampire activity became steadily worse, and halfway across Tuglikki sector, Avery was forced to turn back for a second time in the face of Vampire-held systems and roaming fleets. The chances of reaching home diminished daily.

In utter desperation Avery grasped at the only straw he could reach. *Spirit Hope* repaired her systems as best she could and began a desperate run across the sector, fighting her way past those Vampires she could not hide from. Ever conscious of the risk of Misjump, *Spirit Hope* pushed her damaged drives back up to Jump-4 and even Jump-5. Somehow, against the odds, *Spirit Hope* crossed the Vampire-infested Tugikki sector on the final leg of her voyage. Forced to head more to Spinward than Rimward, she aimed herself at Regency space in general and hoped for the best.

Just a few parsecs from the Spinward Marches and safety, *Spirit Hope* was engaged in a savage battle with Vampire vessels and forced to flee into Jump. The strain of the emergency Jump caused a massive breakdown in her drive and, coupled with the extensive systems damage she had already received, it was obvious that the heroic ship's strength had at last given out.

With systems breaking down daily and her crew descending into desperate madness, *Spirit Hope* struggled to make repairs for one last Jump. It was hopeless. An explosion in the portside fuel processing plant vented much of the ship to space and killed most of the crew as internal bulkheads failed. Only a handful remained alive, and the damage was irreparable. Even life-support power was failing and there was no real chance of rescue, not even here on the edge of the Marches. To have come so far only to fail was more than the crew could bear, so they took one last gamble.

Shutting down everything but the maneuver drive, *Spirit Hope* flung herself into a slingshot orbit to gain as much speed as possible. The surviving crew entered low berths as the ship trembled under the strain of the slingshot. Then, as she emerged on her new course, *Spirit Hope*'s resident Viral entity set up a simple automated program to trickle what little power remained in her systems to the low berths and shut everything else down.

As Avery and his surviving companions slept, *Spirit Hope* sped on into the night. She would be detected as she passed through the inhabited systems of what had been the Regency, or she would go out into the endless night and be lost forever. In the main computer, *Spirit Hope* kept

a lonely vigil until finally the power ran out and she died. When they were finally recovered, the ship's hard-data records showed that *Spirit Hope* had used the last of her power to affect a course change to avoid collision with an asteroid, trading the last years of her own existence for the continued survival of her crew and the hope that her mission might yet succeed.

Spirit Hope's sacrifice was not in vain. Many years later, the derelict ship was indeed detected and a boarding party entered her, expecting to find a dead Vampire or a relic of the old Third Imperium. What they found was both and neither. The ship was a relic of the vanished past but she was also the great hope for the future of civilization in Charted Space. The survivors were brought to the Republic of Regina and from there set out for Usdiki with their findings. Against all the odds, at the cost of her own existence, *Spirit Hope* complete her mission and brought her crew home.

LONGBOW AND RELATED PROJECTS

The original Project Longbow (a name derived from LONG Baseline Observation Window) was a project implemented in the 800s to allow Imperial researchers to observe the Zhodani Core Expeditions. Since light and other radiation propagates at lightspeed, Zhodani activity near the core thousands of years ago could be observed by detecting radiation emanating from that area at that time.

The original Longbow array was at Depot in the Lishun sector, and consisted of an enormous array of sensor groups spread across the star system, tied together into a single synthetic-aperture system by central computers. The system was effective, but limited in some ways. Its Time-Space Observation Window (TSOW) was limited by the speed of propagation of the radiation it measured. Thus Zhodani activity could only be observed at a certain location at a certain point in time. The farther away the event (i.e. the nearer the core it occurred) the older the data was.

In order to observe more recent Zhodani activity it was necessary to set up sensors closer to the core, shortening the distance light had to travel and in effect enabling the sensors to view 'younger' data. This was one of the goals of the Longbow II project, though the Longbow organization also covered several other projects. One such was an artificial psionics research project, which was intended to have several applications including enhancing the Longbow II data.

The heart of the Longbow II data-gathering system was a chain of sensor stations situated on a line from Antares

sector to the Spinward Marches, tied into a central net by fast couriers and extremely accurate time-synchronizing devices. This incredible device was not online in 1116, and would have taken decades to calibrate properly even if it had been completed.

One Longbow II system that was online in 1116 was the Chain of Advanced Distant Observation Stations (CADOS) set up to Coreward of the Vargr Extents. CADOS was connected to the Longbow base at Depot/Lishun by fast couriers running through Vargr space, and by a chain of psionic relay stations in key areas. CADOS was in its infancy, and some aspects of the technology (such as the artificial psionics component) were totally untried in 1116 when the Second Imperial Civil War broke out and the Imperium dissolved into chaos. However, by this time the CADOS stations had already begun collecting data, including the now-infamous 'Empress' image that turned out to be the first moments of the Yaskoydri distress message. The threatening but cryptic nature of the data from CADOS – coupled with the fact that some of the stations had gone out of contact – was considered sufficiently important to demand Strephon's absence from Capital at the time of the attempted assassination.

Emperor Strephon and his advisors considered that the Wave was a clear threat to the Imperium, especially considering its effects on the Zhodani Consulate. In this, Strephon was not completely correct, though the arrival of the Wave would have had some effects on a volatile situation. At that time in Imperial history, it seemed that the Imperial Golden Age had given way to decay and internal fragmentation. Strephon was concerned that his realm might tear itself apart if the right stimulus were applied. In that he was correct, though the actual circumstances differed from his expectations.

To mitigate the effects of a fragmentation or disastrous war, Strephon implemented Project Jumpstart (see the entry on Jumpstart, below) and took a number of social measures intended to reverse the decay process. These of course were too little, too late, and indeed included the elevation of Dulinor to Archduke which in turn allowed him to make his bid for the throne and trigger the destruction of the Imperium.

The Longbow project was extremely secret at the time of the Civil War, though many naval personnel knew they were involved in servicing and guarding some kind of secret sensor project. Longbow II stations in some regions were plundered for their resources, and it is fairly certain that the main Longbow array at Depot/Lishun was destroyed during the war. It is possible that some stations were quietly mothballed and abandoned, and that some still exist. All were located in remote outsystem areas but their size makes it unlikely that they evaded detection. The CADOS stations visited by Avery's mission were

destroyed, one way or another, but some of the others may have survived. These stations may be treasure troves of experimental technology if they can be rediscovered, but a mission to do so remains a long-term possibility only. There are more urgent problems closer to home.

It is known that some Longbow personnel were able to make their way to Usdiki during the war and the Collapse, so perhaps not all of the Longbow data is lost. Some may have been filed and largely forgotten about since it was of no immediate use. With crises threatening the very survival of the Marquisate (and later the Imperium) every day, blue-sky research was accorded a low profile. It is likely that some fragments of the Longbow and Longbow II programs do exist somewhere, probably on the 'bowline' from Antares to the Spinward Marches or out beyond the Vargr Extents. A mission to find and recover them may someday be launched.

PROJECT JUMPSTART

Even as Emperor Strephon took his measures to prevent the breakup and collapse of the Third Imperium, he ordered that preparations be made to assist in recovery if the worst befell. The most important of these measures was Project Jumpstart, the seeding of caches of equipment to assist reconstruction efforts

Each Jumpstart cache contained a vast database of technological and scientific information up to TL15, blueprints of critical equipment to allow systems to be quickly rebuilt or repaired, and a small amount of immediately-useful equipment. The caches were protected mainly by anonymity – nobody knew about them and they were not located in places where they might be stumbled over. Most Jumpstart caches were located on worlds capable of supporting humans unaided, and often co-located with Imperial bases and other installations. They were not armories to allow heroic rebuilders to fight off the barbarian hordes, as some vid shows suggest, but were in practice nothing more than repositories of knowledge and a few critical tools to allow rebuilders to skip many years of build-a-tool-to-build-a-tool-to-fix-the-machine.

Jumpstart caches were designed to be used by stable governments and organizations rather than desperate survivors. They were generally quite difficult to access, requiring either a good knowledge of standard subjects such as physics and mathematics, or access to certain data protocols and responses to questions that only a member of a starfaring or at least industrialized civilization would make. There were, however, a few special Jumpstart caches. Most of these were hidden on rocks in deep space, and consisted mainly of starship components and spares such as fuel processors and electronics systems. These were intended to allow long-range recontact or diplomatic missions to cross long distances.

The final set of Jumpstart caches was hurriedly set up in the last years before the Collapse, in the region around Usdiki. This consisted mainly of reconstruction equipment and information to allow the rebuilding of a technological society in the event that one of the other powers bombed the major population centers of one or more of Strephon's worlds. These caches proved very useful during the Dark Years after the Collapse.

Many Jumpstart caches have been compromised since 1103, when the project was commenced. The locations of all those within the Domain of Deneb were given to Archduke Norris when the *Arrival Vengeance* mission returned home. They were expended by the Regency in its bid to survive the years of isolation.

Caches in other areas may remain intact or they may be either plundered or destroyed by the ravages of time. One of the missions of Imperial personnel investigating worlds out in the Wilds is to ascertain whether or not a Jumpstart cache remains intact on the world. Even if nothing else is gained from opening it, all caches contained a working fusion reactor that could be used to power a small industrial town. That alone could be a critical factor in rebuilding a world in the Wilds.

As a rule, if the ragged survivors of a world blasted back to the iron age were able to enter a cache they would be able to do little with it. Caches were not built as a survival kit. However, if the same ragged survivors, having established a stable community and set up basic needs like a food supply, were able to enter the cache accompanied by someone with at least a basic knowledge of what was possible with technology (perhaps a Free Trader crew) then the cache would permit the locals to make incredible advances. The virtually unlimited power supplied by the reactor would fuel industry in a single location; perhaps enough to power a civilization. Prototypes and tools – and most importantly, knowledge of how as well as why – contained within the database would allow vast progress in the space of a few short years.

Jumpstart was aptly named – it would indeed jumpstart the recovery process. But it would be of use only in those places where people were in a position to begin the recovery. To set up the project any other way might be to simply hand ready power to would-be barbarian overlords.

MATTERS OF HISTORY

Some of the events occurring in recent history require a little explanation. What is known is spelled out here, though 'the truth' is left uncertain in some cases. This is to allow the individual Referee freedom to decide what is true and what is not, or because the finest minds of Charted Space do not, as yet, know the all the facts.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE THIRD IMPERIUM

The fragmentation of the Fourth Imperium's predecessor, the Third, came as a complete surprise to many. However, some analysts had been predicting trouble for many years. For example, in his book *The Inevitability of Night* (published in 1120), professor Julian Trane suggested parallels between the final days before the Long Night and the then-current Rebellion situation. His work claimed that all civilizations go through cycles of growth, stability and collapse, and that the collapse of the Third Imperium was overdue. Certainly Emperor Strephon felt that the Imperium was growing old and heading down a path that would lead it to fragmentation or destruction. As early as 1103 he feared that the Imperium might fragment if faced with any major crisis.

The problem was mainly one of regionalization. In an area so vast, with communication taking so long, it was perhaps inevitable that citizens would feel greater loyalty towards their local region than to the distant throne. Strephon was aware of this, and decided that the structure must be renewed. The present situation, he believed, was that the Imperium was subdivided into distinct cultures and regions perhaps a sector each in size (interestingly, this is the current size of the Fourth Imperium, a size at which it has all but ceased expanding).

Strephon implemented Project Jumpstart as insurance against the worst-case scenario, but in the meantime he planned to create a new vision that would re-emphasize the Imperium and the Throne as the center of everything Imperial. This was a departure from his policy up to that point of re-emphasizing the Archdukes and their Domains, but the Archdukes had their part to play in leading their people back to being citizens of the Imperium first and foremost.

One of the great ironies of the last years of the Third Imperium was the appointment of Duke Dulinor of Dian to the post of Archduke of Ilelish. Strephon believed that the innovative and charismatic Duke would be a force for regeneration and change throughout the Imperium; that he would be a key figure in shaking the Imperium out of its comfortable lethargy and making it face its future.

Of course, Dulinor fulfilled this expectation in a rather unexpected way. He saw Strephon's reforms as too little, too late, and decided that the office of Archduke was not high enough for him to achieve what he needed to. The only possible way was to assume the mantle of Emperor. Dulinor's surviving records and journals state quite clearly that he believed Strephon to be a good man and a friend, but unable to see what needed to be done and to do it. It was, he told history, duty to the Imperium that made Dulinor murder his friend and liege. In doing so, he precipitated the crisis that Strephon had feared and the result was what he had been working to avoid. The Imperium did indeed fragment into cultural and economic regions.

The other great irony of the collapse was the nature of the Empress Wave. Given the effects on the Zhodani Consulate and the fact that some of the deep Longbow (CODAS) Stations had gone silent, Emperor Strephon had every reason to expect that the Wave would cause chaos in the Imperium. Therefore, he was sure, the crisis was 90 years away at most (the Wave was 90 lightyears short of Imperial space at that point). Something had to be done, and fast. The Imperium must be turned around from a sleeping giant to a vibrant power capable of weathering the upheavals that were surely coming. A mere century was a short time indeed to carry out such a task.

The Wave will of course cause a certain amount of disruption, but it is not the massive threat that Strephon believed. Thus it may be that Strephon's reforms were not too little too late, but too much too fast. However, for all we know an entirely different crisis may have hit in 1120 or 1130 and had the same result. It is not worthwhile to speculate on alternatives and maybes. The crisis did begin in 1116, and the Imperium did fragment along a number of fault lines.

Many forces affected the fragmentation. Early on, traditional loyalties and the feeling that things would get better prevailed. As the war dragged on into the Hard Times, cultural affinity was important, but so was the desire for protection. Worlds tended to gravitate to the strongest local power. Finally, astrography became the deciding factor. With space travel increasingly dangerous and less ships available, the distances that could be covered in trade or diplomacy, or to protect interests, shrank rapidly. Nearby worlds clung to one another for support or plundered one another in a microcosm of the larger Collapse going on across the former Imperium.

Accidents of astrography threw together some unlikely allies, and in some cases elements of one faction fleet or another found themselves with nowhere to go so pledged loyalty to the ramshackle government of a nearby cluster. Those clusters that inherited some warships and contained the right balance of worlds were able to hold

on the longest; sufficiently long in some cases that when the Viral Plague washed over and was gone, the worlds reached out to one another as 'traditional friends'. Some groups actually avoided the worst of the Plague and survived into the Dark Years as starfaring powers. Internal differences caused the downfall of some of these. Those that were best able to overcome these tensions were the ones that were still there when the lights came back on.

Even though over a century has passed since the fragmentation of the Third Imperium, many worlds retain memories of traditional loyalties and/or enmities. These loyalties may be to a Duchy or Domain, to a culture such as the Vilani, or to local friends who struggled through the Hard Times together. On the other hand, diplomacy is complicated in some cases by old enmities; a betrayal (real or perceived) as the darkness closed in, membership of a different faction, or even the ancient Solomani/Vilani cultural differences might sour relations between worlds that would otherwise make excellent partners in reconstruction.

Many questions remain unanswered about the fragmentation of the old Imperium. Why was it so violent, so destructive? How could it be that the four main factions were so evenly balanced that none could win, and yet so diametrically opposed that two or more could not ally and crush the others? How could responsible leaders allow such carnage to go on for so long, especially after it became obvious that nobody was going to win?

Most of these questions are unanswerable. The actions of the protagonists made sense to them at the time, from their perspective. Other events happened. We know that they did; they are recorded in history. The whys and wherefores of these strange happenings can only be examined by 'going there' and watching events unfold. To the scientists and historians of the Fourth Imperium, this is not possible.

However, some things are known for certain. These are discussed below.

HIVER INVOLVEMENT IN THE CIVIL WAR

It is fashionable to blame the Ancients for any inexplicable physical phenomenon or event, and to blame any social quirk on Hiver manipulation. The Hivers are known to have attempted to manipulate their neighbors throughout history, but then so has every other society – it is usually termed 'Diplomacy'.

Imperial authorities are as sure as they can be that there was no Hiver involvement in the collapse of the Third Imperium. Apart from anything else, the Imperium provided a counterweight to the K'Kree, ancient enemies of the Hivers. Destroying the Imperium was not going to increase

security for the Hive Federation. It has been argued that the Hivers may have attempted to alter the nature of the Imperium to gain themselves an obedient little human watchdog, and that the Manipulation went horrifically wrong somewhere. This is a little more plausible, but all the same it is almost certainly untrue.

The Hiver penchant for meddling in other people's affairs means that they surely attempted to influence the outcome of the Civil War – but then so did every other external power and internal faction. Some influence was undoubtedly brought to bear, but the fact is that the Hive Federation played no greater part in the downfall of the Third Imperium than did the K'Kree or the Aslan. The collapse of the Third Imperium was a human tragedy. It was brought upon the Imperium by its own leaders. Appealing as it may be to blame meddling outsiders, the Collapse was nothing more than the culmination of many, many bad and conflicting decisions. There was no 'Hiver Masterplan'.

THE LUCAN SHIPS

It may never be known whether the 'Lucan Ships' were in fact all 'real Lucans' or just a facsimile of his observed personality traits. Each of the ships certainly claimed to be the real (or a real) Lucan, as did the original Viral Lucan that inhabited the Imperial Palace computers. It is highly likely that each Viral Lucan believed itself to be the real thing. While the Palace Lucan was in existence, each of the command-ship Lucans was subordinate to it. As soon as the palace entity was destroyed, each Lucan Ship attempted to assume control of the Black Imperium. They seemed to be unable to cooperate without bickering over precedence even in the face of an overwhelming threat. Cynical observers have taken this as positive proof that each ship really was Emperor Lucan, since only Lucan would be capable of such crass stupidity.

Whatever the truth may be, the Lucan Ships were instrumental in holding down the Black Imperium and maintaining control over all its worlds. Each was an iron-fisted dictator, yet also a protector. It is known that the Black Imperium beat off attacks by Vampires and K'Kree forces, among others, that might have slaughtered the population wholesale. While some would say that life under the many avatars of Lucan the Black was little better than a living death, it was at least life of a sort.

There are known to have been several command-ship Lucans assigned as local governors or the commanders of reaction fleets. In addition, Lucan Ships made several forays beyond the Black Curtain (for example the assault on Warnir and the murder of Duke Craig). The most dramatic of these episodes are well known, but few individuals are aware that smaller vessels, each also infected with a Lucan entity, made several 'personal attention' missions outside the Black Imperium. Not all of these vessels were

able to return; Fleet records recovered in the wreckage of the Imperial Palace suggest that some were definitely destroyed while others remain lost, fate unknown.

The Lucan Ships were hunted down as a matter of deliberate policy on the part of several major powers, and also by certain less official groups. Of these, the most famous is the Hunters, an organization originally of Solomani origin. The Hunters were the remnant of a Solomani pocket empire that had suffered at the hands of a Lucan Ship. With no homes to return to its vessels set out across the Wilds to find and kill the Viral avatar that had visited such destruction upon their homes. In time, the original Hunters were mostly killed but others joined the mission. It is not known how many Hunter ships still continue their search for surviving avatars.

Of the large command ships, only one was known to have survived the fall of the Black Imperium. This vessel, INS *Invincible*, led the assembled fleets to victory at the Second Battle of Gateway. It was presumed destroyed, but since so few ships actually came out of the battle no definite record of destruction exists. A search for wreckage was undertaken but so many vessels had been destroyed that this was a low-percentage proposition at best. The search was quickly abandoned when more K'Kree ships began arriving in-system.

It is, therefore, possible that INS *Invincible* did in fact survive the battle. If so, this presents the Fourth Imperium with something of an embarrassing quandary. The heroic last stand of Lucan the Great (as that particular avatar is now referred to in some Imperial histories) and his death in victory over the K'Kree horde has earned him something of a redemption in the eyes of the people of the Fourth Imperium (who are distanced from the worst of Lucan the Black's atrocities, after all). Lucan the Dead Hero is the stuff of morality tales; that even the worst individual sometimes has a part to play in saving others. However, a living Lucan would be a rather different proposition.

In addition to INS *Inflexible*, other Viral Lucans may still exist aboard minor ships or other computers they managed to infect during their missions. This possibility is downplayed by Imperial authorities, but standing orders still call for vessels operating beyond the Imperial border to maintain vigilance for signs of Lucanic influence.

The body of the human Emperor Lucan has never been located. Records show that there was a plan to preserve his body for display in the Imperial Palace after the personality upload to the palace computers, but it is not known if this was carried out or not. Given the events that occurred on Capital it is likely that Lucan's body was destroyed, though it is considered possible that it decorates the bridge of a Dominate command ship somewhere.

THE DOMINATE AFTER THE SECOND BATTLE OF GATEWAY

The Grand Dominate of the Gods of Thunder suffered a savage blow with the destruction of their prophet at the Second Battle of Gateway. However, the Dominate remains a powerful, if fragmented, force to Trailing of human space.

Various warlords and would-be overlords ('Thunder-Lords') have come forward to present themselves as the legitimate leader of the Gods of Thunder. These individuals (Viral and K'Kree, and in some cases even members of other species) are currently involved in a bitter leadership struggle. While this goes on, the Dominate is weak and fragmented, and some conquered systems in the 2000 Worlds have already made a bid for independence.

It is highly unlikely that this situation will be resolved for the next 3-5 years at the very least. Until that time, Dominate activity will be mostly confined to areas of current influence. An ambitious leader might make a big raid or launch a small crusade into human or Hiver space to demonstrate his ability to prosecute the war against the G'naak and thereby rally additional support, and such an attack would be a serious matter. However, a massive campaign such as those seen in recent years is unlikely.

Once those five years or so are up, it is likely that the Dominate will be reduced in stature but more unified than it currently is. It will once again be able to undertake major operations. At that time, its goals will be the reunification of the K'Kree under whatever leader emerges, and then revenge for the setbacks suffered at Gateway. A new campaign in the direction of Capital is possible, but this is unlikely until the K'Kree have been conquered.

For the time being and the foreseeable future, the Dominate is a distant threat and a real nuisance, but not an overwhelming, imminent disaster. Something will have to be done about it sooner or later but there are other matters to attend to first. The survival of humanity and other species may depend upon whether Something Is Done before the Dominate can regain its strength. For now, neither side has the capability to continue the death-struggle other than with minor raids and the occasional covert operation.

THE GREAT RESCUE

As already mentioned, the majority of the Star Vikings are in the process of crossing Charted Space on their way Coreward on the first leg of their Great Rescue. There truly is no way to predict what they may find 'out there'.

Assuming that they are not distracted by other events on the way, the Vikings may indeed manage to locate surviving Yaskoydri. Some may have retained some of their technology and be anxiously watching for rescue ships. Others may have forgotten their heritage and be dwelling contentedly in mid or even low-tech towns. The Great Rescue will be more than a matter of operating a bus service between the Coreward regions and Charted Space. It may be necessary to convince reluctant populations to move on from their happy home. The rescuers may find themselves having to help design and build starships after first raising the local tech level to make building them possible.

Just crossing the vast distances involved is an epic undertaking that might require exploration, diplomacy and combat at various times. And there are other possibilities too. What of other species encountered in the region settled by refugee Yaskoydri? What of wonders undreamed-of waiting out there in the depths of space? What about the possibility of somehow crossing the high-energy wave zone and exploring on the far side – perhaps all the way to the galactic core!

The Great Rescue is not an adventure; it is a whole new epic story, and one that will be told in future *Traveller* supplements. However, much of the story will take place far from Charted Space; the Star Vikings' tale may never be told there. Or perhaps some day the Star Vikings will return with news of success or disaster... bearing a warning or asking for aid. These events will indeed unfold, but they will unfold over many years. They deserve a whole series of game supplements to detail them. They will get them.

THE DROYNE, THE ANCIENTS AND RELATED MATTERS

At the time of the breakup of the Third Imperium it was known that the Ancients were in fact Droyne, but the Droyne of 1116 were not the Ancients. The Droyne of ancient times were probably not very much different to today, but among them arose Yaskoydray, or Grandfather. Yaskoydray and his children elevated their species (most of whom shared neither the supergenius intellect nor the incredible ambition of Grandfather and his offspring) almost to the status of gods.

The Ancients built wonders all across Charted Space, including Ringworlds, planetary rosettes and floating cities deep in gas giant atmospheres. They transplanted promising species all over Charted Space and beyond, and voyaged over immense distances to explore the wonders of the universe. At some point, the Ancients fought a war that destroyed their civilization. It is generally accepted by Imperial scientists that the Ancients warred among themselves; Yaskoydray against his children. There are other theories, but this one has gained acceptance in most circles.

Whatever the cause, the so-called Final War (a term that is now also applied to the Second Imperial Civil war, though the latter was somewhat less impressive) lasted about 2000 years and shattered the Droyne civilization. Many worlds were wiped out and others saw their population revert to a pastoral existence. Some Droyne populations lost the ability to 'caste' and thereby become full Droyne. These beings are now the semi-sentient Chirpers. Grandfather survived (and thus probably won) the war, but eventually retreated to a pocket universe where he remains to this day – at least according to an 1105 expedition that claimed to have entered the pocket universe and spoken with him. There is little proof of this assertion.

The Droyne of today are not the Ancients. Their Oytrops (communities) vary in size and technological sophistication, and are scattered randomly across Charted Space. A few Ancients artifacts remain in working order among the Oytrops but these are not understood and certainly cannot be duplicated. The Droyne of 1248 cannot be thought of as a single group. Each enclave is distinct, an entity in its own right and often unconnected with any other Droyne community. There are some starfaring communities of Droyne, but more mid to low-tech ones. Many were hit by the Viral Plague just like everyone else, and have recovered to whatever degree they were able. They go about their business, whatever it may be, as they always have. Droyne rarely explain their actions to

humans, and even rarer is the explanation that is actually understandable.

It may be that there is some kind of Droyne resurgence going on. Certainly their ships have been quite active in recent years, as they were during the last days of the Third Imperium. The possibility that the same freak mutation that produced Grandfather could happen again cannot be discounted, but it is extremely unlikely.

The Droyne do not seem interested in the fate of the Yaskoydri – and indeed, why would they be? The transplant of the Yaskoydri was carried out by the Ancients, not modern Droyne. Events so far away are of little interest to the Droyne of Charted Space. However, the Empress Wave is of some interest to the Droyne. What its psionic effect might be upon Droyne – or upon Chirpers – is at present unknown.

THE DEADSPACE PHENOMENON AND THE GHOST FLEET

Deadspace is the term given to a range of phenomena that may or may not be related. First documented in the Crucis Margin sector, Deadspace is an area where Jump drives behave erratically or not at all. Physical and temporal laws seem to be also distorted in the region. The exact region where this occurs is vague, but most reports have originated from a region somewhat to Rimward-Trailing of the point where Ley, Gateway, Glimmerdrift reaches and Crucis Margin sectors meet.

In the latter days of the Third Imperium, the Deadspace Phenomenon was the subject of some concern and several expeditions to investigate it. Not all returned, and those that did often presented inconclusive information or contradictory data. It was eventually established that Deadspace was, among other things, a 'Misjump Graveyard' for starships.

The full story of Deadspace is told in the Gateway Domain series of Grand Adventures, and that story is not recorded in the official histories of the 4th Imperium as of 1248 since it occurred far away and long ago. What is known is that someone found a way to deliberately 'hide' starships in Deadspace, holding them in a form of temporal stasis. Many of the vessels so hidden were the results of random Misjumps, but others were deliberately entrapped as part of a policy to store warships against some future need.

It is now known that the Ghost Fleet was steadily built up by the controversial Archduke Erechs of Gateway Domain during his reign. Erechs was exposed to Deadspace when his Superdreadnought flagship Misjumped at the Battle of Annapabar during the Solomani Rim War. Later rescued from Deadspace, Erechs was different afterward, and was eventually deposed. His actions in the latter years of his reign were at the time incomprehensible, but it may be that he somehow came to understand that a fleet would be needed in the future and set about creating one. It is also possible that Erechs was quite mad, as many supposed at the time of his deposition, and that the Ghost Fleet was part of some lunatic plan that never came to fruition.

Whatever his purposes, Erechs was able to direct large numbers of Imperial Navy vessels into the Deadspace area. Most of these ships were identified among the Ghost Fleet at the time of its re-emergence. Erechs also instituted several programs that made no sense at the time – indeed, some seemed detrimental to the Imperium or even treasonous in nature – but which played a part in the survival of the Gateway region during the Dominate war.

How the existence of the Ghost Fleet came to be known to the leaders of the Imperium may never be revealed, but nevertheless an expedition penetrated Deadspace during the desperate last days of the Gateway campaign. There they found the means to turn the tide of the war. Freed from their long imprisonment, the vessels of the Ghost Fleet joined the general melee around Gateway Station and were instrumental in winning the very marginal victory there. There were few survivors of that immense clash, but their tales do shed a new light on certain events occurring in the 990s in Gateway Domain.

The Deadspace Phenomenon does remain active, though it is diminished in size now.

THE FORWARD TIMELINE

The information presented here is fairly general in nature, giving an indication of what is likely to unfold in the coming years. Intentions stated here are the plans of the power group or the state in question rather than a definitive statement of what will occur. What follows is some general data to give Referees an idea where the *Traveller* universe is going. These themes and concepts will be more fully explored in future supplements and adventures.

Note that nothing in this section is carved in stone. Something unexpected may happen, causing the plans of a given power to be derailed. Or a Referee may decide that he/she wishes to disregard or alter some aspect of the setting. What is certain is that while the 1248 setting will change and evolve from this point forward, with the odd little surprise thrown in, there will be no radical changes to the setting. Referees can go on from this point in the knowledge that there is no great universe-changing event planned for a couple of game years' time.

The information here for the most part represents what is known to the inhabitants of Charted Space in 1248. Some of what follows may be a little inaccurate or may be found in the future to be based on incorrect assumptions. The concept of 'wheels within wheels' is central to the *Traveller* universe so we will not present simple truths to be filed and forgotten. Instead, we give you some generalizations and starting points. Who knows where deeper investigation of these concepts may lead?

THE FOURTH IMPERIUM

The 4th Imperium is a powerful state, on the face of it, but it desperately needs to put its house in order. Many of the leaders who brought worlds or organizations into the Imperium were not people who Avery would have chosen as his great nobility. Some are fine men and women, but headstrong and determined to have things their own way. Others are 'reformed' dictators and warlords who have agreed to abide by the Imperial Charter but must be watched carefully. There is neither the time to let things settle down, nor any likelihood that the Imperium would become the place it is supposed to be if this were allowed to happen. Already, in the few short weeks since his coronation, Avery has been forced to deal harshly with members of the great nobility, stripping their titles.

This move has caused ripples among the nobility and the populace. Clearly Avery is attempting to assert and solidify his power and to clean out the worst of the 'expedient' nobles. There is no guarantee that such a move will not splinter the fledgling Imperium, since many nobles have a checkered history and there are plenty of skeletons concealed in a great many closets. Some have welcomed

the move as a genuinely good thing, some have accepted it after assurances that they will not be purged if they will lend their support. Others are angrily opposed to the move, which seems to fly in the face of agreements made at the formation of the Imperium. Not all of those who oppose Avery's consolidation are likely targets for a purge – some are entirely above reproach. However, there is a feeling that the Emperor may be seeking (by choice or out of a sense of duty) to become too much of an autocrat.

Protests are regularly made in the Moot about heavy-handedness on the part of the Imperial authorities, but there seems to be little option. The Emperor is the Emperor – he must rule as well as lead. Besides, the Emperor's spokespersons repeatedly state, Avery's actions are entirely legal and correct within the Imperial Charter. All actions previous to becoming an Imperial noble are irrelevant – the Emperor is only interested in whether or not a given noble has failed in his or her duty to the Iridium Throne and the people of the Imperium. Those that fulfill their duty, however grim their past, have nothing whatsoever to fear.

The same situation exists at lower levels of the nobility. Some of the senior nobles are quietly purging dubious characters from the ranks of their followers. In most cases, this is probably a fair and necessary action. However, lands and holdings can be transferred to other nobles, perhaps individuals whose loyalties lie closer to their liege than those of the purged predecessor. The process is monitored as best as possible, but there may be incidences of political readjustment that go unnoticed.

Those nobles who find themselves dispossessed tend to develop a vicious resentment of the Imperium as a result. After all, the holdings that they have just been stripped of may have been husbanded through the Dark Years and pledged to the Imperial cause in good faith, only to be lost at the whim of a senior noble. Some take their cases to the Moot and to the Emperor. Others leave Imperial space with a few followers. They may cause trouble on nearby worlds, trying to rally support to regain their holdings (or just hurt the Imperium), or head out into the Wilds to make a new home for themselves. Someday the Imperium will have to deal with the fallout of these events.

On the economic and technological front, the Imperium is weak and shaky. A great many Imperial worlds have stabilized at a mid-tech level (6-8), which is sufficiently high to allow them to contribute personnel to the Imperial services (with suitable training) and to be a market for high-tech goods, but not enough for them to contribute much to the Imperial economy. There is relatively little very high-technology manufacturing (D or better), but a fair amount of TL B-C industry.

Thus at present the economy is based on mainly TL B-C worlds, with higher-tech industry being mainly used to provide components for hybrid systems and/or small-volume runs of high-capability equipment, mainly for military use. Plans are being drawn up to begin a general elevation of tech level and industrial capability across the Imperium. On the mid-tech worlds, the emphasis is on elevation to TL 9, the point at which the world can usefully contribute to the Imperial economy and provide effectively for its own defense. Reconstruction Service personnel are active on such worlds

Elevating so many worlds to starfaring tech levels is a huge task, and investment money is severely limited. Thus the usual process is to set up a 'seeder' industrial complex capable of turning out TL 9 equipment that can be used to speed up the world's own redevelopment program. Of course, such a project is expensive and only a handful can be funded from the Reconstruction Service coffers. Most worlds must either wait their turn (this will be a long time) or find the money themselves. Otherwise, redevelopment must be done the hard way, with components bought offworld at market prices and advisors brought in from wherever they can be found.

The aim of the Industrial Redevelopment Project is to create a 3-tier system. The base tier will be the many TL 9 worlds, creating a good market for higher tech goods and a useful industrial base. The second tier will consist of the worlds currently at TL B or C. Assistance in reaching TL C will be given, and once there investment made available to expand the industrial base of the world. This will be the backbone of Imperial manufacturing.

The top tier is the TL D and above worlds, which will continue to produce high-tech components but will also be encouraged to begin creation of high-capability systems as specialist manufacturers. A handful of these worlds are targeted as 'regional technology centers' to be the site of training facilities for personnel and to be the core of the local economy. Some such worlds are also being funded in a bid to regain TL F and perhaps progress beyond.

The Industrial/Technological Development Program is a long job, and expensive. Other measures being taken to improve the economic well-being of the Imperium include investment in merchant starship fleets and starports. Competition for grants is fierce.

On the military front, the rationalization of the armed forces continues. The main problem is that there are not enough ships, and not enough yards to build and maintain them. The need to project power right across Charted Space into Ley Sector and beyond was a huge drain on the fleet, and of course most of the ships that were sent were lost in action. This drain of resources (in terms of trained crews

as well as hulls) has resulted in dreadful shortages among the squadrons of the Imperial Navy.

Programs are underway to fill the holes with cheap stop-gap vessels as the main fleet assets are made good, but there is also a shortage of good crews. Officers are often over-promoted, doing the best they can but without the experience they need. This situation will eventually resolve itself, especially since the standing fleet deployment to Trailing provides those who survive with a wealth of combat experience. Border incidents are also a source of on-the-job training.

The Imperial Navy has a commitment to keep the major trade corridors open, and undertakes sweeps out towards Terran and Freedom League territory. Small 'liaison and goodwill' squadrons are maintained on standing deployments in the Wilds to protect friendly powers. Whether these commitments can be maintained in the long term is an open question.

Diplomatically, the Imperium has more or less stable relations along its frontiers and maintains contact with most of the great powers, however tenuous that contact may be. There is tension with the Ziru Sirka along the mutual border, but neither side has the resources to push the issue. At times the situation resembles a cold war, with both powers courting Wilds worlds and countering one another's influence. At other times relations are cordial – but they are never friendly.

The Imperium has formally renounced any claims to territory beyond its current borders, and after a brief period of 'open arms', has embarked upon a policy of discouraging applications for membership. A few worlds are important enough to be considered anyway, but the best that most could hope for would be Client status. Clients cannot expect much from the Imperium at present. Some low-level technical assistance, investment by private Imperial companies, and the occasional 'liaison' visit from a patrol ship would be typical. Worlds with a strong economy might become part of a trans-border trade corridor, which might even be accompanied by a naval deployment, but this is unlikely.

The Imperium is at present primarily concerned with putting its house in order and shoring up its economy. It cannot afford to look exclusively inward, however, so some programs are ongoing. These include:

- Establishment of secure border regions by increased investment in local economies and defenses, allowing Imperial assets to be redeployed.
- Maintenance and development of existing Trade Corridors to Terra, Phoenix and Nicosia.
- Increasing the security of the Ziru Sirka Border Zone, while at the same time improving relations with the

Vilani Imperium.

- Establishment of a 'Buffer Zone' of friendly states in the Wilds.
- Continuance of support for Aslan at Kusyu and development of an alliance or strategic partnership.
- Maintenance of good relations with moderate powers among the Spinward States.
- Maintenance of pressure on Dominate forces to Trailing
- Maintenance of a presence in the former Black Imperium and rehabilitation of survivors there.
- Location and recovery of Longbow data and equipment.
- Continued re-exploration of the Wilds and 'taming' operations.

'Taming' operations in the Wilds are mainly focused on assisting worlds and states in the Wilds to defend themselves better, allowing them to suppress pirate and Vampire activity. In time these worlds will send out trade ships to other Wilds polities and create a web of contact which will gradually result in further taming of the Wilds and the establishment of a region of small, stable powers. This region of 'client states' will be a market for Imperial goods and a bastion against any foreign power that might encroach upon local space.

The Imperium has an active policy of encouraging independent expeditions into the Wilds. These are monitored as far as possible by the Scout Service, but there are persistent rumors of empire-building by factions using Imperial resources. On balance, however, these missions help drive back the frontier of the Wilds and contribute to the ongoing campaign to bring civilization back to the stars.

The Fourth Imperium does have a long-term plan. The first component is the stabilization and strengthening of the economy and society. This will likely take 10-15 years, during which time groundwork can be laid for later projects.

The second phase is to create a web of friendly states close to the Imperial borders, and further out. These will gradually spread their civilizing influence until they meet up. The support and advice offered (however minor) and trade with the Imperium will create goodwill among most of these states. Hostile ones may fall victim to events, but if not then measures may have to be taken. By selectively supporting friendly states, the Imperium hopes to eclipse the less amenable ones. This phase of the project may take up to 25 years just for the nearby sectors, but the groundwork is already being laid so the main segment of this phase can begin in 5-10 years. Priority is being given to small friendly states along lines of communication with the other great powers, as stepping stones in the trade corridors and as a buffer against foreign expansion.

The third component of the plan is to consolidate influence over these friendly local states and use them as a springboard for further efforts out into the Wilds. By then, some of the nearby friendly states will wish to become full Imperial members. This will be entirely acceptable providing they join as assets rather than needy poor relations. The Imperium cannot afford to take on further drains on its economy.

There is no final outer border planned, but neither does the Imperium wish to grow too large. A region bounded by the 'claw' to Spinward and extending perhaps two sectors to Trailing, creating an area about the size of a Domain of the Third Imperium, is considered the limit of desirable expansion. The plan is to cultivate friendly or client states beyond this point, developing a buffer region inhabited by polities capable of defending themselves but not threatening the Imperium and perhaps even relying upon it for defense against a major threat.

Within the overall plan there are two major factors that influence everything else. Firstly, the power of the Emperor must be consolidated and impressed upon every world or corporation within the Imperium. There must be a single leader with a vision to lead the citizens into the future, and that leader must have the power to protect and guide his realm. Delegation is essential over such great distances, so a caste of honorable and dutiful subordinates must be cultivated – people who can lead as well as rule.

The second priority concerns the Empress Wave. Although it is not the awesome threat that was first feared, the Wave may still cause great upheaval in the Imperium. Society must be cohesive yet pliable enough to flex under the strain and remain intact. Creating this society means ensuring that leaders are both trustworthy and charismatic, both powerful and dutiful. This is perhaps the most difficult task facing the young Imperium. Economic and military strength can be built, but it will mean nothing if the fabric of society comes apart and the strength so laboriously regained is turned one faction upon another. This lesson was learned hard in the fall of the Third Imperium. Creating this society will be the completion of Strephon's reforms; the work that Avery was literally born to accomplish.

The future of the Imperium thus lies in the hands of the people that lead it, and foremost among them is Emperor Avery I. He must unite the people and persuade leaders to follow him. He must purge the 4th Imperium of the worst elements among its noble caste and raise those who are more worthy in their place. And yet he must do this without losing the faith of the people, without becoming a Lucan and without falling victim to an assassin's bullet or a great noble's coup. Doing what must be done without losing the trust and faith of the people is Avery's greatest challenge.

It is for this reason as much as any other that the Emperor surrounds himself with young nobles bearing pistols while he carries only a sword. He was born to lead the Imperium into the future, but his fate is in the hands of the people. Each of those young nobles has it within his or her power at any time to bring down the Emperor and set the Imperium on a different course – or to prevent someone else from doing just that.

Thus far, the gesture of trust has been well-rewarded. An assassination attempt just days after Avery's coronation was met by fanatical resistance from the Inner Circle of nobles and the Imperial Bodyguard Detachment. Avery's own response to the events that followed are an indication of his vision for the future of the Imperium:

"We are each and every one of us the guardian and protector of the future. Each of us is indeed his brother's keeper. Collectively and individually we will shape the future. Any one of us, and all of us collectively, hold the fate of worlds in our hands.

It was the choice, not the duty, of these people to place themselves in the line of fire. A choice freely made and paid for in blood. Any one of them could have instead fired at me, or simply sought cover and let events take their course. Yet they chose to fight to defend me. Upon the day that an Emperor is not worthy of such sacrifice, the Fourth Imperium will fall like others before it.

I am merely the custodian of a vision; it will be others that make it reality. I have helped to keep the Flame alive through the dark years, and I have tried to show you the way, but it will be others who bear the Flame out into the darkness. When no-one is willing to bear the Flame, to face danger in the hope of building a better future, then I will no longer matter.

And so long as there are men and women willing to risk their lives to protect the vision that lies at the heart of all we do, the Fourth Imperium will endure. I may fall, but the Flame will pass to others. My vision is of a future in which the bearers of the Flame are so many that I no longer matter; a future where the fate of this thing that we call the Imperium is safe in the hands of her people. And in that future, too, I am irrelevant.

One way or another, I will cease to matter. Which of these fates comes to pass is not mine to decide.

The nature of my eclipse is in your hands."

Whether a heartfelt and impromptu speech or a deliberate piece of public-relations work aimed at further building the 'cult of personality' surrounding Avery as Emperor, there is an element of truth here. At present the future of the 4th Imperium depends upon Avery; a single bullet could

unravel everything. In time, however, a decision will be made. Either enough 'bearers of the flame' will take up the challenge and the Imperium will become a living thing with a purpose of its own, or it will fail.

The future of the Imperium is very much in the hands of her people.

THE ZIRU SIRKA

The Ziru Sirka suffered terribly in the early years of the century, suffering a massive drain on its resources. Although Vland is once again the seat of power and the three Bureaus are answering to the commands of the Shadow Emperor, the balance of power has shifted. The Ziru Sirka still retains a vague dream of becoming once again a powerful interstellar empire, but reality has roughly intruded into these visions. The truth is that the Ziru Sirka needs to regain its strength before any expansion can be even considered, and in the meantime it has some serious problems.

At the present time the Ziru Sirka is having trouble holding down what it already owns. Faith in the bureaus and the Shadow Emperor has been somewhat shaken and some worlds would prefer to chart their own course than risk being dragged into future follies. This is entirely unacceptable to the Vilani leadership, and various means (ranging from economic coercion to outright military action) are being used to prevent secession.

The border with the 4th Imperium is also a major issue. The Vilani are suspicious of Imperial motives, and believe that in the long term the 4th Imperium will attempt to reintegrate the old territories of the 3rd. The border zone in Dagudashaag sector must therefore be fortified and brought under strict control. There are also plans to create a buffer zone by promoting pro-Vilani or at least anti-Imperial sentiment in the region. Ideally Imperial encroachment will be prevented by the locals, with little involvement from the Ziru Sirka. For now, however, significant shipments of arms and arms-manufacturing equipment have been sent to certain worlds as a 'goodwill gesture' intended to promote the 'self-defense capability' of those worlds.

Another measure undertaken to limit Imperial expansion is a quiet sponsorship of privateering and even piracy in the border zone. While the 'Flaming Eye' (the traditional Vilani pirate emblem) is never welcome in Vilani space, certain worlds have been quietly encouraged to support vessels of dubious registry and not to ask questions about their cargoes. Vilani agents working through local contacts are willing to pay over the odds for cargoes originating aboard Imperial vessels. Such activity could increase tension or even spark a war between the Imperium and the Ziru Sirka, so the Vilani are having to tread carefully. Curtailing the aggressive Imperials seems worth some risk, however.

Finally, the Ziru Sirka is going to have to deal with the effects of the Empress Wave in the near future. Some disruption is almost certain, and there is real concern about what might happen when the inert War Machine on Vland is encountered by the leading edge of the Wave. Given that the Vilani have a cultural hatred of psionics and the Wave can occasionally activate the latent abilities of an individual, some sort of psionic backlash is quite likely as the Wave passes over the Ziru Sirka.

THE SPINWARD STATES

The Spinward States are in quite a mess. The most powerful of the successor states to the Regency, the Imperial Regency, retained the lion's share of vessels and military forces as various regions seceded. Its fleet, even after the disasters in Core sector, is larger than it can maintain. They are currently being used to intimidate member worlds into remaining loyal and to keep other successor states at bay. It is obvious, however, that the Imperial Regency is becoming locked into a spiral. It needs the huge fleet to hold down its territory, but its territory cannot support the fleet.

Reforms of the fleet and the economic structure of the Imperial Regency itself are overdue. However, to slim down the fleet would be to lose the ability to keep worlds in their place, further reducing the capability of the Imperial Regency to maintain its forces. This spiral has three possible endings. It may be that measures will be taken to improve conditions and relations with nearby powers, allowing a reduced fleet structure to be implemented. More likely, the downward spiral will continue until the Imperial Regency breaks up under the strain.

However, there is a third, and very disturbing, possibility. The Regency may decide to use the fleet while it remains, to take advantage of the balance of power before it shifts. If this occurs then a war of conquest is likely. Whether the Imperial Regency could win such a war is debatable and would depend heavily upon the response of her neighbors.

As an almost inevitable consequence of the situation, the Imperial Regency is becoming increasingly militarized. Budgets for non-military programs are being cut and planetary taxation increased. In the short term this is working to shore up the crumbling defense establishment, but at the price of making the Regency a fairly unpleasant place to live. Concern about worlds seceding has further soured relations with neighbors, to the point where the Imperial Regency is becoming an arrogant bully whose personnel treat 'foreigners' with contempt and suspicion. Even the Regency's merchant fleet behaves like its captains are lords of the spacelanes.

For the next few years at least, a state of Cold War is likely around the Imperial Regency region, a war that

might become hot at any time, or flare up in sporadic clashes, annexations or rebellions. The Imperial Regency is destined for troubled times and will almost certainly export those troubles to her neighbors.

In addition to dealing with continued troubles with Aslan to Spinward-Rimward (albeit greatly diminished troubles now that expansion back into the Hierate has begun), the other states of the former Domain of Deneb are all in a state of transition. New alliances are forming, and some of them have major issues to settle.

The League of Spinward States is made up of very different peoples, who sometimes have trouble getting along or reaching a consensus. The Republic of Regina and the League of Deneb are both finding their identity and putting their own house in order at present, a task made more difficult by the passage of the Empress Wavefront through their territory.

The Wave is likely to cause considerable disruption in the next few years, most notably among the Zhodani refugees who settled in the region. It is unlikely to have the catastrophic effects that it did in the Zhodani Consulate but since those who have been exposed to psionics (for example, having had treatment for depression administered by the Tvarchedl') are more receptive to the Wave's psionic component, some civil disturbance is likely. Finding ways to minimize the effects is a priority for the Spinward States.

To Coreward, mostly on the other side of the Wavefront, the dust is beginning to settle in the former Zhodani Consulate. Several 'sane' states are gradually coming together into the Zhodani Concord, but they are opposed by those who do not, for whatever reason, want to be part of such an organization. Some of these naysayers are 'insane' by Zhodani standards, but many are good, stable Zhodani societies that have managed to reconstruct their own microcosm of the old Consulate or found another workable system and do not want to be dictated to.

The various Zhodani states are also somewhat compelled to at least try to send aid to their Yaskoydri cousins to Coreward. Expeditions are necessarily small and limited in capability, but there is a distinct move Coreward which is likely to continue over the next few years.

THE RIMWARD STATES

To Rimward of the Imperium, the two great post-Solomani states (the Terran Commonwealth and the Solomani Imperium) continue to expand. The Solomani Imperium claims leadership of all Solomani people, everywhere, and seems intent upon enforcing this. Its ambitious program of expansion is likely to result in a total withdrawal of support from ongoing operations against the Dominate. Already the border zone between the two great post-Solomani

states is the scene for considerable espionage and covert operations activity, as well as constant harassment of shipping. This situation is likely to get worse rather than better.

The Solomani Imperium has stated its intention to impose the Second Rule of Man across the region, and is already pushing towards Home, former capital of the Solomani Confederation, along a narrow arm of annexed worlds. Expansion is being undertaken by a cynical mix of diplomatic bullying and slight economic inducements, with occasional outright annexations. Most worlds are offered 'full membership' of the Solomani Imperium, with some slight economic inducements, or the hint that they will be annexed as 'associate member' worlds which are basically exploited for the benefit of the full-member worlds. Most worlds with a non-human (and non-Solomani in some cases) population are directly annexed as 'protectorates' allowing the Solomani to disarm and exploit the non-humans.

The aggressive expansion of the Solomani Imperium is viewed with alarm in the Terran Commonwealth, which is far less expansionistic. At present the balance of power is about equal, in that the Commonwealth is economically stronger but distracted by a need to supply vessels to the ongoing efforts against the Dominate. The Commonwealth is also far less well integrated than the Solomani Imperium, both at the tactical and the strategic level.

Commonwealth strategy in containing the Solomani Imperium is to establish friendly relations with as many independent worlds as possible and encourage them to resist the expansion of the Rule of Man. A little hard aid is offered, but this is mainly in the form of smallarms and advisors rather than warships. The Commonwealth is trying to avoid a war with the Solomani Imperium but at the same time intends to use the threat of war to prevent the Rule of Man from acting too vigorously against the many resisting worlds.

The Commonwealth strategy is to use independent worlds as pawns in its struggle, draining Rule of Man resources on each world and at each system that is annexed until the strain is too great and the Solomani Imperium bankrupts itself. The essence of this strategy is a rather cynical one, and this is compounded by a deliberate policy of encouraging commerce raiding and privateering (both of which are Solomani traditions) in the Rule of Man's areas of interest. Having drawn out Solomani Imperium warships to deal with the raiders, Commonwealth 'special operations ships' (Naval vessels disguised as merchant ships, Vampires or independent forces, thus deniable) will ambush the warships and increase the drain on the Rule of Man.

All this activity is making the Rimward region somewhat more turbulent than it might otherwise be, and small emerging states are being caught up in the conflict. The situation is likely to get worse rather than better in the near and mid term, unless something or someone intervenes.

THE BLACK IMPERIUM

The Black Imperium is a shambles in 1248, and is likely to remain that way for some time. Various states are involved in offering aid to the shocked survivors, but the task is too great to be completed in any reasonable time frame. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that several powers wish to control Capital (which is increasingly being referred to by its old title, Sylea). Reasons for this range from ongoing research into the nature of the Lucan Ships, as a status symbol, or to deny it to others. There is thus a certain amount of rivalry and friction within the Black Imperium.

The surviving locals cannot do much besides watch events unfold and hope that their misery will eventually come to an end; any trouble tends to originate from outside the Black Imperium region. Incidents between the naval assets of rival states are not uncommon, and the odd Vampire will wander in from time to time. There have even been small assaults from the direction of the Dominate as one warlord or another tries to demonstrate his power by taking the Imperial capital.

It would appear that the worlds of the Black Imperium are still significant. While incapable of causing much trouble on their own, they are likely to be the flashpoint for other problems in the near future.

THE COREWARD-TRAILING STATES

To Coreward-trailing of the Black Imperium lies the old Imperial Domain of Antares, and the Julian Protectorate. The Protectorate was once part of the Vilani Imperium and the Rule of Man, but it was never part of the Third Imperium. Indeed, it was an enemy for most of its history – and an enemy that managed to defeat the forces of the Imperium in battle.

The Antares region is now a wasteland, haunted by Vampires and Gods of Thunder forces. Beyond it lie several minor states with mixed human and Vargr populations. Some are merely trying to survive; they are ready victims of the so-called Raider Kings who lead several small (often one-world) states in the region. The Raider Kings are, as their name suggests, pirates and raiders, throwbacks to the glorious days of Vargr expansion and opposition to the First Imperium. They pose a real threat to the rebuilding of civilization in the region, mitigated somewhat by the fact that they regularly turn on one another.

The only real power for order in the region, the New Protectorate (more often known as the Julian Protectorate, and claiming direct succession from that ancient power), is wracked by internal division and at times seems about to shatter into dozens of minor states. Only the impending threat of the Raider Kings keeps it together.

The Star Legion, as the cobbled-together military arm of the Protectorate is called, is badly overstretched at present, trying to beat back the Raider Kings and dislodge the Gods of Thunder from Antares sector. The future of the fledgling Protectorate will be decided in the next few years, and is by no means certain. On one hand, recent defeats have weakened the Vilani and drawn Raider King attention in that direction while the Gods of Thunder enclaves in Antares have been weakened by raids carried out by Imperial and other naval forces. However, the Protectorate is at best a tenuous organization whose members are prone to fall out over almost any issue. There also appears to be some kind of problem to Coreward or Coreward-Trailing, but details are not known to Imperial scholars at this time.

It is likely that if the Protectorate does not firm up in the near future then it will collapse entirely. The only thing that can save the Protectorate is the possibility that a strong leader may arise. The original Protectorate was named for Julian, a human who welded its diverse membership together, so perhaps history may repeat itself. If not, analysts give the Protectorate 15 years at most, and probably as little as 5 before it becomes a squabbling mass of tiny states or a new set of Raider Kings.

If the Protectorate does get its act together then it is likely that it will attempt to crush the Raider Kings and pacify (and annex) Antares sector. The latter may bring it into conflict with the post-Imperial powers active around Core sector or with the Dominate. It is known that the K'Kree had a small enclave on the Protectorate side of the Lesser Rift, to Coreward-Trailing. It what became of this foothold is unknown.

THE UNITED WORLDS AND THE FREEDOM LEAGUE

Having dissociated themselves with the Hive Federation, the Freedom League stands as the main power in the region. The League has strong ties with the United Worlds and the Fourth Imperium, and is well aware that the Dominate is a pressing threat to all of Charted Space. The League is thus primarily concerned with operations to Coreward-Trailing in the hope of disrupting or even curtailing the Dominate's resurgence. The League finds the obsession with Capital and Core sector that some other powers display to be nonsensical. The problem is the Dominate, not who gets to rule the wretched survivors of the Black Imperium. Certain other powers find the

League tiresome on this point, and others are happy to let the League spearhead the fight against the Dominate while they put their own house in order.

Recent moves on the part of the Solomani Imperium are also a cause for concern. Not only has the Rule of Man decided to stop fighting the Dominate, its assertion that it will someday rule all Solomani is troubling since much of the League is situated in what was once Solomani space. However, the Freedom League is in a difficult position. It must keep up the pressure on the Dominate, and so lacks the power or influence to prevent the new threat of the Solomani Imperium from growing.

As insurance against the Rule of Man, links with the Terran Commonwealth are being strengthened and League missions actively oppose Rule of Man agitation in the Wilds. However, the rather cynical policies of the Commonwealth do not sit well with the League, which feels that if a power wants independent worlds to fight its battles then at least some overt support is desirable.

The League is determined to expand and integrate as much territory as possible, but is firmly opposed to using force to this end. Its programs of diplomacy are coupled with economic and technological assistance, plus 'courtesy' visits by League warships that usually end up helping with pirate or Vampire problems. The result is an atmosphere of goodwill, and while the League is not willing to exert any pressure at all (except where its security is severely threatened), many worlds have petitioned to join. Since these tend to have received 'bootstrap' uplift programs already, they tend to come in as minor but useful members of the League rather than dependents to be supported. The League intends to continue this policy in the foreseeable future, bypassing worlds that do not wish to join.

The United Worlds, while a very minor power, occupies a strategic position between the Terran Commonwealth, the Freedom League and the 4th Imperium, and as such benefits from considerable trade. All three powers have major embassies on the UW capital, Phoenix, and will often thrash out major issues there. The economic and political benefits for the UW are considerable. The United Worlds is well aware that its position depends upon the goodwill of its three large benefactors, which can occasionally lead to ticklish issues.

The UW is not interested in expansion. Its merchant fleet is quite considerable in size, and is augmented by vessels of other powers using the UW as a 'flag of convenience' while operating in the region. Links with local states and independent worlds are mainly economic; while UW patrol ships do range across the region to protect the merchant fleet, the only major naval units are permanently assigned to defend the worlds of the core systems. A handful of

vessels have been sent to join various fleets, and UW ships did fight at the first and second Battles of Gateway, but for the most part the UW navy is small and incapable of projecting power. This is entirely acceptable since the leadership perceives little need at present. This situation is unlikely to change.

THE DOMINATE

With the destruction of the great prophet, it is highly unlikely that the Dominate will re-emerge as a unified force in the near future. Far more likely is the establishment of several successor states, each led by a great warlord or self-styled prophet.

The current period of confusion within the Dominate is expected to last for at least 3 years, with various factions becoming involved in infighting as leadership is disputed. The 2000 Worlds remnants will attempt to reassert their independence during this time, and some groups may even succeed. If the 2000 Worlds can produce a suitable leader and obtain help from somewhere, it may be able to recapture significant territories and retain them, significantly weakening what is left of the Dominate. If this comes to pass, the Dominate is likely to remain a collection of smallish (3-4 subsectors each) successor states that fight among themselves as often as they cooperate.

However, if the 2000 Worlds' bid for freedom fails, the victors should gain enough power to intimidate other successors to follow them, and the Dominate will once again become a unified force. If this is the case, it is unlikely that they can be stopped. Another Grand Alliance is virtually inconceivable. The original campaign exhausted the various states and set back the recovery (according to Imperial estimates) by some 10-20 years. The resources to defeat a unified Dominate a second time simply do not exist.

There is one other major concern about the Dominate. The effects of the Empress Wave on Viral entities are largely unknown. There is no telling what may result as the Wave passes into Dominate territory. The only certainty is that the Dominate is down but not out.

THE HIVE FEDERATION

The Hive Federation is probably the most difficult of all power blocs to predict. It seems to be maintaining its bunker mentality stance, hiding within a border zone and maintaining contact with other states only through intermediaries or long-range diplomatic missions. It is likely that the Hivers still feel extremely threatened by the Solomani Imperium and plan measures to contain their expansion.

The Hivers would probably be extremely reluctant to come to the aid of their ancient K'Kree foes, even though doing so might be the decisive factor in breaking the power of the Dominate. Various ambassadors have already suggested to the Hivers that they might like to consider extending assistance to the 2000 Worlds survivors but so far the Federation has not even graced the suggestion with a reply.

No-one in Charted Space knows what lies beyond the Hive Federation to Rimward-Trailing. There are some wild theories that something happening there has demanded the Hivers' attention. There is of course no way to prove or disprove this theory, and the Hivers are less than forthcoming with information.

The Hive Federation remains the great enigma of Charted Space.

AN OPEN BOOK

The last page in the history of the Third Imperium has been written; a new story is now unfolding. A new era has begun among the wreckage of the old. It is a time of danger and opportunity; of loss but also of hope. Analysts are able to make some predictions based on the information available, but what will happen next remains to be seen. As 1248 dawns, the future of Charted Space is very much an open book.

FINAL NOTES

The New Era 1248 setting is a deliberate attempt to bring together the best aspects of the various *Traveller* milieux. Exploration, reconstruction and great naval battles can take place alongside delicate politics and tramp-trading in a beat-up old merchant ship. For those who liked the stable Imperium there are great powers within whose borders things are reasonably settled. For those who wish to head out into the unknown there are frontiers and wonders to explore. What any given *Traveller* group does with the setting is up to them. If an aspect of the setting is disliked, it can be downplayed and ignored. Conversely, if a Referee likes a given concept it can be the focus of an entire campaign.

There are old and new mysteries to be explored in 1248. Not everything revealed as 'true' is strictly that; there may be complications or deeper truths yet to be exposed. But what you can be sure of is that while the 1248 setting will grow deeper and wider, it will not be subject to sudden and massive changes. 1248 is *Traveller*, and the developed 1248 setting as it will be ten supplements down the road will still be *Traveller*. There are no intentions to try to turn it into something else.

Okay, so here it is at last. There are other supplements to be written and adventures to be developed, but this one is finished. It is time to hand it over to the true Keepers of the Flame, the people who kept the game alive through the Dark Years – and the good times too.

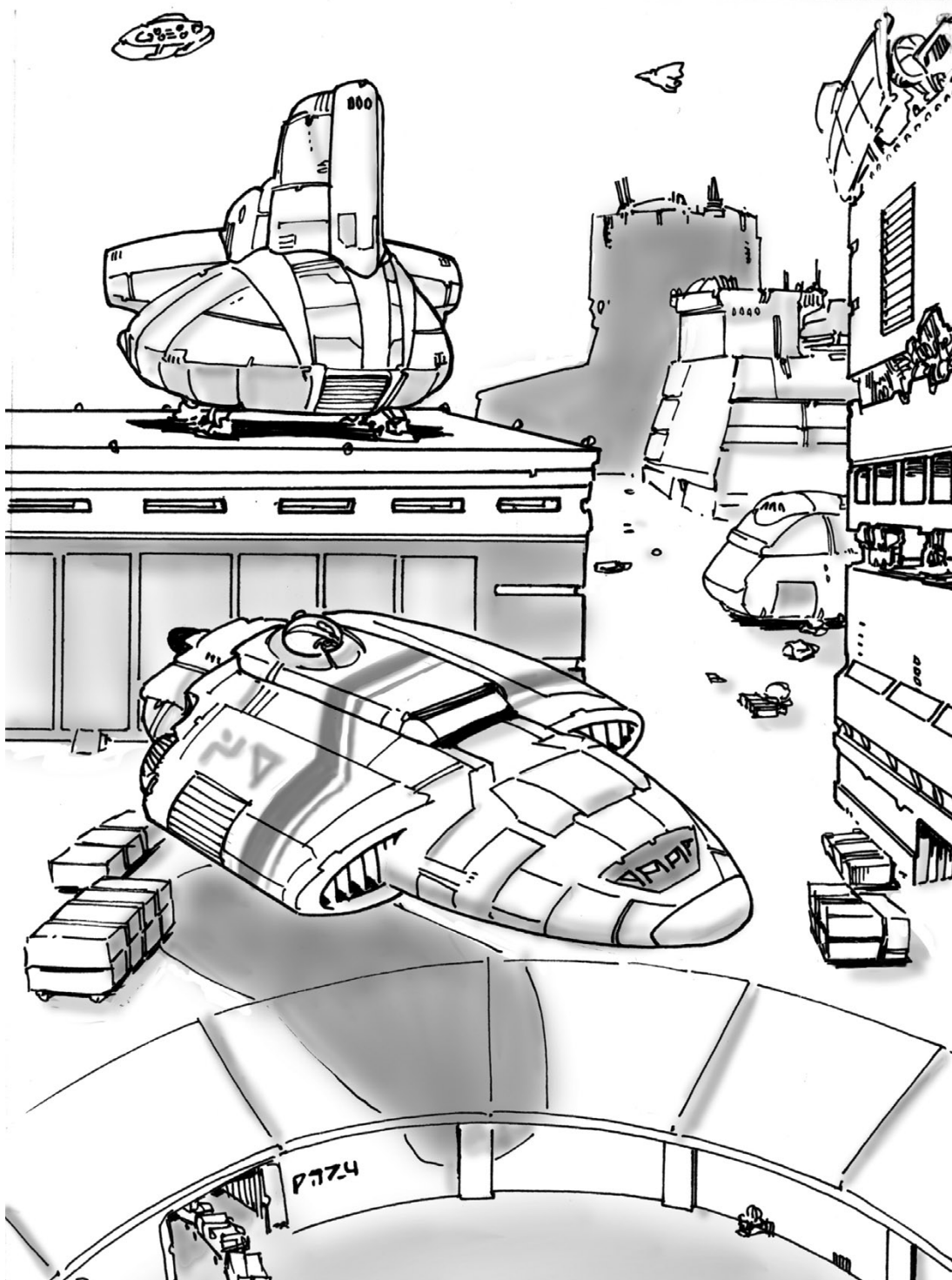
That'd be you.

“Just Believe”

MJD, Spring 2006.

APPENDIX 1

GENERATING UWPS FOR WORLDS IN THE NEW ERA



Ukse's B class starport, located in the County of Ukse, Dagudashaag Sector.

The worlds of the New Era are a special case in terms of world generation. The state of the various worlds is the result of a long period of stability followed by a short and very violent war, then a downward spiral, possibly with some kind of recovery. The procedure for generating UWP data for the New Era is thus carried out in two stages. First, the raw data is obtained using the standard **Traveller** system. It does not matter which version of the game is used, since the results are 100% compatible.

Since UWPs already exist for much of Charted Space, dating from the 993 or 1107 periods, it may not be necessary to generate the raw data for the system in question. If no data is available, begin by generating the system data normally. Next, the effects of the Collapse/Recovery period are applied to this data, giving a result for the year 1248.

Naturally, the effects of the Collapse vary considerably from region to region. Some areas were particularly hard hit; others were within a 'safe area' and suffered relatively little. In some cases these protected worlds might even have flourished and advanced during the years between the Collapse and the dawn of the New Era. Some regions are also subject to special considerations, such as the worlds of the Black Imperium.

COLLAPSE/RECOVERY EFFECTS

Nobody came through the dark years unscathed. Even in the Regency, which was the safest and best-protected region of Charted Space, compromises were made and futures were mortgaged for immediate survival. In some areas there was no protection whatsoever and the Collapse was almost total. Recovery also depended upon many factors, including friendly neighbors, access to Jumpstart caches or assistance from bodies such as the Usdiki Reconstruction Service.

Apply the Collapse Effects first, then Recovery Effects. It is for the Referee to decide whether any given factor applies to a world. If there is doubt, assume that the world is a 'Wilds' system.

MAXIMUM SUSTAINABLE POPULATION (MSP)

Some worlds cannot support a population without technological assistance. Determine the MSP of a given world as follows:

If atmosphere is type 0,1,2,3,A, B or C, habitation is not possible without life support equipment. If life support breaks down (see below), population drops to zero and the world is defined as a Boneyard.

If atmosphere is any other type, determine MSP using a base of A (10) and applying all applicable factors from the table below.

TABLE: MSP MODIFIERS

Factor	Modifier
Size	
Size 5-7	-1
Size 1-4	-2
Atmosphere	
Type 5,7,9	-1
Type 4	-2
Type D, E,F	-3
Hydrographics	
Hydro 1,2,A	-1
Hydro 0	-2

TECH LEVEL DECLINE

Higher-tech worlds tended to suffer most from the effects of the Collapse. Consult the table below to determine the number of tech levels lost in the Collapse. All die rolls use 6-sided dice, abbreviated D, e.g. 2D-2 means throw 2 dice and subtract 2 from the result. Minimum Tech Level is obviously 0. 1/3D: throw 1 die: 1-3 indicates a 1, 4-6 is a 2. 1/2D: throw 1D: 1-2 = 1, 3-4=2, 5-6=3. Any subtraction is made after this result is determined.

TABLE: TECH LEVEL DECLINE

Starting TL	Decline (TLs)	Dice
0-4	0-1	1/3D-1
5-7	0-2	1/2D-1
8-9	0-5	1D-1
A-B	2-7	1D+1
C-D	2-12	2D
E+	4-14	2D+2

TL Decline Modifiers

Region	Modifier	Notes
Safe Area	4 in 6 chance no TL drop; If TL drops, amount is 1/3 normal	Eg Regency
Frontier Region	2 in 6 chance no TL drop If TL drops, amount is 1/2 normal	Eg Usdiki
Wilds	None	Default option
Deep Wilds	TL drop +1 level	Hard-hit areas, e.g. most of Illeish
Holocaust Region	TL drop +1d3 levels	Major release points, e.g. route of Coronation Fleet, 'Vampire Highway' in Diaspora Sector

LIFE SUPPORT INTERRUPTION

If life support is interrupted on a hostile world (Atmos 0,1,2,3,A, B or C), large segments of the population (and quite possibly, everyone) will perish. To determine if life support was interrupted, use the following procedure:

If TL drops to 4 or less, Life Support fails completely. The world becomes a Boneyard. Otherwise, roll 2d6 and add the total number of TLs dropped in the Collapse. Consult the table below for results:

TABLE: LIFE SUPPORT INTERRUPTION

Roll (2D

+ modifiers)	Result
5 or less	No interruption
6-10	Partial loss of life support. Population digit drops 1d3+1
11-15	Massive loss of life support. Roll 1d3. This is the new Population digit
16+	Total life support loss. Population drops to 0 and world becomes a Boneyard.

STARPORT DECLINE

Starports are complex installations that tend to decay without proper maintenance. High-quality facilities were popular targets for Black War strikes, Vampire raids and tended to be the first area of a world to be attacked by Virus infection. Roll 1D plus modifiers on the following table to determine Collapse effects on a given Starport.

STARPORT DECLINE MODIFIERS

Region	Modifier	Notes
Safe Area	-5	Eg Regency
Frontier Region	-2	Eg Usdiki
Wilds	None	Default option
Deep Wilds	+2	Hard-hit areas, e.g. most of Ilelish
Holocaust Region	+5	Major release points, e.g. route of Coronation Fleet, 'Vampire Highway' in Diaspora Sector

Other Modifiers

TL Drop due to Collapse: Add number of TLs lost in Collapse

Special

If Population dropped to 0, Starport becomes Type E or X.

TABLE: STARPORT DECLINE (1D PLUS MODIFIERS)

Total	Result
0 or less	No Change
1-3	Port declines one level (e.g. A to B, E to X)
4-6	Port Declines 1-2 levels or to C, whichever is lower
7-9	Port Declines 1-3 levels or to D, whichever is lower
10+	Port Declines 1-6 levels or to E, whichever is lower

A world whose port drops below E is rated as X, meaning that the locals now shun offworld contact and do not even have a clearly marked landing area. Any previous port is so ruined that landing there would be more of a hazard than simply setting down in the wilderness.

GOVERNMENT CHANGE

Government types in the New Era are rated according to the standard *Traveller* system, though there are some special considerations. As a rule, decisive action and harsh measures were necessary in many cases in order to survive the chaos of the Collapse, and by the same token the conditions were ripe for an armed coup. Some worlds did maintain their existing governmental system even in the face of considerable pressure.

Roll 2D on the table below to determine if a government change and/or alteration in law level took place.

TABLE: GOVERNMENT CHANGE DUE TO COLLAPSE EFFECTS

2D	Result
0-6	No Change
7-9	World becomes Balkanized. See Balkanization, below
10-12	Government replaced. See Post-Collapse Government Table below
13+	Total collapse of central government. World is effectively an anarchy

Modifiers:

Region	Modifier	Notes
Safe Area	-3	Eg Regency
Frontier Region	-1	Eg Usdiki
Wilds	None	Default option
Deep Wilds	+1	Hard-hit areas, e.g. most of Ilelish
Holocaust Region	+3	Major release points, e.g. route of Coronation Fleet, 'Vampire Highway' in Diaspora Sector

Population Decline + amount population digit dropped by.

Where a world's population drops to zero, government type is automatically 0.

TABLE: POST-COLLAPSE GOVERNMENT TYPES (2D)

2D	UWP Code	Type	Notes
0-1	Q	Interim Government	The world is ruled by a temporary government (which may have been in power for some time)
2	C	Charismatic Oligarchy	Government by an elite group which enjoys considerable popular support
3	5	Feudal Technocracy	Government is based on control of technology or performance of technical tasks on behalf of the general populace Low-tech feudal structures are also possible
4	0	Anarchy	No formal government. Family bonds predominate. The world may be in the throes of a brief period of disturbance, or may be a permanent Anarchy
5	A	Charismatic Dictator	A single leader enjoying considerable popular support from the masses
6	M	Military Dictatorship or Junta	Government by the armed forces as an interim survival measure or result of a Coup
7	7	Balkanized	The world has several or many states. See Balkanization, below
8	T	Technologically Elevated Dictator	A leader or small group holds power through the use of relic technology
9	6	Captive Government	The world is ruled from outside, as a colony or a possessed territory
10	1	Tribal/Clan	Autonomous clans exert limited control over local areas.
11	D	Religious/Mystical Dictatorship	Government by a religious group or quasi-mystical leader.
12	B	Non-Charismatic Leader	A single leader who does not have popular support. Regime may be unstable.
13	S	Slave World	The world's government is ineffectual or non-existent. The populace survives by offering tribute or slaves to an outside power (often Vampire ships) which does not care to rule the world directly.
14+	V	Viral Hell	The world is run by malevolent Viral Entities, either openly or through a Quisling government

Modifiers

Region	Modifier	Notes
Safe Area	-2	Eg Regency
Frontier Region	-1	Eg Usdiki
Wilds	None	Default option
Deep Wilds	+1	Hard-hit areas, e.g. most of Ilelish
Holocaust Region	+3	Major release points, e.g. route of Coronation Fleet, 'Vampire Highway' in Diaspora Sector

POST-COLLAPSE LAW LEVEL

Law levels tend to be high on worlds that have had to take harsh measures in order to survive. If government type has changed due to the effects of the Collapse, redetermine Law Level by rolling 2d6-7 and adding the Base Law Level listed below for each government type. A result of less than 0 equals 0. An Anarchy (Government Type 0) automatically has Law Level 0.

TABLE: BASE LAW LEVEL FOR POST-COLLAPSE GOVERNMENTS

<i>Government Code</i>	<i>Base Law Level</i>
1	2
5	5
6	9
A	B
B	A
C	B
Q	7
M	C
S	B
T	D
V	F

BALKANIZATION

While many worlds that possess an effective planetary government have remote areas or primitive peoples that are not properly under the control of the central authorities, they are still considered to be unified states. Balkanized worlds are a different matter. These worlds have two or more (sometimes many) governments of varying sizes.

Balkanized states on the same planet can vary considerably in terms of tech level, government type and law level, and it is entirely possible that states will have very different levels of population or power. Generate the nature of Balkanization using the table below. The government and law level of each state should be generated separately, though where many tiny states exist only the most important ones need be detailed.

Balkanized worlds are sometimes peaceable, often with some kind of international body overseeing interaction between sovereign states. However, it is more usual that tension or even a state of war exists between the many states of such a world. If some states on a world are Viral Hells, Slave States or Technologically Elevated Dictatorships, the chances of peaceful interaction with other states will be rather small.

TABLE: BALKANIZATION

<i>2D</i>	<i>Result</i>
2-4	One Superpower, several Minor Powers
5-6	1-6 Major powers, several Minor Powers
7	Many Minor Powers, general anarchy elsewhere
8-9	2-6 Major Powers, general anarchy elsewhere
10	Two Superpowers, many Minor Powers
11-12	Three Superpowers, many Minor Powers

Definitions are local, and relative. Obviously, a 'Superpower' comprising 40% of the population of a world with 872 people on it is immensely powerful only when compared to the other 'states' of the world. For very low population worlds (digit 3 or less), it may be easier to consider Balkanized results to mean Anarchy or Tribal Government (type 1 or 2 respectively). References to major powers and super powers on such worlds are either deluded posturing on the part of local leaders or else represent remnants of much larger states whose population has been drastically reduced.

- A single Superpower typically represents 2D+2 multiplied by 5% (20-70%) of the world's population digit
- Two Superpowers each represent 1D+3 multiplied by 5% (20-45%) of the world's population digit
- Three Superpowers each represent 1D+1 multiplied by 5% (10-35%) of the world's population digit
- Each Major Power represents 1D+4 multiplied by 2% (10-20%) of the world's population digit

Percentages are rolled separately for each power. Any leftover population can be considered to be grouped into Minor powers (no more than 1-6% of the population in each, and often less), or a situation of general anarchy and chaos with many family groups, autonomous towns, nomadic tribes and tiny factions with no overall structure discernable.

TECHNOPHOBIA AND XENOPHOBIA

The events of the Collapse have left the population of many worlds with deep-seated fears of offworlders or technology, which can severely limit technological recovery or result in offworld contact going badly wrong. On the other hand, experiences may have given the population a more positive outlook. Roll 2D on the following chart to determine level of technophobia and xenophobia on such worlds. The same process can be used to determine attitude to other factors, such as Psionics.

TABLE: PHOBIAS

2D Result

0-2	Strongly Positive Attitude
3-5	Positive Attitude
6-8	Neutral Attitude
9-10	Negative Attitude
11-12	Strongly Negative Attitude
13+	Violently Negative Attitude

Modifiers

Population Drop: + amount digit reduced by in Collapse, to both Xenophobia and Technophobia

Wilds: +2 to both rolls

Holocaust Area: +2 to Xenophobia, +5 to Technophobia Roll

Raided by

Offworlders: +2 to Xenophobia Roll

Heavily Raided: +3 to Xenophobia Roll

COLLAPSE/RECOVERY RANDOM EVENTS

The period 1130-1248 was a very turbulent one, and most worlds suffered their share of disasters. Some achieved unlooked-for success, or were spared the worst effects of the period through good leadership or blind luck. It is not possible, nor desirable, to generate all the events that occurred on every world in Charted Space. Instead, the following chart allows the Referee to determine if something particularly unusual or noteworthy occurred, and how the world fared in terms of attempting a recovery.

If no random events occurred on a given world, it can be assumed that the surviving population have struggled on without making any real progress towards recovery. They may have made several attempts to clamber out of the wreckage, but each time new disasters have tumbled the world back into chaos. Thus, the post-collapse tech level, population and governmental data determined above is used unchanged.

It is up to the Referee to explain the results found on the table below in a plausible fashion. It seems unlikely that a world population can climb from hundreds to millions in just 120 years, for example, so perhaps the planetary population has been increased by refugees coming in from offworld, or maybe a large number of wild tribes, living beyond the borders of civilization, have now been integrated into the population.

Roll 1D for number of events: 1-2 = no random event. 3-4 = 1 event. 5 = 2 events. 6 = 1-6 random events. Apply all results. To determine which events apply, throw 1D for table then 1D for the actual event.

TABLE: RANDOM COLLAPSE AND RECOVERY EFFECTS

1D Result

1-2	Table 1
3-4	Table 2
5-6	Table 3

COLLAPSE AND RECOVERY EFFECTS TABLE 1

1D Result

1	Severe Virus infection. Increase Technophobia by one level
2	Raided by Imperial ships during the Black War. Population react negatively to Fourth Imperium
3	Raided by pirates or others during Recovery. Increase Xenophobia by one level
4	Major social catastrophe. Redetermine Government type on Post-Collapse Government table, and add +1d6 to law Level
5	Technological Recovery. Roll 1d6 on Extra TL Recovery table
6	Social Stability Achieved. Reduce Law Level by 1d3 and redetermine government as per standard <i>Traveller</i> rules

COLLAPSE AND RECOVERY EFFECTS TABLE 2

1	Significant relic technology recovered. Referee determines effects (see below)
2	Plague or Bioweapon. Reduce Population by 1d6+1 multiplied by 10%
3	Massive bombardment by Vampires or during the Black War. Significant regions uninhabitable and apply results of Continued Slide, below
4	Recovery never really got started. See Continued Slide, below
5	Undiscovered technology cache on world. See below.
6	World conquered by Vampires or Pocket Empire. Government becomes Captive (type 6) or slave (type S)

COLLAPSE AND RECOVERY EFFECTS TABLE 3

1	Very harsh survival measures required. Increase law level by 1d3
2	Government very shaky and unstable. Civil War possible
3	World made an early recovery but collapsed in the early 1200s. Apply results of Continued Slide, below
4	Population learned to pull together and came through well. Apply Recovery Effects and reduce law level by 1d3
5	Climatic or other disaster unrelated to the War or Viral Plague. See below
6	Anomaly or No Effect (Referee's choice). See below.

DESCRIPTION OF RESULTS

Most of the results of the above table are self-explanatory. In addition, most results are sufficiently open as to allow the Referee to create a suitable explanation. It can be especially poignant for characters to contact a world that made a heroic effort at recovery, only to fail and fall back into chaos. It is up to the Referee to determine what happened, how, and why.

CONTINUED SLIDE

Some worlds never achieved even the shaky post-collapse stability that most of the Wilds managed. For such worlds, roll 1D on the table below:

TABLE: CONTINUED SLIDE RESULTS

1D	Result
1	Central government completely collapses. Government type is now 0 (Anarchy) and reduce TL by 1-3
2	Technological decline continues. Reduce TL by 1
3	Population continue to die off. Reduce population digit by 1
4	Apply results 2 and 3
5	Apply results 1 and 3
6	World collapses into anarchic barbarism. Government is now type 1 (tribal), TL is reduced by 1-3. Fighting between factions continues.

TECHNOLOGICAL CACHE

Sometimes there are relic starships, supply depots, university databases or industrial complexes still in repairable condition on a world or elsewhere in a system. These can greatly aid recovery, though they may need heroic efforts to gain access to. It is up to the Referee to determine the value of the cache, difficulty of making use of it and the effects thereof. For example, a regressed world may regain Jump drive by reverse-engineering one found aboard a wrecked starship on a distant moon. Recovering the ship using TL-6 rocket craft would pose quite a challenge.

Sometimes such caches (which may include Jumpstart caches) may be undiscovered by the population, or claimed by someone else.

RECOVERY

Most worlds that reached 1200 reasonably intact managed to survive into the New Era. However, most never achieved anything more than struggling to survive. Those that actually began to climb back out of the wreckage are in the minority. For such worlds, roll 1D on the following chart and apply the results to give the final Post-Recovery UWP.

For all worlds that make any sort of recovery, reduce Xenophobia and Technophobia by 1d6. In addition, if a world has a Post-Collapse Government type, there is a 1

in 3 chance that it is replaced by a standard government generated using the standard *Traveller* rules. In either case, the government is stable and in control of its people. It may be a very nasty dictatorship or a wise commonwealth, depending up on the government type, but at least there is little chance of anarchy in the near future.

TABLE: RECOVERY EFFECTS

1D	Result
1	World achieves shaky stability at post-Collapse level, but remains there. Things are improving but very slowly
2	World achieves solid stability at post-Collapse level.
3	Some recovery takes place. Increase TL by 1
4	Solid recovery takes place. Apply result 2 and increase TL by 1. Upgrade Starport by 1 class or to Type D, whichever is better.
5	Impressive recovery. Apply result 2 and increase Population digit by 1 and TL by 1-3. Reduce Law level by 0-2. Upgrade Starport by 1 class or to Type D, whichever is better.
6	Amazing recovery. Apply result 5, but minimum TL is 9 and the world has at least 1 working starship. Upgrade Starport by 1 class or to Type C, whichever is better.

CLIMATIC OR OTHER DISASTER

As if the events of the Civil War, the Collapse and the Viral Plague were not enough, some worlds have suffered other disasters. Some of these were caused by the Civil War, such as nuclear winters, poisoning of water supplies with fallout, and such like, while others (meteor impact, climate change, crop blights and so forth) may have had nothing to do with the destruction of the past century. Had the world been a part of a functioning interstellar community, it would have been better placed to deal with whatever catastrophe befell. Left to its own devices, with a ravaged economy and industrial base, the world may not have been able to cope at all, and may be fighting a last-ditch battle for survival.

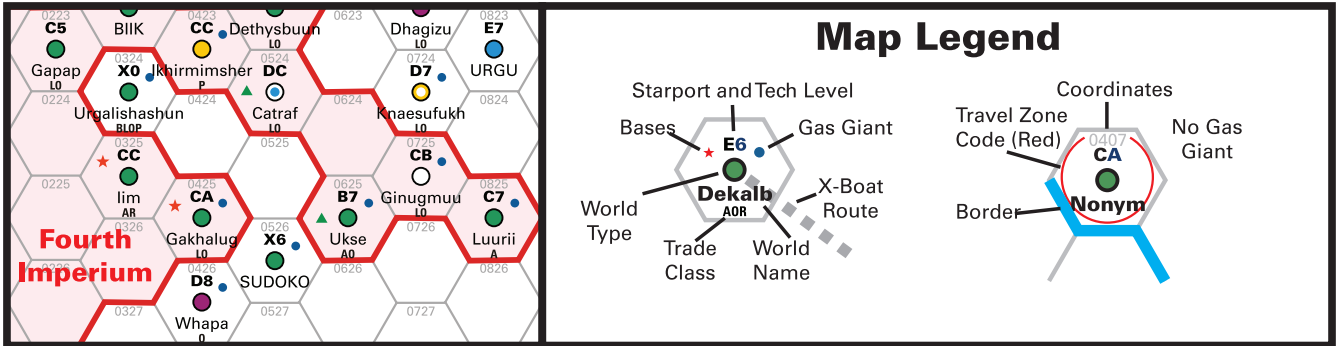
ANOMALY

Sometimes the combination of events over the past 120 years throws up something very unlikely or at least unexpected. The Referee may treat Anomaly rolls in any way he/she chooses. The simple option is to assume that the world had no event, or convert it into a Boneyard. However, Anomaly results can be almost anything else. Possibilities include:

- A world ruled by a benign Viral entity, which has advanced rather than regressed
- A 'trade hub' world where many independent starships come to trade and refit
- The core of a successful Pocket Empire
- A civilization base on an unlikely alliance between humans and an alien species
- A mystery, e.g. the entire population has disappeared without trace
- A minor alien race that has risen to prominence since the Imperium fell.

APPENDIX 2

THE COUNTY OF UKSE



The County of Ukse is described here as a starting location for a **Traveller** campaign. Situated right on the outer fringe of the Fourth Imperium, the County offers many opportunities for adventuring. Internal politics meets Wilds exploration here; there is room for any type of Traveller to make his or her mark upon the pages of history.

THE COUNTY AND SURROUNDING REGION

The County of Ukse consists of three worlds on the very border of the Imperium: Ukse, Ginugmuu and Luurii. It is part of a sprawling main/cluster chain that lies close to the Imperial Trade Corridor towards Terra. As such the region is of some importance. However, it is being developed on a shoestring and there are some 'untamed' worlds in the Wilds just a few parsecs from Ukse itself.

THE COUNTY OF UKSE

The County of Ukse is the domain of Count Josef Uskemii, a naval officer of some distinction. It was granted in honor of long and glorious service to the Imperium, and as a means for the Count (who was badly injured at the Second Battle of Gateway) to continue to be useful now that he is no longer fit for naval service.

The three worlds of the County are ruled by their own governments, which answer to the Count. Worlds are normally free to proceed as they think best within the guidelines laid down by the Count. This does lead to some tension but the three worlds agreed to accept the leadership of Count Josef in return for some very real benefits. The overall result is very positive and the Count's authority was voluntarily accepted rather than imposed from above. As yet, a working relationship is still being established. Most projects are still in the planning stage, or have only begun to be implemented. However, things are looking up for the worlds of the County, and there is a general feeling of optimism among the citizens.

There are big plans for the County. The two agricultural worlds, and the port at Ukse, create a modest income which is being invested in developing all three worlds as

well as in County-level assets. Meanwhile a steady trickle of colonists from both habitable worlds into the boneyard at Ginugmuu should eventually recover considerable amounts of technology that can be sold or used to fuel the recovery. However, this is a slow process. The problem is not so much training the colonists to cope with their new environment as encouraging people to move to a world that has already killed one entire population.

In addition to creating a small naval patrol force to secure and protect the County, internal and external commerce is being encouraged. Pooling the assets of the three worlds depends entirely on being able to move people and materials around, and of course goods must be moved into and out of the County. At present there are no County-owned merchant ships, though a handful of semi-regular Free Traders come through and are chartered for whatever tasks need carrying out.

The industrial base of the two habitable worlds is not large, but it is a very respectable TL 7, allowing the creation of goods that can be sold on regressed worlds out in the Wilds. This potential source of revenue is of great interest to the Count, though exploiting it will be problematical. Once sufficient funds are available, investment in higher-tech production will be undertaken. Perhaps some of the salvage from Ginugmuu will prove useful in this endeavor.

There are also long-term plans to sponsor talented individuals to study offworld at the Imperial universities, or to serve in the Imperial forces, Scouts or the Reconstruction Service. These individuals will eventually bring their expertise home to the worlds of the County. In the meantime, offworld experts are being offered generous contracts to teach at the County's colleges and to lead field teams where locals can gain hands-on experience.

The main obstacles to the reconstruction of the County are lack of funds and the threat of attack. Every credit that has to be diverted into defending the County is one that will not be invested in the economy. It is impossible to place a credit value on security; it is a must-have for sure, but how much is enough? With the Navy badly overstretched and the Wilds just a Jump-1 away, the only simple answer is 'more than we have'.

UWP DATA

Urgalishashun	0324 X221000-0	Ba Lo Po	022	Na	K4 V D
lim	0325 C986779-C M	Ag Ri	300	Im	G0 V
Gakhalug	0425 C877273-A M	Lo Ni	711	Im	K3V M7V
Whapa	0426 D8C3458-8	FI Lo Ni	624	Na	K1 V
Catraf	0524 D115177-C S	Ic Lo Ni	102	Im	M8 V
Sudoko	0526 X86A3N7-6	Lo Ni Wa	522	Na	K9V M7V
Ukse	0625 B666542-7 S	Ag Ni	425	Im	G4 V
Knaesufukh	0724 D510179-7	De Lo Ni	933	Na	M0 IV
Ginugmuu	0725 C3002M8-B	De Lo Ni Va	922	Im	K2 V
Luurii	0825 C375788-7	Ag	324	Im	M0 V M0 V

Overall, the people of the County get along well enough and are happy with the Count's rule. Society is forward- and outward-looking, and outsiders are welcomed once they have proven their worth. There is a lot going on and much more that could be done if only the personnel and the funding were available. Almost any party of Travellers could make a difference in the County and find perhaps even find themselves a home among the locals. There are opportunities here for those with the wit and daring to make use of them.

COUNT JOSEF OF UKSE

As Lieutenant-Commander Josef Uskemii IN, Count Josef served as executive officer of the heavy cruiser *Ardent*. *Ardent* was part of the Imperial Bodyguard Squadron that accompanied Avery's flagship into the battle, and was the only survivor other than the flagship. *Ardent* did not surrender control to the Lucan Ship but remained close to Avery's vessel to protect it. She was hit heavily whilst trying to repel a Dominate gunship swarm attack and lost her main bridge along with most of the command crew. Although wounded and suffering from a slow suit leak, Commander Uskemii took command of the cruiser and kept her in the fight, clinging to the Flagship's flank throughout the desperate maneuvers that characterized much of the battle.

Despite losing her spinal mount and much of her fire control, and with serious damage in all areas, *Ardent* defended the flagship until she was little more than a wreck. As the Dominate heavy forces closed in on the Emperor's ship, Uskemii sent *Ardent* on a death-ride, throwing what was left of his cruiser at the nearest Dominate battleship in an apparent attempt to ram. There was little chance of success of course, but the enemy vessel was forced to alter course away from her target. As *Ardent* passed close to the Dominate ship, she activated her Jump drive, deliberately Misjumping out of the action.

Whether it was done for the purpose of damaging the enemy or not (the citation for Lieutenant-Commander Uskemii's Starburst for Extreme Heroism, and that of the *Ardent's* Acting Chief Engineer shows that it was), the activation of a Jump drive so close to the enemy battleship caused considerable damage and took the ship out of the fight. Avery's flagship was able to escape through the gap in the enemy formation and temporarily continue the battle.

This maneuver has been used once or twice before, and almost always results in destruction or loss of the vessel. However, in this case *Ardent* was lucky. She re-entered normal space 28 parsecs to Spinward-Rimward, on the edge of the Lepanto/Diamond-Prince system. The crippled ship was able to struggle halfway across Fornast sector to make contact with Imperial Navy support units. By this time *Ardent's* drives were extremely dangerous to

operate so she was abandoned. Her surviving crew finally returned home aboard other ships.

Commander Uskemii's injuries were very severe, and exacerbated by his refusal to accept proper medical treatment until his crew was safe. The effects of partial depressurization impaired the Count's eyesight and hearing, and caused severe lung damage. Today, even with the best medical treatment available to the Fourth Imperium, he is a very sick man. It was obvious that he could not be allowed to return to naval duty, but Uskemii not only deserved a reward but desired to continue to serve the Imperium.

Created Count Josef of Ukse for his actions (along with a promotion to Captain and a Starburst for Extreme Heroism), Uskemii's reward was to be given suzerainty of three worlds on the Imperial frontier along with wholly inadequate funding and far too few personnel to achieve anything worthwhile. His instructions are to improve the security and economic strength of the region; a tall order perhaps, but Count Josef knows that what he has to work with is more than could be spared. He is as determined to succeed at Ukse as he was at Second Gateway.

The Count arrived on Ukse at the very end of 1247, aboard the Imperial Yacht itself. Although Emperor Avery was busy elsewhere, the gesture was a profound one. Although the level of material support arriving with the new Count was modest at best, the appointment was well received on Ukse itself and the new Count is popular with the citizens of the world.

Count Josef is physically unimpressive. Never very tall nor athletic, he now walks rather slowly and with a stoop. He is almost blind and deaf but for the enhancement headset he constantly wears. He gets out of breath crossing a wide hallway. Yet beneath the frail exterior is an active and driven personality. Count Josef has thrown himself into his new role with gusto – perhaps to distract himself from the damage to his body and the end of his naval career. He is an able administrator, though somewhat inclined to gambling on risky high-yield projects rather than implementing steady growth.

Count Josef has a number of friends and admirers in the Navy. He is very close with the doctor who tended him aboard *Ardent* and the engineering lieutenant who helped implement his desperate plan. Both are still on active service with the Navy. The Count is also very popular with the Scout Service and Reconstruction Service personnel assigned to Ukse. The reasons for this popularity – which amounts almost to hero-worship in some quarters – are not commonly known.

Relations with the world's democratic government are not so good. Although the government agreed to become

part of a new County, an initial clash of personalities has resulted in friction between some governmental ministers and the Count. Both sides are working towards greater understanding and cooperation, but for now things are rather strained.

Count Josef has an extensive estate on Ukse, which is mainly staffed by offworlders. The estate is effectively a small town with its own spaceport (equivalent to a Class C starport but not open to non-official traffic). The Count's Huscarles are barracked at the estate and provide security as well as operating the extensive communications equipment necessary to run the County from there. Imperial courier ships routinely use the spaceport when reporting to the Count, and the occasional Scout or Navy vessel comes through.

The Count receives delegations from the three world governments at the estate, and routinely tours the three worlds offering advice and personal oversight of various projects. His private yacht (a converted 400t Patrol Cruiser) acts as a mobile command post in this case. The rest of the time it is deployed as a system defense asset supporting local forces.

WORLDS OF THE COUNTY

The three worlds of the County are very different. Only one of them has a ruling noble house, though this situation may change in time.

Ukse

0625 B666542-7 S Ag Ni

425 Im G4 V

Ukse came through the Dark Years in relatively good shape despite extensive Black War raiding around 1120-25. An agricultural world with breathable air and plenty of water, Ukse was an ideal candidate for long-term survival and even managed to keep a couple of starships flying. Although times were hard, the population chose to cooperate rather than fight among themselves for the table-scrap of civilization. The result was a strong sense of community and duty among the people of Ukse.

World government was lost for a time, but the various regional governments were able to find common ground and eventually work together to deal with the various disasters that befell Ukse. By the time the Usdiki Trade Federation made contact, Ukse was stable at TL 7 and beginning a modest reconstruction of its own.

Recovery was of course fairly slow given the modest (and fairly scattered) population, so the offer by what became the Imperial Interstellar Scout Service to set up a small base at the starport – and pay for the facilities to support it – was welcomed. Ukse Starport soon grew into a thriving commercial concern which brought considerable offworld revenue into the governmental coffers. This is being invested in a range of projects including the acquisition of a number of trading vessels and improved system defenses, plus industrial and economic projects worldwide.

Today, Ukse makes a modest profit from exporting agricultural goods, and somewhat more from interstellar trade. The world has benefited from the Scout Service presence in several ways. Not only does the expanded port bring in offworld trade but the Scout Service leases a number of facilities from the government of Ukse, which operates the port. In addition, the port contract provides funding for a modest customs enforcement and orbital defense force made up of mercenaries.

The opening of the trade corridor to Terra has led to increased traffic through the region and while most ships enter and leave Imperial space somewhat to Rimward of Ukse, some operators prefer to use Ukse Starport as their first or last Imperial call. This has brought in a number of private Virus-proofing firms and Imperial inspectors, and these in turn create revenue for the port.

The government of Ukse is honest, open and forward-looking. Its representatives are popularly elected and tend to be dynamic personalities. Clashes with the Count have resulted from differences of opinion and too many good ideas rather than personality issues or vested interests. The world government chose to be ruled by the Count, and does not regret the decision (though some representatives do on a personal level). The Imperium has been good for Ukse and becoming the capital of an Imperial County is part of the world's plans for increased prosperity.

Ukse maintains a small security force equipped with imported TL 9 PAD missiles and aerospace interceptors, plus a few grav vehicles. This is backed by a voluntary militia armed with TL 7 smallarms and little else. Orbital defenses are in the hands of a mercenary force which operates a dozen or so System Defense Boats and several fighter squadrons to back up the inspection cutters. This defensive force is a little light for a world on the Imperial frontier, and for many years the Imperial Navy has maintained a patrol in the region. Recent events have drawn off much of the Navy's strength however, leaving Ukse feeling somewhat vulnerable. The deficiency has been somewhat offset by an arrangement with the Scout Service whereby Scout vessels sweep the system from time to time, but this is no real substitute for a naval presence.

The new Count has made his personal yacht available to the world government. This 400t warship, which is crewed by ex-Navy personnel and retains all its armament, is expected to be joined by other vessels as the Count expands his Huscarle force. Eventually some sort of County Navy will be established, though for now funds are in rather short supply.

The Scout base on Ukse is a fairly small affair located at the orbital Highport. It exists mainly to support IISS expeditions heading into the Wilds to Trailing, and to forward their findings into the Imperium. The majority of the vessels using the base are in the 100-400t range; Scout/Couriers, Survey Scouts and small long-range vessels for the most part. Sometimes a larger ship comes through but this is relatively rare. The base also serves Reconstruction Service vessels bringing in salvage from Ginugmuu and other boneyard worlds in the area.

Ginugmuu

0725 C3002M8-B DE LO NI VA 922 IM K2 V

Ginugmuu is a boneyard world whose population escaped or died off during the Dark Years. The airless rockball that is Ginugmuu has been picked over several times but there is still a fair amount of valuable salvage to be had, particularly heavy equipment that cannot be removed by a small ship. Thus the world has been settled by a

Reconstruction Service colony which exists mainly to strip the world of whatever can be used elsewhere. However, it has proved possible to get some of the world's relic industry operating again, so the colony may well become permanent.

Ginugmuu is under direct Reconstruction Service administration, which effectively takes the form of a dictatorship. The population is steadily growing, with colonists mostly coming in from Luurii. An increasing proportion of the population are not IRS employees but effectively citizens of Ginugmuu. It is likely that the existing commander or a replacement will be granted a title as the noble ruler of the world if the colony proves viable

At present there is little to Ginugmuu away from the small community around the reopened starport. Several underground cities lie all but untouched, awaiting the teams charged with disposing of the bones of the dead and cataloging what can be taken as salvage. Picking over a dead world like this is a grim and sometimes dangerous task. Even without dormant Viral infection to deal with there are the hazards of vacuum and 130 years of neglect to deal with. Some of the settlements were abandoned, some wiped out by the Viral Plague or other disasters. Each one has its unique dangers, but the need for high-technology parts is considerable so the teams continue their work.

A handful of licensed independent salvage companies also operate on Ginugmuu, along with a larger number of unlicensed and illegal ones. Away from the starport there is little enforcement of law, and claim-jumping is rife. The authorities do what they can but resources are very limited; anyone venturing far afield is pretty much on their own.

Luurii

0825 C375788-7 AG 324 IM M0 V M0 V

An agricultural world lying at the very Trailingmost extreme of Imperial space, Luurii joined the Imperium only a year ago. What Luurii brought to the table was unremarkable; a small starport, a small but stable TL 7 industrial base and a population of some 30 million under a popular but inefficient bureaucratic government. In short, Luurii came in as neither asset nor burden; a typical Imperial member world that carries its weight but contributes little to the overall power of the Imperium.

Luurii is enthusiastically pro-Imperial, mainly as a result of Navy operations in the region. Seeing Imperial Navy ships engaging raiders and Vampire vessels, and indeed driving them from the system, made the people of Luurii realize that they wanted and needed the protection of the fleet on a more permanent basis. Their own TL 7 armed

forces included a handful of low-tech orbital missile boats that while better than nothing, were totally inadequate for defense against raiders.

As part of its membership negotiations, Luurii received four torpedo boats from the Naval Reserve. These craft represent a quantum leap in the ability of Luurii's space force to defend the world – now its personnel can get killed driving off a raider instead of just getting killed trying to. It is obvious that a better system defense capability is needed, but obtaining it is a thorny problem.

The System Defense Flotilla Project is Luurii's main contribution to the defense of the County. A complex arrangement has been set up whereby personnel from Luurii, which has the biggest population base in the County, enter service with the Count. They are trained up as salvagers and join the teams working on Ginugmuu, helping that world become a viable colony and in the process gaining experience with high-tech operations. The share of profits earned by these salvagers goes to the County coffers rather than those of any particular world, and are used to purchase armed small craft for operation by the Count's Huscarles. These Huscarle craft are then parceled out between the three worlds to create a small system defense flotilla, and a reserve is retained by the Count for use wherever it is needed. Of course, moving this reserve around presents a problem, but the acquisition of a couple of old merchant ships for conversion to fighter-carriers might prove possible.

The Flotilla Project is in its infancy at present, and has not yet achieved anything worthwhile. However, it is creating a habit of industrial, technological and military cooperation at the County level that, if it continues, will prove beneficial in the future.

NEARBY WORLDS

The affairs of the County affect and are affected by events on many nearby worlds, both within and without the Imperium.

Urgalishashun

0324 X221000-0 BA LO PO 022 NA K4 V D

Urgalishashun is a boneyard world. Although it possesses enough atmosphere to support primitive life and even some surface water (in the form of ice), the world was simply not viable during the Dark Years and suffered a total population extinction. Today Urgalishashun is not officially an Imperial member world but it is claimed and lies within the Imperial border. Belters visit the two planetoid belts from time to time, and Navy patrols occasionally make a sweep, but for the most part the system is empty but for the odd hopeful scavenger team searching for valuable relic technology among the ruins.

These scavengers occasionally fall foul of dormant Virus and other hazards. Worse, they will sometimes sell their finds 'under the counter' without going through the usual checks and inspections. This means that infected equipment can sometimes find its way onto more developed worlds of the Imperium. Other than imposing harsh penalties on unlicensed salvage trafficking, there is little that can be done to prevent this – the assets to police scavenging activities properly simply are not available.

lim

0325 C986779-C M AG RI 300 IM G0 V

lim is a very recent Imperial member, having come in during the 'open arms' period of the past year. A large, wet world with a dense atmosphere, lim has a diverse ecosphere and sufficient agricultural surplus to provide respectable export revenue. Although the world is Balkanized, consisting of two main powers and several minor ones, relations are friendly and the recently-formed World Council is making progress towards becoming a functioning planetary government.

lim came through the Dark Years fairly well, and hung on to a very respectable technology base. Finding that everything they needed was available on lim or in the system, the world's various powers had no interest in expansion or conquest. They did however construct a number of small trading vessels and maintained contact with nearby worlds. Relations with Ukse and Luurii are friendly as a result of this contact and trade. lim-based firms provide avionics and fire control software for the small craft now being constructed at Ukse, and industrial cooperation is common.

lim does not possess a starfaring navy, but has a respectable SDB flotilla for home defense. Little funding or investment has been forthcoming from Imperial sources, mainly on the grounds that lim can take care of itself. There are other regions of the frontier that need to be stabilized and provided with defenses first. However, a small Imperial Navy detachment has recently arrived on lim to provide training to local SDB crews and to help the defense forces of the various states integrate into a single planetary navy.

Gakhalug

0425 C877273-A M LO NI 711 IM K3V M7V

Gakhalug is quite habitable despite its tainted atmosphere, but has not yet attracted much in the way of recolonization efforts. The world has a population of around 700, scattered in far-flung communities. The majority of Gakhalug's native population (about 250 or so) dwell in and around the starport, which lay in ruins until 1239. Although the odd ship from lim came through, the people of Gakhalug

were pretty much on their own, clinging to failing remnants of technology as best they could. That changed in 1239 with the arrival of a band of mercenaries.

The mercs (a legitimate outfit named Sorenson's Crusaders) were seeking a base of operations from which to undertake a border-protection contract from the Imperium. The wrecked starport at Gakhalug proved ideal, and was rebuilt to a C-equivalent standard with the help of the locals. The Crusaders own and operate two vessels; an 800t Mercenary Cruiser and an armed Far Trader. In addition they can deploy a security company and a ground staff to support the ships. Their personnel add perhaps 200 more to the world's tiny population.

The partnership that evolved between the Crusaders and the starport dwellers has been more than profitable. The mercs protect the locals, who are gradually learning to operate the port themselves. The port itself brings in little revenue as yet, but mercenary operations along the frontier are paid for by Imperial credits which are mostly spent in the Startown. The arrival of the Crusaders marked the turning point in Gakhalug's history. No longer are the locals fighting a rearguard action against decay and collapse. Now they are once more part of a starfaring community.

The mercs' Far Trader generally plies between Ukse, Gakhalug and Iim bringing in supplies and conducting a little trade. In recent years passenger travel has become quite common between the three worlds, creating stronger ties with each trip. Count Josef is known to be involved in discussions with the Crusaders, presumably with the intent of obtaining their services, and relations with the Huscarles are cordial. Personnel exchanges are common.

Whapa

0426 D8C3458-8 FL LO NI 624 NA K1 V

Whapa is a pretty good example of a hell-world. Its insidious atmosphere makes survival quite a problem, and as technology levels fell in the Dark Years much of the population died off rather horribly. Those that remain (about 6000 or so) dwell in a single underground city near the north pole. Unsurprisingly, the ruling caste is derived from personnel trained to maintain and operate the world's critical life-support equipment.

Whapa would like to become a member of the Imperium, mainly to get access to Reconstruction funding and advanced life-support equipment. However, its application was quietly stalled until the end of the 'open arms' period. Given that there would be little return on any investment in the world for a long time, the refusal makes economic sense. However, Whapa cannot continue indefinitely without outside assistance.

The IISS maintains a small forward base and refueling station on a gas giant moon in the outsystem. The Scouts have little contact with the Mainworld and are there mainly to support recharting and survey operations along the edge of the Wilds.

Catraf

0524 D115177-C S IC LO NI 102 IM M8 V

Catraf is an iceball world of little interest except to the salvagers who search its ruined habitats for usable technology. The world is divided into several zones, each theoretically administered by a different salvage or reconstruction company. However, most of the operations have now moved on to richer pickings, making the Balkanized government listing more or less meaningless. An unknown number of freelance and illicit salvage operations are underway across the system.

The IISS is in the process of setting up a small base in the ruins of Catraf's starport. Rumors abound as to the purpose of this installation, but the most likely function is to support expeditions out along the main to Trailing. It is also possible that the base will be a central processing point for salvage operations in the region, performing a mix of administrative, law enforcement and Viral-checking functions.

At present the base consists of a handful of Scouts and some engineering contractors. No ships are yet assigned other than to support the construction, and it will be some time before the facility becomes active.

Sudoko

0526 X86A3N7-6 LO NI WA 522 NA K9V M7V

Possessing very little in the way of land, Sudoko is home to 5,000 people. The only settlement on the planet is located in a tiny island chain near the equator. It has a stable TL 6 economy and is self-sufficient in terms of food and other staples. There is no starport and the population are known to be highly xenophobic.

Sudoko is now ruled by a renegade Imperial house. Recognized early on in the formation of the Imperium, Baron Rafael Tegiisi was stripped of his titles soon after for reasons that have never been made fully public. Leaving the Imperium at the head of a few dozen armed supporters, Tegiisi arrived on Sudoko and took over without much difficulty. Since that time the Imperial border has advanced until it is now just a parsec away.

Baron Tegiisi and his followers might have taken over by force, but their rule seems (according to what little intelligence can be gathered) to be fairly benign. No real effort seems to have been made to uplift the locals; rather,

the Baron and his followers have apparently ‘gone native’ and live very much like their subjects. There is no sign of what might have happened to the starship they arrived on, or any heavy equipment that may have been brought.

Imperial policy towards Sudoko is to leave well enough alone. The world is no threat and the Baron’s people are not withholding vital resources from the Imperium. There is simply no need to become involved with Sudoko and plenty of better things to be doing.

Knaesufukh

0724 D510179-7 DE LO NI 933 NA M0 IV

Knaesufukh is a typical Wilds world. All but uninhabited, it is listed in Imperial charts as ‘Balkanized’. Civilization disintegrated on Knaesufukh during the Dark Years, with several factions arising to fight over control of the remaining resources. This more or less guaranteed that everyone would perish. The handful of inhabitants today operate a tiny starport that ostensibly caters to the Free Trader and Belter communities. That may be true, but the port also has been known to harbor corsairs and raiders. An Imperial Navy task force cleaned the place up (not for the first time) in 1246, but the downward spiral continues and it is only a matter of time before a new crop of pirates moves in.

The outsystem of Knaesufukh contains three planetoid belts, and these are quite rich sites for prospecting. Thus a sizable community of Belters is present in the system at any given time. Most of them make use of the port from time to time, giving it a veneer of rough respectability. Belters are not the most refined of people but they are generally honorable.

A few larger mining concerns are also interested in Knaesufukh outsystem. These mainly deploy mining ships; self-contained mining/smelting plants served by Jump-capable ore barges. They have little need to visit the mainworld and rarely do so.

ADVENTURING IN UKSE COUNTY

The County is very much a new frontier. Just a couple of Jumps away lies a region of Wilds, beyond which are foreign powers. As such, the opportunities for adventure are limitless. There are many reasons why an adventuring group might become involved in the County’s affairs. A selection of adventure seeds follows.

PICKING OVER THE BONES

There is plenty of salvage to be found on the boneyard worlds of the region, and a good market for high-tech components once they are checked for Viral infection. An adventuring group might decide to go prospecting or salvaging in between adventures, or might be sponsored to try to find needed components in a long-abandoned outpost.

Apart from claim-jumpers and the possibility of infected robots, there is always the chance that an ‘abandoned’ outpost might not be as desolate as expected. Outsystem or boneyard facilities make a ready haven for smugglers, pirates and other criminals, none of whom take kindly to being disturbed. There are other possibilities too. Boneyards are creepy places where the true horror and tragedy of the Collapse and the Dark Years can be experienced. In such a place it is not hard to let the imagination run riot – do the dead really lie quiet?

Salvage is not restricted to worlds and planetoids. Many starships were lost in deep space when their computers became infected, or tumbled out of control due to battle damage. A salvage team might be sent to locate and bring in such a wreck for sale or rebuilding.

Adventure Seed: A derelict starship is drifting in a highly eccentric orbit that will bring it within Ukse’s gravitational well in a few months. The Count is seeking a spacer crew to board the derelict and assess whether it can be reactivated, stripped for salvage or towed into a holding orbit and dealt with later.

TRADE AND COMMERCE

The County needs trade links between its worlds, and ideally between the Imperium and the Wilds. The crew of a merchant starship can find all manner of charters and exploratory trade opportunities here on the edge of the Imperium. Not all of them might be legal.

One possibility is the ‘Trade Scout’ mission, whereby a ship is sponsored to head out into the Wilds with a mixed cargo. If the trip makes a profit, all well and good, but the main aim is to locate trade opportunities and set up relations, allowing a follow-up mission to be targeted for

maximum profit. Wilds trading is always dangerous, but the possibility of an untapped market is too good to pass up.

Trade can also be a factor in other adventures. For example, the Count's forces might be forced to deal with a cross-border smuggling ring. Distinguishing illegal merchandise from legitimate trade is a tricky business at best, and it may be that the discovery of the smuggled goods is embarrassing to someone high up in the Imperial hierarchy.

Adventure Seed: The Count is sponsoring a 'trade scouting' mission around the main clockwise from Ukse. A Jump-2 ship can return via Dagimi and Whapa, or a second circuit can be made in the other direction. The ship's expenses and an initial speculative cargo will be paid for by the Count, who will take half the profits (if any) in return. The mission is not so much about making a direct profit as learning more about the nearby worlds and setting up relations for a follow-on mission.

BEARERS OF THE FLAME

Although the Imperium is not encouraging worlds to join, it is in its interests to help nearby states to become stronger. This will eventually lead to the establishment of a buffer zone of self-sufficient, friendly worlds along the Imperial frontier. There is little or no 'foreign aid' funding available, so assistance usually takes the form of traders and advisors who can help the world make the most of its own assets.

The Count is keen to develop links with nearby worlds, and is willing to sponsor small advisory teams to head out into the Wilds and do what they can to help. These teams are in effect the emissaries of the Imperium, and they can make a huge difference in some areas. Many worlds have some relic equipment lying around in a salvageable state but lack the knowledge to get it working again. In other cases the lack of a critical component or tool is all that prevents an important installation from functioning. Even if they cannot provide the necessary parts, the Imperials may be able to recognize what is missing and advise on where to get one.

The life of these teams can be rather eventful, since the Wilds are a dangerous place. Many leaders are willing to use force to obtain a team's equipment or knowledge, and too paranoid to accept that what they need might be offered for free.

The converse of this situation may also come about; a Wilds world has something needed in the Imperium (a cache of relic equipment, a rare plant needed to make medicine, or a specific piece of knowledge). In this case a team might be sent to offer help and assistance on a

mutual-benefit basis, or to covertly obtain what is needed under the guise of helping the locals.

Adventure Seed: The Travellers are hired by the Imperial Reconstruction Service to head out across the border to assist an isolated community in the Wilds. Despite many difficulties and very limited resources, these people have managed to create a stable society. The Travellers can offer advice and technical assistance – if they can persuade the stubborn survivors to accept it. Just getting there may be an adventure in itself.

COLONISTS

Worlds are big, and even some of the most habitable ones have large areas of unclaimed land. A colonial mission (from the County or other source) might be sent to claim some of that territory. Resources are likely to be limited, requiring careful management and some critical tradeoffs.

Usually a colony will be set up for one of three reasons: To claim an area for later development, to assist locals in uplifting their own technology, or to make use of some asset at the colony location. Often a colony will be set up at the derelict starport of an uninhabited world, or in one of its smaller cities. This allows salvage to be used to fuel the colony's growth, though it can be risky – there are usually reasons why cities fall into ruin.

Colonial operations are long-term undertakings and tend to create their own adventure opportunities. Exploring the local area, making contact with any native population, defending the colony, dealing with unrest among the colonists and setting up trade routes back into the Imperium are all possibilities. What is for certain is that a group of characters involved in a colonial operation will rarely lack for something to do with their time.

Adventure Seed: The Travellers are sent to survey the site for a small colonial expedition. The site is close to a resource that might be exploited, such as disused industrial installation. However, there is (rightly) some doubt about the wisdom of opening up the site before a proper survey has been carried out. The characters are on a tight time frame and will have to make a strong case for canceling the expedition. Any undiscovered hazards will threaten the new colonists when they arrive in just a few weeks.

GUARDIANS OF THE IMPERIUM

The County offers various opportunities for characters who are 'in service' in one capacity or another. The Count is expanding his Huscarles to create a navy and a County-level armed force, but there are also opportunities for mercenaries, scouts, naval characters, army or marine personnel and other servants of the Imperium including

Ministry of Justice officials or even members of the Bureaucracy.

Depending on the nature of the characters, they may end up protecting shipping or a ground installation, investigating the disappearance of a salvage team or looking into corruption among the shipping contractors serving the County. Any group of characters might find themselves drawn into a desperate defense against a big threat. The latter might include offworld raiders, Vampire ships or a natural disaster. To a fragile society struggling to recover from the Collapse, a flood or earthquake might be the last straw – unless heroic measures are taken.

Adventure Seed: The characters are deployed as a 'fire brigade' to deal with whatever crises may arise. Whilst troubleshooting a minor dispute at a remote settlement on Luurii, they are suddenly faced with a much more serious problem. A massive and unseasonable storm rolls in, washing out roads and making grav vehicles unsafe. Amid the chaos as everyone tries to get undercover, a distress signal comes in from a field team. They are lost in the storm with a wrecked vehicle and injured personnel. Someone is going to have to brave the elements and go to the rescue.

ON THE QUIET

There are of course many opportunities for espionage or intrigue in the region. The Count wants information on Baron Tegisi of Sudoko, and of course there are those who want information on the Count. There is also the possibility that one of the Imperial corporations is conducting illegal research (perhaps on Viral weapon systems) just outside the Imperial border. A lab ship could hide in the outsystem for months without being detected, but ships need supplies. It should be possible to eventually track down such a vessel, but its mobility would allow it to flee – unless it could be boarded before the crew knew they had been found.

Adventure Seed: The 'freeport' at Knaesufukh is rumored to be harboring raiders once again, but without concrete proof the Navy cannot spare the resources to deal with the problem. A group of characters posing as Belters or salvagers might be able to obtain such proof.

WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE

When an individual commits a local crime and flees offworld, there is normally little that can be done. However, if a felon wanted under Imperial High Law flees, the Ministry of Justice will seek him out. It is also common practice to post a bounty on the individual and to allow bounty hunters to go after him. Warrants are never 'dead or alive' when issued officially, but some 'under the counter' bounties posted by individuals may be. The border region is a good place to seek Imperial felons, who may try to escape into the Wilds beyond the reach of the MoJ.

Adventure Seed: A wanted felon arrives on Ukse with several hunters on her tail. However, the bounty they are trying to collect is an unofficial 'dead or alive' contract posted by the family of one of her victims. Such a bounty amounts to incitement to murder in High Law and the Count does not want that sort of thing going on in his domain. The characters are charged with making a lawful arrest of the felon (they can of course use lethal force if she violently resists; that would be self-defense, not murder) before the hunters can kill her.

HERE BE DRAGONS

Much of the data even on nearby areas of the Wilds is badly out of date. Some of it was put together by gathering rumors and spacers' tales, some of which are inaccurate and the rest downright untrue. The result is that even the shortest trip out into the Wilds is something of a voyage into the unknown. The Scout Service and private exploration missions do their best to penetrate the fog of uncertainty but it is a slow process.

Some areas of the Wilds are more mysterious than others. Ships inexplicably disappear, or rumors surface of strange happenings in certain star systems. Some of these tales are the equivalent of the words 'here be dragons' on ancient maps of Terra – wild tales that cover the fact that no data is available. But in some cases the tales are more accurate than anyone would like.

Adventure Seed: The characters are loaned a small vessel and sent out over the border, to investigate the loss of a merchant ship and the Scout vessel diverted to look for it. The loss may be due to piracy, Vampire activity or perhaps something more unusual. The Travellers need to find out, but without becoming victims themselves.

THE BIG SCORE

There is money to be made on the frontiers, some of it legal. Imperial and County contracts are a reasonable source of revenue, but the real 'big score' lies in finding something valuable before anyone else does. The score itself might be a trade opportunity, a cache of technological goods or a salable commodity such as a cure for a disease afflicting a Wilds world. Rushing out ahead of the planned and safety-conscious 'official' operations offers the best chance of finding something really valuable, but it is very hazardous. Many of the groups rushing around the frontier chasing rumors meet a sticky end or go broke without ever making that elusive find.

An alternative is to become a parasite off the reconstruction effort. The level of funding allocated to the frontier is small by Imperial standards but vast in terms of what one person can spend. Clever characters can find ways to skim off funds or divert shipments of valuable goods for sale elsewhere. More honest types, or those who have seen what happens when a new colony is denied vital

supplies, may devote their time to stamping out this kind of corruption.

Adventure Seed: A large shipment of small arms and other military hardware, en route for Ukse, has been hijacked along with the ship carrying it. The vessel was damaged in the attempt and is rumored to be downed on one of the worlds of the frontier. The Count offers a substantial fraction of the cargo's worth for its recovery. But first it must be found...

SURVIVORS

Some of the people of the frontier managed to struggle through the Dark Years and the Recovery without outside help. Their attitudes to the Imperium are distinctly mixed. Some welcome the restoration of order, some fear a forcible annexation or a return to the madness of the Civil War. These survivor groups can be assets to the Imperium or a serious nuisance along the borders, depending upon how they are treated. The Travellers may be sent to make contact with a survivor culture, or may be members of that society sent to visit the new Imperial neighbors and find out what they can about the County.

Adventure Seed: The Travellers are part of a delegation sent to make contact with a Wilds world and offer Imperial assistance. However, when they arrive they find that it is the delegation that needs help from the survivors, who demand an unreasonable treaty in return for their help.

CONTACT AND LIAISON

The Imperium is powerful but it cannot afford to do everything by force. Peaceful relations are necessary along as much of the frontier as possible. Diplomats and negotiators are as important as warships in this difficult time. On a smaller scale, Count Josef needs the people of his three worlds to work together in order to grow and prosper. This means smoothing over difficulties and ensuring that bargains are kept.

Diplomatic missions range from first contact with a Wilds world to resolving a dispute among salvagers on Ginugmuu. Not every compromise is satisfactory, but the important thing is that the recovery and rebuilding of the County is not stalled by pointless internal bickering. Emissaries from the County might be sent farther afield; into the Imperial core or out to other powers such as Ikabi and Munlamer.

Adventure Seed: The Travellers are sent to Ikabi, 13 parsecs distant, aboard a small starship. Their mission is to open up negotiations for trade through Ukse into the Imperium, which would bring in a great deal of revenue. However, other Imperial groups are also interested in a trade corridor to the Ikabi Exchange. Ukse is the nearest good-quality Imperial port but there are many other factors

to consider. Diplomatic skills may be necessary just to get across the Wilds to Ikabi.

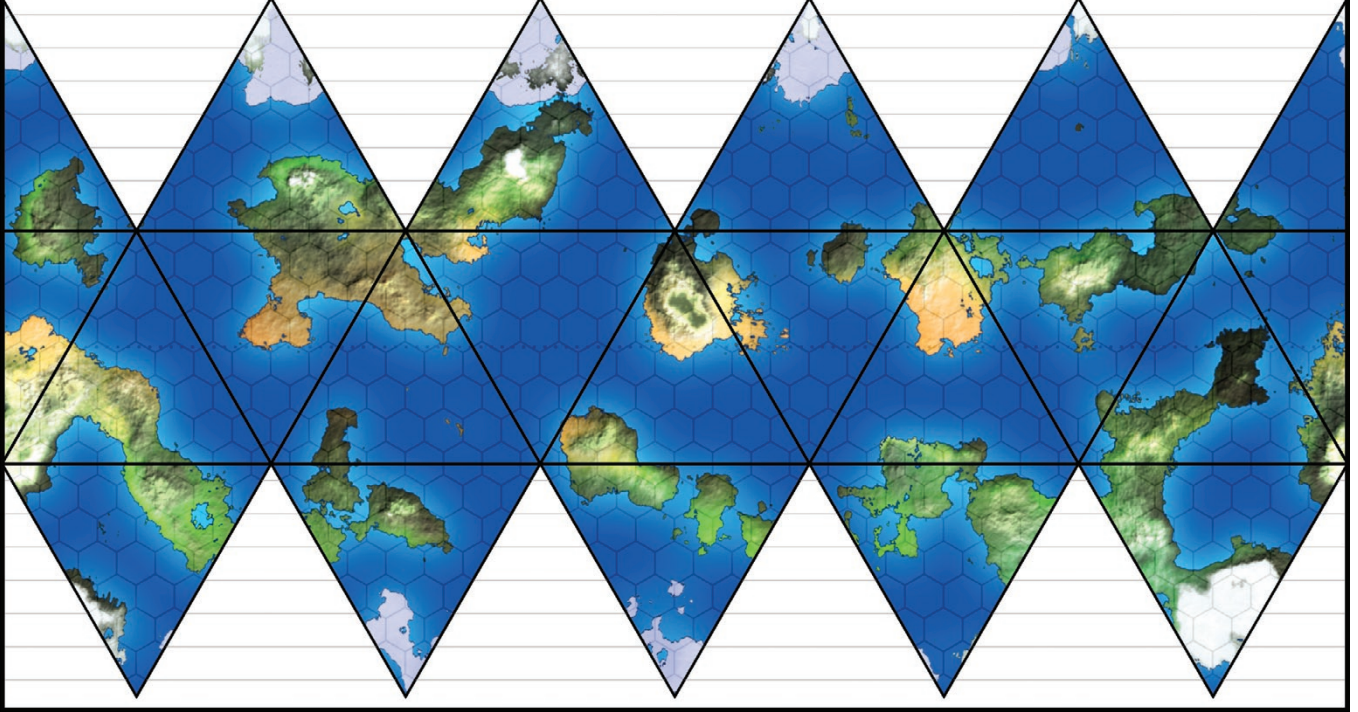
COUNT JOSEF'S NAVY

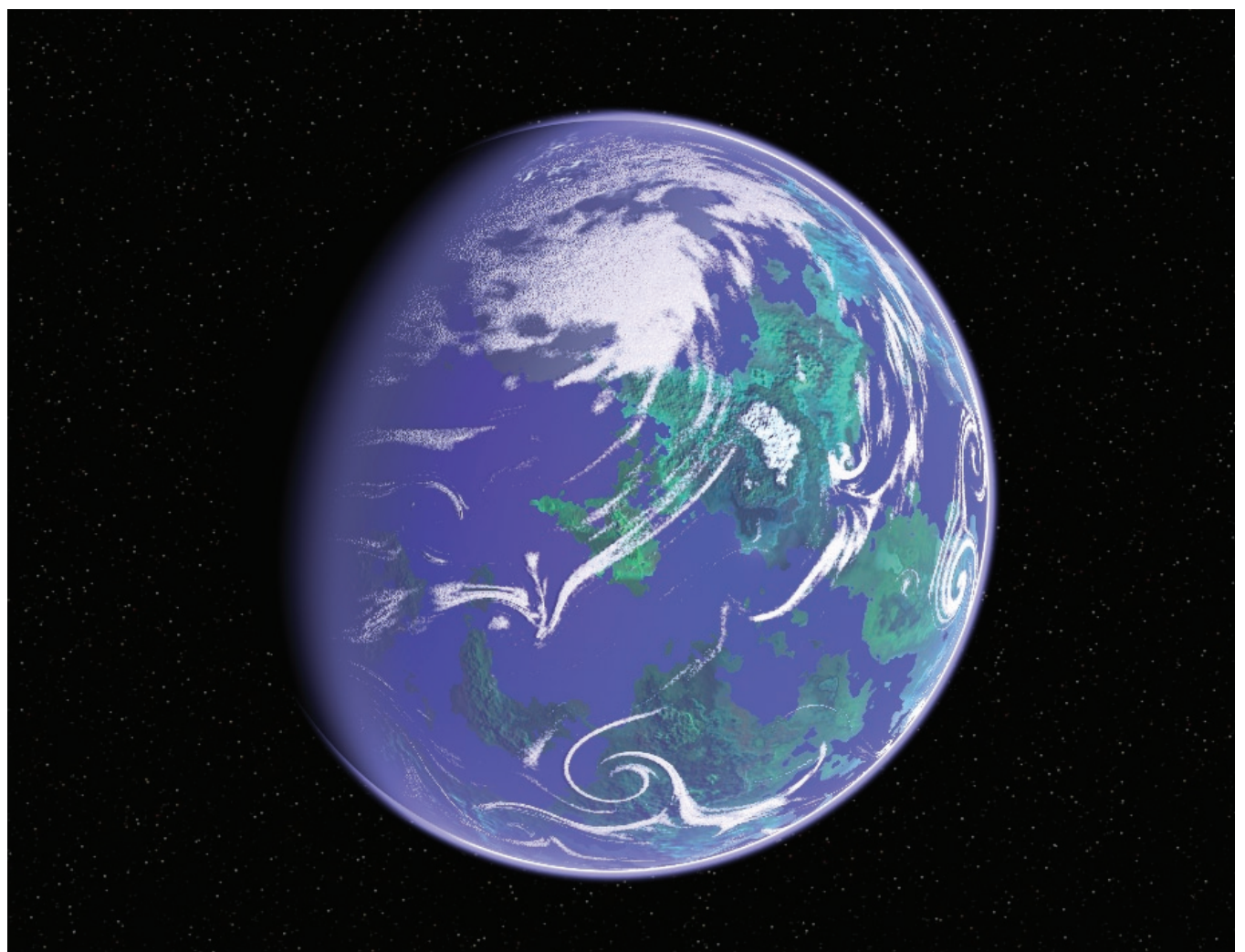
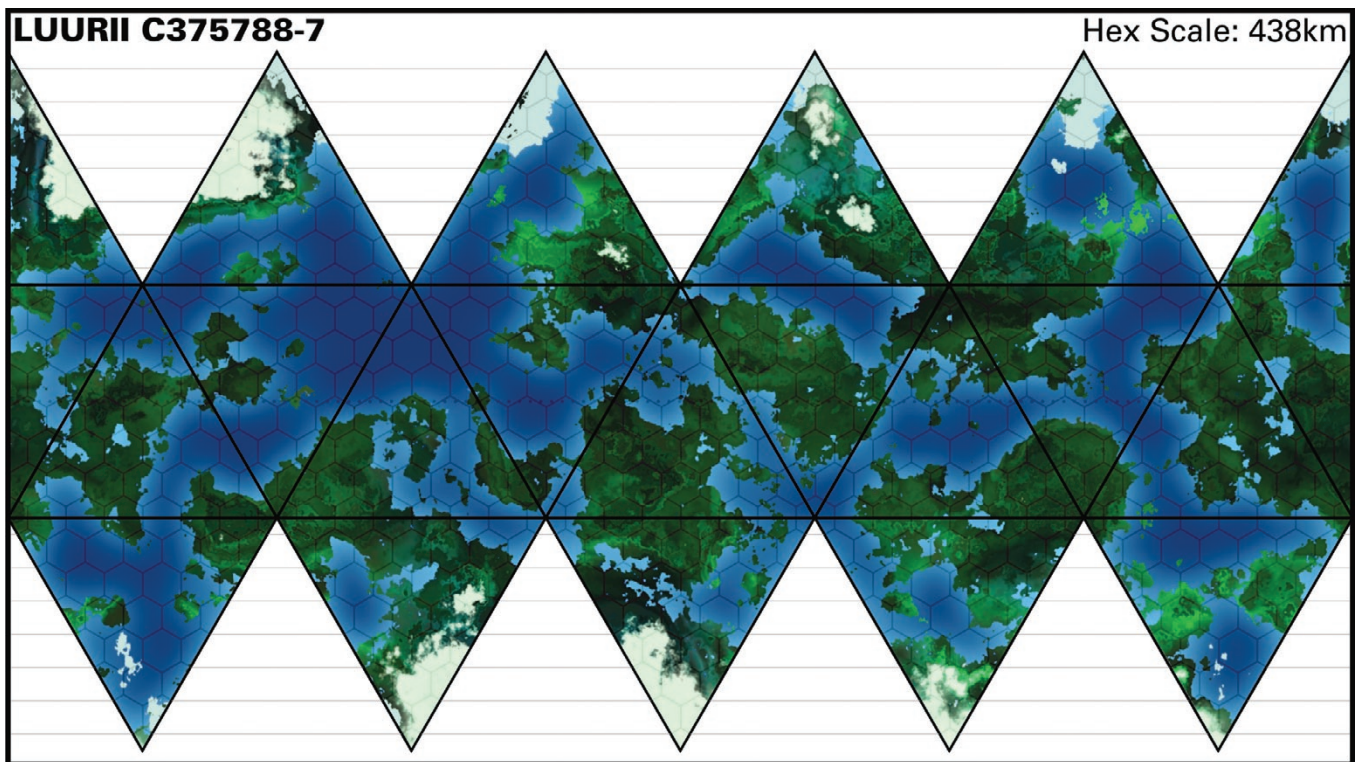
Count Josef's plans to create a County Navy might keep the characters occupied for a long time. If the funds were available the Count could just buy the vessels or the components to build them, but this is not feasible. Instead the force must be created 'on the cheap', substituting effort and ingenuity for bundles of cash. Salvaged hulls and shipbuilding equipment can be used as the basis for a small force of defense craft. Weapons and electronics must also be obtained, probably from different sources. This may require the Travellers to buy from salvagers or agents, or to obtain the parts themselves. Ships must also be tested and modified until they are suitable for duty.

Adventure Seed: After a brush with a raider, an Imperial-registered Subsidized Merchant vessel is no longer fit for service. The Count has reached an agreement with the insurers to buy her cheap if his people go and get her. If she can be brought into Ukse Highport, the merchant can be converted to carry a handful of fighters, giving the County Navy a Jump-capable patrol capability. However, she is in a sorry state; sufficiently so that just getting her to Ukse will be a major challenge.

UKSE B666542-7

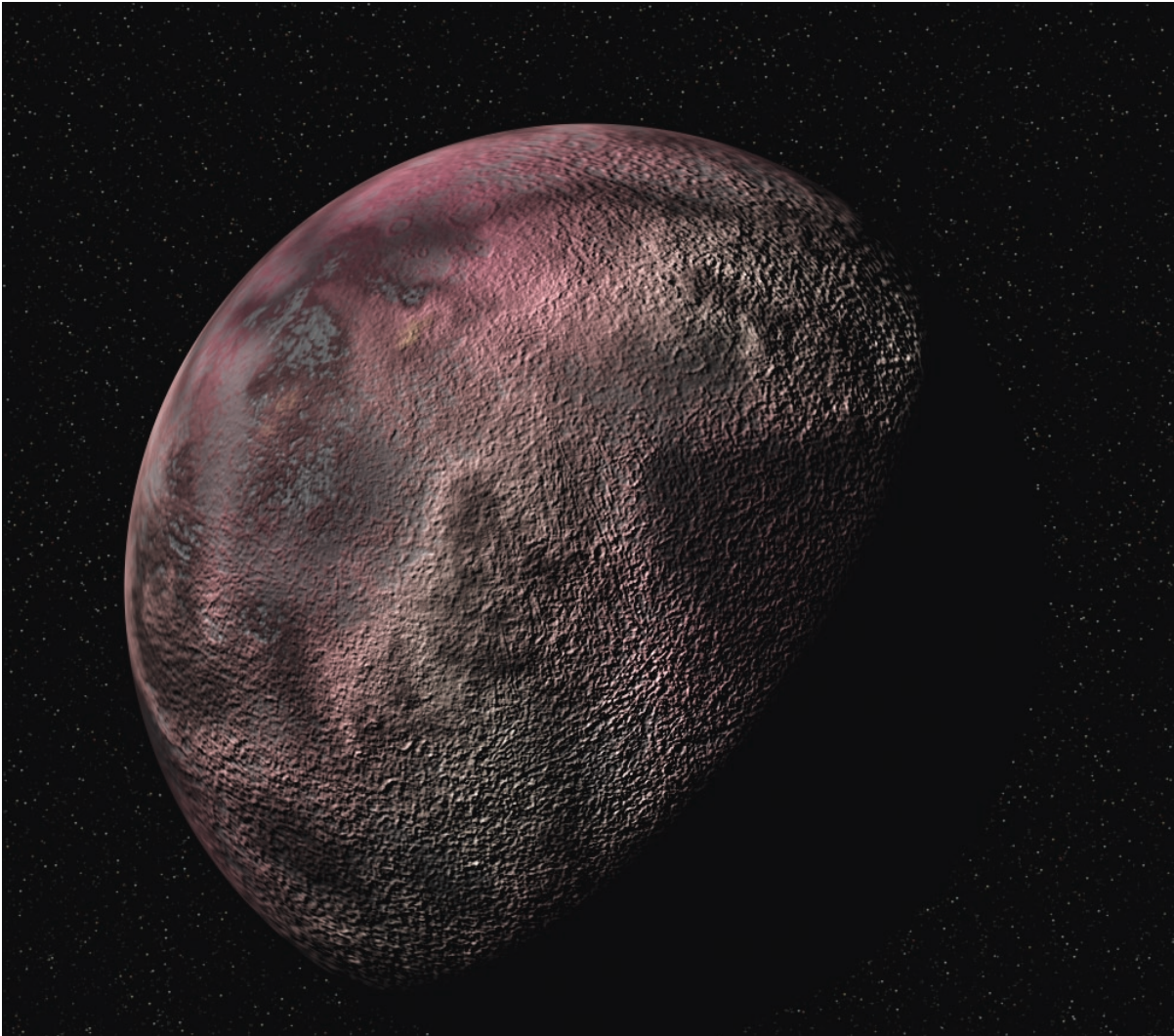
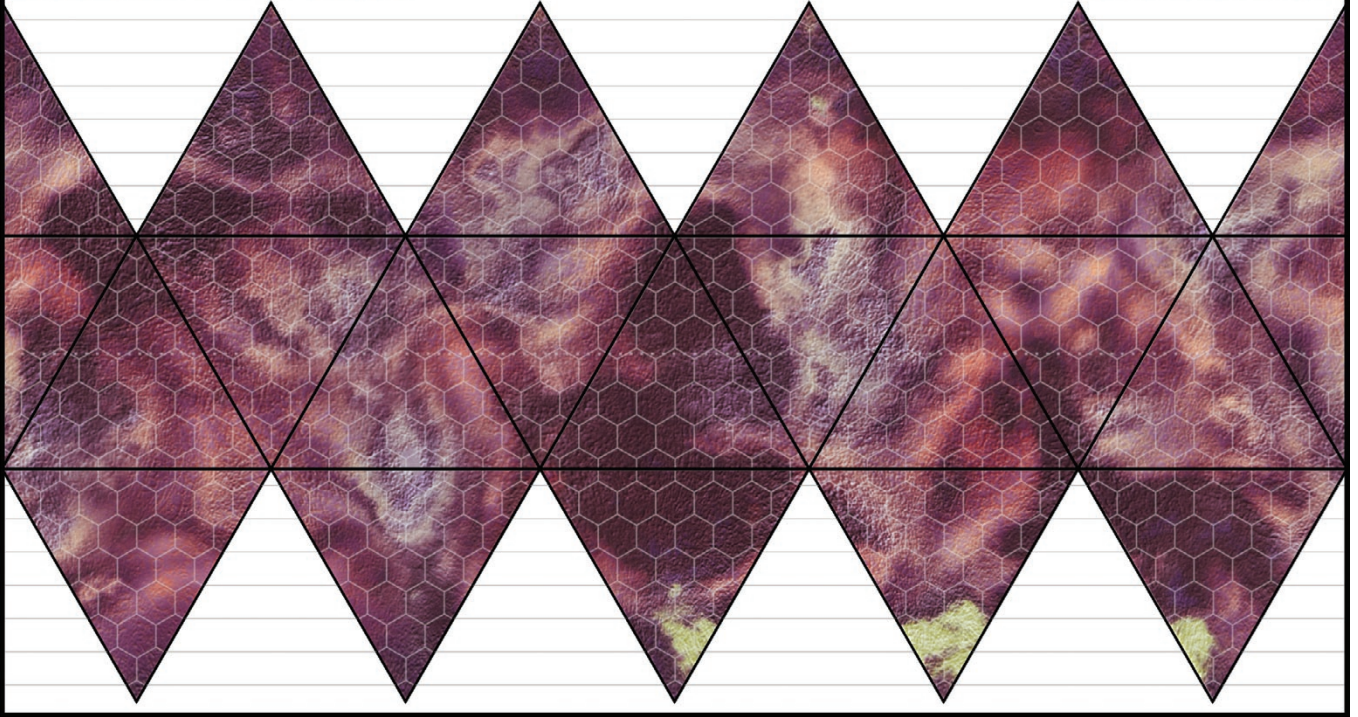
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Hex Scale: 438km



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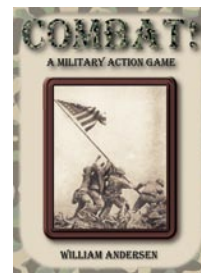
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