

PIRATES OF DRINAX:

LIONS
OF
THEBUS



TRAVELLER

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T R A V E L L E R INTRODUCTION

The Travellers are engaged by an Aslan lord to rescue his missing son Ftahteas from the world of Thebus. Ftahteas has fallen victim to local conditions and is in grave distress, not least since he is being hunted by Aslan-hating humans who intend to claim they mistook Ftahteas and his followers for local wildlife. The rescue attempt leads the Travellers to one of the old cities of Thebus, bombed but not quite destroyed in the last days of the Sindalian Empire. The biggest obstacle to the rescue, however, is Ftahteas himself.

THE SETTING

Thebus was once an important world of the Sindalian Empire, lying adjacent to the capital and sharing in its wealth and status. Ultimately, this meant Thebus also shared in its fate. The world was bombarded with nuclear and deadfall weapons, asteroids allowed to fall from orbit and cause immense damage on impact. This was not the worst of it, however. A variety of biochemical weapons were also used, some of which merely infected their victims with terrible diseases. Others were worse, creating forced mutations that had little effect on victims but ensured future generations would suffer a high mutation rate and live short, miserable existences.

One unintended side effect of this weapon was mutation among local animals, some of which developed into species that could survive the post-bombardment wasteland. Indeed, the mutagen agents used to destroy Thebus may have also enabled its ecosphere to recover. As a result, today's Thebus has several rather strange creatures and plants, of which the most impressive is the so-called Thebun Lion. The Thebun Lion has a thick skin and its glossy pelt provides considerable natural protection, and disguises the fact that the creature is a big-but-skinny animal.

Due to the world's very thin atmosphere, the Thebun Lion is quite lightly built for its size, and its chest is impressive primarily because it needs to contain a set of large and highly efficient lungs. Thebun Lions are less of a threat than most visitors to the world imagine, a misconception fostered by enterprising locals who run lion-hunting safaris for visitors. These safaris are a major source of income for the small planetary population and might not be so popular if they ceased to be seen as exciting and dangerous.

The population of around eight thousand is well adapted to the very thin atmosphere, though this is by long acclimatisation rather than mutation; the mutagens died out long ago in most areas. Offworlders typically use breathing masks or supplemental oxygen, though it is possible to acclimatise over a period of several weeks. Those who do not will find any exertion extremely tiring and can suffer from altitude sickness even at sea level. This causes confusion, slow reactions and sometimes delirium, and can cause otherwise rational people to do extremely stupid things.

This is a real problem for Aslan, who at a distance might be mistaken for Thebun Lions. An Aslan not acting coherently and who does not respond to a call or challenge might get shot at by an over-zealous hunter.

THE PATRON

Ftahkaiw is a minor male Aslan noble. That means that he behaves as if he owns the universe and everyone else is just renting space in it. He spends a lot of time conducting business across the human/Aslan border, operating from offices aboard his yacht, which is escorted by one or two small warships.

If he is staying at a starport for more than a couple of days, Ftahkaiw usually sets up a temporary residence and office at one of the better hotels. This is characterised by a series of fairly unreasonable demands for changes to his operating and dwelling space, to be undertaken immediately and quickly, but to an exacting standard. He then nitpicks the work that is done and drags the high price asked for down to the point where the hotel's owners wonder if it was worth all the trouble.

From this newly rearranged space, Ftahkaiw issues invitations to those he wishes to do business with, and holds court when they attend him. It is very rare that he will condescend to visit someone else in their place of business; Ftahkaiw enjoys playing the great lord and the psychological advantage he gains from having others come to him for whatever they want.

Ftahkaiw is notorious in some ports along the border, though there are several other Aslan names that come to mind when this sort of behavior is mentioned – it is not uncommon. As with all Aslan, Ftahkaiw intends to pass his lands, titles and fortune on to his eldest son; the others get nothing.

That, however, is not the whole truth. Ftahkaiw's younger sons will not directly inherit anything from him, but he is quite willing to furnish them with the means to make their own way. In the case of his second son Ftahtees, this was a small transport ship, a craft full of guns and enough cash to attract some followers. With this, Ftahtees was to go out and grab himself a fortune of his own. Plunder, land-grabbing, even trade were all options.

Ftahtees, to his father's pride, naturally announced that he would grab a huge expanse of land from someone capable of putting up a decent fight over it, and set off to do just that. This sort of vainglorious announcement is quite common among *ihatei*, and is often followed by annexation of some worthless piece of swamp or a failed expedition into the middle of nowhere. Ftahkaiw has done a certain amount of boasting about what his son is going to achieve, and now watches anxiously (though he would not admit to that) to see what develops.

The fate of Ftahtees' expedition will reflect on Ftahkaiw, which is an additional concern beyond a natural desire not to see his son killed on some backwater world. Given the circumstances of Ftahtees' current predicament, Ftahkaiw also has strategic concerns. This is partially because he cares about the status of the Aslan Hierate and his clan within it, and partially because he might be implicated if the present incident has bad results for Aslan in general.

Ftahkaiw thus has complex motivations. He is an anxious father, a haughty lord who fears his people may suffer, and a minor leader who knows he will be a scapegoat if there are consequences. All of these motivations point to the same outcome – he needs his son Ftahtees rescued from Thebus, and ideally in a way that lets him keep at least some of his self-respect intact.

HIRING ON

Whilst the Travellers are near Thebus, they receive something that falls about halfway between a summons and an invitation to attend the Lord Ftahkaiw and thence receive a potentially lucrative assignment. Although the tone is condescending and rather off-putting, there are some good reasons for attending. This Lord Ftahkaiw is known for entertaining people of some influence at his court, which might enable the Travellers to make useful contacts. Plus, he is offering an incentive in the form of 'trade credit' (whatever that is) to attend his 'court' and listen to his proposal.

Ftahkaiw's court is extremely pretentious, with armed guards and a large exclusion zone around the conference suite he has taken over. There are other guests, mostly well-dressed humans, chatting and drinking wine. Some may actually be conducting business; most seem to have been invited just to create the illusion of a busy court. Once announced, the Travellers are invited to approach Lord Ftahkaiw and hear his proposal.

Ftahkaiw outlines the situation, which comes down to this: his son Ftahtees and a band of *ihatei* set out to make a great fortune and win lands of their own, but met with treachery or disaster. It has taken a while to locate them but it seems their ship was downed on Thebus. Thebus, as all well-educated sophonts know, is famous for its lion-hunts.

Ftahkaiw is openly contemptuous of this concept, partly because he knows the Thebus Lion is far less dangerous than the safari operators lead their clients to believe, and partly due to the racist connotations. He believes (not incorrectly) that some people hunt Thebus Lions because they dislike Aslan. Ftahkaiw is not so much upset at the idea of his species being hunted as contemptuous of someone who hunts and kills a lesser creature in place of dangerous prey.

The Travellers' mission is to go to Thebus, locate survivors of the *ihatei* expedition (especially Ftahtees) and rescue them. The operation is to be low-key – Ftahkaiw does not want it publicly known that his son needed the help of non-Aslan to extricate himself from his predicament. If the ship can be salvaged, Ftahkaiw will pay a bonus but mostly he wants to save his son and avoid embarrassment for himself, his clan and the Hierate (in that order).

Payment is Cr50000 for a credible attempt at the rescue, doubled if Ftahtees is brought back alive and well, and doubled again if the *ihatei* ship can be saved. In addition, Ftahkaiw offers his (in his mind at least) extremely valuable goodwill and assistance in any dealings with Aslan over whom he has influence. This latter is something of an empty promise, though he actually believes his own propaganda and thinks he has a lot more pull than he really does.

The trade credit is also slightly useful but worth less than Ftahkaiw thinks. It takes the form of a 5% discount or premium on all trade with Aslan clients, up to the total value of Cr10000. In other words, if the Travellers buy goods from Aslan sellers worth Cr20000, they get a 5% discount (Cr1000). Once they have received discounts (or premiums on sales) totaling Cr10000, their preferential credit is used up.

LIONS OF THEBUS

The highport at Thebus is large and busy, but it might as well be in a different star system to the mainworld. Few vessels proceed to the surface, though shuttles provide a regular (but infrequent) service planetside for those who wish to visit. Most do not; Thebus Highport exists to support traffic along the interstellar trade lanes, and for those with an eye to profit there is simply no good reason for stopping at Thebus itself.

The port is not owned by the world government (such as it is), but is a private concern built by the General Development Corporation and sold to investors. It is now run as the Thebus Highport Corporation, which takes care of its own business and more or less ignores the planet below. Most of the port's income is from interstellar trade moving along the Sindalian Main, not least since Thebus is the jump-2 entry/exit point to the main via Marduk and Torpol.

Local trade along the main and the Torpol Cluster is frequent, with big freighters plying the Imperial/Florian trade route less common but worth a lot more per ship. The port makes a special effort to cater to the 'big-ship clients', with high-volume freight handling equipment and discounted accommodation for those taking a few days away from their vessel. There is not a lot of difference between a liner cabin and one at the starport, and it is entirely possible to live aboard a ship in port and go ashore for short trips. To entice crew and passengers to base themselves in the port instead, the operators have made the entry/exist process just a little more time-consuming than necessary whilst offering very good prices at portside hotels.

This approach has worked well, with the result that when a big ship is in port the hotels tend to get very full and the nightlife is sometimes excessively exuberant. The social phenomenon locally known as 'party season' varies depending on what sort of ship is in port – a big freightliner with ordinary passengers sets a different tone to a high-end liner whose passengers have money to burn.

The port itself is well protected with missile and beam weapons but, other than its shuttles and a couple of repair/rescue tugs, has little in the way of small craft. There is not much need for a system defence flotilla when the only thing worth defending is the port itself and traffic within close proximity of the mainworld. The world itself is of no great consequence to the port

operators; all they need is its gravity well. They do not prevent ships going directly planetside, but they do have a rule that vessels which do so will not be allowed to dock at the port. This is blatantly for commercial reasons, though it is covered by the polite fiction that the port operators have a duty to conduct customs and legality checks on vessels coming through the system.

When the Travellers arrive in the Thebus system, they will be quickly contacted by the port and informed of the rules about going planetside. They are expected to dock and refuel at the port, during which a standard spaceworthiness check will be conducted (this is common in most ports, and usually consists of no more than a look at the ship's maintenance log and a 5-minute walkaround by an official with more urgent things to do. Afterward, the Travellers can experience 'party season' at Thebus Highport and perhaps ask around about the *ihatei* ship.

It is widely known that an Aslan vessel recently went straight to the planetary surface and thus ceased to be the problem of the port authority. It is presumed by most to have left the system, but deeper investigation shows it was never tracked doing so. Its rough landing location can be obtained by bribery, hacking or otherwise getting the port staff to divulge it.

PLANETSIDE ON THEBUS

The Travellers might proceed directly to the surface in their own ship – though if they do this they will not be allowed to come back to the highport – or could take a shuttle to the planet's one small community. This is a town of about 8,000 people, with a collection of outlying farms. Travellers who go via the settlement will be bombarded at both ends of the trip with offers to take a guided safari and photograph interesting animals/shoot dangerous animals/hunt and kill something that looks just like an Aslan. The pitch varies depending on the apparent attitudes of the Travellers.

Since there is no enforceable law outside the one settlement, there are no restrictions on the equipment and weaponry the Travellers can take planetside. Carrying of weapons is not allowed on the highport, but transition to the shuttle and thence the ground is routine. Even fairly ridiculous requests, like taking a 30mm autocannon and putting it in the shuttle's cargo

hold, will be entertained so long as enough credits are offered. The locals are equally willing to let offworlders indulge their idiocy if they pay highly enough.

Groundside, the Travellers find most of the people of Thebus have no real interest in offworlders or their affairs, but there is a segment of society who make a very good living from rich people wanting to take a safari into the wilds. Guides are highly recommended (of course) for such an undertaking, since the world still has radioactive hotspots, active mutagens, poison, plagues and lethal wildlife – at least according to the prospective guides. What they tend not to mention among all this exaggeration of quite minor or virtually non-existent threats is potentially the greatest hazard Thebus has for offworlders – its atmosphere.

Someone not acclimatised to Thebus' very thin atmosphere can function for a short while with little more than mild discomfort (though the shortness of breath is frightening) but soon they will tire or become confused. Guides will warn of the need to wear a compressor mask or use an oxygen supply, but if none are hired then this piece of information will be quietly omitted. This is a rather cynical ploy which has cost lives in the past, but is in the interest of the local safari-guide community for the world to seem more dangerous than it is and for services to be seen as absolutely necessary.

The locals can confirm no Aslan ship has landed at their settlement for some time – well over a year in fact – but they did see a ship pass low overhead a few weeks ago. It was headed roughly north-east, into an area that used to be quite densely populated in Thebus' heyday. The region is quite well-watered, which is unusual on Thebus, and was a natural site for cities to grow – and therefore a target when the bombardment began. Today, it has considerable forest coverage and is a good place for hunting, though can be hazardous. At this point the list of potential threats and needs for a guide are trotted out again.

This does sound like the sort of place *ihatei* might try to claim. The thinness of the atmosphere might be a problem but Aslan are attracted by 'good land' which generally translates to greenery and the potential to build impressive cities in the future. *Ihatei* are particularly prone to grabbing lands where they can enjoy hunting, yet planning the day when it is buried under starports and factories.

Travellers who want to use their ship as a base will find landing sites are difficult to find. The low, scrubby dryland undergrowth often conceals crumbly soil and uneven ground. Landing anywhere other than a previously scouted site risks the ship suddenly tipping as one side sinks into the ground, and damage is quite possible. Major components are unlikely to be disabled, but the Travellers will have to deal with minor breakages and the occasional battle to get a landing foot out of a concealed gully.

OVERLAND ON THEBUS

Travellers who venture outside the settlement on Thebus will find it is a rather dry environment with harsh sunlight and a great deal of glare. Vegetation is more brown than green, with spiny stems and creepers that cling to every surface. Tripping is a constant hazard, as seemingly flimsy plant tendrils fail to yield and snag Travellers' boots. Most vegetation is low, no more than knee high, with the occasional scrubby patch of bushes. However, where there is more water, such as near a river, plant life gets taller and greener. The region the Travellers are heading into could be considered an actual forest.

Those concerned with radiological, chemical and biological hazards might bring detectors with them. They will find the threat levels are for the most part extremely low, with occasional areas where a low or even moderate threat is detected – in short, the residual toxins from the bombardment have been overplayed. A guide, if one was hired, will make a big show of taking the Travellers around 'threat spots', saying that levels rise fast in some areas and by the time a detector has warned its user, it may be too late. There are a few places on the planet where this might actually be true, but for the most part it is showmanship to justify the price of the safari.

The Travellers may sight one or more Thebus Lions in their travels, and they do indeed resemble Aslan. They travel on all fours, but stand on their hind legs to look around or reach into higher vegetation for prey that has taken refuge. They are wary of humans, however, and will slink away at their approach. Again, a guide 'sells' this by claiming the Thebus Lion is extremely sneaky and will move away if detected, only to come back to ambush unwary hunters. This is not true; they are just predatory animals who recognise humans as a threat and beyond their normal prey. Thebus Lions would only attack if threatened, such as when a party of humans enters the territory of a group with young who cannot be moved away.

THEBUN LION

ANIMAL	HITS	SPEED
Thebun Lion	22	10 m
SKILLS	Melee (claws) 2, Recon 1, Stealth 2, Survival 1	
ATTACKS	Claws (2D)	
TRAITS	Armour (+8), Heightened Senses, Large (+1)	
BEHAVIOUR	Carnivore, Hunter	



The Aslan ship (an *Aoa'iw*-class light trader) can be detected easily enough from orbit, and even on the ground a rough bearing can be obtained from its residual powerplant emissions. It is deep in the forest, at the end of a long furrow ploughed through the trees. It has obviously crash-landed, and deposited several pieces of itself along the crash path. The drive section travelled furthest, apparently tumbling as it did so, and now lies upside-down amid a tangle of broken trees. It also smashed up most of the ship as it broke free and crashed through the wreckage, killing most who had survived that far.

It is not immediately apparent what brought down the ship, but an inspection of the wreckage by someone with naval or shipboard engineering experience may reveal signs that the drive area was hit by a missile. This is not conclusive – there is so much damage that it is hard to tell for sure – but it seems like the most plausible explanation for the crash. If so, the strike must have occurred whilst the ship was flying low over the surface of Thebus, which has some interesting connotations. At present, there is no way to determine the truth, and in any case the Travellers have a mission to carry out.

It appears there were survivors among the passengers and crew. Some of the internal wreckage has been cut away, perhaps to retrieve bodies. Certainly, there are no corpses within the ship, and not far from it is a line of graves. Someone survived, and made a real effort to bury their dead before stripping what they could salvage from the wreckage and moving off. It should be possible to track the handful of survivors as they head roughly north.

KINGS OF THE RUINS

As they proceed northwards, Travellers with tracking experience (Survival or Recon skills) might begin to suspect they are not the only ones in the area. The occasional track intersects those of the *ihatei*, as if someone was intermittently crossing their path or paralleling it with the occasional check to make sure the trail had not been lost. The additional tracks are made by human-sized boots, but no signs are seen of those who made them.

Background radiation is a little higher in this area, and there are occasional toxin alerts. These are nothing serious but suggest the area was hit by very concentrated chemical weapons a long time ago. Traces still linger in the local ecosystem. There are also odd shapes to be seen in the forest; mounds and narrow ridges that were once the lower parts of walls. Further north, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Travellers are walking through what was once a city. There are some open areas with no walls which were ground-zero for nuclear detonations. There is little residual radiation after all this time, but the realisation that the Travellers are standing where a bomb once came down from orbit might be sobering.

Finally, the Travellers come to an area with more intact walls, some of which jut up above the ground. These are covered in creepers, but here and there are chunks of a nearly-intact building; the lower floor or two at least. The Travellers will become aware that they are being watched, and with little warning they emerge into a clearing. Ahead is an intact set of steps with a stub of some tall building at the top. In front of this structure, on a flat area serving as a dais, sits Ftahteas on his throne.

Ftahteas

SPECIES		GENDER		AGE	
Aslan		Male		-	
TRAITS		Heightened Senses			
STR	12	INT	7	SKILLS	
DEX	7	EDU	6	Athletics (strength) 1, Carouse 1, Drive 0, Electronics 0, Gun Combat (slug) 2, Heavy Weapons (man portable) 1, Leadership 1, Melee (blade) 2, Melee (natural) 2, Recon 2, Stealth 1, Survival 2, Tactics (military) 1	
END	10	SOC	8		
EQUIPMENT		Aua-leather (+1) Crescent Blade (2D+3), Dewclaw (1D+2), Yeheal Autorifle (3D, Auto 2)			



Male Aslan

SPECIES		GENDER		AGE	
Aslan		Male		-	
TRAITS		Heightened Senses			
STR	10	INT	7	SKILLS	
DEX	7	EDU	5	Athletics (strength) 1, Carouse 1, Drive 0, Electronics 0, Gun Combat (slug) 2, Heavy Weapons (man portable) 1, Leadership 1, Melee (blade) 2, Melee (natural) 2, Recon 2, Stealth 1, Survival 2, Tactics (military) 1	
END	10	SOC	7		
EQUIPMENT		Aua-leather (+1) Dewclaw (1D+2), Reaver's Axe (4D) or Spear-hook (2D), Yeheal Autorifle (3D, Auto 2)			



Female Aslan

SPECIES		GENDER		AGE	
Aslan		Female		-	
TRAITS		Heightened Senses			
STR	12	INT	8	SKILLS	
DEX	7	EDU	8	Admin 2, Athletics 0, Electronics (computers) 2, Diplomat 1, Gun Combat (slug) 1, Medic 1, Melee 0, Recon 1, Survival 1	
END	10	SOC	7		
EQUIPMENT		Autopistol (3D-3)			



Ftahteas is unmistakable as his father's son. It is not just the markings of his fur or his features; the haughty way he sits at the head of his court – even in this extremity – reminds the Travellers of their patron. Ftahteas's throne is a heavy chair apparently salvaged from the ship wreckage – quite a feat under the conditions – and his 'court' consists of a handful of male and female Aslan who are all in an a poor state.

The *ihatei* have only a couple of compressor masks between them, and these are becoming worn out after weeks of use. They are not short of food, thanks to their ability to hunt in the surrounding forest, but have few tools, the clothing they wear, and not much in the way of weaponry. Nevertheless, they are a proud people and living with as much dignity as they can.

Ftahteas challenges the Travellers to approach. He is breathless in the thin air, and clearly has trouble concentrating, but his regal bearing does not waver. He demands to know why the Travellers have murdered one of his people then walked into his court. There is a fresh grave off to the side of the clearing, and astute Travellers might spot one or two additional Aslan hiding in the forest fringe.

Ftahteas is considering using the last of his ammunition and spending the lives of his followers to take the Travellers' weaponry and equipment, but this is a very risky strategy. He would prefer to find some other way to profit from the situation or extricate his people from their predicament, but lack of oxygen has given him a headache for the past few weeks. In addition, he is tired, irritable and easily confused – typical symptoms of 'altitude sickness'.

The Travellers might inadvertently trigger a bloodbath, but may be able to convince Ftahteas that they are not his enemies. The idea of being rescued by non-Aslan is galling, and the thought of going back to his father and thanking him for sending rescuers (was the choice of who to send an insult? Ftahteas has many reasons to be suddenly angry, and this question is one of them). However, if the Travellers are respectful and persuasive, they may be able to get through to Ftahteas and perhaps convince him to accept the help he desperately needs.

CONFRONTATIONS

One of Ftahteas' hunters was shot and killed yesterday by persons unknown. The Travellers may – correctly – suspect this was the party they previously detected. It is possible it was a genuine accident, but might equally have been a racist killing – hatred of Aslan is high along the border at present, and there are those who would like the opportunity to shoot one if he was no threat. Even if Ftahteas can be convinced to leave Thebus, these hunters are still a potential problem.

Ftahteas knows very well that he must get his people offworld, and wants to be given a reason to accept rescue. On the other hand, it is his duty to die rather than bring shame upon his father or his clan. The Travellers will have to tread very carefully in talking to Ftahteas, otherwise he is honour-bound to dig his heels in and declare he will die on the ground he has won. He might even turn upon the Travellers if they insult him – or, in his present confused state – he *thinks* they have. In short, Ftahteas is an honourable person with cross-cutting duties. He does not want to die nor lead his people to destruction, but will do so with stubborn dignity unless the case can be made for retreating from Thebus.

Hunters

SPECIES		GENDER		AGE	
Human		-		-	
STR	7	INT	6	SKILLS	
DEX	8	EDU	6	Admin 1, Carouse 2, Drive 0,	
END	7	SOC	8	Electronics (computers) 1, Gun Combat (energy) 1, Profession (various) 1, Recon 1, Stealth 1, Survival 0	
EQUIPMENT		Dagger (1D+2), Laser Rifle with Scope (5D)			



Assuming the Aslan can be convinced to leave, the party of hunters must also be dealt with. They are in some ways a typical safari party; a handful of rich offworlders who wanted some excitement. Most would not consider murdering a sentient being, but one of them came to Thebun to kill something that looked like an Aslan, and got an unexpected bonus. He knows he has killed a real Aslan warrior and is both delighted and slightly horrified. However, he is pretending it was just a Thebun Lion, and since the body could not be found (the warrior managed to crawl off and hide before expiring, and was later found by the other Aslan) there is no proof.

Ftahtea and his Aslan want vengeance for their friend, but most of the hunters are innocent. They will, however, resist any attempt to avenge the dead Aslan or impose any form of justice – most genuinely do not believe he has killed a person, and will think the Aslan are just trying to make trouble. The murderer will try to engineer a situation where the rest of his party are forced to ‘defend themselves against Aslan aggression’ if he can, perhaps by ‘mistaking’ another Aslan for a Thebun Lion.

If the hunters can be dealt with or evaded, Ftahtea and his people need to be escorted back to the settlement or the Travellers’ ship, and perhaps conveyed to the starport. That might be an additional challenge, since the *ihatei* did not arrive through the port and will be refused entry unless the Travellers can come up with a reason for letting them in. Dropping Ftahtea’s name might help, due to his reputation in this region. Bribery, deception or other means are all possible too. Alternatively, the Travellers could simply bring their ship down from the port and pick up the *ihatei*, though they will be refused docking permission if they then try to return to the highport.

Whether Ftahtea is rescued or not, there is still the question of who shot down his ship and why. It was obviously an Aslan vessel so they knew what species they were firing upon, but beyond that there is little information to be had. Perhaps it was rival *ihatei*, pirates or someone else operating on Thebus... or maybe another ship. These questions may lead the Travellers to new adventures once they have brought Ftahtea home to his family.

