

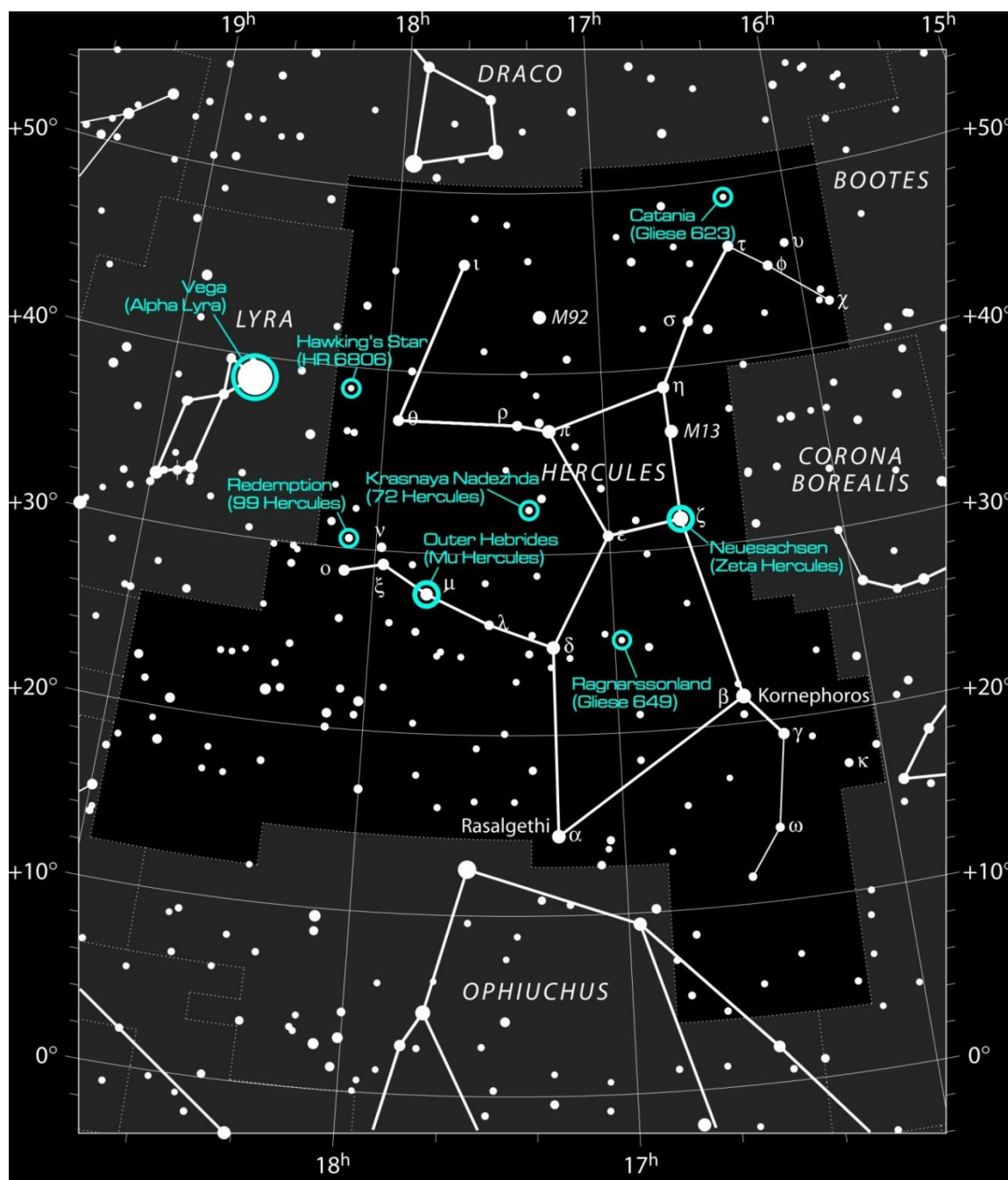
# THE THIRD HERCULES WAR

## INTRODUCTION

Starting in the year 2520, several major powers went to war among the colonized star systems of the Hercules Constellation. This was a region with a long history of war, this being the third major conflict among these stars in just fifty years. Like most wars, the Third Hercules War drew its roots from the past, and was therefore tragically avoidable, yet at the same time somehow inevitable.

On one side stood the navy of the United States, sleek, powerful, and modern - yet also deeply wounded - bitterly cheated after fighting not one but two savage wars at the behest of other powers. Their main enemy would be the

Royal Navy of the United Kingdom, flush with recent victories, now perhaps too eager to reap rewards for wars won on the other side of Known Space. Japan and the Holy Russian Empire would be drawn in as well, along with peripheral roles played by the Corporate Consortium, the Indian Republic, and the Black Dragons of the Khitan-Tunguska Free State. This would be a war of strange allies and rivalries, with age-old foes aligning against traditional allies. Such is the nature of colonial war this far out in the void, where your only true friend is the hull of your ship, and your enemy is whoever's standing between you and home.



## THE STARS OF HERCULES

All wars are influenced by the battlefields over which they are fought. Accordingly, a quick look at the stars of the Hercules constellation is necessary to understand the causes, course, and outcome of the Third Hercules War.

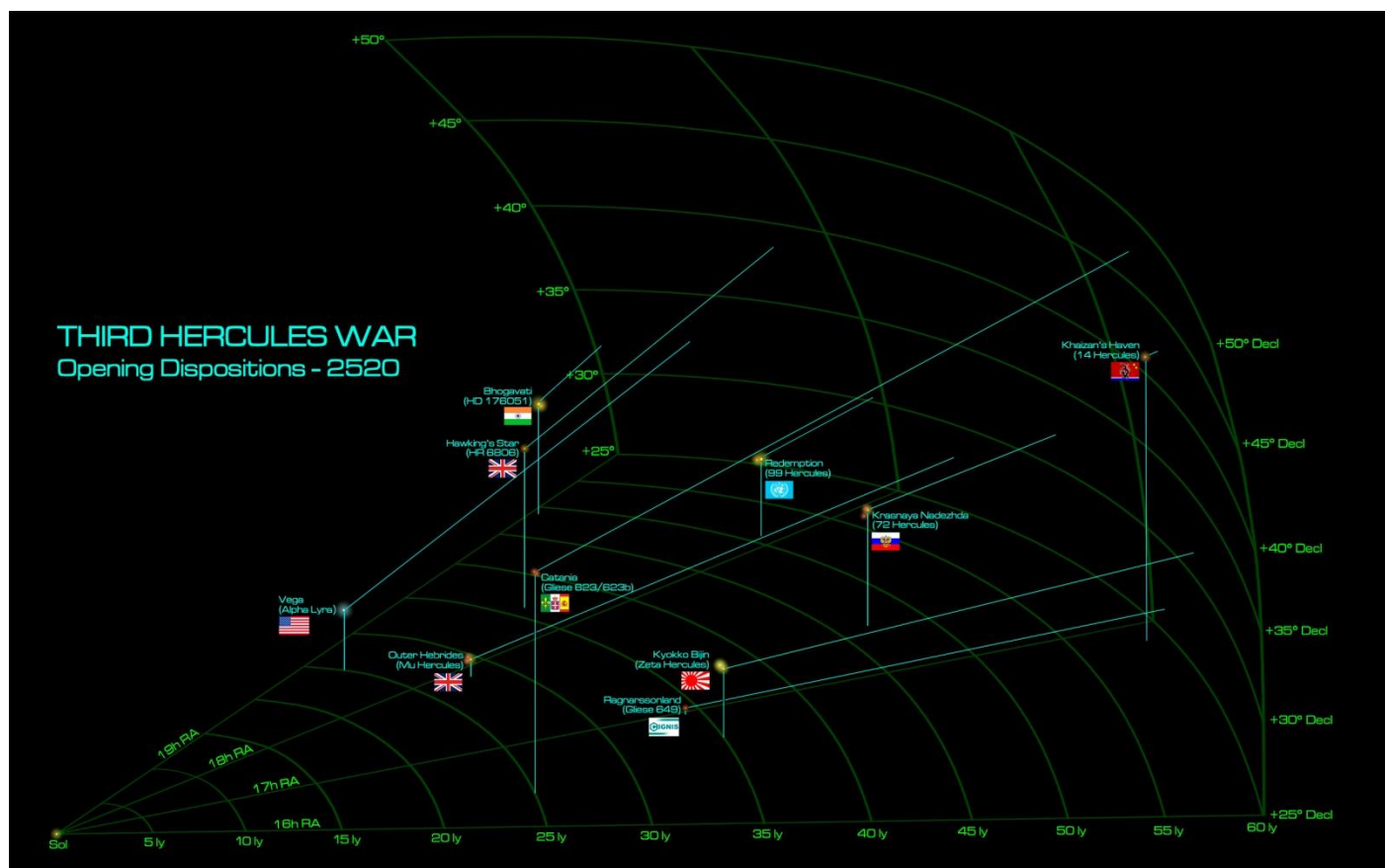
Once beyond Sol, the vectors that extend into Hercules are even more a barren than other vectors of interstellar space. There is not a single Hercules star within the Core, and none within the first dozen light-years of what is usually considered the “Second Band” of Known Space. Not until Gliese 623, fully 25 light-years from Sol, does the first feeble red dwarf shine against the depthless eternity of space. By the time the first pioneers reached this waypoint in 2445, the colonies of Alpha Centauri, Procyon, Barnard’s Star, Wolf 359, Tau Ceti, Epsilon Eridani, Sirius, and half the Second Band of Known Space ... all lay trillions of miles in the cold darkness behind them.

Once among the stars of Hercules, however, habitable systems appear much more regularly. Within the 400 cubic parsecs that make up the Hercules constellation within the Second Band, there are eight distinct star systems, with sixteen stars ranging from F-class yellow-white sub-giants to dM-class red sub-dwarfs. Most of these stars have planetary systems, but many are also binary or triple star systems, resulting in planetary orbital paths than problematic for colonization, to say the least.

This enormous void that abruptly gives way to a relatively busy stellar neighborhood has prompted some navigators to nickname this stretch of space the “Hercules Shelf” or the “Hercules Rim.” Such titles are usually bitten off with a curse, since few civilian captains care to venture here. After all, even fast commercial traffic (capable of 7<sup>th</sup> magnitude Darkstar waves) typically takes almost five months to cross the abyss between Sol and the Hercules Rim.

Starting closest to Sol, the New Roman Republic has maintained its Catania colonies at Gliese 623. Next are the Outer Hebrides colonies of the United Kingdom at Mu Hercules ( $\mu$  Herculis). Gliese 649 was initially the home of Imperial Prussia’s Ragnarsson colony, now purchased outright by the Corporate Consortium. Next is the much larger Japanese colonial complex of Kyokko Bijin (Sunrise Beauty) located at Zeta Hercules ( $\zeta$  Herculis). At 36 light-years from Sol is HR 6806, home of the United Kingdom’s Hawking’s Star colony, followed by the Russians’ Krasnaya Nadezhda (Red Hope) at 72 Hercules. Finally, just past the traditional limit of the Second Band, lies the United Nations mandate of Redemption, located at 99 Hercules. This is an open star system, with all powers here having at least one colony orbiting a planet or moon in the system.

However, there are also colonies of the United States (Vega) and India (Bhogavati - HD 176051) in the neighboring Lyra Colony, as well as Black Dragons of the Khitan-Tunguska Free State lurking at Khaizan’s Haven (14 Hercules).





## HISTORY OF THE HERCULES COLONIES

The first pioneers reached the Hercules stars in 2445, a full sixteen years after the USS *Pioneer's* first FTL voyage to the Alpha Centauri system in 2429. Despite this late start (mostly due the sheer distance between Sol and the closest Hercules stars), the relative richness of the area's planetary systems meant that colonization rapidly made up for lost time. Another factor that accelerated the growth in this area was the fact that many of the richest worlds of the Core were already claimed by "First Wave" powers like the United States, the Panasian Union, Japan, the New Roman Alliance, and the Corporate Consortium. This meant that "Second Wave" powers like the United Kingdom, Imperial Prussia, and the Holy Russian Empire were only more eager to quickly stake a predominant share of claims in the next systems available.

The Hercules stars were just such a place. The United Kingdom became first to plant the flag out here at Mu Hercules (The Outer Hebrides), established in 2456. They were rushed in the effort, resulting the tragic Darkstar accident of HMS *Labrador* and the collapse of their first colony established at Davison-Browne. The reason for this accelerated (some would say reckless) effort was clear, one of the leading Core-based powers was already pushing into the Hercules area. This was the newly-established Catania colony established by the New Romans in Gliese 623,

officially on-line just a year later in 2457. Only barely had the United Kingdom secured a foothold in Hercules, almost cut out of this sector of the "Darkstar Gold Rush" before it had even started.

Whatever one might think of British motives, the Prussians were quick to reply, establishing the New Saxony (Neuesachsen) colony at Zeta Hercules in 2462. These two systems are only about 15 light-years apart, and it wasn't long before these old maritime rivals were jockeying for position in regards to shipping lanes and smaller neighboring systems like Gliese 649 and HR 6806. Control of these peripheral systems vital, since the sphere of influence projected by the New Romans out of Catania sharply limited options for shipping lanes back to Sol. Darkstar ships could not easily perform with the transrelativistic endurance that they do now, and it was preferable to have a chain of systems that they could hop through, especially before tackling the 25 light-year leap from the "Hercules Rim" all the way back to Sol.

Wrangling over these smaller star systems finally sparked armed conflict in 2469 with the First Hercules War, although in truth one would hardly call such a skirmish a "war" in modern terms. Warships were rarely capable of Darkstar waves stronger than 8<sup>th</sup> magnitude in those days, and "battleships" of the time carried the kind of firepower commonly found on today's destroyers. Furthermore, the

war was mercifully brief, ending after two years and only three major battles. The UN then stepped in on Earth, forcing the British and Prussians to come to a settlement. The British were awarded with HR6806 (which they soon colonized as "Hawking's Star", named for famed astrophysicist Steven Hawking), and the Prussians took Gliese 649 (colonized as "Ragnarssonland" in 2471).

In decades since, historians have concluded that both the British and Prussians basically "shot themselves in the foot" with the First Hercules War, which only allowed the Russians to jump past them both and establish a foothold in 72 Hercules. This colony was named "Krasnaya





Nadezhda" (Red Hope) in 2474. The remainder of the 2470s saw both the British and Prussians engage in a series of raids (the British using their privateers and "Q-Ship" disguised merchant raiders and the Prussians their dreaded "U-boat" *umfangangriffboote* torpedo-corvettes) against the Russian colony. Clearly their intent was to make Red Hope commercially untenable, hoping the Russians would pull out and leave 72 Hercules open for British or Prussian annexation. But the Russians stuck it out and the raids were called off by 2480.

Twenty years of relative peace followed, with all four powers more concerned with the construction of development of their star systems than with planting more meaningless flags on dead moons. Immense strides in DT-fusion reactors and Darkstar distortion drives soon had even commercial traffic up to 9<sup>th</sup> magnitude Darkstar waves, cutting the travel time to the Hercules Rim to under two months. Furthermore, the Hercules constellation became the heart of what is generally considered the "Hercules Strategic Command Sector", or Hercules SCS. With the Prussians, British, and Russians all now first-rate interstellar powers, the Hercules holdings became the fulcrums on which rested a vast surrounding panoply of colonies in neighboring constellations like Draco, Serpens, Boötes, and Lyra. Many of these colonies were owned by the Americans, Chinese, Japanese, and Consortium, and often they had to pay hefty tariffs to pass through colonies along the Hercules Rim. The colonies exploded, and by the turn of the 26<sup>th</sup> Century, various nations were beginning to make the next leap out of the Second Band into what would soon be known as the Third Band or the frontier.

This, of course, lit the long-smoldering fuse of the Second Hercules War. Within the Hercules stars, only one major system remained, 99 Hercules, practically on the "border" between Second and Third Band space. Until now, there had been little interest in colonizing a world 51 light-years from Sol, a system that could barely be reached and could serve as the gateway only into a more impossibly-distant void. But a new generation of faster, longer-ranged starships was making colonization of 99 Hercules practically a necessity, at least to any Hercules colonial powers that wanted any kind of future stake in the newly-opened Third Band.

Sensing that another Hercules War was imminent, the United Nations quickly stepped in. In 2496, they colonized 99 Hercules themselves, declaring "Redemption" an open system and demilitarized zone for the duration of its 20-year lease. Since then, Redemption has indeed known peace, with British, Prussian, Russian, and New Roman colonies quietly established throughout its planets and moons. But these same twenty years has also seen a vast expansion into the Third Band, and since 99 Hercules is the only major "halfway" system that can allow staging of large, long-term, and expensive colonization efforts out into the Third Band of Hercules, its strategic importance to the sustained future of these empires became all the more important.

## THE SECOND HERCULES WAR

In 2516, a motion was entered onto the floor of the UN Assembly (the "Migawa Resolution") to extend the international peacekeeping lease of Redemption colonies in 99 Hercules, perhaps as far as 2550. However, all four empires with colonies throughout the Hercules constellation



were already making plans to take the Redemption system for themselves, and exerted tremendous political and economic pressure through their UN delegates to have the Migawa Resolution defeated. In an odd episode of “cooperative enemies,” British and Prussian diplomats coordinated their bribes, extortions, and blackmails, working their way through hearings and floor votes until finally the Migawa Resolution was put down. “Japanese resolve,” commented one bitter journalist, “has proven no match for Anglo-Prussian coordination, cooperation, and shared vision toward a common purpose. The Germans and British have won this great victory together, and as a reward are now free to start killing each other.”

As the UN began pulling out of the Redemption system (mandated by treaty starting on January 1, 2517), the British and Prussians began discreetly sending ships to the system, far before the system was officially “open” for re-colonization. Naturally, pulling out of a star system after twenty years is an immensely complicated process, with a long list of thorny considerations like the disposition of pre-existing facilities, populations, law enforcement, taxation of revenue generated by the system’s industrial base, and so on. The UN withdrawal was planned as a carefully phased process, with increasing levels of colonial presence allowed only a strictly scheduled basis coordinated with different stages of the UN withdrawal. British politicians and Prussian bankers, however, had little time for such considerations, and gambled on the UN’s reluctance to start trouble over a system they were being forced to vacate anyway.

Sure enough, tensions continued to escalate until a full-blown war erupted all across the Hercules Rim. Sometimes called the “Hercules Gate War”, the Second Hercules War was no minor skirmish like the first war had been. Forty-five years of technological advancement, colonial development, and military buildup ensured the British and Prussians had the fleets available to truly “light the stars afire” as one historian would put it. Most of the fighting took place in the 99 Hercules (Redemption) star system itself, with both the Prussians and the British keen to dominate this expected “Hercules Gateway” out to the Third Band frontier. Soon the Holy Russian Empire joined the fray on the side of the Prussians, forming what was called the “Baltic Pact.” The British were joined by the New

Romans Alliance, especially the French, in an alliance soon coined the “New Plantagenets.”

The Second Hercules War ignited in April 2517 with a skirmish at Pritchard’s Isle, a British holding in the “open” Redemption stay system. A much larger battle followed at the Italian colony of Avezzano in May, big and bloody enough to put a final end to any last despairing peace overtures.

Once the war was officially on, the various navies wasted no time in smoking up their gun barrels. The French lashed out at the Prussians at the Jörmungandr colony (Ragnarssonland system), sparking a battle neither side really won. The Russians struck at British orbital facilities at Bristol Head Upsilon and Theta, two of the moons of a Hawking’s Star gas giant. Again the battles were largely draws. To buy time for powerful cruisers and battleships to converge on Redemption (99 Hercules), the British launched a diversionary raid to pin down Prussian naval units gathering in the protoplanetary debris field of the system, finally resulting in the first clear victory of the war. But the Prussians and Russians were onto the British diversion, and actually crushed out a major win in a huge cruiser clash in the atmosphere of Zubrin, a British-held gas giant in Hercules 99, a battle that won a Knight’s Cross for the Prussian commander. Eager to buy more time for the British allies, the French scrapped with the Prussians at Hnoss, a moon of Freyja in the Ragnarssonland system, while the Russians tangled with a Commonwealth fleet of Canadians, Australians, and New Zealanders at the Cambrian Hill gas giant in the Hawking’s Star system. The British finally started to regain their balance when they hit the Russians at their Kayashenko gas giant, but really turned the tide when their main fleet from Earth, led by the *Royal Sovereign* class battleship *King George V*, scored a smashing win at the Battle of the Lost Dutchman (Redemption / 99 Hercules system,



28 November 2517).

The Prussians reeled but struck back immediately with a major win in a convoy battle at the Lost Dutchman, slowing British pursuit of the limping Prussian force defeated in the main battle. The British sent in yet another light force of destroyers and frigates, winning a skirmish against the Prussians and cutting off part of the Prussian fleet's escape. The Prussians were finally able to start a series of short, "dog leg" Darkstar jumps, hoping to evade British pursuit as they pulled out of the Redemption system altogether. An attempt was made to capture a crippled Prussian heavy cruiser, igniting yet *another* scrap at the Lost Dutchman, but a scratch force of Russian and Norwegian warships stopped the Italians making this effort.

The Battle of Lost Dutchman really sealed the end for the Prussians in the Second Hercules War. There would be two more battles, (Thorne gas giant at Hawking's Star and Rindr 11 at Ragnarssonland), but the British win both of these and the Baltic Pact soon sued for peace.

The Second Hercules War, or Hercules Gate War, was played out in *Darkstar* back in 2013-14 between James Johnson, Jennifer Lemon, Alex Carney, and Jeffrey Porro.

## A BRIEF PEACE

The British and New Roman victory in the Second Hercules War had two immediate and long-lasting outcomes.

One, crushing reparations paid by the Prussians to the British made the continued operation of Prussian colonies in the Hercules sector economically unfeasible. The colony of

Ragnarssonland would soon be sold outright to the Corporate Consortium (mainly Ares Security Concepts, Cignis Systems, and United Aerospace Technologies), the bulk of these funds used to pay off Prussian war debt not only in the Second Hercules War, but Duchess Annabel's War in 2518-19 as well (see below).

Two, the United Nations unilaterally extended its "lease" on the Redemption / 99 Hercules system. Simply put, they weren't going anywhere. Clearly the region was nowhere near ready for peace, and so the UN resolved to maintain a watchful presence along the Hercules Rim.

A United Nations presence notwithstanding, observers openly doubted the prospects of lasting peace here in the Hercules colonies. The UN had no meaningful military presence out this far to enforce any prohibitions on further hostilities, and although the Prussians had been largely pushed out of the region, rivalries remained high among other powers in the region. Notably, the "Plantagenet" Alliance fell apart almost immediately, old rivalries between the neo-Victorian British and the "Vatican Coalition" having been swallowed only in the face of the Prussian threat and expansionism on the part of the Holy Russian Empire.

In fact, Great Britain and the New Roman Alliance were soon at war in another region of known space. Once again the Prussians and British had come to blows, this time in Duchess Annabel's War in the Sagittarius-Libra-Arae sector of the Second Band. This time, however, the New Roman Alliance lined up with the Prussians, weary of British tariffs and shipping taxes through the all-important "Annabel's Star" system of that region.

The Prussians would wind up losing that war as well in early 2520, and the ripple-effect of that outcome again reaching back to the Hercules Rim and lighting the fuse for a Third Hercules War later that same year.

Another Prussian ally in the Duchess Annabel's War had been the Imperial Japanese. However, although the Japanese task forces in that war had won virtually all their battles, the Prussians and New Romans still wound up having to sue for peace with the British and their allies. This meant that the Prussians would have to again pay the "condemned man's





share” of the reparations, a debt they just couldn’t shoulder alone. The Japanese, as their erstwhile allies, agreed to pay their share of the debt, but in exchange they would take over the Neuesachsen (New Saxony) colony in the Hercules Rim.

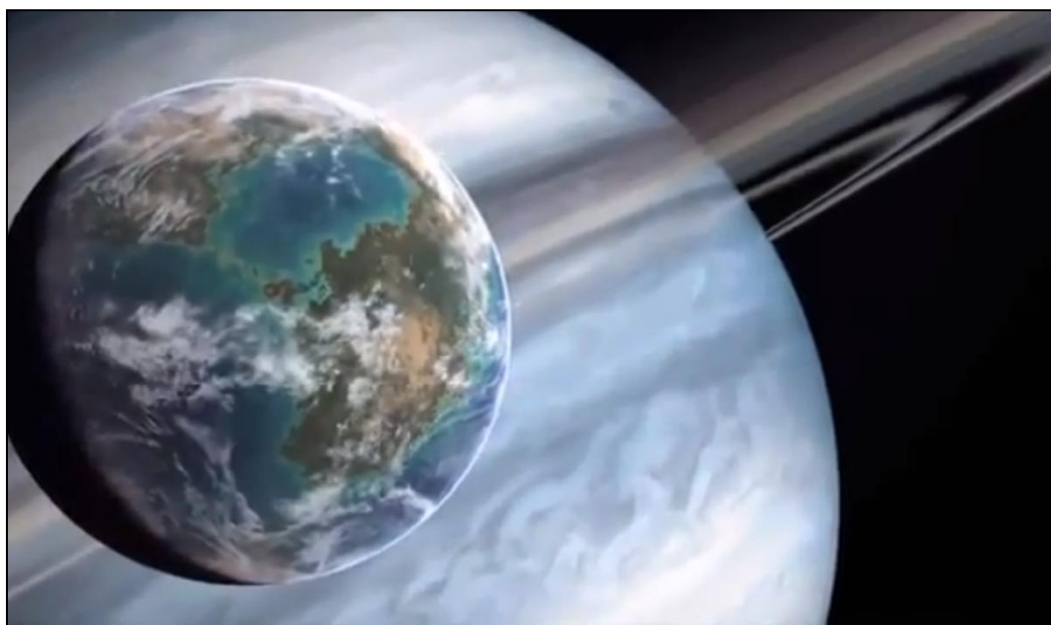
The Prussians had little choice, and by mid-2020, the Japanese had taken possession of Neuesachsen and established their new “Kyokko Bijin” (Sunrise Beauty) colony at Zeta Hercules.

The British, having just fought a war against the Japanese at Annabel’s Star (often to British regret), and determined not to have simply traded one Hercules Rim enemy for another, made earnest and repeated diplomatic overtures to the Japanese at Kyokko Bijin. The Japanese, having made off rather well in their “defeat” at Annabel’s Star, readily accepted. Thus was established a new 連携 (Renkei, “Cooperation”) Alliance between the United Kingdom and Imperial Japan, a powerful new coalition that made other powers in the region almost immediately nervous.

## OTHER WARS

Meanwhile, other wars were raging through distant sectors of Known Space. As far back as 2512, the Black Dragon revolt had overthrown dozens of Panasian and Russian colonies and tenuously established the rebel “Khitan-Tunguska Free State.” The Black Dragon War has never really ended, and shows no signs of doing so. Put simply, wherever an outer Russian or Pansian colony exists near any Black Dragon holdings (almost universally out along the Third Band frontier), count on the Black Dragons taking the opportunity to stab at that colony. Needless to say, with the Russian Krasnaya Nadezhda colony laying at 47 light-years from Sol, and a small Black Dragon outpost at 14 Hercules (Khaizan’s Haven), Black Dragon incursions or at least raids can be expected if Russians get drawn into another conflict along the Hercules Rim.

The Black Dragon War also involved the Japanese in 2516 when the Black Dragons invaded the Xi Scorpio stellar group at a staggering 91 light-years from Sol. Xi Scorpio included the “Hokkaido’s Flower” colony, one of the closest Earth-analog planets yet found. A desperate counter-strike was mounted against this distant threat, but Xi Scorpio was so far away that the Japanese needed help for a fast response over



so great a distance. They therefore leveraged clauses in the treaty that ended their Andromeda Arc War against the Americans, compelling the Americans to help them in the Xi Scorpio War and the Scorpion’s Tail War that followed.

These wars were relatively small but brutal. Being so far from home or other hospitable colonies, neither side could afford to give quarter, especially in the war’s early stages. The American Navy took heavy losses in a war they wanted nothing to do with, forced by treaty to fight alongside an enemy that had defeated them just two years before. Although the Americans were given leases to develop small colonies on Hokkaido’s Flower along with their Japanese hosts, the “victory” of Xi Scorpio and the Scorpion’s Tail Wars were bittersweet for the Americans, to say the least.

All of which leads to the Americans casting hungry eyes on the Hercules Rim. They’re actually right next door, with a huge super-colony at Vega, brightest star in the neighboring Lyra constellation. They also have colonies in the neighboring Draco constellation where they the Japanese in 2512 in the 19 Draconis War. Plans are afoot to expand exploration, colonization, and development of these holdings into the Third Band of Lyra and Draco, but such endeavors aren’t liable to bear fruit until the 2530s or 40s.

In the meantime, the Americans feel entitled to a bigger slice of the pie in the Second Band, especially with the UN leases in Redemption now extended indefinitely. After all, if Redemption will remain an open, demilitarized, multinational and UN-mandated system, why can’t the Americans have a holding there as well? And now that the Japanese have a colony in the Hercules Rim, shouldn’t they at least lease some gas giants or moons to the Americans in Kyokko Bijin ... given all the American blood spilled for the Japanese in the two Xi Scorpio Wars?

## ROOTS OF CONFLICT

Ever since the Prussians were forced out of the Hercules Rim, long-standing balances of power have been upset and the region has become fundamentally unstable.

First, the Japanese acquisition of the former Neuesachsen colonies (now Kyokko Bijin) have made the Consortium executives at Ragnarssonland more than a little nervous. The Consortium had grown comfortable with the idea of a beaten and bankrupt power next door, the threat of a powerful navy with a string of recent victories under its belt is decidedly less accommodating.

Second, the Americans feel they have been cheated by the settlements of recent the Andromeda Arc, Xi Scorpio, and Scorpion's Tail Wars. At Andromeda Arc, the Japanese were their enemies. In the Xi Scorpio Wars, the Japanese were their "allies" but walked away with almost all the spoils. With colonies in the Hercules Rim up for grabs, and the Japanese getting a rich new colony, the Americans feel they are long overdue for a share of Japanese fortune.

Third, the Russians and British were allies in the recent Duchess Annabel's War, but the British wound up with most of the spoils. The Russians also feel cheated, albeit with the British instead of the Japanese. Furthermore, the Russians and British were enemies in the Second Hercules War, and suffice it to say have never been the best of neighbors in the Hercules Rim.

Fourth, now the UN leases in the Redemption star system (99 Hercules) have been indefinitely extended, the Americans want the opportunity for a "free colony" here the same the British, the Russians, the Japanese, the New

Romans, and the Consortium. The problem is the British have recently fought a bitter war in this system (most of the Second Hercules War took place here), and have no illusions that an American foothold in the Hercules Rim will be the first step in challenging the growing British and Japanese colonization and shipping monopolies in the area.

Fifth, the Americans openly have a growing problem with the Japanese, and since the Japanese and British have just signed the Renkei Accords, an American problem with the Japanese means an American problem with the British.

Sixth, with increasing American diplomatic pressure in the Hercules Rim being met with stiffening British and Japanese stonewalling, the Americans try to "stack the deck" on the floor of the UN by gathering alliances among others who are not pleased with the Renkei Accords and the Anglo-Japanese monopolies they represent. First to sign up are the Corporate Consortium, wary of the new Japanese presence so close to their Ragnarssonland holdings. Next are the Russians, who haven't been keen on the British in this region since the Second Hercules War. Lastly is the Indian Republic, which also has holdings in the neighboring Lyra constellation, and are promised generous rights through American held Vega shipping lanes if they support the Americans in their Hercules efforts.

Lastly, the Black Dragons are reinforcing their small outpost at Khaizan's Haven (Hercules 14). Keeping a steady eye on the Russians at Krasnaya Nadezhda. This is just one more factor making the Russians nervous and heightening tensions in the area.

By the end of 2020, two distinct blocks have formed that will square off in the upcoming Third Hercules War.

The Renkei Alliance: a treaty between the British and the Japanese, with the Black Dragons as allies of convenience if the Russians align against them (which they will).

The Coalition of Eagles: a treaty of cooperation signed between the United States and the Holy Russian Empire, a play on the eagles so important in the symbology of both nations. The Corporate Consortium signs on as "junior partners" and the Indian Republic also pledges a limited degree of support.

The stage is set. The battle lines are drawn. All that remains is an incident to set off yet another powder keg in the fractious world of Darkstar.



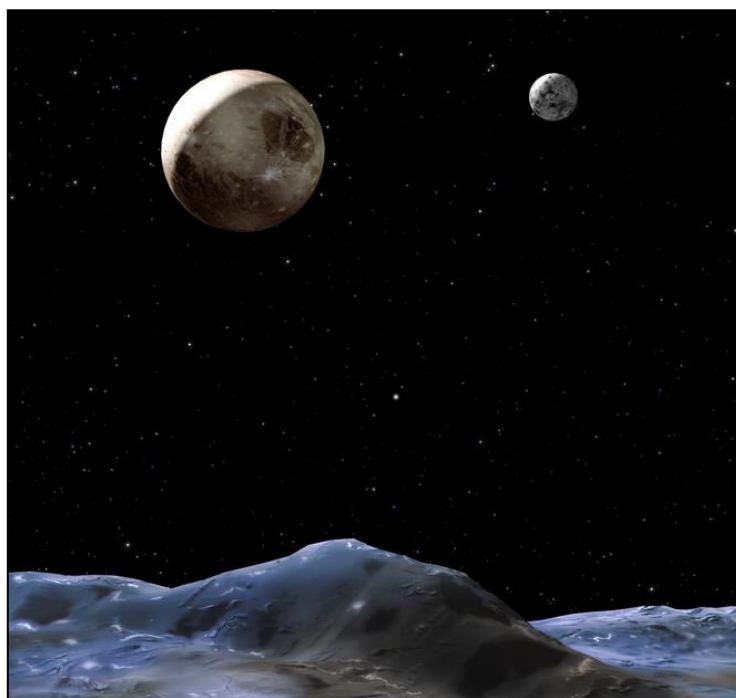


## COMMANDERS: RENKEI ALLIANCE

Overall operational command for the Royal Navy in the Hercules constellation belongs to Vice-Admiral Sir John Arthur Winton, Lord of Verne and Viscount of Persephone. He is a refined and well-spoken bulldog of a man, his family deeply entrenched in naval tradition for almost six hundred years. He also commanded the British here during the Second Hercules War just three years ago, and bears victor's laurels for the climactic Battle of the Lost Dutchman that largely decided that war. Aboard his flagship HMS *King George V*, he is sworn to protect these star systems over which his family has watched for three generations (note his noble titles of peerage). In addition to the formidable screen that supports his own battleship, he also commands a panoply of planetary bases, a skirmish force of "Q-Ship" privateers, a modest carrier strike group, and three brigades of Royal Marines. Finally, he has "Force A" and "Force K," two powerful heavy cruiser strike squadrons centered on HMS *Agamemnon* and *Kraken*, respectively. In particular, Task Force "A" has been instrumental in the recent British victory in Duchess Annabel's War, and Task Force "K" sails under the flag of Commodore Rhea Aubrey, a veteran of the Psi Serpentis, Second Hercules, and Aegean Path Wars.

Japanese command falls under Rear-Admiral Hisashi Myoto. Despite his title, he is hardly a full combat command, charged mainly with the construction and establishment of the new Kyokko Bijin colonies in the former Prussian holdings of Neuesachsen. His flagship is the aging *Haruna* class battleship IJN *Yamashiro*, along with a small force of escorts and support craft. However, he has two very powerful cruiser forces that are likely to carry out most of the combat operations for Japan in this war. First is the "Naginata" squadron under the flag of Commodore Hiromi Ozawa. A veteran of the six wars, she has fought against or with the Americans in three of them, and knows some of her imminent foes personally. That said, the Naginata squadron has taken heavy damage in the recent Xi Scorpio and Duchess Annabel's Wars, so it remains to be seen how active they will be in the initial phases of the Third Hercules War. Instead, the "Kama" cruiser squadron will most likely form Myoto's primary striking force in the opening days.

Finally we have the peripheral support of the Black Dragons, mounted by the Khar Khugtga (Black Saber) cruiser squadron under the flag of Captain Baraqin Dalai. A fearsome veteran of the Black Dragon, Xi Scorpio, Scorpion's Tail, and Duchess Annabel's Wars, his small, scrapped together force of stolen Chinese and Russian cruisers, destroyers, and corvettes may well pose a painful problem for the Russians ... and anyone else who gets in his way.



## COMMANDERS: COALITION OF EAGLES

Overall American naval command is held by Vice-Admiral Eleanor McKnight, a no-nonsense 40-year veteran flying her flag from the *Colorado*-class battleship USS *Texas*. A staunch opponent in American involvement in the Xi Scorpio wars, she's gone on record with her determined resolution to win an "honest" war actually fought for American interests. An alliance with the Russian Empire makes her nervous, but recent performance of the British and Japanese navies convinces her she'll need allies wherever she can get them. Her flagship is supported by a squadron of *Gettysburg*-class heavy cruisers, *Obama*-class fleet carriers, and smaller support craft. Rumors that a *Lexington*-class supercarrier may be deployed to her Vega fleet remain unconfirmed.

Two other powerful groups stand ready under McKnight's command. First, Task Force Liberty is built around the *Endeavor*-class light fleet carrier USS *Liberty*, legendary veteran of wars extending back to IK Pegasi, under the flag of Captain Zachary T. Irons. Second, Task Force Oriskany is a small but incredibly deadly "wolfpack" of *Valcour*-class destroyers, *Mako*-class torpedo corvettes, and a US Marine Corps assault carrier. Commanded by Captain Matthew A. Spencer aboard the USS *Oriskany*, this small fleet's effectiveness may prove out of all proportion to its size, if for no other reason that it's Darkstar drives propel them at near triple the speed of other warships, allowing them to appear almost anywhere.

The Holy Russian Empire, meanwhile, has a smaller more defensive investment in this war, primarily aiming to upset the growing Anglo-Japanese monopolies of the Renkei

Alliance, and perhaps win back some of their possessions lost during the Second Hercules War.

The Russian fleet at Krasnaya Nadezhda is commanded by Rear-Admiral Vladimir Antonovich Drodz, Baron of the Holy Russian Imperial Court and personal envoy of Czar Nikolas IV. Although he currently has no battleships under his command, rumors that a *Peter the Great* class dreadnought (probably CPK *Alexandr III*) is on the way cannot be definitively disproved. In the meantime, Drodz has a formidable force of *Slava* class heavy cruisers, *Konstantin* and *Kutusov* class light cruisers, and of course the dreaded K-56 type torpedo corvettes.

Drodz also has the *Lazarev* task force under the flag of Captain Pyotr Fedorovich Myshaga, a small but highly-decorated force that has served with bloody-knuckled distinction in both the Psi Serpentinis, Aegean Path, and Duchess Annabel's Wars. Myshaga fought on both sides of the Psi Serpentinis War, originally one of the confederates of the rebel Vanya "Papa" Konolov. By judiciously switching sides just *before* the Czar's *okhrana* secret police showed up and helping Imperial Intelligence find and entrap the renegade Konolov, Myshaga managed to save his career and those of his officers. Myshaga also helped stave off immediate Russian defeat in the disastrous Aegean War by winning the stunning upset at Helikarnassus, and turned the tide in Russia's favor with a series of wins in Duchess Annabel's War.

For the Coalition of Eagles, the wild card support factions are the Corporate Consortium and the Indian Republic. At the outset of the war no one really knows what forces they will commit. For the Consortium, there are vague reports of "X-Team" (Escalation Teams) Sigma and Theta. The Indian Republic may commit a force of force of *Sharada-class* light cruisers, *Gujarat-class* destroyers, and *Rajkot-class* frigates, but time will tell.

Neutral on the sidelines are the New Romans. With only one colony in the Hercules constellation (Catania at Gliese 623), the New Romans never really had a flag-ranked officer in command of a large battle fleet. When the Plantagenet Treaty was signed, the original plan was to send a commander from the nearby Psi Serpentinis systems, the French Rear-Admiral Michel Marquis de Beauchamp. However, the predominantly Italian governors and administrators throughout the Catania colonies demanded that one of their own be sent instead (perhaps unimpressed by Beauchamp's eventual defeat in the Psi Serpentinis War, not to mention his scandalous pursuit of a Spanish countess, the Lady Theresa Rochelle di Medici). Accordingly, Rear-Admiral Giovanni Doria diCarlo was detached from the massive New Roman fleet at the Casa Savoia colonies of Procyon, and assigned to command the newly-forming *Regia Marina Catania* (Royal Navy Fleet Command, Catania) in the Hercules constellation.

Flying his flag from the battleship *Vittorio Veneto*, diCarlo commands a coalition of warships (admittedly smaller than the force committed by the British, Japanese, or Americans) drawn from the navies of Italy, Spain, and France, including the decorated *Leclerc* battlegroup under Captain Rafael deChalemonde. An arrogant and infuriating man to work with, deChalemonde still insists that he "won the Aegean War singlehandedly," and unfortunately has the Battle of Thessalonica to prove it. He and Commodore Aubrey positively hate each other, and were bitter enemies throughout the long and bloody course of the Psi Serpentinis War. Now on the same side, their ability to work and fight together remains in question. Aubrey despises deChalemonde as a glory-hungry careerist and "insufferable, womanizing, preening little jackass," while deChalemonde only replies that any woman as hideous as this "frigid, menopausal battleaxe" must, in fact, be a man.

