

THE PERSEUS-ARIES WAR (2522-2523)

INTRODUCTION

The Perseus-Aries War took place deep in the “rimward” reaches of Known Space, through the outer star systems of the Second Band and extending into the Deep Frontier stretching away from the galactic center. Initially known in the American media as the War for Kinkaid’s Outpost, the conflict is sometimes recorded (perhaps more accurately) as the Aries-Taurus War in the media of other nations. In a cruel twist of irony, this was a war born from a peace treaty, the

conflict’s fuse lit when the renegade “Black Dragons” of the Khitan-Tunguska Free State signed a limited, region-based cease-fire with their most implacable enemies, the Panasian Union and the Holy Russian Empire. Far from ending the widespread conflagration commonly known as the “Black Dragon War,” the adoption of this shaky, conditional, and incomplete “peace” had the unfortunate side effect of turning the Black Dragons from a threat faced primarily by the

Panasians and Russians . . . into a threat faced by virtually every navy in Known Space.

The history of the Black Dragons is a bloody one. Beginning in 2512, the “Khitan-Tunguska Free State” started as a coordinated, sector-wide revolt among the coreward colonies of the Panasian Union and Holy Russian Empire. Overworked and under-supplied, abused and exploited, ignored and oppressed, they rose in their thousands, seizing at least a dozen major industrial colonies and shipyards in the Sagittarius, Scorpio, and Serpens sectors. The revolts were a bloodbath, nearly sixty years of rage unleashed in a stunning firestorm of brute violence. It is not our intention in this reference to comment on the nature, causes, or justifications for the Black Dragon revolt, it is noted here only to inform the kind of enemies the Black Dragons would become in future conflicts with other powers.

For five years the Black Dragon War raged along the outer reaches of the coreward strategic command sectors,



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fought between the newly-established “nation” of the Khitan-Tunguska Free State and their former colonial masters, the Panasian Union and the Holy Russian Empire. All this changed, however, when a new earth-like “Eden” world was discovered in the Kurokawa Colonies of Xi Scorpio D (disputed between the Japanese and the Panasian Union). Simply put, the Black Dragons wanted the new world, accordingly struck the Japanese with chilling ferocity and without warning. This ignited the Xi Scorpio War, fought between the Black Dragons on one side, and the so-called “Pacific Alliance” of the Japanese and United States on the other.

The Xi Scorpio War (and the smaller “Scorpion’s Tail” War that followed) marked three sobering developments vis-à-vis the Black Dragons and their role to play in ongoing conflicts and deep space naval operations.

First, for the first time, the Black Dragons had instigated a war with nations *besides* their original enemies (with whom they were still fighting elsewhere).

Second, the Black Dragons pursued this war in a pitiless, “take-no-prisoners” manner, their attacks just as merciless against their new enemies as they’d been with their original colonial oppressors.

Third, it showed *why* the Black Dragons were truly fighting these wars. There weren’t just seeking to satisfy some vague sense of revenge or bloodlust. In a strategic doctrine called simply *Khuvi Zayaa*, or “The Destiny,” the Black Dragons were instead driven (perhaps with an intensity not shared by any other naval power) to carve out for themselves a new, permanent home among the stars. Clearly no “citizen” of the Khitan-Tunguska Free State could ever return to Earth, and if

they were to survive as a people, they would need that rarest of all treasures . . . an actual planet. They would need a true place to set down roots both literal and metaphorical, a sky beneath which to raise their children and earth in which to bury their ancestors.

Such was the impetus driving the aggression and ferocity of the Black Dragons and their wars, a goal for which their captains were all too willing to die . . . and kill.

In the wake of the Xi Scorpio and Scorpion’s Tail Wars, the Black Dragons would occasionally meddle in other wars between the Ten Powers, at least when said wars would spill close enough to a Black Dragon colony along the Deep Frontier and there seemed to be some advantage to be gained by the Free State. Perhaps most notably, the Black Dragons struck at the Arab League colony at 14 Herculis during the Third Hercules Rim War of 2519-2520, usurping the colony while local League battlefleets were engaged with the Americans and Russians. Briefly renamed “Khaizan’s Haven,” the system was soon retaken in a determined Arab League counteroffensive to re-establish the original caliphate.

Through these non-committal years, however, the Black Dragons were in fact just biding their time. Their ongoing wars with their original enemies in the Panasian Union and Holy Russian Empire wouldn’t allow for much accumulation of strategic resources or buildup of sufficient combat power to mount the kind of permanent invasion their long-range goals of *Khuvi Zayaa* demanded.

This changed, however, when a series of disasters befell counter-invading Russian and Panasian fleets driving against Black Dragon strongholds in the Serpens strategic command



sector. The loss of two battleships and several cruiser task forces, along with an entire Panasian invasion force at Lambda Serpentis, finally forced the signing of the Lhasa Accords in July 2521. In this agreement, the Black Dragons won not only possession of several more star systems in the Serpens and Sagittarius sectors, but a formal cessation of hostilities against the Holy Russian Empire and Panasian League. It should be noted, however, that the Black Dragons had to repatriate thousands of Russian and Panasian prisoners, cede several star systems back to the Panasian Union and Holy Russian Empire in regions closer to Sol, and of course full-scale war continues in the Scorpio, Lupus, and Aquila sectors. Although mitigated and scaled down, by no means is the Black Dragon war “over.”

Still, this reprieve in combat frontage, combined with the windfall of resources, manufacturing, and shipyards, has greatly enhanced the overall strategic position of the Khitan-Tunguska Free State, and emboldened them to expand their territorial ambitions into new sectors of Known Space.

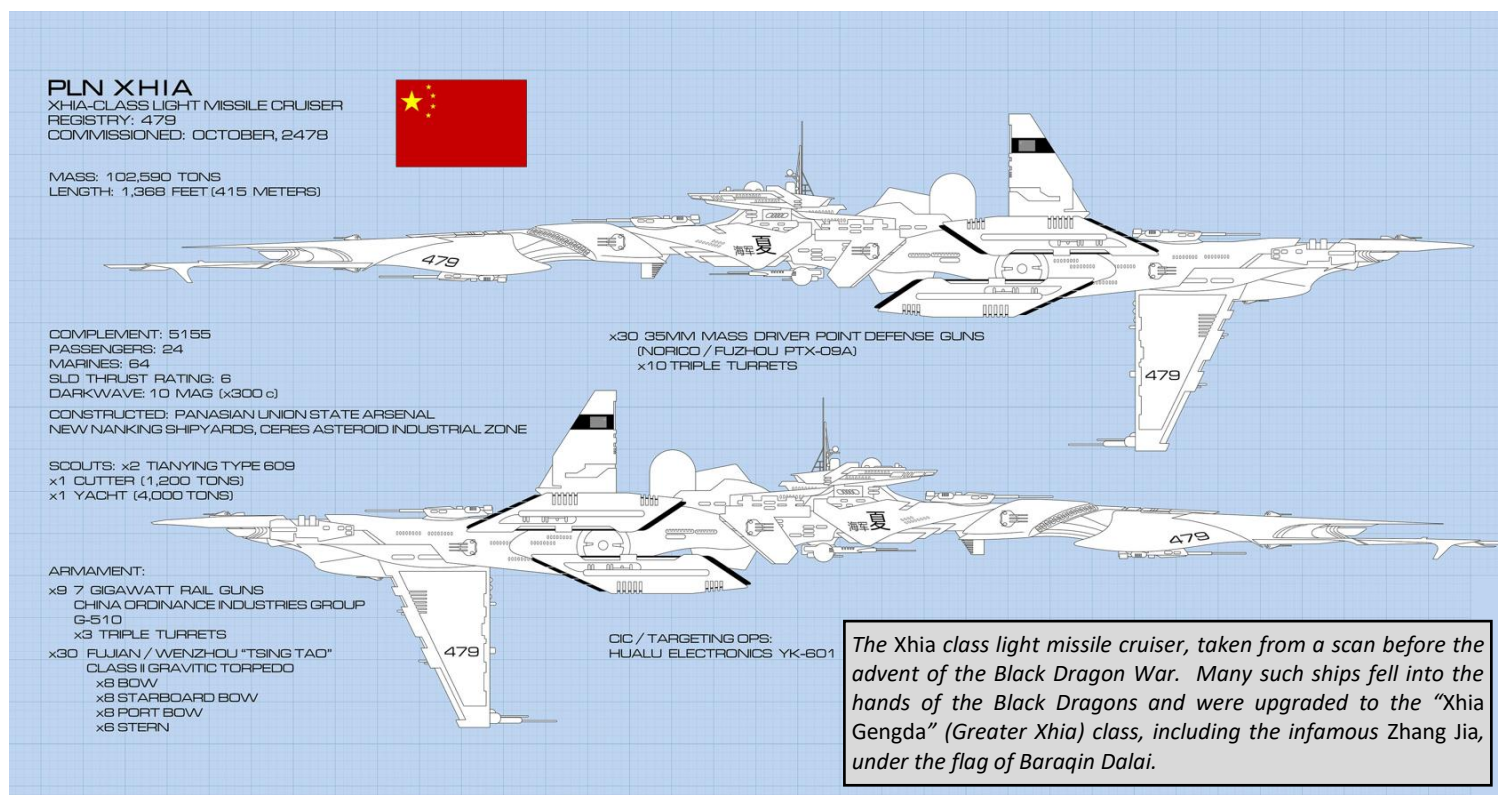
One such opportunity has been the rimward sectors of Perseus, Aries, Taurus, and Triangulum, known in most navies as the Perseus-Aries Strategic Command Sector (SCS). The 2510s and 2520s had seen a rash of wars through coreward regions like Draconis, Psi Serpentis, the Hercules Rim, The Aegean Gate, and Xi Scorpio. Rimward sectors had enjoyed a relative peace, an illusion the Black Dragons set their minds to shatter. A series of audacious strikes were planned, fast and hard-hitting, designed to smash down the defense systems and flotillas of dozing star systems, thus clearing the way for seizure of installations and even ground invasions to follow.

Selective targeting for these strikes was carefully undertaken according to three basic criteria.

First, the Black Dragons were seeking vulnerability. Not only did targeted systems have to be relatively weakly defended, but also isolated from immediate reinforcement. Initial points had to be as far as possible from large naval bases from which counterattacks could be staged, so Black Dragon invasions would have more time to secure hopeful lodgments. Also, such targets would preferably lie close to unclaimed systems along the Deep Frontier that Black Dragon task forces could use as jump-off points for short, stealthy Darkstar approach waves.

The second criteria for selection was the political situation of the potential target. The Khitan-Tunguska Free State deliberately selected possessions and colonies of under the flag of nations that had more than their fair share of enemies in the immediate region. It was hoped that an abrupt bloody nose on these “local bad actors” might earn the Black Dragons the occasional alliance of convenience among other nearby powers, even if said alliance was exchanged simply on the assurance that the “ally” wouldn’t be next on the Black Dragon hit list. Such expectations might have been a touch optimistic given the Black Dragons’ conduct in recent wars and general reputation for untrustworthiness. But at the very least, the political and economic elements of their target selection could at least limit their enemies’ ability to call on nearby allies.

Third, the Black Dragons aimed their strikes, as always, according to the doctrine of *Khuvu Zayaa*, “The Destiny,” the near-religious national goal of a near-Earth world to call their



own. Any strike point that was within one or two or even three Darkstar waves of a world even coming close to this mythical dream was automatically pulled to the top of the list.

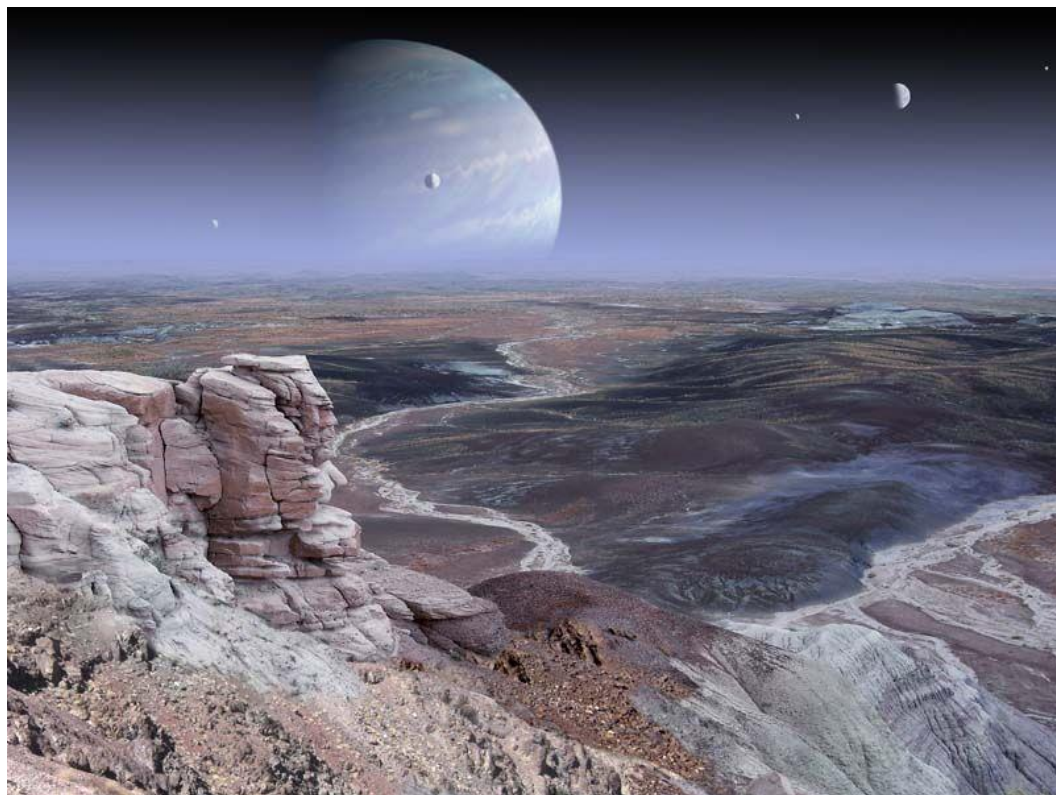
Lofty as such a goal might be, even the Black Dragons harbored no illusions as to their prospects. In 120 years of interstellar exploration and expansion, an infinitesimal fraction of the worlds discovered and colonized could be construed as anything even *close* to "Earthlike." The discovery of one such world (Hokkaido's Flower in the Kurakawa Colonies, Xi Scorpio D) had been the spark that ignited not one but two wars fought bitterly over its possession. Such worlds were exceedingly rare, and even those few that existed would require centuries of terraforming before a person could cheerfully open a window or go for a stroll without EVA gear.

Still, there were planets that were close, and even if the Black Dragons couldn't find one, there were planets (or moons) that offered far easier prospects for colonization.

One such location, sadly for the United States Navy, was at 51 Persei, their newly-colonized "Kinkaid's Outpost." This rocky, terrestrial world orbited 0.7 AU from a G8V orange dwarf. The planet possessed a spinning metal core and thus an active magnetic field, protecting its surface from the worst of stellar and cosmic radiation. The planet's geology was active driven by plate tectonics, ensuring rich mineral and metallic resources for easy commercial use. Liquid water was stable on the surface under an atmosphere with a median pressure of 1022.5 mb, even if that water was choked with chlorides and potassium and the atmosphere was an unbreathable soup of carbon dioxide, nitrogen, and methane. The planet's tectonics had also left the surface cut with deep fissures, sometimes three kilometers deep, perfect for easy enclosure into large sustainable "outdoor" environments sometimes dozens of kilometers square.

More ominously, Kinkaid's Outpost was also isolated, a full 45 light-years from the nearest American naval base (Lee Harbor, named for the American World War II battleship admiral) at Theta Perseus.

Finally, most of the development leases on Kinkaid's Outpost were held by United Energy and Transport (UET), a rather ham-fisted megacorp with a long list of grievances against British, Japanese, Arab League, and Prussian industrial, shipping, and naval interests in the Perseus region.



In short, the Americans wouldn't find many local friends in the immediate aftermath of a Black Dragon invasion.

And of course, it didn't hurt that the Americans had been instrumental in the Black Dragons' defeat in the Xi Scorpio, and had outright beaten the Black Dragons in the Scorpion's Tail War by themselves.

Through December of 2521 and January of 2522, Black Dragon task forces were quietly assembled in the hitherto vacant star systems of 13 Trianguli and 12 Persei.

To their credit, the Americans at Kinkaid's Outpost were not utterly oblivious to the threat, long-range corvette patrols had detected gravimetric bow-shocks of arriving warships in nearby star systems that were supposedly empty. Further evidence had been uncovered by UET prospect and expedition ships that had already begun snooping around in 13 Trianguli and 12 Persei (despite having no congressional or UN mandate to do so). Some escort ships detached from the famous *Liberty* carrier task force were stationed at Kinkaid's Outpost, joining a flotilla of aging light cruisers and a small carrier already there. But in all honesty, the rotating crews of these original ships had done little in the last six years beyond shooing off complaints, challenges, or criminal proceedings against various UET ship captains - the stiffest conflict they'd faced in the last six years had been a UET workers' strike.

All that however, was about to change. Hidden in the dark, frozen abyss of 12 Persei's cometary debris cloud, the *Khar Khilizh* (Black Saber) task force, under the flag of Baraqin Dalai aboard his light missile cruiser *Zhang Jia*, had just received their final strike orders.

The Perseus-Aries War was about to begin.

SCENARIO 01

SURPRISE STRIKE AND LODGMENT IN ENEMY-HELD STAR SYSTEM
 HOPEWELL A21 - HOPEWELL GAS GIANT - KINKAID'S OUTPOST (51 ARIES)
 24 February 2522 (Sol Standard Date)

The Perseus-Aries War erupts on 24 February 2522, when the Black Dragon “Khar Khilizh” (Black Saber) task force, under the flag of Captain Baraqin Dalai aboard his infamous light missile cruiser *Zhang Jia*, erupts from a slow, short, precise “stealthglide” Darkstar wave in the 51 Aries star system. Their target is the Hopewell gas giant, where the US Navy has a substantial series of installations orbiting the planet’s various moons, guarding the outer orbital zones of the Kinkaid’s Outpost colonies. Specifically, the Black Dragons are vectoring toward Hopewell A21, one of the larger moons of the gas giant, and the main American naval base in this part of the star system.

The approach has been well plotted, Dalai’s task force bursting into normal space just a few hundred thousand kilometers from Hopewell A21. Clearly a longer jump has been made from the initial jump-off point somewhere in the 12 Persei system (some 21 light-years away), and Dalai’s task force has been retrofitted with enhanced Darkstar drives to cut approach times by as much as half. As is typical with such approaches, the initial wave is made at a much sharper dilation curvature (higher speed), aimed for somewhere in the target system’s cometary cloud or helioshock boundary. Then, with new bearings and refreshed surveillance, a much slower wave is plotted to the actual strike target, the slower

have setting off far fainter gravimetric distortions, making it much harder to detect.

The tactic has paid off today. The Black Dragons explode out of their Darkstar waves with complete surprise, just 200,000 kilometers from Hopewell A21. With an exit velocity of 320 kps, the Black Dragons need just 18 minutes to decelerate to attack speed and close the distance to the stunned American warships.

Still, the Americans do not waste those 18 minutes. General quarters is sounded, the destroyer *Cowpens* and frigates *John Young* and *Ronald Evans* in particular pivoting with remarkable speed against the invaders (these ships are part of the elite Task Force “Liberty”). The rest of the American force, older ships permanently station and was thought to be a quiet sector, crewed largely by reservists and civilian contractors, nevertheless rally quickly, even if the light carrier USS *Sedgwick* has to decouple from Hopewell A21’s mooring docks before raising steam.

American demands for the Black Dragons to identify themselves and declare their intentions are greeted with the unmistakable reply of torpedo launches and an opening volley of rail gun fire from the cruisers *Zhang Jia* and *Xin Tian*. The battle is on, and the Perseus-Aries War is officially underway.

UNITED STATES FORCES



Battlegroup 12.5.1 (reinforced)

USS *Austin* (CSGN-510, *Sacramento* class light cruiser)
 USS *Mobile* (CSGN-519, *Sacramento* class light cruiser)
 USS *Sedgwick* (DSCV-510, *Buford* class light carrier)
 VSF/A 131, *The Sky Rangers*
 USS *Ronald Evans* (FSGN-641, *Shepard* class frigate) *
 USS *John Young* (FSGN-618, *Shepard* class frigate) *
296 points

BLACK DRAGON FORCES



KHAR KHLIZH TASK FORCE (forward elements)

Zhang Jia (*Greater Xhia* class light missile cruiser) ***
Xin Tian (*Greater Xhia* class light missile cruiser) ***
Dzeraghov (*Sovnya* class destroyer) **
Malaynovets (*Novgorod* class frigate) **
297 points

No Special Rules or Setup Conditions
 Assault Victory Conditions. Darkstar Shorthand 3.0 Resolution.

The Khar Khilizh Task Force slashes straight at the Americans in an echelon left, their bows unloading torpedoes while also angling for an evident turn to present port broadsides. The cruiser USS *Austin* presents a broadside in turn, only to find that Dalai has feinted, his swift cruisers just fast enough to cut instead to starboard, leaving *Austin* out of position. The carrier *Sedgwick* manages to back off, launching torpedoes and aerospace craft to cover her withdrawal, the destroyer *Cowpens* ordered to cover her. This too, Dalai sees, his *Zhang Jia* cuts again (flanked by destroyer *Dzeraghov* and

frigate *Malaynovets*), closing the range straight past the cruisers *Austin* and *Mobile* to get range on the *Sedgwick* and cut the American cruisers off from their escorting frigates *Ronald Evans* and *John Young*.

The cruiser *Xin Tian* opens a cruel fire on the *Austin*, who returns fire as best she can, along with her sister ship *Mobile*. But the veteran crew of the *Xin Tian* has been hardened by the Black Dragon, Xi Scorpio, Scorpion's Tail, and Duchess Anabel's Wars ... and although she’s forced to break off the action, at least she can do so under her own power. The *Zhang Jia* has

crossed the *Mobile's* stern, a single withering volley from her forward rail guns blowing her stern apart, her burning hulk crippled and set adrift. Amazingly, *USS Mobile* will later be **captured** by Black Dragon raiders and put into service by the Khitan-Tunguska Navy. At the same time, *Zhang Jia's* aft rail guns, together with the broadsides of the *Dzeraghov* and *Malaynovets*, likewise cripple the light carrier *Sedgwick* (having just completed the launch of VSF/A 131, "The Sky Rangers").

Reeling from the shock of the attack and initial losses, the Americans struggle to find their balance and strike back. Already the *Xin Tian* is fleeing the battlespace, two kilometers of burning atmosphere and reactor coolant streaming behind her. The destroyer *Cowpens* pivots around the stricken *Sedgwick*, hammering the frigate *Malaynovets* and setting a fire that melts her reactors out of her hull. The *Malaynovets* will later have to be scuttled, finally ending the career of this battered little frigate that fought so hard through four wars, coming up against the Americans so many times they had nicknamed her "Mayonnaise" for how many times she'd been spread across the stars by battle damage. Alas, this is one last fight from which the *Malaynovets* will not return.

Other efforts of the American response are not going so well. Although the frigates *Young* and *Evans* inflict respectable damage on the hated *Zhang Jia*, the aerospace strike by the Star Ranger aerospace group is almost completely broken up by *Zhang Jia's* mass driver defenses.

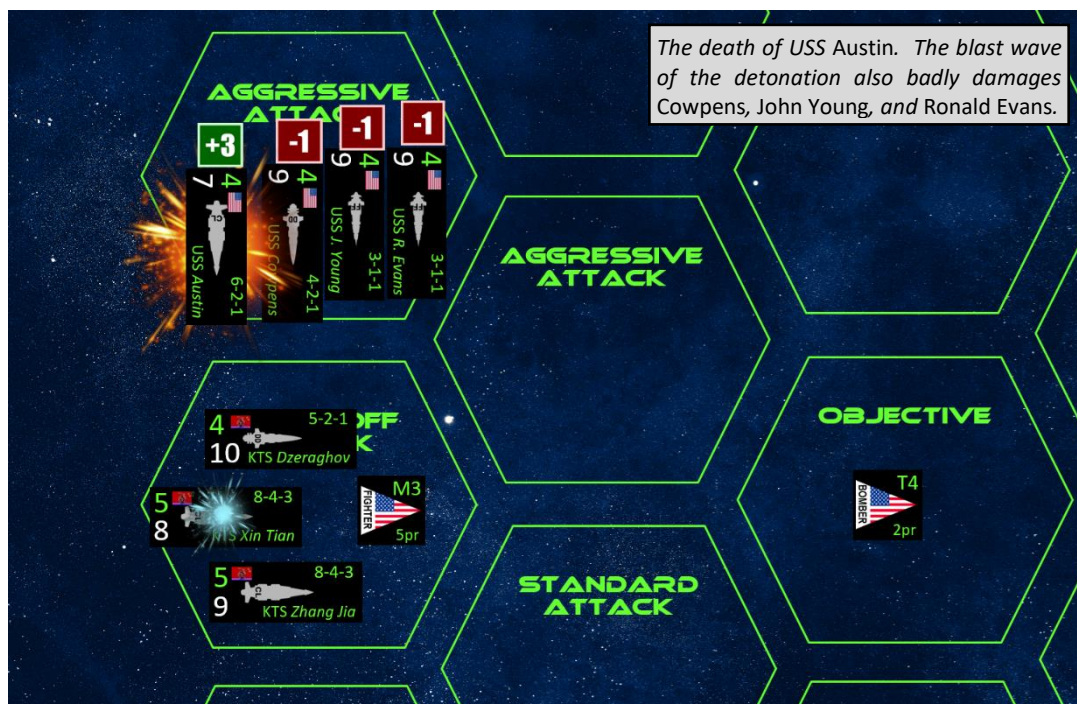
Xin Tian is making a run for it. Set on vengeance, the *Austin* goes after her, raising just enough speed and a slight gravity assist against the Hopewell A21 moon to cut after *Xin Tian*. This proves to be a grave mistake, however, as *Zhang Jia* cuts behind *Austin* in turn. And the *Xin Tian* may be fleeing, but she is still operational, and her guns wait until the *Austin* is point blank before opening fire. The *Austin* reels under fire from two Black Dragon cruisers, with the destroyer *Dzeraghov* pitching in for good measure. The *Austin* gives up her chase of *Xin Tian*, returning fire against *Zhang Jia* instead, but it's already too late. The light cruiser *Austin* **explodes** (taking over half of her 460

officers and men with her), the shockwave also smashing into the *Cowpens*, *Young*, and *Evans*, all of whom were running close abeam to escort the *Austin*.

Assuming command of what's left, Commander Rachel Collingsworth aboard the *Cowpens* rallies the two badly-damaged frigates and fires into the *Zhang Jia*, already damaged by the *Young* and *Evans* like a wolf harried by two terriers. Even the F/S-44 Star Corsair fighters of VSF/A 131 extract a measure of revenge in a courageous strafing attack. But the *Zhang Jia* remains operational (albeit horrifically damaged) and against all odds, remains in the fight! She limps toward the orbital installation, *Dzeraghov* along her port beam, determined to dominate the battlespace until the Black Dragon troop ships can arrive.

All remaining American ships are badly damaged, either by torpedoes, gunfire, or the death-blast of the *Austin*, so Collingsworth engages at stand-off range, content to lob her last torpedoes at *Zhang Jia* from a distance and wait for reinforcements. When Dalai sees this tactic, he tries to raise steam after the *Cowpens* and her escorts, but *Zhang Jia's* damaged engines and maneuvering thrusters just can't take it, and Collingsworth backs off easily. Long range fire from the *Zhang Jia*, however, forces the *Ronald Evans* to break off, the heavy rail guns of the destroyer *Dzeraghov* similarly sees off the *John Young*. Another brave strafing run by the Star Rangers costs two fighters, but even with all the American torpedoes Collingsworth has left, the *Zhang Jia* remains in orbit over Hopewell A21.

The *Cowpens*, now alone, closes the range, hoping to re-



engage with guns and at least drive off the *Zhang Jia*. Again Dalai orders flank speed and a hard starboard turn to rush the *Cowpens*, but limping as she is, *Zhang Jia* just can't close when *Cowpens* can simply backs off again. Smaller and undamaged, the *Dzeraghov* could execute such a maneuver, but that would split up the two Black Dragon warships. The *Cowpens* pings away at *Zhang Jia* and **finally** she has no choice but to retire. As she does so, however, she unleashes a vicious

vengeance on the *Cowpens*. Previously damaged by the Austin's blast, the *Cowpens* is torn apart, only by ejecting her reactors at the last second does the engineer save the ship from explosion.

Black Dragon Victory: Dzeraghov remains vs. 8 US fighters, 4 US bombers (58 to 24, +34 points = 11%)

SCENARIO 02

COUNTERSTRIKE AGAINST ENEMY FOOTHOLD

OUTER DEBRIS BELT - KINKAID'S OUTPOST (51 ARIES)

19 March 2522 (Sol Standard Date)

The stunning Black Dragon invasion of Kinkaid's Outpost (51 Persei) sends shockwaves through the Perseus-Aries SCS and the US Navy in particular. Of course, no one knows about the Black Dragon strike at first, even with the fastest 12mw-capable courier ships can only get the news to the nearest American naval base (Lee Harbor, Theta Persei, 45 light-years away) in eleven days.

Once the alert is received, however, the response is immediate. In particular, USS *Cowpens*, *Ronald Evans*, and *John Young* are part of Task Force Liberty, but the rest of this fleet (RAdm Zachary Irons, commanding) won't be ready to deploy for an additional week and can only mount an 11mw Darkstar wave, so a course to Kinkaid's Outpost would take a solid month in any case.

For the immediate present, all the Navy can send is Task Force Oriskany (RAdm Matthew A. Spencer, commanding), a smaller 12-mw capable "rapid-reaction" force and destroyer strike group. Orders are to hit the Black Dragons as hard as they can, if only to keep them from entrenching in Kinkaid's Outpost until a heavier counterstrike can be mounted.

Spencer sorties his task force from Lee Harbor with just six hours' notice, jumping into a maximum-dilation Darkstar wave on March 7. By March 18 the Americans emerge near the helioshock boundary of 51 Persei, gathering what signal intelligence they can (even if such data will be days old due to distance). They find a portion of the Black Dragon invasion force staged in the outer debris belt, where a civilian mining and astrophysics station has been repurposed as a fueling, navigation, and command staging point for the Black Dragons' outer system defense.

Spencer has his target. Setting a slow, pin-point accurate 4mw Darkstar wave, he crosses the 52 billion kilometers (about 2 light-days) to the outer belt staging base in six hours, bursting out of his Darkstar dilation and immediately vectoring into an attack.

The Black Dragons, however, seem intent on contesting the issue. Only part of their force is here, and they've only had about six minutes of warning. But it's been more than enough, and judging by what's facing them, Task Force Oriskany has a fight on its hands.

<p>UNITED STATES FORCES</p> <p>TASK FORCE ORISKANY</p> <p>USS <i>Oriskany</i> (DSGN-797, <i>Valcour</i> FRAM-I class destroyer) *****</p> <p>USS <i>Valley Forge</i> (DSGN-794, <i>Valcour</i> class destroyer) ****</p> <p>USS <i>Hancock</i> (DSGN-798, <i>Valcour</i> class destroyer) ****</p> <p>USS <i>Tarawa</i> (ASCV-943, <i>Buford</i> class light carrier) ****</p> <p>VMF/A-391, <i>Tigersharks</i> (USMC) ***</p> <p>USS <i>Daggerfish</i> (SSGN-871, <i>Mako</i> class torpedo corvette)</p> <p>425 points</p>	<p>BLACK DRAGON FORCES</p> <p>KHAR KHILIZH TASK FORCE</p> <p><i>Zhang Jia</i> (<i>Greater Xhia</i> class light missile cruiser) ***</p> <p><i>Xin Tian</i> (<i>Greater Xhia</i> class light missile cruiser) ***</p> <p><i>Dzeraghov</i> (<i>Sovnya</i> class destroyer) **</p> <p><i>Xian Hoa</i> (<i>Nanchong</i> class destroyer) **</p> <p><i>Jyinsang</i> (<i>Nanchong</i> class destroyer) *</p> <p><i>Mingzhao</i> (<i>Zhenhai</i> class missile frigate) *</p> <p><i>K-206</i> (<i>K-56</i> class torpedo corvette) *</p> <p>427points</p>
<p>No Special Rules or Setup Conditions</p> <p>Assault Victory Conditions. Darkstar Shorthand 3.0 Resolution.</p>	

Task Force Oriskany pivots aggressively toward the Black Dragon cruisers defending the improvised enemy installation, but at around 1,000 kilometers the Americans fire retros "all back full" and kick the grav rudders hard to port, keeping the

engagement range open while presenting starboard broadsides to the Black Dragon warships turning against him. Thus, American gunnery hits the enemy simultaneously with torpedo spreads fired during their initial approach. The light

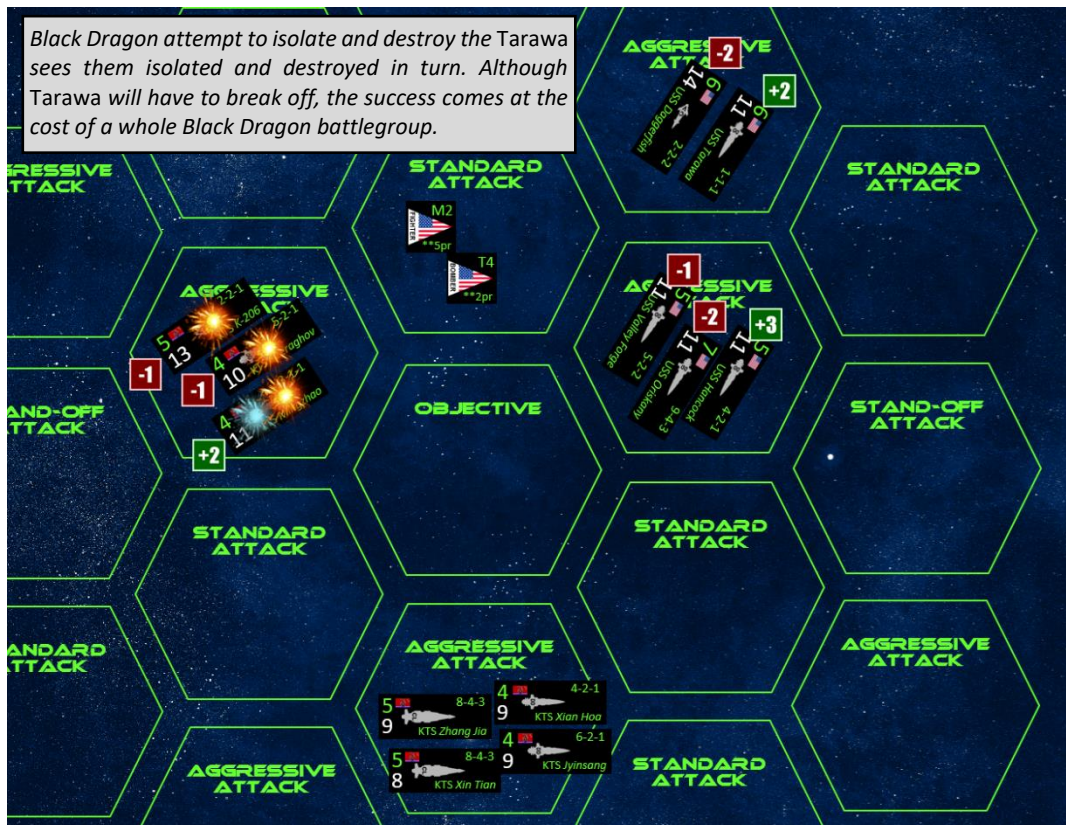
carrier *Tarawa* (escorted by the torpedo corvette *Daggerfish*) trails slightly behind, launching her elite Marine Corps strike squadron VMF/A-391 (Tigersharks) and joining the *Daggerfish* in lobbing out spreads of deadly, longer-range torpedoes. Interestingly, *Tarawa* launches her F/S-44 Star Corsair fighters *first*, contrary to usual doctrine of launching bombers first. In this way, the “Tigershark” fighter pilots hope to get an extra crack at thinning out the deadly Black Dragon torpedoes swarms already coming back at him. The tactic actually works, with Black Dragon torpedoes being slower Class II Tsing Taos and Class III Khurdan Jads and P-500s, thus taking longer to cross the

measured distance the Americans are keeping from the enemy’s main body. Meanwhile, Spencer’s three destroyers (*Oriskany*, *Valley Forge*, and *Hancock*) screen the carrier, closing the range slightly to engage with gunnery as well as still more torpedoes.

The unexpected pivot in the American approach leaves most of the Black Dragon force somewhat flat-footed in close orbit of the installation. Only the destroyer *Dzeraghov*, frigate *Mingzhao*, and torpedo corvette *K-206* are quick enough to maneuver against the *Tarawa* and *Daggerfish*, seemingly tempting targets due to their distance from the mass driver cover of the American destroyers. But this maneuver also separates the *Dzeraghov* and her escorts from Dalai’s main body (cruisers *Zhang Jia* and *Xin Tian*, escorted by destroyers *Jyinsang* and *Xian Hoa*).

Aboard his flagship *Zhang Jia*, Baraqin Dalai gives the order to open fire. His cruisers and destroyers unload everything at the *Hancock*, but supporting fire from *Valley Forge* and *Oriskany* (and the fighters of VMF/A-391) shoot down all the torpedoes and *Hancock’s* shields and armor weather the storm of plasma and rail guns. The *Tarawa* isn't so lucky as *Dzeraghov’s* ad-hoc battlegroup makes its strike, but for now *Tarawa* remains on her feet.

The Marines of VMF/A-391 take exception to the assault on their carrier, and launch a deadly stand-off ordinance strike on the frigate *Mingzhao*. *Dzeraghov* and *K-206* offer all the



covering fire they can, but *Mingzhao* takes critical damage to her engineering spaces, aft hangars, med bay and FTL drive. Casualties are grievous and *Mingzhao* must flee the battlespace. Torpedoes from the *Tarawa* and *Daggerfish* are disappointing, however, and only score superficial damage on the much more dangerous *Dzeraghov*.

Spender orders his three destroyers to switch targets at the last moment, cancelling the fire orders against *Zhang Jia* and *Xin Tian* and instead opening fire *Dzeraghov’s* flanking battlegroup. It works beautifully, the *Oriskany* crippling the *Dzeraghov*, the *Hancock* crippling the *K-206*, and the *Valley Forge* putting a torpedo into *Mingzhao’s* stern as she turns to flee (in fact she nearly explodes). In a stunning succession of blinding flashes, all three Black Dragon ships are crippled. A Marine landing party from USS *Hancock* will in fact **capture** the *K-206* after she is found adrift two days after the battle.

BY now, Baraqin Dalai sees that Spender has no intention of coming straight for the station, so raises steam and thunders up after the Americans. But Spender’s destroyers back off, again keeping between the enemy and the *Tarawa*, who falls back even further (still escorted by *Daggerfish*) to recover her aerospace group.

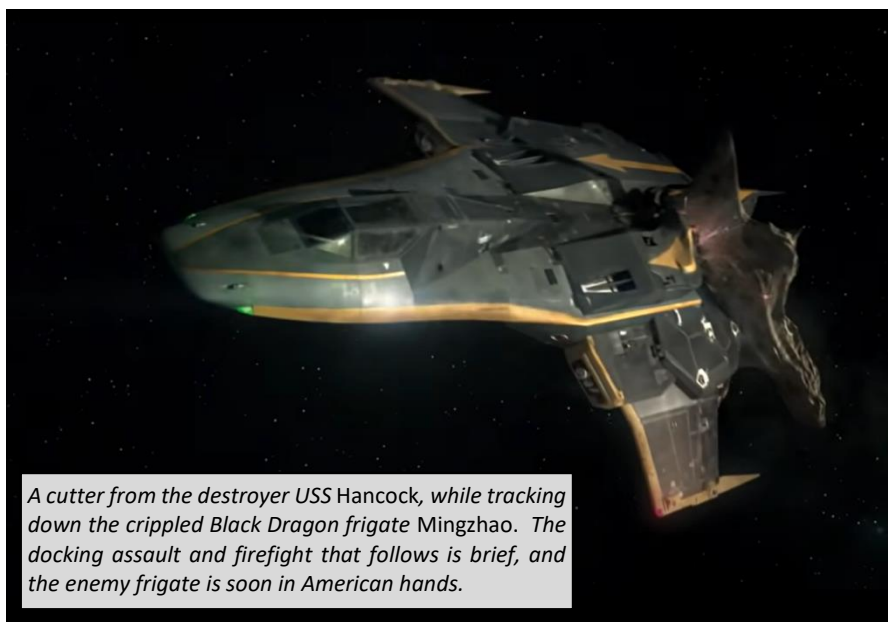
This time Spender’s tactic doesn't quite work, however. The *Zhang Jia* and *Xin Tian* finally finds the range, and *Tarawa* takes heavy damage to her forward hangars, magazine, and bridge. Captain Raymond Cruz makes the call and *Tarawa* is

breaking off, having lost power to her hangars and thus unable to rearm the strike group she just recovered. The *Daggerfish* is also damaged by fire from the Black Dragon destroyers, but remains on station. *Oriskany* hammers the destroyer *Jyinsang*, but amazingly nothing ... **nothing** ... gets through the destroyer's shields. The wounded *Daggerfish* has better luck against the *Xian Hoa*, landing three well-placed Mark 48 on the destroyer's starboard quarter and venting a reactor room into space. All other American gunnery goes into the light missile cruiser *Xin Tian*, but again, this thick-skinned veteran shrugs off the worst of it.

Baraqin's cruisers are nothing if not fast, but Spencer's destroyers are faster still. Still they refuse to let the Black Dragons close the range. The Americans can't outrun rail gun bolts or torpedoes, however, a point brought home as the killer-ship *Zhang Jia* does her level best to add the *Daggerfish* to her grim tally, all but blowing the stern clean off the corvette despite covering fire from *Oriskany*. It's a miracle *Daggerfish* doesn't explode. Indeed, the Black Dragons have definitely found the range on Spencer's task force despite his stand-off tactics.

Meanwhile, *Xin Tian*, *Jyinsang*, and *Xian Hoa* all return fire on the *Oriskany*, but covering fire from *Valley Forge* and *Hancock* thin out a truly withering hail of torpedoes and *Oriskany* survives with minor rail gun and plasma damage to her fo'c'sle. The *Valley Forge* and *Hancock* unload on the damaged destroyer *Xian Hoa*, forcing her to break off the action, while *Oriskany* re-introduces herself to the *Jyinsang*. As badly as *Oriskany*'s last volley missed, this time every round finds its mark with brutal precision. *Jyinsang*'s bow is carved open with syglex emitters, *Oriskany*'s rail guns venting a hangar with rail guns, while a torpedo detonates inside her forward magazine for good measure. While not crippled, *Jyinsang* rolls on her back, fish-hooks away, and disengages at flank speed, a river glowing debris sizzling in her wake.

Even as *Jyinsang* and *Xian Hoa* break off, they remain momentary threats, slinging out their last torpedoes as they flee. Dalai knows this, so pushes *Zhang Jia* and *Xin Tian* the opposite direction as his fleeing destroyers, hoping to force Spencer to either engage his cruisers at close range (finally) or put himself in a crossfire between his guns and torpedoes from the fleeing destroyers. Spencer picks a third option, nearly breaking off the action himself, largely denying battle



A cutter from the destroyer USS Hancock, while tracking down the crippled Black Dragon frigate Mingzhao. The docking assault and firefight that follows is brief, and the enemy frigate is soon in American hands.

by setting a reverse course at flank speed and half-ducking behind drifting ODBOs (outer debris belt objects, often nicknamed "oddballs"). He's largely giving up the chance to cripple the *Xin Jian*, but if he can keep his three destroyers operational, the Black Dragon hold on the outer debris belt of 51 Aries becomes untenable. Out of range from the fleeing *Jyinsang* and *Xian Hoa*, Spencer fish-hooks for a last broadside and volley of torpedoes. As expected, the *Xin Tian* shrugs off the feeble blows, battered but defiant alongside *Zhang Jia*. Dalai, meanwhile, puts every gun he can into the destroyer *Hancock*, selecting her since she's already damaged and has weaker shielding and EW emitters than *Oriskany*. The range is just too great, however, and the *Hancock* also remains standing.

The fight is over. Where Baraqin wanted a barroom brawl, Spencer wanted a chess match, and was able to compel Baraqin to fight *his* battle. With their escorts gone, torpedoes exhausted, and survivors drifting into space, the Black Dragons are compelled to withdraw.

Yet, the American hold on the outer debris belt of 51 Aries is far from secure. Additional Black Dragon forces at Hopewell, Kinkaid's Outpost, or nearby systems like 13 Trianguli and 12 Persei are much closer than the nearest American forces at Lee Harbor (Theta Persei). Indeed, at least for the time being, the American foothold in 51 Aries tenuous at best.

Americans have *Oriskany*, *Hancock*, and *Valley Forge* (294 point), Black Dragons have *Zhang Jia* and *Xin Tian* (214 points), +80 points, 19%, AMERICAN MINOR VICTORY

SCENARIO 03 (BATTLE OF HOPEWELL CLOUDS)

RAID AND INTERCEPT – GAS GIANT ATMOSPHERE

CLOSE ORBIT / UPPER ATMOSPHERE – HOPEWELL GAS GIANT (51 ARIES-F)

28 March 2522 (Sol Standard Date)

Read Admiral Matthew Spencer, commanding Task Force Oriskany (currently the only operational American naval force in 51 Aries) faces a difficult choice. He’s won a victory here along the outer debris belt of the Kinkaid’s Outpost colonies. But he knows it’s not a decisive victory in any measure of the term. Furthermore, he knows Black Dragon staging points, troops ships, and battlefleets are building up in nearby star systems like 13 Trianguli and 12 Persei, further out on the Deep Frontier. In fact, 12 Persei is where the Khar Khilizh (Black Saber) Squadron struck Kinkaid’s Outpost in the first place, and Spencer has no idea how much more combat power the enemy may have marshalled back there. Adding still further peril to the situation, Spencer knows that any hope of friendly reinforcement is a dim prospect, Lee Harbor at Theta Persei is 45 light-years away. The rest of the “Liberty” Carrier Task Force, for instance, can’t be expected to arrive until at least 30 April.

For now, Spencer is convinced he has to hit the Black Dragons again, if for no other reason than to keep them off-balance until more substantial naval formations can arrive and redress the balance in the Kinkaid’s Outpost colonies.

Spencer’s problem, however, is that his task force, in addition to being terribly small, is also fairly shot up after the skirmish in the system’s “Kuiper Belt.” USS *Oriskany* and *Valley Forge* are in good shape, but *Hancock* is damaged, the light carrier *Tarawa* was beat-up until she had to flee the battle area, and the torpedo corvette *Daggerfish* was all but blown in half.

Focusing repair efforts on the *Hancock* for now, Spencer strives to assemble the strongest attack force possible. Soon he has three destroyers ready to go in a small, fast

battlegroup, escorted by about half of VMF/A 391, his Marine Corps aerospace strike wing (carried along in a requisitioned fuel tanker of all things). It isn’t nearly enough, but it will have to do. There is simply nothing else available.

Spencer sets his target at the Hopewell gas giant, site of initial Black Dragon incursion against Task Force Austin (TF 12.5.1) at the war’s outset. The US Navy outpost there now serves as headquarters and primary support station for the Black Dragon’s lodgment in the system. Spencer knows he can’t re-take the base, he lacks a sizable Marine contingent if nothing else. But he hopes a hard-hitting raid could cripple some of the Black Dragon warships and keep them from expanding their hold on Kinkaid’s Outpost.

On 28 March, aboard USS *Oriskany*, Spencer sets an incredibly slow, very accurate, and almost invisible Darkstar course as close as he can to the Hopewell gas giant. Travelling at just twice the speed of light, he exits his distortion wave after seven hours. As he vectors toward the Hopewell installation, however, he finds sizable elements of the Khar Khilizh Squadron on a high-speed intercept course.

What Spencer didn’t know was that the Black Dragon commander, Captain Baraqin Dalai, had a cutter powered down and watching him in the outer debris belt of Kinkaid’s Outpost. As soon as Spencer’s ships set their course and entered their approach wave, the cutter jumped into a much faster 10-mw dilation and arrived at Hopewell to give Dalai at least three hours’ warning.

Fortunately, the Black Dragons needed most of that time simply to maneuver around Hopewell’s incredible size. Nevertheless, as he makes his final approach, Spencer realized his “daring raid” had become a pitched battle.

UNITED STATES FORCES

TASK FORCE ORISKANY

USS *Oriskany* (DSGN-797 *Valcour* FRAM-I class destroyer) *****

USS *Valley Forge* (DSGN-794 *Valcour* class destroyer) ****

USS *Hancock* (DSGN-798 *Valcour* class destroyer) ****

Partial Detachment, VMF/A-391, *Tigersharks* (USMC) ***

(4 double-elite bombers, 5 double-elite fighters)

337 points



BLACK DRAGON FORCES

KHAR KHLIZH TASK FORCE

Zhang Jia (*Greater Xhia* class light missile cruiser) ***

Xin Tian (*Greater Xhia* class light missile cruiser) ***

Xian Hoa (*Nanchong* class destroyer) **

Jyinsang (*Nanchong* class destroyer) *

336 points



Raid Victory Conditions. Darkstar 2.0 Full Form

Gas Giant Special Rules: At the end of movement, all starships automatically drop two hexes straight down. After final position established, resolve wind or lightning damage if in clouds hex. Wind: one row armor for each ending velocity point over 12. Lightning: each ship roll d10, "1" is a 3pt EPC hit, random d6 facing. Crippled ships off the table "safely" but in clouds, -2 on WRT.

Moment after Task Force Oriskany detects the incoming intercept force, Rear Admiral Spencer orders his ships to peel up and away from the cloud tops of the Hopewell gas giant. He hopes he can “climb” out of the full torpedo arc of the Black Dragon warships, then pivot down in a dive to unleash a full torpedo spread in turn. The maneuver doesn’t work, Spencer’s ships can’t accelerate enough, climb against the gas giant’s immense gravity, and execute the required starboard turn all at once.

The two battlegroups instead exchange full frontal torpedo spreads, the first shots ranging out from USS *Oriskany*’s frontal batteries at 3800 kilometers. The range is carefully chosen by Spencer, at this distance *Oriskany* is the only ship on either side in range.

Aboard the *Zhang Jia*, Captain Baraqin Dalai maintains his course and speed, allowing Hopewell’s gravity to steadily glide his warships ever closer to the cloud tops. He has to wait for the Americans to make his move, but Spencer isn’t giving anything away. Not until the Black Dragons are practically right beneath him, just starting their turns up and out of the Hopewell gravity well (some of their ships actually trailing wisps of hydrogen cloud-gas off their hulls) does Spencer make his move. The American destroyers *Oriskany*, *Valley Forge*, and *Hancock* roll over and spiral-dive straight at the enemy, maneuvering thrusters and grav rudders screaming as they pull up at less than 400 kilometers’ range. Dalai sees the move just in time, punching the *Zhang Jia* forward at all-ahead flank, then fish-hooking up behind the Americans to broadside the Americans on their starboard quarter.

A shrieking hail of torpedoes, previously launched by both sides, arrive a heartbeat later. The Americans are targeting the hated *Zhang Jia*, who puts up a blinding curtain of mass driver defense fire. Still, *Oriskany* hits with two torpedoes, *Hancock* and *Valley Forge* each with one. *Zhang Jia*’s starboard reactor is hit, then wiped out by a follow-up missile strike from F/S-44 “Star Corsair” fighters of VMF/A 391 (Marine Corps “Tigershark” aerospace strike squadron). Marine FS/A-81 “Avenger” bombers are next, their torpedoes destroying the port reactor. The *Zhang Jia* reels from the blows, fires out of control all throughout her stern, her hull shaking with internal explosions.

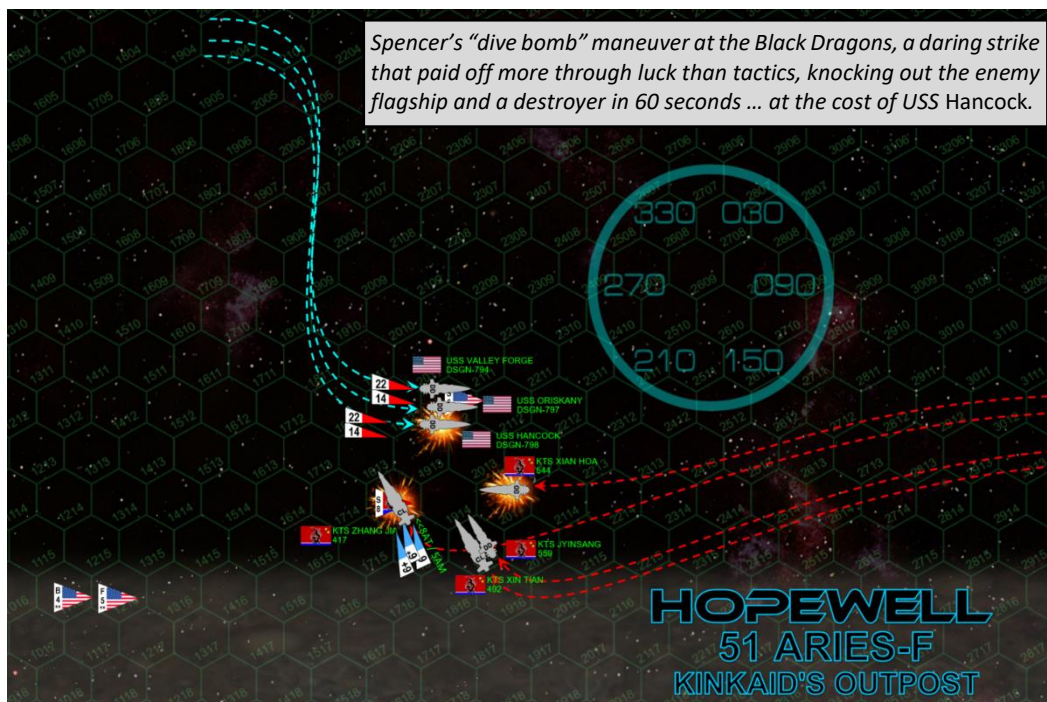
American mass driver fire against the Black Dragon torpedo wave, meanwhile, is so shockingly ineffective that after the battle there is an investigation to see whether the enemy could have somehow hacked their fire control systems. All enemy warheads target USS *Hancock*, a logical choice since she’s the only ship engaged without heavily-upgraded electronic warfare suites. The unfortunate destroyer is hit by 62 warheads, 44 “Tsing Tao” Class IIs and 18 “Khurdan Jad” Class IIIs. Starboard side reactors and engines are just gone. The aft 20mm mass driver mounting is blown out of the hull. Aft shields are collapsed, capacitors explode in the aft rail gun turret. The destroyer *Xian Hoa* adds her broadside to *Hancock*’s misery, blowing out more sensors, exploding the hangar for the starboard scout, and uprooting another mass driver mount. Then the light missile cruiser *Xin Tian* and the destroyer *Jyinsang* open fire with forward rail guns, EPCs, and plasma projectors as they thunder up out of Hopewell’s

swirling, lightning-shredded atmosphere. The *Hancock* loses her portside hangar, maneuvering thrusters exploding at the same time. The warheads already loaded in both torpedo banks detonate in their launchers, magazines for both forward rail gun turrets explode, capacitors for the forward laser array back-feed and fry the system into ionized slag.

There’s nothing Commander Priscilla Wolfe can do. *Hancock* is crippled and adrift, and now coasting out of control into the clouds of the Hopewell gas giant ...

Zhang Jia, meanwhile, unloads her broadside of 7gw rail guns on

Spencer’s “dive bomb” maneuver at the Black Dragons, a daring strike that paid off more through luck than tactics, knocking out the enemy flagship and a destroyer in 60 seconds ... at the cost of USS *Hancock*.



Oriskany's starboard quarter at nearby point-blank range. But only two guns hit, due partly to a last-second weave on *Oriskany's* helm, her upgraded ECM and gravitic shielding, and just plain bad luck for Dalai's gunners. Still, *Oriskany* loses a 25mm rotary driver system and a precious sensor suite.

All American guns target the *Xian Hoa*, ripping apart her starboard bow, hoping for a bridge or magazine hit. This fire includes USS *Hancock* just before she's crippled, the two destroyers brutally hammering at each other at 350 kilometers. The broadside is, frankly, a beautiful nightmare, the lasers and rail guns of the *Valley Forge* and *Hancock* slashing through the *Xian Hoa's* bridge so fast, that the *Oriskany* has time to shift fire to the looming *Zhang Jia*.

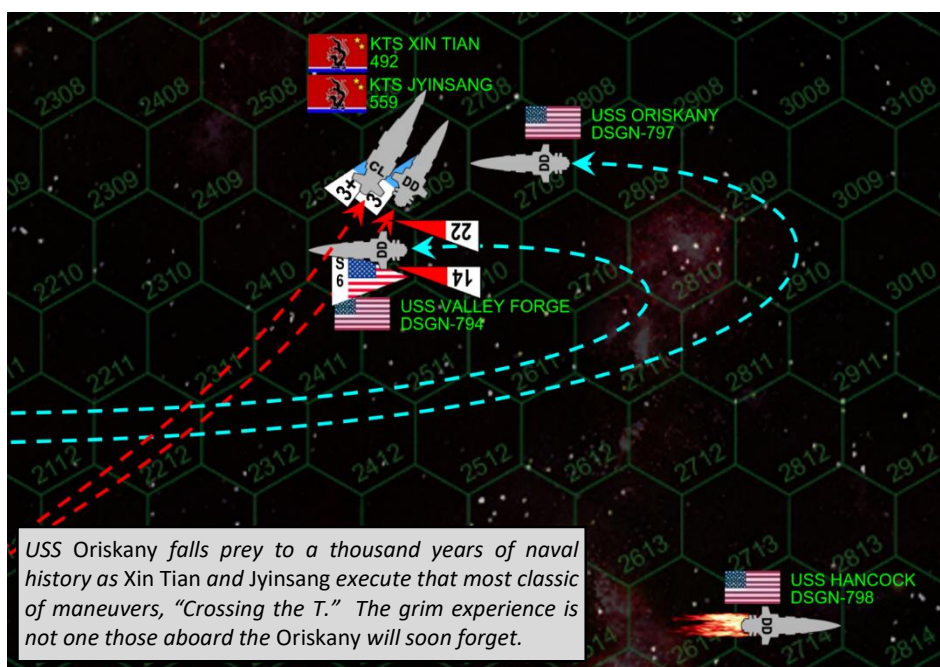
The damage *Oriskany* inflicts is savage, especially from the 75-eHz syglex emitters (part of her FRAM-I refit). But *Oriskany* just misses *Zhang Jia's* forward magazine, actually shooting right past it, nearly destroying No. 2 rail gun turret instead. Not that it matters. By now, Baraqin Dalai has to ditch his melting reactors before they go critical, sending the *Zhang Jia* spinning helplessly away from the Hopewell cloud tops.

Having released their ordinance (and with no carrier to land and rearm on), the Tigershark aerospace pilots streak toward the fray. They are intercepted by the Black Dragon scouts, and even as the cruisers and destroyers eviscerate each other two hundred kilometers overhead, this dogfight snarls fifty kilometers deep in the Hopewell clouds. Numbers and luck are on the Black Dragons' side, the lightly-armed scouts somehow managing to shoot down two elite Marine Corps Avengers.

Watching helplessly as the burning *Hancock* careens in a decaying orbit towards the Hopewell cloud tops, Spencer orders *Oriskany* to peel away from the gas giant and come hard about, intent on another broadside and to keep himself between the enemy and the stricken *Hancock*.

Spencer's course is just a little too predictable, and the Black Dragons are ahead of him this time. The cruiser *Xin Tian* and destroyer *Jyinsang* kick their grav rudders in a hard turn to starboard, crossing *Oriskany's* "T" just as she completes her turn. The cannonade against *Oriskany*, every gun the Black Dragons have left firing at less than 200 kilometers ... well, the Black Dragons just can't miss.

The *Oriskany's* forward guns bravely fire back, targeting the *Xin Tian*, and again *Oriskany* just misses the magazine of



her target. An instant later, rail guns aboard the *Xin Tian* blow *Oriskany's* fo'c'sle apart, the *Jyinsang's* plasma emitters pouring white-hot charged particles through a heartbeat later. The bridge is hit, Spencer himself is badly wounded, a magazine explodes and **all** forward weapons are gone. Decompressions ripple through the hull until *Oriskany's* reactors and engines begin to fail, clear at the other end of the ship. Casualties, needless to say, are grievous.

Bleeding and burnt, Spencer fights to keep his ship on her feet. *Oriskany's* reactors actually fail for a terrifying moment, but the engineers bring the starboard reactor back on line. The crew on another ship would have broken by now, but the crew of the "Lady O" rallies like few in recent naval history.

[Game terms: five internal boxes = 100% chance to break off, reduce to 50% for Resolute Crew, percentile dice roll is a natural 100.]

After the battle, Rear Admiral Spencer will recommend no less than four of his officers and senior NCOs for the Navy Cross. Eleven more are recommended for Distinguished Service Crosses or Silver Stars. So many Purple Hearts will be needed that US Twelfth Fleet HQ at Lee Harbor will have to order more all the way back from Earth. If there was any doubt that USS *Oriskany* is one of the most decorated warships in the US Navy, the Battle of Hopewell Clouds lays them (yet again) to rest.

Meanwhile, the *Valley Forge* has executed the same turn as the *Oriskany* but tighter, now crossing the stern of the two Black Dragon ships that just blew the bow off *Oriskany*. The *Jyinsang* suffers *Valley Forge's* vengeance, both portside engine and reactors going up, the internal explosion ripping

the aft plasma turret out of the hull and hurling it into space. Yet *Jyinsang* remains in the fight as well, the Black Dragons of the Khar Khilizh Squadron are just as determined as Task Force Oriskany to win the day.

Grim heroism notwithstanding ... Spencer knows the *Oriskany* really should break off the action. She can't turn, she's lost half her engines, forward shields are down, she's lost all forward weapons ... if *Oriskany* lingers, she will be blown out of the stars by Black Dragon torpedoes and someone has to stay operational to rescue the *Hancock* (just now gliding into the Hopewell atmosphere). *Oriskany* turns to starboard and breaks off, signaling the *Valley Forge* to cut across the enemy's stern one more time before following *Oriskany* off the map.

Aboard the *Valley Forge*, Captain Garrison Heathe complies, knowing he will have to face the full firepower of the enemy one last time. But he's managed to maneuver behind the enemy warships, an especially cozy spot at the moment since the *Jyinsang* has lost all aft shielding to *Valley Forge's* last broadside. Furthermore, the Black Dragons were barely able to launch any torpedoes, not only because of bad position but *Xin Tian's* starboard bow array was destroyed earlier by *Oriskany*. Still, Heathe is outweighed here almost three to one, and he knows he'll need all the help he can get.

The Tigershark strike squadron is thus called in, but it's a move the Americans quickly regret. With only the *Valley Forge* firing torpedoes at her, the cruiser *Xin Tian* chooses to ignore the American warheads. Instead, she targets her mass driver guns at the Marine "Corsair" fighters. All five are immediately shot down, only three of the pilots will be rescued. The *Jyinsang* shoots down three of *Valley Forge's*

torpedoes, the remaining three hitting the *Xin Tian's* shields. But only hits the hull, skipping harmlessly off her port quarter, a meager prize that has cost half the Tigershark squadron. The only bright spot for the Americans is a gallant strafing attack by the scouts, one E/S-101 "Hawkeye" from the *Valley Forge* scoring a hit on the *Jyinsang's* unshielded stern.

The *Valley Forge* goes to work redressing the balance. She puts a single 5gw rail gun bolt into the unshielded, burning stern of the reeling *Jyinsang*, instantly knocking her out of the battle (sidenote: gun camera footage is inconclusive as to whether it was this one rail gun shell or the gallant scout that scored the killing blow on the *Jyinsang*).

Everything else goes point blank into the stern of the *Xin Tian*. A mass driver turret is knocked out, her stern shields collapse, and her portside reactor is hit along with port and centerline engines.

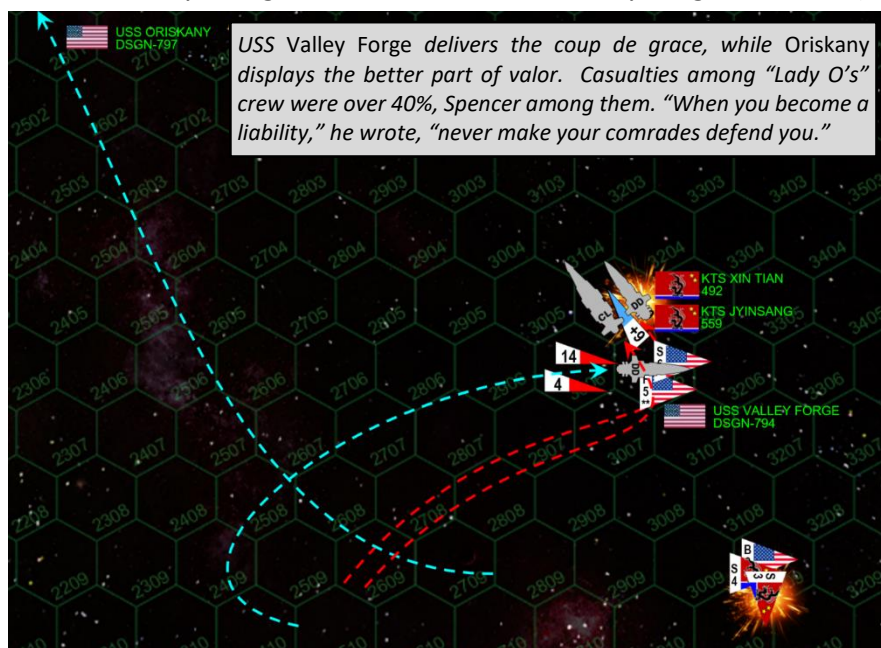
Enemy counterfire is shockingly ineffective. What few torpedoes the Black Dragons were able to launch all refract or detonate prematurely off *Vally Forge's* shields. Thus, she's able to target her mass drivers at the Black Dragon scout that are going after the Tigersharks' bombers, three Black Dragons shot down in rapid succession. Then, only one of *Xin Tian's* rail guns hits, leaving the *Valley Forge* remarkably undamaged despite the point-blank (but badly angled) fusillade.

Damaged as she is, however, *Xin Tian* remains operational, and slowly starts to pull her bulk around to line up another broadside on the *Valley Forge*. Captain Heathe is having none of it. Disobeying orders from Rear Admiral Spencer, Heathe does **not** break off the action, and easily loops over his own wake to again cross *Xin Tian's* stern (now without without shields). *Xin Tian's* skipper, clearly seeing what's about to

happen, and realizing he has to save the *Zhang Jia*, *Xian Hoa*, and *Jyinsang*, puts on flank speed and breaks off the action, leaving the Americans in control of the battlespace.

The shooting may be over, but when warships engage this close to a gas giant, the struggle between life and death is rarely over so quickly. Aboard USS *Hancock* (now two hundred kilometers deep in the Hopewell cloud canopy), Commander Priscilla Wolfe manages to get one engine and half a reactor up. It's just enough to roll the *Hancock* on her back so she can crowbar herself out of the gas giant's fatal embrace, limping clear some four hours later.

Zhang Jia isn't operational for another six hours, *Jyinsang* soon after that. Worst off is the



Xian Hoa, not only skimming down into the Hopewell atmosphere ... but flying much too fast, her bow beginning to melt just minutes after the battle. Despite this, *Xian Hoa* **almost** makes it, her captain rolling her on her side to vent her hangar bays, the explosive force almost enough to angle her trajectory up out of the atmosphere. The *Xin Tian* tries to reach her, but *Xian Hoa* is careening just too fast and the Black Dragon cruiser can't reach her.

Even the Americans try, but the limping *Oriskany* and the *Valley Forge* unable to reach *Xian Hoa* before crushing pressure and scorching heat begin to boil the plating off her hull. Fortunately, bulk of the crew has already been

evacuated, (these last-ditch escape maneuvers being attempted by remote). Finally, the captain and the last of his crew cram into the *Xian Hoa's* cutter and abandon ship. The *Xian Hoa* implodes just six minutes later, lost forever in the fiery grave of the Hopewell gas giant.

The United States has crippled *Zhang Jia* and *Jyinsang*, destroyed *Xian Hoa*, and shot down four scouts (112 + 56 + 48 + 4 = 220 points). The Black Dragons have crippled *Hancock*, while shooting down five double-elite fighters and 2 double-elite bombers (72 + 20 + 8 = 100 points total). +120 points, +36%, MINOR UNITED STATES VICTORY

SCENARIO 04

REPEL ENEMY REINFORCEMENT FLEET

LOW ORBITAL ZONE - JACOBSEN (51 ARIES-D) - KINKAID OUTPOST
15 April 2522 (Sol Standard Date)

Recent successes aside, the Americans in the 51 Aries (Kinkaid's Outpost colonies) system are in real trouble. Personnel losses are stacking up. Damage to warships is accumulating. Supplies, fuel, and ammunition are running low. Help is coming, but still chillingly far away. Specifically, the remainder of the "Liberty" carrier task force and other units of US 12th Fleet (Persei-Aries SCS Command) have sortied from Lee Harbor as of April 7, but they won't reach Kinkaid's Outpost until the end of the month.

Conversely, staging points for the Black Dragons are much closer to the warzone, and enemy reinforcements are *already* arriving from places like 13 Trianguli and 12 Persei (the latter being less than 17 light-years away). While USS *Oriskany* is being gingerly welded back together beneath him, Spencer realizes he has to do something to disrupt Black Dragon reinforcements before they consolidate in the 51 Aries.

Making matters even worse, some of these newly-arriving Black Dragon warships are outflanking American. Driving

straight into the system's core orbital zones, they begin settling into orbit around the Mars-analog world of "Jacobsen" (51 Aries-D), just forty light minutes from the main colony of Kinkaid's Outpost itself.

Spencer assembles whatever ships he can that are even close to combat worthy. His own flagship USS *Oriskany* is technically "operational," but the horrific damage sustained at Hopewell Clouds precludes her participation for at least another two weeks. Command of the strike is instead given to Garrison Heathe and Raymond Cruz (captains, USS *Valley Forge* and *Tarawa*, respectively). Together with the destroyer *Cowpens*, a pair of frigates, and the little torpedo corvette *Daggerfish*, "Task Force Lib-skany" (as it's jokingly called) is dispatched to Jacobsen to raid this Black Dragon buildup.

Under no circumstances is this ad-hoc task force meant to "retake" the Jacobsen. This is a raid, the Americans hoping only to bloody their enemies enough to keep them off balance a few more precious weeks.

<p>UNITED STATES FORCES</p> <p>TASK FORCES ORISKANY & LIBERTY (elements)</p> <p>USS <i>Valley Forge</i> (DSGN-794, <i>Valcour</i> class destroyer) ****</p> <p>USS <i>Tarawa</i> (ASCV-943, <i>Buford</i> class destroyer) ****</p> <p>VMF/A-391, <i>Tigersharks</i> (USMC) ***</p> <p>USS <i>Cowpens</i> (DSGN-788, <i>Valcour</i> class destroyer) *</p> <p>USS <i>John Young</i> (FSGN-618, <i>Shepard</i> class destroyer) *</p> <p>USS <i>Ronald Evans</i> (FSGN-641, <i>Shepard</i> class destroyer) *</p> <p>USS <i>Daggerfish</i> (SSGN-871, <i>Mako</i> class torpedo corvette) *</p> <p>321 points</p>		<p>BLACK DRAGON FORCES</p> <p>KHAR KHILIZH TASK FORCE</p> <p>KTS <i>Xin Tian</i> (<i>Greater Xhia</i> class light missile cruiser) ***</p> <p>KTS <i>Khorvorskaya</i> (<i>Gagarin</i> class light fleet carrier) *</p> <p>221st Naval Aero Assault Regiment</p> <p>KTS <i>Dzeraghov</i> (<i>Sovnya</i> class destroyer) **</p> <p>KTS <i>Yuanhan</i> (<i>Nanchong</i> class destroyer) *</p> <p>320 points</p>	
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Raid Victory Conditions. Darkstar 2.0 Full Form

Gas Giant Special Rules: At the end of movement, all starships automatically drop two hexes straight down. After final position established, resolve wind or lightning damage if in clouds hex. Wind: one row armor for each ending velocity point over 12. Lightning: each ship roll d10, "1" is a 3pt EPC hit, random d6 facing. Crippled ships off the table "safely" but in clouds, -2 on WRT.

The Black Dragons streak in fast, skimming close to the Jacobsen atmosphere, hoping the planet's curvature will provide cover from the incoming American battlegroup. The cruiser *Xin Tian* and destroyers *Dzeraghov* and *Yuanhan* form a tight strike wedge in front, while the sleek light fleet carrier *Khorvoskaya* trails slightly behind, launching Tupolev Tu-97 "Zvesbureya" (Star Storm) bombers.

The Americans make their approach from Jacobsen's night side, their engines retro-burning in "all back full." Slowing sharply, they drop at a steep angle into Jacobsen's gravity and upper mesosphere. This move is calculated, pulling the American ships out of the full frontal arcs of Black Dragons' full torpedo racks. The destroyers *Valley Forge*, *Cowpens*, and light carrier *Tarawa* hang back, the frigates *Ronald Evans*, *John Young*, and corvette *Daggerfish* screening while the *Tarawa* unloads the FS/A-81 Avenger bombers of Marine Corps strike group of VMF/A-391 (the "Tigersharks").

Thirty seconds later, the Black Dragons open fire, hitting the *Ronald Evans* four times on her bow. The damage is startling, but Black Dragon task forces are rarely ones to shy away from a close-range gunfight. The *Valley Forge* and *Cowpens* both hand hits on the destroyer *Yuanhan*, but in truth these are little more than ranging volleys.

The Black Dragons decelerate, S-turning to port, matching the American dive and skimming fully into the Jacobsen atmosphere. The Americans switch their task force's two basic elements, the frigates and corvette looping back while the destroyers taking the lead, lining up perfect broadsides while allowing the Black Dragons to return fire with only their

forward weapons.

Marine F/S-44 "Star Corsair" fighters streak from *Tarawa's* launch bays, forgoing making a missile run on the Black Dragon warships and instead going after their bombers. The carrier *Khorvoskaya* tries to cover her bombers, her mass driver gunners neglecting the incoming American torpedo spread and instead shooting at the Corsairs. The Marines just get damned lucky this time, **every** mass driver on the *Khoroskaya* somehow misses. The Black Dragon bombers have just enough time to release their ordinance, but instants later are slaughtered by the Tigersharks. Even the Marine scouts join in the butchery and within one horrific minute ... all ten Black Dragon bombers are lost.

The Black Dragon torpedo strike vectors on the American destroyers. Even with the careful American approach (having limited the enemy's target acquisition arcs and ravaged their bomber force), the size of the strike is horrifying. American point-defense systems thin out as many torpedoes as they can, but seven still hit the fantail of USS *Cowpens*. A frantic, last-second swerve by Commander Rachel Collingsworth puts most of these torpedo hits off to the ship's outer port side, the explosions knocking down critical systems but minimizing direct damage to *Cowpens'* engineering compartments. Portside engines are still hit, however, shutting down as the coolant system fails.

More blows land a heartbeat later, welds splitting open all along the *Cowpens'* hull. The cruiser *Xin Tian*, along with destroyers *Dzeraghov* and *Yuanhan*, have just opened fire will all frontal weapons on *Cowpens'* starboard quarter. Rail guns

and plasma burn through shields, blowing up crew quarters, a troop bay, and the aft hangar. Incredibly, however, *Cowpens* maintains power and control. ... even as one of her torpedoes slams into the stern of the *Xin Tian*. Two follow from *Tarawa*, two from *Valley Forge*, two from *Daggerfish*, two from *Ronald Evans*, one from *John Young* (all torpedoes from the Tigershark's bombers were shot down). The *Xin Tian's* engines and reactor rooms tear themselves to shredded hails of glowing titanium, the



Both sides make their approach, using the planet's curvature for protection as long as possible. This works fine at first, but in the long run serves only to make the engagement ranges (when they finally emerge) murderously short. When this skirmish gets underway in earnest, it's a bloodbath.

blasts cavitating into her Darkstar drive, comnav systems, aft hangar, med bay, sensor suites and mass driver defenses. Only the fact that *Xin Tian's* reactors are practically vaporized **before** they go critical saves the ship from thermonuclear explosion.

American gunnery, meanwhile, targets the *Yuanhan*. The accuracy is amazing, even among ships with greener crews and ships are further away like the frigates *John Young* and *Ronald Evans*. The forward magazine of the *Yuanhan* goes up, sparked when the forward EPC mount is destroyed by a rail gun hit from USS *Ronald Evans*. Yet the *Yuanhan* maintains power, even if her port bow has effectively been blown off.

Those sixty seconds at Jacobsen ... is just freak luck for the Americans. Admittedly, careful planning, experienced crews, and expert maneuvering put their ships in just the right positions at just the right ranges. But the complete failure of the *Khorvorskaya* to hit even one Marine fighter, the failure of enemy scouts to shoot down a single Marine bomber, their plasma and rail gun hits splattering all over the *Cowpens's* stern and starboard quarter, and the barrage of gunnery on the *Yuanhan* ... all of it was a statistical miracle.

"Nothing else can explain it," writes Raymond Cruz, captain of USS *Tarawa*. "We were flying with angels on our shoulders that day."

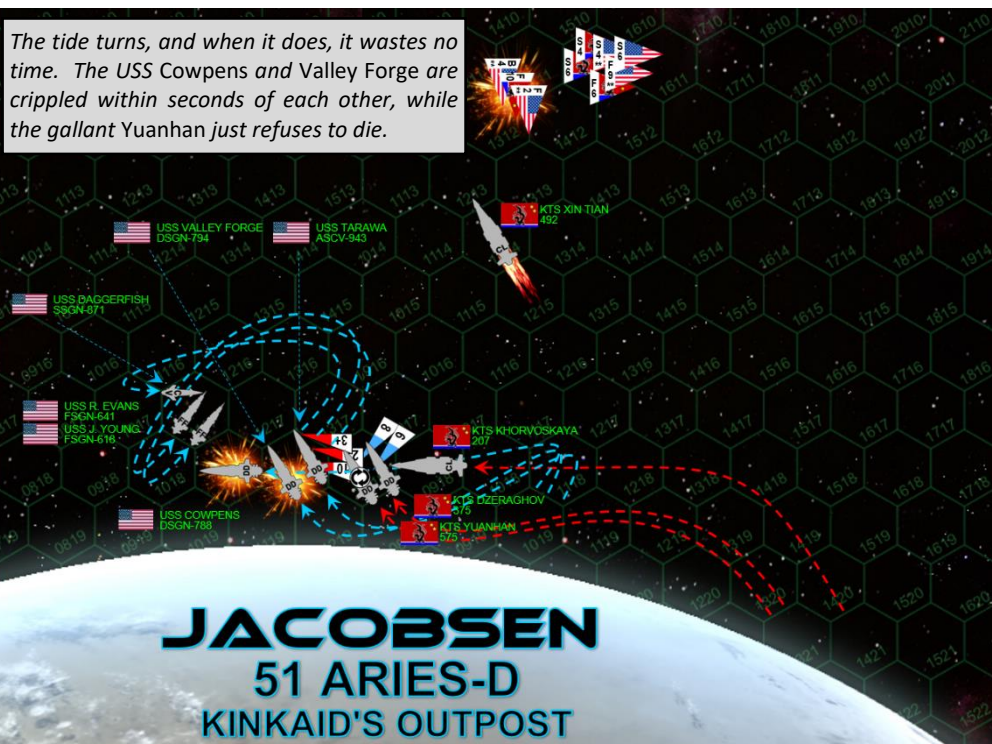
Sadly for the Americans, those angels are about to desert them.

Aboard the horribly-damaged USS *Cowpens*, Commander Collingsworth raises steam to make a run for it. But with her portside engines gone and maneuvering thrusters damaged, all while pulling against a planet's gravity, her options are limited to say the least. The vengeful destroyers *Dzeraghov* and *Yuanhan* pivot behind her at less than 400 kilometers, all guns already menacing over their port broadsides. The *Tarawa* and *Valley Forge* cut between the enemy and *Cowpens*, vainly trying to cover her as best they can. Mercifully, the combined mass driver defenses of six American ships (all with advanced CICs and most with enhanced electronic warfare suites) shoot down most of the Black Dragon torpedoes. But they can't protect the *Cowpens* from the guns of the *Yuanhan* - a single spray from her forward 30kg

plasma projector and finally the *Cowpens* is left burning and adrift.

The rest of the *Yuanhan's* guns pivot to the *Valley Forge*, which just shrugged off what few enemy torpedoes made it through point-defense fire. The *Yuanhan* scores two hits before a torpedo from the *John Young* and one from the vengeful *Cowpens* hits *Yuanhan's* unshielded port bow. The *Yuanhan's* forward decks erupt in a volcano of ruination, she loses all her torpedoes, all forward guns, all forward mass drivers, three hangars ... the bow of the ship is basically torn off and hurled burning into Jacobsen's atmosphere. Yet the *Yuanhan* remains in the fight!

With their ordinance expended and their carrier in the midst of a 390,000 ton dogfight, the Marine bomber jockeys break for high orbit, just trying to stay out of the battle's way. But the Black Dragons pursue, their MiG-103 "Tunguska" fighters easily overtaking them. The Marine fighters chase after the Tunguskas, the Black Dragon scouts chase the American Corsairs, and the American scouts chase after the enemy scouts, everyone tangling up in a 50-plane hairball while the burning hulk of the *Xin Tian* careens wildly between them and the rest of the battle. The dogfight is a furious scissor-storm of laser, chain gun, and particle cannon fire. The four Marine "Avenger" bombers are all shot down, although they take one Mig-103 Tunguska with them. The American scouts take out two more, while the elite "Corsair" fighter pilots of VMF/A-391 kill no less than seven, albeit at the loss of two of their own. Despite a clear edge in Black Dragon



numbers, the Americans will win this dogfight, it's just costing too much time and too many casualties.

The *Dzeraghov* now opens fire on the *Valley Forge*, hoping to exploit the damage just scored by the *Yuanhan*. Despite *Valley Forge's* enhanced shielding, the *Dzeraghov* hits with all guns, positively tearing *Valley Forge's* starboard quarter apart. The destroyer shudders and loses power, burning and spinning helplessly out of the battlespace. All American guns pour into the *Yuanhan* in reply, destroying what little is left of the ship's forward half and killing a third of her crew, yet still the *Yuanhan* maintains power ... even if she is forced to break off the action.

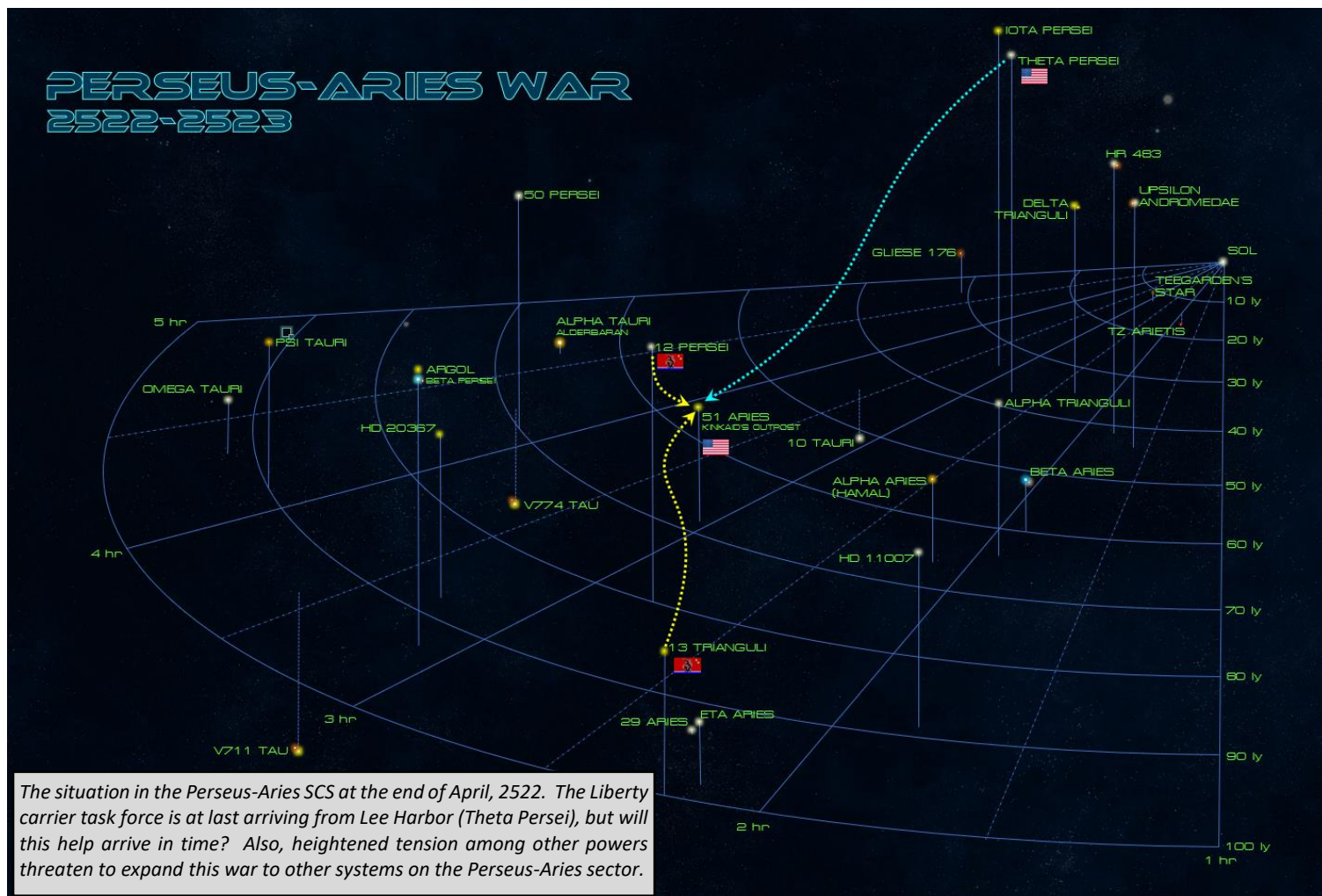
She's hardly alone. Sizing up the situation, the Black Dragons realize that despite their amazing comeback, the fight will only go down here from here. They're losing the fighter battle. The Americans have just launched eighteen fresh Mark 48 torpedoes. The *Dzeraghov* is the only gun-heavy ship left, yet could probably face down the much smaller *John Young* and *Ronald Evans* ... if not for all that fighter and torpedo support.

Accordingly, the Black Dragons accelerate to all-ahead

flank, vectoring up and away from Jacobsen, breaking off the battle. Far from cowardice, this is shrewd calculation. By breaking off the action before the Americans can conclusively win the battle, the Black Dragons maintain a presence (and thus still pose the threat) here along the inner planetary orbits of 51 Aries.

The skirmish at Jacobsen has been a brutal affair. Both sides have positively mauled each other, the ferocity of the fight resembling a full-scale planetary assault more than the "fast skirmish raid" both sides had in mind. For the Americans, the engagement end in a frustrating draw, marginally inflicting more damage on the enemy than they sustained themselves, but not enough to consider the action at Jacobsen any kind of success.

The United States has crippled KTS *Xin Tian*, driven off KTS *Yuanhan*, shot down ten fighters and ten bombers. (112 + 24 + 20 + 20 = 176 points). The Khitan-Tunguska Free State has crippled USS *Cowpens* and *Valley Forge*, shot down four double-elite bombers and two double-elite fighters (50 + 90 + 16 + 8 = 164 points total). +12 points, 3%, DRAW.



SCENARIO 05

FULL FLEET ACTION - SPEARHEAD PLANETARY COUNTER-INVASION
LOW ORBITAL ZONE - KINKAID THREE (51 ARIES-C) - KINKAID OUTPOST
30 April 2522 (Sol Standard Date)

The bloody, stalemated result of the Jacobsen Raid has hardly been the end of the American Navy's disappointment at Kinkaid's Outpost. Quite the opposite, the whole month of April has been and increasingly steep decline of bad news. With the losses at Jacobsen only compounding American shortfalls in manpower, equipment, supplies, and warships, Read-Admiral Matthew Spencer finds himself holding his battered task force together with both hands. Only the timely arrival of military supply and support ships from the United Kingdom's Royal Navy (see below: "Pereus-Aries, the War Expands") gives the Americans the wherewithal to drag Task Force Oriskany once more to its feet. Crews work overlapping 16-hour shifts to weld, stitch, glue, patch, and pray their ships back some passable degree of combat readiness.

Unfortunately, these British supply convoys contain military assistance rather than reinforcements (i.e., no warships), the British have enough trouble of their own with the Black Dragons and escalating tensions with the Japanese. Furthermore, these support convoys have had to come all the way from the Hamal colonies (Alpha Aries), even with first-line military warships this voyage takes twenty days.

The Black Dragons, meanwhile, have hardly let this time go to waste. With reinforcements continuing to pile in from 12

Persei and 13 Trianguli, up to and including three upgraded heavy cruisers in addition to the new warships already seen at Jacobsen, they quite simply shove their way directly into the heart of the 51 Aries system. This, of course, is Kinkaid's Outpost itself (51 Aries-C), *Khuvi Zayaa* "Earth and Sky" prize for which the Black Dragons have gone to war.

Spencer, of course, cannot contest the move. Clinging to abandoned naval posts and old industrial installations among the system's gas giants and outer debris belt, the barely-healed ships under his command are outgunned at least three-to-one, even if they were combat-ready, which they honestly aren't.

The Black Dragon invasion of Kinkaid's outpost is a mercifully bloodless affair. Anyone who could leave from the surface colonies has done so long ago. Those who remains are wise enough not to contest the nearly 1,000 shock troops and 40 combat vehicles the Black Dragons set down from their assault fleet of converted *Gagarin*-class light fleet carriers and *Zhukov*-class planetary assault ships. From the cold darkness of the system's outer orbital zones, Spencer and his men can only watch.

Fortunately, real help is *finally* arriving in the form of the rest of the "Liberty" Task Force. Among the ships arriving are the celebrated USS *Liberty* (CSCV-446) under the flag of Rear-Admiral Zachary Irons, carrying of the best full aerospace strike squadrons in the US Navy, VSF-221 (The Dead Rabbits) and VSA-193 (The Eight Ball Express). Right alongside her is the USS *Northampton* (CSGN-534), under the command of Captain Jack Morrison, Spencer's roommate and best friend from all the way back at Annapolis. Sleek, bristling, beautiful, *Northampton* is among the new *San Antonio* class light cruisers, some of the most high-tech warships in Known Space.

The reinforcements actually arrive a day early, with Irons having cut a very close Darkstar track to the 51 Aries helioshock boundary, the flaring into Hopewell's high orbital zone to rendezvous with Spencer aboard USS *Oriskany*.

The reunion comes not a moment too soon. Spencer, Irons, and Morrison all agree on what has to happen right away. The Black Dragons must be ejected from Kinkaid's Outpost before they can



entrench themselves too deeply.

Fortunately, Irons' reinforcement fleet also contains the USMC planetary assault ships *USS Khe Sanh* and *Tripoli* (LCHA-476 and 472, respectfully), each carrying 196 Marines and eight combat assault vehicles. That would still leave them outnumbered over two-to-one against the Black Dragons already on the ground at Kinkaid's Outpost, but if Task Forces Oriskany and Liberty can clear the drop zone of enemy warships (which they'd have to do anyway before a counter-invasion could even be attempted), orbital bombardment and aerospace superiority could offset the enemy's numerical advantage.

Of course, winning such a naval battle remains a daunting challenge. Even with the arrival of *Liberty* and *Northampton*, and the rehabilitation of all the damaged ships *Spencer* and *Irons* already have in the system, the prospect is far from certain. In raw tonnage, just the three Black Dragon heavy

cruisers tip the scales against *both* American task forces combined, and that's without including *Zhang Jia*, *Xin Tian*, or the host of destroyers escorting this force.

Yet as uncertain as the odds are at present, even day the Americans hesitate will only make them worse. The Black Dragons are entrenching and 12 Persei is still much closer than Lee Harbor or the new British allies Alpha Aries. There's no time to lose. The orders go out, the ships are readied. The guns are primed, the torpedoes are loaded, the pilots briefed. At 03:15 hours local, 30 April 2522 (Sol standard date), the combined American fleet glides into a short, slow, and precise "ghost wave", their Darkstar dilation taking them to within eleven minutes of the planned counter-invasion zone, over one of the ground larger colonies on the surface of the Kinkaid's Outpost ... Kinkaid Three.

This will be a battle not soon forgotten by anyone involved, or anyone living anywhere in the Perseus-Aries sector.

<p>UNITED STATES FORCES</p> <p>TASK FORCE LIBERTY</p> <p><i>USS Liberty</i> (CSCV-446, Endeavor class light fleet carrier) *** <i>VSF-221</i> (The Dead Rabbits) *** <i>VSA-193</i> (The Eight Ball Express) *** <i>USS Cowpens</i> (DSGN-788, <i>Valcour</i> class destroyer) * <i>USS John Young</i> (FSGN-618, <i>Shepard</i> class destroyer) * <i>USS Ronald Evans</i> (FSGN-641, <i>Shepard</i> class destroyer) *</p> <p>TASK FORCE ORISKANY</p> <p><i>USS Oriskany</i> (DSGN-797, <i>Valcour</i> class destroyer) ***** <i>USS Valley Forge</i> (DSGN-794, <i>Valcour</i> class destroyer) ***** <i>USS Hancock</i> (DSGN-798, <i>Valcour</i> class destroyer) ** <i>USS Tarawa</i> (ASCV-943, <i>Buford</i> class destroyer) ***** <i>VMF/A-391</i>, <i>Tigersharks</i> (USMC) *** <i>USS Daggerfish</i> (SSGN-871, <i>Mako</i> class torpedo corvette) *</p> <p>890 points</p>	<p>BLACK DRAGON FORCES</p> <p>KHAN TAGHARIN TASK FORCE</p> <p><i>KTS Khan Tagharin</i> (<i>Slava</i> class heavy cruiser) ** <i>KTS Bi Chi Quan</i> (<i>Shanxi</i> class heavy cruiser) ** <i>KTS Tarasevich</i> (<i>Slava</i> class heavy cruiser) *</p> <p>KHAR KHILIZH TASK FORCE</p> <p><i>KTS Zhang Jia</i> (<i>Greater Xhia</i> class light missile cruiser) *** <i>KTS Xin Tian</i> (<i>Greater Xhia</i> class light missile cruiser) *** <i>KTS Khorvorskaya</i> (<i>Gagarin</i> class light fleet carrier) 221st Naval Aero Assault Regiment (reinforced) <i>KTS Dzeraghov</i> (<i>Sovnya</i> class destroyer) ** <i>KTS Jyinasang</i> (<i>Nanchong</i> class destroyer) ** <i>KTS Yuanhan</i> (<i>Nanchong</i> class destroyer) *</p> <p>890 points</p>
<p>No Special Rules or Setup Conditions Assault Victory Conditions. Darkstar Shorthand 3.0 Resolution.</p>	

The Americans shake off their Darkstar waves, close formation, and approach the Kinkaid Three orbital zone hard and fast, gravity-slinging their way around the planet's night side to emerge across the dusk terminator. There, above the Kinkaid Three colony, three enemy heavy cruisers, *Khan Tagharin*, *Bi Chi Quan*, and *Tarasevich*, lay staged almost in a triangle, the Black Dragons unsure from which position the Americans could approach.

The carriers *Liberty* and *Tarawa* (escorted by the torpedo corvette *Daggerfish*) set up a stand-off position from which to launch their aerospace strike groups, the cruiser *Northampton* forming up with destroyers *Hancock* and *Cowpens* in a protective wedge in front. The *Oriskany* and *Valley Forge*, meanwhile, take the two frigates *Ronald Evans* and *John*

Young on a mission around the enemy flank to hit the carrier *Khorvorskaya*, which is already launching waves of MiG-103 "Tunguska" fighters and Tupolev Tu-97 "Zvesburya" (Star Storm) bombers. The Americans want this aerospace strike group out of the equation, and they don't want their own elite strike squadrons wasting their time in dogfights. Thus, the carrier has to go.

The fight begins with an up-close gunnery slugging match between Jack Morrison's battlegroup (*Northampton*, *Hancock*, *Cowpens*) and the heavy cruiser *Tarasevich*, escorted by the hated cruisers *Zhang Jia*, *Xin Tian*, and destroyer *Yuanhan*.

Such a close-range sledgehammer duel is perhaps not the best approach with the Black Dragons, a point brought home

with grim purpose by the gunners of *Zhang Jia*, *Xin Tian* and *Yuanhan*, all opening fire at 1,200 kilometers against the *Northampton*. Enemy torpedoes are dealt with well enough, thanks to valiant mass driver support from the *Hancock*, but rail guns and plasma hit *Northampton* hard while the larger *Tarasevich* (hanging back at 1,800 kilometers) opens fire on the *Cowpens*, who's running close abeam the *Northampton* for still more mass driver support. Yet *Cowpens* sustains remarkably light damage, luck not shared by the *Hancock* when she's hit by a volley of long-range torpedoes fire from the carrier *Khorvorskaya*, half-forgotten in the chaos and firing from 3,000 kilometers away.

The American aerospace strike, a coordinated assault by the Dead Rabbits, Eightball Express, and Tigersharks (eighteen FS/A-81 "Avenger" torpedo bombers and twenty-six F/S-44 "Star Corsair" fighters) arrives moments later. The strike is beautiful, not quite harkening back to the "Miracle Five Minutes of Midway" but impressive nonetheless. The heavy cruiser *Tarasevich* is positively gutted by at least fifteen hits, despite a veritable wall of covering fire from *Zhang Jia*, *Xin Tian*, and *Yuanhan*. The heavy cruiser reels, heaving away to break off, only to catch a salvo of Mark 48 torpedoes in her belly from *Cowpens* and *Hancock*. A chain reaction of internal explosions tears through her ventral and aft sections, leaving the *Tarasevich* dead in space.

Heedless of her wounds, the *Northampton* unloads into the *Xin Tian*, the enemy cruiser's mass drivers already engaged with the tsunami of Mark 48s hitting *Tarasevich*, her engines exposed in a covering turn. In moments *Xin Tian* is opened to space as well and is about to break off. But another fistful of Mark 48s from the American carriers, the *Daggerfish*, and the two frigates *John Young* and *Ronald Evans* finish her off for good.

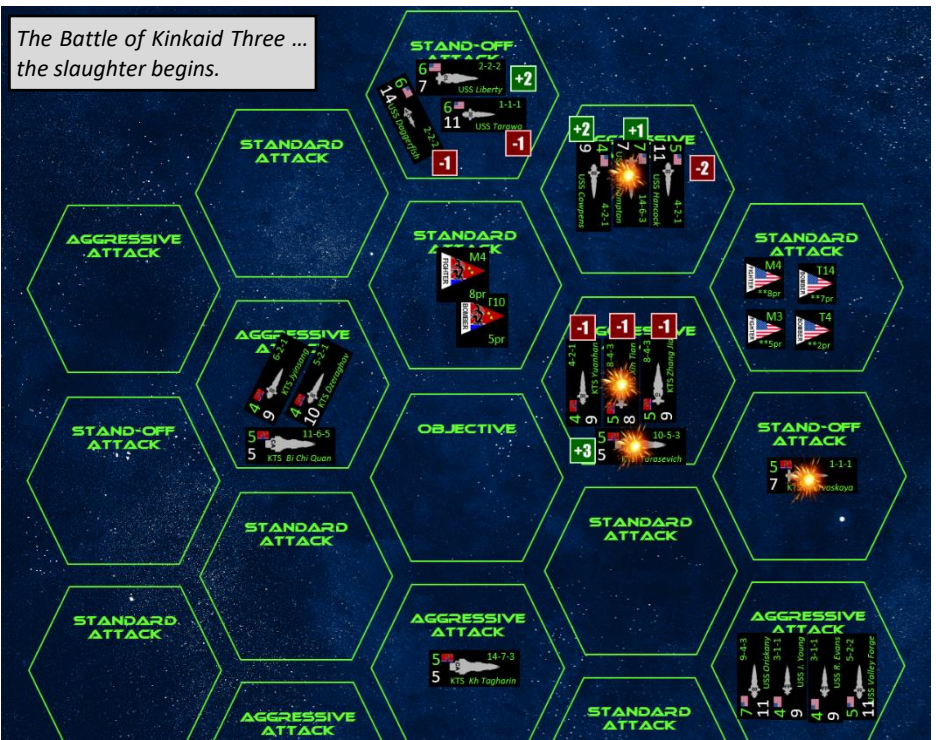
Yet this second torpedo spread has somewhat upset the plans of Admirals Irons and Spencer, who had detached *Oriskany*, *Valley Forge*, *Evans*, and *Young* to hit the *Khorvorskaya*. With the *Evans* and *Young* pulled away in the chaos to support the attack on the *Xin Tian*, the *Oriskany* and *Valley Forge* must now go after *Khorvorskaya* alone. The two elite, highly-decorated destroyers do so in fine style, however, the *Oriskany* hitting *Khorvorskaya*'s stern with four torpedoes, the *Valley Forge* with three. Seconds later the two destroyers rake the carrier's fantail with rail

guns, syglex emitters, and 6MgKv lasers, slashing her engines and reactors apart and leaving her a burning, spinning wreck.

In all, the battle is going amazingly well. Aboard the bridges of *Oriskany* and *Northampton*, Spencer and Irons are already on the comms, hurriedly planning the coup de grace, when the heavy guns of the *Khan Tagharin* smash the conversation to a disagreeable halt. Having raised steam for flank speed and pivoted hard into the battle, *Khan Tagharin*'s expert gunners land an amazing volley at nearly 3200 kilometers that smashes out the torpedo bays of the *Northampton*, exploding her forward magazine and hitting bridge. Just that fast, the Americans' largest gunnery platform is gone.

Indeed, the Black Dragons are shaking off their shock and regaining their balance. The heavy cruiser *Bi Chi Quan* (unflatteringly nicknamed "Bitchy Queen" by the US Navy pilots ... "Bitchy C***" by the Marines) has pivoted against the American carrier battlegroup. Yet her guns largely miss the *Liberty*, her hailstorm of "Tsing Tao" Class II torpedoes exploding by the dozen off *Liberty*'s enhanced shielding, ECM, and EW suites.

Sadly, the Black Dragon aerospace strike is another matter. While delivered with nowhere near the precision or skill as the Americans, the strike is carried out bravely, the pilots coming desperately close before releasing their ordinance. The risky tactic pays off - American mass drivers having largely been occupied with torpedoes of *Bi Chi Quan*, *Jyinsang*, and *Dzeraghov*). The *Liberty* is hit hard, kicked almost on her side



another catastrophic explosion. *Oriskany* and *Evans* cut behind the *Bi Chi Quan* just after five Mark 48s (three from *Oriskany*, one each from *Evans* and *Young*) slam into the heavy cruiser's stern. *Oriskany's* syglex emitters can't miss at this range, carving across the behemoth's ravaged stern, laying bare her engines and reactors to be torn apart by *Oriskany's* rail guns and *Evans's* EPCs. The *Bi Chi Quan* is out of the battle, corkscrewing out of control and trailing a river of molten metal and escaping atmosphere.

But again, the triumph is short-lived ... the escorting destroyer *Jyinsang* taking out the *Ronald Evans* just seconds later. The *Oriskany* fires her remaining guns into the *Jyinsang* as she rockets past the stricken *Bi Chi Quan*, the *Jyinsang* herself taken out heartbeats later by a well-timed torpedo strike from the lurking torpedo corvette *Daggerfish*.

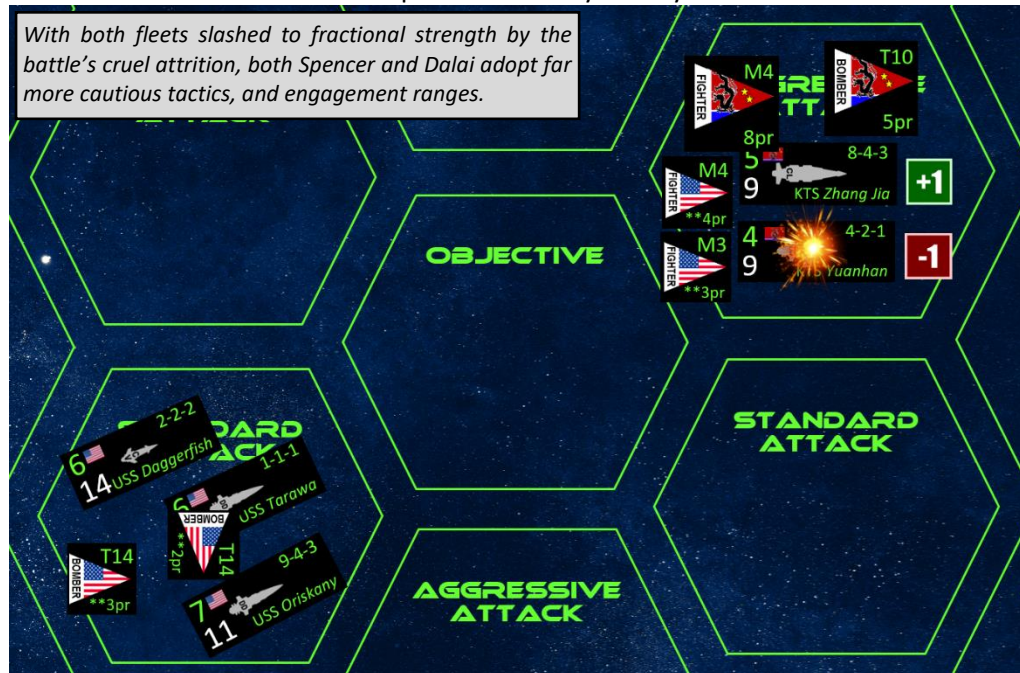
Worse is yet to come. Set a thousand kilometers off from the slaughter over the dropzone, the *Zhang Jia* and the *Yuanhan* have been chasing after the American carriers, hounding the badly-damaged *USS Liberty*. The *Zhang Jia* in particular is typically ruthless, Captain Baraqin Dalai standing off at a comfortable distance and drilling *Liberty's* burning hangar bays with 7gw rail guns, the carrier's shuddering hull flailing in vain attempts to flee. Yet *Liberty's* last torpedoes, along with *Tarawa's*, sail into the *Yuanhan*, which is badly damaged but maintains power.

The horror over the Kinkaid Three drop zone can barely be described. In just over two minutes, nine ships have been crippled, a tenth ship exploded with over half her crew, and sixteen aerospace craft have been lost. None of this included the two light cruisers and one heavy cruiser that were crippled at the battle's outset, bringing the total losses to thirteen ships in about five minutes.

And still, the Battle of Kinkaid Three isn't over ... although the opposing fleets don't have much left. On the Black Dragon side, the *Zhang Jia* and damaged destroyer *Yuanhan* races toward the surviving American bombers, guessing they will want to land aboard the *Tarawa* to rearm and thus the light carrier can't venture too far away. Spencer counters, ordering the *Tarawa* behind *Oriskany* and *Daggerfish* (the last ships he has left), hoping to engage and fend off the Black Dragons while the *Tarawa* recovers and rearms a handful of bombers.

Tarawa sets to the task, although the bombers she lands are from VSA-193 (The Eight Ball Express), none of her Tigershark bombers survived the *Hancock's* death blast.

The Tigersharks and Dead Rabbits, however, still have plenty of fighters up, and with a howl of vengeance they set upon the *Zhang Jia*. The *Yuanhan* dutifully throws up a hail of defensive fire, yet *Zhang Jia* still suffers a startling amount of damage (these are some of the best pilots in the US Navy and Marine Corps, after all). Still Black Dragon MiGs take their toll, four more Corsairs are lost as they focus on the *Zhang Jia* instead of enemy fighters. But this valiant sacrifice draws off protection from the *Yuanhan*, which is then targeted by every gun and torpedo Spencer has left. *Yuanhan* is so badly torn apart that she nearly explodes, Spencer has to pre-detonate the last two Mark 48s to prevent just this from happening. Not that Spencer has any mercy in his heart after what



happened to *USS Hancock*, but he has over twenty fighters directly above the *Yuanhan* and the Americans have already lost far too many souls this day.

The *Zhang Jia* tries to hammer back at *Oriskany*, the vicious rivalry between these two ships perhaps unsurpassed in Known Space. But Spencer has placed *Oriskany* directly behind *Zhang Jia*, and only one of Captain Baraqin's turrets can even come to bear.

Defiantly, the *Zhang Jia* turns toward the Americans. She now stands alone, save the fighter squadron, yet Baraqin is determined to take as many Americans with him as possible. After all, any ship she can cripple is one less ship that will be supporting the inevitable invasion and ground battle. This time she manages a broadside which, combined with her last

torpedoes, damages *Oriskany's* fo'c'sle and starboard bow enough that Spencer has to break off the action. As she turns away, however, *Oriskany* slings out her last broadside and last torpedoes, slamming into the *Zhang Jia*, followed a heartbeat later by the torpedo spread of the *Daggerfish*, the *Tarawa*, and the vengeful bombers of the Eight Ball Express. Of course, *Tarawa* couldn't recover and rearm all of them, her bays are far too small to accommodate the bomber group of the much larger *USS Liberty*.

Even this coup de grace does not come without loss. The Black Dragon fighters wheel to engage these re-armed bombers. Corsairs of the Tigersharks and Dead Rabbits cut in to intercept (at last released from strafing attacks on enemy warships), and wreak a cruel harvest on the enemy MiGs. Ten Tunguskas are lost, although all four Navy bombers go down as well.

Still, the bombers have released their ordinance, and combined with the torpedoes of *Oriskany*, *Tarawa*, and *Daggerfish* ... it's enough. Torpedo after torpedo spears into the *Zhang Jia*, tearing out her portside reactors and engines, soon leaving her a mangled and crippled wreck.

Any other day Spencer would immediately raise flank speed, hunt down the wrecked *Zhang Jia*, and finally kill this scourge of the stars for good. But *Oriskany* is already shuddering with decompressions, her AI has taken over the helm and getting the ship clear to save the crew. Besides, only the *Oriskany* (badly damaged), *Tarawa*, and *Daggerfish* both empty on torpedoes) are left to secure the landing zone, and the Marine Corps assault ships *USS Tripoli* and *Khe Sanh* have just dropped out of Darkstar waves and are vectoring on fast approaches toward Kinkaid Three. As if this were not enough, hundreds of Americans are now stranded and adrift aboard wrecked, burning, crippled ships, or stranded in ejection combat compartments, or spinning through space on aerospace ejection seats. Some of these are headed for Kinkaid Outpost's atmosphere, so rescue and recovery are clearly the priority.

The Battle of Kinkaid Three, mercifully, is over. The cost has been hideous. The *USS Hancock* is gone forever. Bloody as it is, however, the Americans have won a clear victory here. The *Tripoli* and *Khe Sanh* drop in the assault force (Task Force Viper, drawn from 2nd Battalion / 5th Marines). *USS Tarawa* (technically a Marine Corps assault ship herself) puts in an incredible eighteen hours, landing and recovering both her own surviving Tigersharks and *USS Liberty's* Dead Rabbit fighters and Eight Ball Express bombers around the clock ... the six bombers and twelve fighters providing non-stop close aerospace support for the ground battle that begins almost immediately.

The ravaged condition of the American fleet, however, limits the support they can provide via orbital bombardment, particularly in those first few hours. Only when the *Daggerfish* and *Tarawa* take on fresh supplies of specialized ground-attack torpedoes are they able to settle just above the upper atmosphere of Kinkaid's Outpost and provide "cruise missile" support for the Marines in the dirt. *USS Oriskany* is soon recovered enough to limp back on station, her rail guns likewise emptying their magazines into the ground battle raging below.

Americans have left in the battle area: **USS Oriskany** (half points, broken off but not yet off the table), *Tarawa*, and *Daggerfish*, along with twelve double-elite fighters and six double-elite bombers. (68 + 64 + 27 + 48 + 24 points = 231 points. Black Dragons have 10 bombers, 6 fighters (32 points). +199 points, 22%, Minor American Victory.

By noon the next day, *USS Ronald Evans* is back on line, her EPCs joining the barrage. Also, "Delta" Company, 2/5 Marines has taken an aerospace port on the outskirts of Kinkaid Three,

At last ... it is over. The grim cost of the Battle of Kinkaid Three is at least partly offset by the fact that it has given the United States back their Kinkaid's Outpost colonies, liberated thousands of civilian colonists, and decisively ejected the Black Dragons from the 51 Aries star system.

STANDARD ATTACK

- 14 USS Daggerfish (2-2-2)
- 6 (2-2-2)
- 7 USS Oriskany (9-4-3)
- 11 USS Tarawa (1-1-1)
- T14 Bomber (**3pr)

STAND-OFF ATTACK

- M4-K (3pr)
- T14 Bomber (**2pr)
- M4 (3pr)
- M3 (2pr)
- M4 (4pr)

AGGRESSIVE ATTACK

- T10/E Bomber (5pr)
- 5 (8-4-3)
- 9 (Zhang Jia)

STANDARD ATTACK

allowing aerospace strikes to be carried out from the ground rather than the exhausted USS *Tarawa*.

Thus, Spencer detaches himself aboard the marginally-repaired *Oriskany*, taking the *Daggerfish* with him as escort. Still determined to find and finish the *Zhang Jia* once and for all, he sets a high-speed orbit around Kinkaid's Outpost. He never finds *Zhang Jia* ... but twenty-two hours after the Battle of Kinkaid's Outpost, he does find the crippled wreck of the much larger heavy cruiser *Tarasevich*, with most of her 749 officers and men still aboard.

As much as Spencer wants payback for the *Hancock*, he won't murder over 700 people. He'd love to capture this ship,

towing it back to the American fleet with "Hancock" painted vengefully on her prow. But again, almost every Marine in the star system is engaged in combat on the surface, there's no way *Oriskany's* small platoon could take such a large ship.

Thus, Spencer sounds the "cruiser rule" signal, giving *Tarasevich's* crew twelve minutes to abandon ship, after which *Oriskany* and *Daggerfish* blow her out of the stars. The *Oriskany* overtakes as many of the escape craft as he can, and as luck would have it [game terms: **Warship Recovery Table, Captain's Fate when a Ship is Lost**], Spencer winds up capturing the captain of the *Tarasevich* and his command crew (along with about 200 of her officers and men).

PERSEUS-ARIES: THE WAR EXPANDS

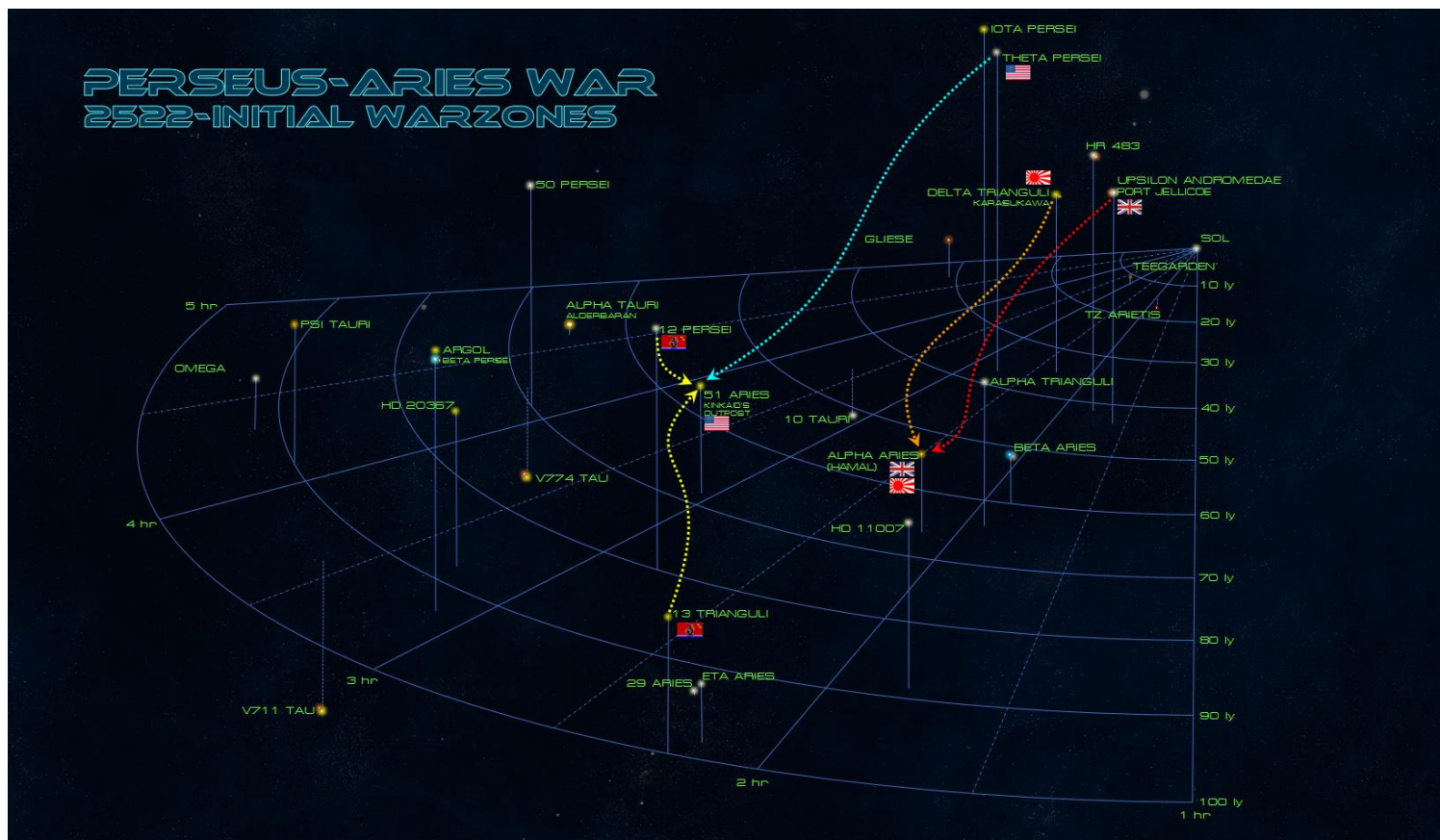
NEW FACTIONS IN THE PERSEUS-ARIES WAR

War, like the universe itself, seems driven by a fundamental property of expansion. Whole libraries of history are soaked in countless examples of "limited" conflicts, no matter how contained or localized, somehow sparking fresh flames in nearby environs. Simmering tensions, long suppressed beneath a civilized veneer, are somehow let loose by someone else's war next door, as if the nearby noise gives the new combatants permission to start shooting at each other. The fires grow together into a combined flame, now

even hungrier for more fuel in fresh pastures. The flame becomes a wildfire, the wildfire a conflagration.

Welcome to the war.

Starting on 24 February 2522 between the United States and the Khitan-Tunguska Free State, the "Kinkaid's Outpost War" in 51 Aries didn't stay contained in 51 Aries for very long. As mentioned previously in this reference, one of the factors considered by the Black Dragons in selecting a target system for their *Khuvi Zayaa* strike was its "political isolation." Put



more simply, Kinkaid's Outpost was picked because Black Dragon intelligence estimated the Americans would have few friends in the immediate region. Thus, the Black Dragons hoped to cut down on the allied assistance upon which their opponents would be able to call ... if not win the Black Dragons a few temporary "allies of convenience" themselves.

As history would witness, the Black Dragon strategy worked only too well.

Following the initial Black Dragon strike at 51 Aries (and the explosive death of the cruiser USS *Austin*), it took eleven days for the fastest couriers to reach US Navy Twelfth Fleet headquarters at Lee Harbor in Theta Persei. Preparations for a counterstrike were begun immediately, with Task Force Oriskany being underway toward Kinkaid's Outpost within 24 hours. But along with these military responses, diplomatic overtures were also underway in parallel. Most significantly, these included reaching out to the United Kingdom, who had a strong presence at Upsilon Andromedae, along with maritime and industrial outposts at Alpha Aries.

The simpler part of the story is easier to summarize. His Majesty's Government received the petition from the US State Department on March 27, which was just about as fast as a 12mw courier ship could carry the news from 51 Aries to Theta Persei, and then to the Royal Navy base and regional British capital at Upsilon Andromedae. This appeal for help cited long-forgotten "mutual assistance clauses" in treaties signed by their grandfathers when the Perseus-Aries sector was little more than a collection of pre-fabricated orbital habitats. Dutifully the Royal Governor's Office reviewed said petition for about a week, and then politely (but firmly) refused on April 2, bad news the Americans wouldn't receive until at least April 22. Stinging scars and smoldering Anglo-American tensions of the recent Third Hercules War remained just a bit too fresh - and the corporate conduct of United Energy & Transport remained a blemish on the American reputation in the Perseus-Aries sector.

That should have been that.

The story grows more complex, however, when one remembers two important factors in how interstellar commerce and warfare tends to develop, especially this far out in the Second Band or along the Deep Frontier. News travels more quickly between star systems that are *nearby*, and commercial interests take action more quickly than government policy.

Alpha Aries is just 20 light-years from the 51 Aries warzone. In fact, it's altogether likely that British businessmen at Alpha Aries knew about what had happened at Kinkaid's Outpost

before the American admirals did at Theta Persei (45 light-years away), much less the British colonial governor at Upsilon Andromedae. And these business tycoons had friends in the United Energy and Transport, the US State Department, the American Navy, perhaps even the US Congress. Naturally, this pipe-smoking cartel of neo-Victorian golfing companions, cousins, and ne'er-do-well brothers-in-law extended deeply in the upper echelons of British society as well, including colonial administration and even naval command.

So, while the Royal Governor's Office was calmly considering and rejecting the American appeal for help, business interests in Alpha Aries were keen on making a fortune selling the Americans whatever they needed to fend off the Black Dragons. Of course such convoys would require military ships with military-grade Darkstar drives ... time was of the essence after all. And since Captain so-and-so of HMS It-Doesn't-Matter owes us all a few thousand pounds from that poker game at the supper club last week, who better than he to take his ship on a "shakedown cruise" to Kinkaid's Outpost (you know, the one he's had scheduled on the books anyway), all while earning himself a sizable off-the-books shipping fee himself? Of course there was nothing untoward about any of this, Britain was a neutral power and besides, wouldn't they be honoring His Majesty's commitments vis-à-vis the Americans and the aforementioned mutual assistance treaties?

FTL TRAVEL TABLE (simplified)		
Darkstar Wave	"c" factor (approx. speed of light)	Days per l/y
1	1	365
2	2	180
3	4	90
4	8	45
5	15	24
6	30	12
7	60	6
8	120	3
9	240+	1.5
10	350+	1
11	600+	0.5
12	1100+	0.25

How much these men *knew* what they were doing, and how much they merely miscalculated, we leave to the reader. The sad, simple truth was that the first military transports from Alpha Aries to Kinkaid's Outpost were already well underway before the news arrived that the British government had in fact ruled *against* helping the Americans. But by then, it was simply too late.

Meanwhile, strong British naval formations were also dispatched out of Upsilon Andromedae to Alpha Aries, a trip of about 22 days for a military-grade fleet. Perhaps the Royal Governor's Office wasn't so dim after all, and had guessed what might be cooking between Alpha Aries and Kinkaid's Outpost. Perhaps certain officials at the RGO were simply in on it as well.

Of course, this all presents a pretty harsh case against British (and American) cronyism. But the fact remains that time *was* of the essence when it comes to the dire situation at Kinkaid's Outpost. This wasn't just backdoor diplomacy, this really *was* how things *had* to work when 300 trillion miles away from Annapolis, Washington D.C., Whitehall, or No. 10 Downing Street. Never mind the slow grind of political gears. Considering FTL transit times alone, had the full letter of the law been applied here, the turn-around on this decision might've been measured in *years*.

And say what you will about this cartel of cloakroom good-ole'-boys. Those first supply ships arrived just in time to get Task Force Oriskany back its feet at Kinkaid's Outpost.

However, the Black Dragons had their spies as well, and were well-informed of these developments. Even before the first whispers of potential Anglo-American cooperation, the

Black Dragons were hard at work with gravitic mines along Darkstar jump-lines commonly used by automated commerce ships in and out of the 51 Aries system. Of course, manned military ships made the first British supply runs, so these mines initially posed no threat. But immediately the Black Dragons stepped up and expanded their mining efforts. Upgraded K-56 class torpedo corvettes made 12mw jumps to the Aries Alpha system's outer debris belt in just five days, the first mines laid as soon as 5 April.

Here, of course, is where the story adds let a further level of complication. The British weren't the only colonial power with gigantic economic, industrial, and military concerns in Alpha Aries. So did their long-time local rivals in the region, Imperial Japan. Whatever the relations may be between the two powers in general (they'd been staunch allies in the recent Third Hercules War), at Alpha Aries the local British and Japanese hated and envied each other. Tensions had never risen to over warfare, but suffice it to say that every planet, moon, claim, colony, installation, down to larger and richer asteroids ... all were contested bitterly. Warships in the region constantly eyed each other, their captains and officers quietly well-paid by the megacorps to keep "national assets" well protected against "incursions" or "piracy."

Yet these are the British and Japanese we're talking about here, the elites running the show on both sides known for their insufferably politeness if nothing else. However, when Black Dragon mines began choking off *Japanese* shipping in Alpha Aries as well as British ... things quickly became less polite.

Even this level of tension was blown sky high, however, when M/S *Komasu Maru*, a Japanese luxury liner, was ripped out of a 7mw Darkstar Wave by a gravitic mine. Darkstar shears are among the deadliest and most feared accidents in modern interstellar travel, no one survives. The *Komasu Maru* was lost with all hands and passengers, over 1200 civilians souls lost without even an explosion to mark their passing.

Given Black Dragon mining activities along the outer rim of Alpha Aries, and the hatred still simmering between the Japanese and Black Dragons in the wake of the Xi Scorpio War of 2517-19, full-scale war seemed imminent between the Japanese and Black Dragons.

But such was not to be. First, the Japanese demanded, in no uncertain terms, that the British immediately halt their assistance to the Americans, the activity that had brought the Black Dragons to Aries Alpha in the first place. But the first American wire transfers had just cleared, those numbers had a lot of zeroes after them, and more was on the way. The



British flatly refused, chalking up the *Komasu Maru* as a “horrific tragedy.”

Then came to real narrative swerve. That hadn’t been a Black Dragon mine that took out the passenger liner. The Japanese produced the com/nav recorder logs of the destroyer HMS *Gloucester*, proving it had been a **British** mine that had destroyed (however inadvertently) the *Komasu Maru* ... a mine laid, in all fairness, to prevent further Black Dragon incursions into Alpha Aries. The mine was at least three AU away from any civilian shipping lane, turns out the *Komasu Maru* had set an unauthorized course to avoid potential problems with increased military traffic coming into Alpha Aries.

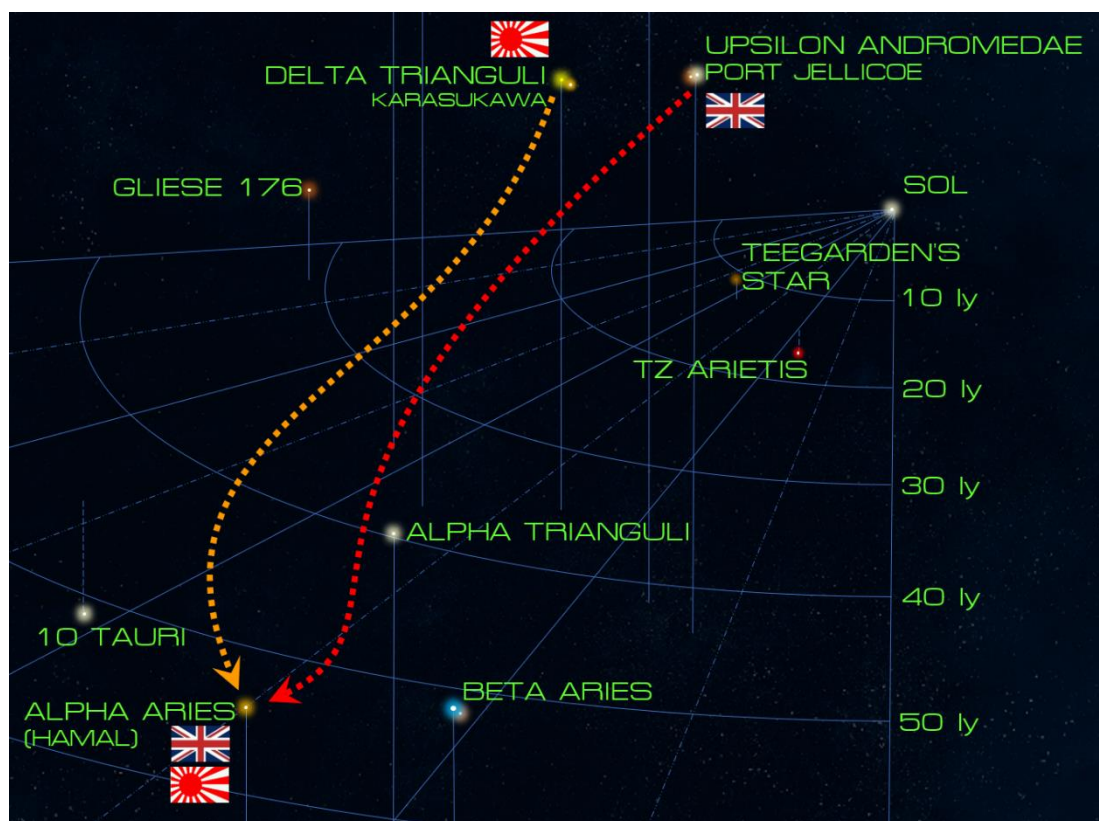
Adding further fuel to British wage was the com/nav log itself. *How* exactly had the Japanese come by detailed navigation and operational orders data from a British warship? Turns out the Japanese had been hacked into the British com/nav and omninet network for years, a gross breach of national security which had the British colonial public and government alike in an incandescent rage. Yet the Japanese, still mourning the loss of 1200 souls aboard the *Komasu Maru*, remained bitterly unimpressed by British protests.

As is so often happens in such cases, reaction begets overreaction. The Japanese demanded the HMS *Gloucester* and her officers be handed over for war crimes. The British didn’t even dignify the demand with a reply. The Japanese Navy in Alpha Aries set out to pursue *Gloucester*, catching her near the Euridice gas giant on April 25. The Japanese moved to board her, the *Gloucester* opened fire, the Japanese returned fire. It’s uncertain what happened, but records suggest that the two Japanese light cruisers refused to cease fire when *Gloucester* was crippled. She exploded, and from a complement a 246 officers and men, 147 souls were lost.

The rest, as they say, is history. The Japanese and British empires were officially at war in Alpha Aries, which of

course extended at 12mw speed to Royal Navy Sector Headquarters at Jellicoe Station (Upsilon Andromedae) and Imperial Japanese Navy regional command at Karasukawa (Delta Trianguli). Emboldened, the Black Dragons attacked a small British relay and refueling installation in the Alpha Aries cometary halo cloud, beginning a general effort to impair their ability to further assist the Americans at Kinkaid’s Outpost.

It is altogether likely, however, that the admiralties on both sides saw this coming a long way off. Again, tensions between Japan and the United Kingdom in the Perseus-Aries sector have been bad for decades. Records suggest that “Battlefleet Nobunaga” had been dispatched from Karasukawa as early as March 5, just four days after the news had arrived about the very first Black Dragon strike at Kinkaid’s Outpost (24 February). It is almost certain that this powerful force (under the flag of Commodore Seizo Yamamoto) was *initially* deployed to Alpha Aries to counter a possible threat by the Black Dragons. One must never forget what happened the last time belligerent Black Dragons came this close to an outer Japanese colony (“Hokkaido’s Flower” at Kurasawa, Xi Scorpio-D, flashpoint of the Xi Scorpio War). Imagine the surprise felt by these men when they emerged from their Darkstar wave 66 days later (a battleship in the fleet limited the voyage to a 9th magnitude-wave) to find themselves at war against the *British*, with the Black Dragons suddenly their sideways *allies*?



The British at Jellicoe Station meanwhile, were much closer, and their forces didn't include any battleships at first. Instead, they sent "Battlefleet Agamemnon" (PA-SCS Force "A") under the flag of Lord Commodore Edward Cavendish. They sortied much later yet arrived well ahead of the Japanese, taking up station around the primary British colony in the system, the planet Blackwell (Alpha Aries-D) on April 28.

On May 10, the Japanese battlecruiser *Nobunaga* and her eight-ship escort force erupted from their Darkstar dilation along the outer rim of the Alpha Aries star system. Quickly briefed by the Imperial Colonial Magistrate, Yamamoto found himself fighting a completely different war than he'd expected, against different enemies and alongside different allies. Communication isn't possible while in a Darkstar wave, so for these men the mining of Aries Alpha shipping lanes, the loss of the *Komasu Maru*, the *Gloucester* incident, all were shocking news. So was the revelation that they were now at war with the British and, by extension, their American allies.

Nevertheless, Yamamoto's orders (as is so often the case with extended Darkstar voyages) were open-ended in the extreme. In summary, these orders rounded out to "Proactively and decisively ensure the security of the Divine Emperor's holdings in the Alpha Aries star system." If this meant crippling the Royal Navy in Alpha Aries, so be it.

Thus, the newly-arrived Japanese fleet jumped again into the heart of the system, joining with smaller Japanese naval units already posted at the colony. British scouts were watching, and Lord Commodore Cavendish had ample time to hit first. However, Cavendish opted for the advantages of fortified defense, and possibly the "high ground optics" of having the Japanese escalate first as well.

Yamamoto had no issue with striking first, and on 18 May 2522, Battlefleet *Nobunaga* blasted out of its Darkstar bowshock above the British colony world of Blackwell. Ready and waiting was "Force A," Battlefleet Agamemnon.

The Battle for Blackwell was on.