

Star*Drive Session Summary 02/06/2011

Attendance

Today represents a historic day: *Bruce* (Lambert Fulson, Taveer) attends via remote control through Skype. He is beside himself with technological joy, to the extent that he threatens the others that he will remove those clothes that he actually remembered to put on for the day. *Patrick* (Lenny, Martin St. John) urges him to refrain, on the basis that nobody is paying him for the session. At least, not this time. *Chris* (Ten-zil Kem and Dreth) holds his hands to his ears and sings out, “Lalalalaaaa!” very loudly. Then he recommends *Rockler Bench Cookies* as a good way to hold a laptop in place (and out of reach of spilled drinks) on a table.

Tim (Gerard Peppin, Haggernak) shows up after a bit, mourning the way he appears as a disembodied head. *Paul* arrives in time to offer that there are drugs to treat that, unless you get Schlotzky’s for lunch. Nobody else understands what he is talking about.

Ernest (Markus Oroszlan, Admiral Ken Takashi) arrives with *Aoife* in tow, explaining that she was stricken with childhood illness and as such cannot be allowed in the presence of other children. It is, however, perfectly fine to put her into the presence of a cluster of adults with weak immune systems. Bruce reflects upon the relative comfort of being 180 miles away from being at risk of succumbing to horrible disease. Aoife offers, “Hi, Electro-Man!” Ernest clarifies, “You’re a 21st century digital boy!” Then he goes on to describe how all fast-food cuisine in Silicon Valley has become dominated by Middle Eastern foods.

<i>Player</i>	<i>Character</i>	<i>Deal</i>	<i>Status</i>
Bruce	Lambert Fulson	Rigunmor Guido Free Agent	Remote
Bruce	Taveer	Mechalus Concord Engineer Tech Op	Remote
Patrick	Martin St. John	Concord Naval Officer Tech Op	Present
Patrick	Lenny	T’sa Ambassador Free Agent	Present
Chris	Ten-zil Kem	VoidCorp Ambassador Diplomat (TO)	Present

<i>Player</i>	<i>Character</i>	<i>Deal</i>	<i>Status</i>
Chris	Dreth	Pict Warchief Combat Spec	Present
Ernest	Markus Oroszlan	Warlion Bartender Combat Spec	Present
Ernest	Ken Takashi	Concord Naval Officer Diplomat (TO)	Present
Tim	Gerard Peppin	Borealin Ambassador Mind Walker	Present
Tim	Haggernak	Weren Concord Administrator Combat Spec	Present

Back Home, Via Lucullus

The characters return from the medurr Rift Ship travel on board *Lambert Fulson's* tramp ship *No Taxable Value* by way of Lucullus. And after a month on board, the ship really does have no remaining taxable value. The characters do have reason to visit: *Markus Oroszlan* wants to check out his Pict empire. There is a rumor going around the Pict population that Markus is actually just the most recent in an unending series of clones, with each Markus recreated from the DNA of his predecessor. And everyone wants to reassure themselves that the Lucullan commitment to the Verge Alliance remains strong.

As the *No Taxable Value* enters orbit the characters get a call from *Basil Turcheyev*, the head of the Jamaican Syndicate. He wants to speak to *Ambassador Peppin*. He invites Peppin and his companions to join him for dinner at Port Royal. Peppin agrees, gets landing instructions, and promptly walks into a ship's bulkhead.

Lambert Fulson reflects upon the fact that the last time he was on Lucullus he was full of hope that he could parlay his business and social skills into an arrangement to have cheap trademark-violation knockoff goods made locally for export to Bluefall. Unfortunately, he actually managed to offend everyone in sight, which pretty much ruined that plan. As usual. To date, the only ways he has been able to consistently make money are by ripping off refugees and landing questionable government services contracts.

Dinner in Port Royal

The characters land at the Port Royal starport, drive across town, and enter a glittering casino operated by the Jamaican Syndicate. They head across the casino floor, through the shouting people and the flashing lights, until they reach Turcheyev and a quieter section with subdued lighting and much higher prices. He gets right to business: he wants them to transport his son *Brent Turcheyev* off Lucullus and to the Lighthouse. He's willing to pay for the privilege, and wants beyond that to pay for a guarantee that his son will be protected into the future. He can provide appropriate false documents. Lambert Fulson is immediately interested: he has a price list all ready to pull up. Turcheyev isn't willing to offer specifics, but he is clearly convinced that Lucullus will soon be attacked and has low confidence in the system's defense. He explains by way of example that the Lucullan ships in the Verge Alliance fleet were not cooperating well and had to be removed from the overall Alliance command structure; they now comprise the United Lucullan Defense Force. He urges the characters to get out of the system as quickly as they can. There is a good chance that the *No Taxable Value* can catch a ride out-system attached to a much larger outbound cargo ship – Fulson starts making appropriate arrangements.

The United Lucullan Defense Force is led by the light cruiser *Birmingham*, commanded by *Ramil ibn Beighur*. The Alliance fleet is led by the Regency dreadnought *Sanctuary*. The Alliance has no Fortress Ships, which immediately puts them at a disadvantage against the I'krl forces – the *Sanctuary* is one step smaller, but is one of only a couple ships that size in the Alliance fleet. These ships are currently in the Lucullus system, as they expect that the next attack will be either at Lucullus or Argos.

Time Is of the Essence!

Brent Turcheyev turns out to be a quiet fellow, possibly with some developmental difficulties. He meets the characters at the spaceport, fully equipped with his new false identity. The characters swiftly usher him on board the *No Taxable Value* and get him out of sight.

While Markus Oroszlan whips his Pictish subjects back into shape, Ten-zil Kem develops a questionable online friendship with Brent Turcheyev. After a few hours of

high-velocity online socializing with his tremendously adolescent avatar, Ten-zil decides that Brent is upset (and depressed) because his girlfriend Seraphina broke up with him. His life is over, nothing means anything, and so on. And he can't even try to contact her because she's locked up in her own personal GridCage and won't see any messages he sends her. Ten-zil extends out a message on Brent's behalf suggesting that the fate of the free world might depend upon her willingness to talk to him again. Of course, by the time she has a chance to respond, the *No Taxable Value* is well on its way to drivespace and away.

The Supervisor Overmind

Peppin decides that he will pay a social call upon the Supervisors' *Overmind* via psychic projection, with the idea of asking it what it can see in the future. It indicates that the future is cloudy, hard to see, but it has made preparations to go to ground should the planet fall. It is quite confident that should that come to pass the Supervisors will be very hard to uproot. But it is not indestructible: even though the Overmind is centered in the person of the Senior Director it depends upon the presence of many other individual Supervisors to maintain itself.

The characters discuss the idea of sending secret messages to the Overmind in the event that Lucullus falls. The psychic alien artifact on the *Lighthouse* provides a way to transfer psychic messages to it. Markus Oroszlan resolves to obtain a quantity of one-time cryptographic pads from the local Alliance command – this will provide a means for local resistance to confirm that the messages the Overmind relays on are actually valid (and not just the random whims of a massively powerful psychic).

Markus Visits Santiago

Markus meets with *Duke Thrall*, the lieutenant he put in charge in Santiago when he returned to the *Lighthouse*. He tells the Pictish chieftain, "I have it on good authority that the time for battle is at hand!"

"Excellent! Tell us where their planet is and we will strike!"

"Their planet is far away, but don't fret – they will be here in about three days!"

"Raaugh! The streets will flow green with the goo of our enemies!"

Markus notes quietly, “Or the goo of your friends, depending upon who gets converted.” It isn’t common knowledge that kroath are reconstructed humans.

Laying the Post-Invasion Groundwork

On the notion that a unified resistance will eventually be important, Ten-zil Kem and Markus Oroszlan make some efforts to create a communications channel between the Picts and the Technospiders.

General belief is that the closest to a standing army Lucullus has is the Picts, and even they’re not really equipped beyond the level of personal and squad-support weapons. If the Externals decide to land troops they will quickly take the population centers, at which point the value of having armed groups among the population will be that *holding* the population centers will be expensive for the Externals.

The Battle of Lucullus

It takes the characters two jumps and twelve days to jump back to the *Lighthouse* at Argos. By the time they arrive, the Battle of Lucullus is already over, with news updates coming back from both drivespace relay and from the fast-jumping capital ships that survived the encounter.

On June 07 the External fleet arrived at the edge of the Lucullus system, led by the Fortress Ships *Phlegethon* and *Acheron*. *Sanctuary* and her escorts moved to intercept. The ships of the ULDF under the *Birmingham* pulled back into a defensive stance, but as soon as the Externals’ ships moved into range it was clear that the Alliance had been betrayed: the assembled ULDF ships fired upon the *Birmingham*.

One of the earliest casualties was a bystander, an evrem crystalline trading ship targeted and destroyed by an Externals cruiser. Beyond expectations, Alliance ships were able to recover some survivors in lifepods. The Alliance sustained 25% losses immediately, with another 25% of their ships so badly damaged that they were unable to withdraw in good order.

The *Birmingham* was not actually destroyed by the betrayal of the ULDF, though it was crippled. The characters immediately start to speculate upon the reasons for the betrayal. There are several good theories: a massive infestation of teln worms, External

bribery among the Lucullan elite, or just a really good bit of diplomacy on the part of the Externals, or a combination of several of these factors.

To get some hard evidence, Peppin goes for the psychic device and contacts the Overmind. The entity responds quickly, "It is good to hear from you. Things have taken a turn for the worse." The Free Trade League, the Jamaican Syndicate and the Union Penates were all heavily infiltrated by aliens, so when the invading fleet showed up those three groups simply opened their cities to the invaders. Teln might have been involved, but there is plenty of evidence that a significant number of the human leaders made their own choices.

The Technospiders and the Supervisors have both gone underground. The Technospiders are trying to infiltrate the alien (and quisling human) computer networks. They are having trouble dealing with the Externals networks, but are making good progress on the human networks. This is more useful than it might seem, because the I'krl occupiers do not have enough of their own biocomputer hardware to completely replace the human systems and continue to rely upon the locals' technology.

The Picts continue to resist, but Santiago has been overrun. The Pict population are being converted into kroath as quickly as they can be stunned and dragged to the conversion pods. Local police forces planetwide have been incorporated into the bareem forces brought by the Externals, so huge monkey-men are walking the streets.

The *Birmingham* did survive the betrayal and has executed a few harassing raids upon External forces. It is still in the Lucullus system as far as anyone knows.

Springtime for Traitors

Soon after the news from Lucullus reaches the *Lighthouse*, another piece of unwelcome information comes in. The world of Ptolemy reveals itself to be a nest of traitors. The pirate ruler of the world sends out a message indicating that the I'krl has given him everything he had ever wanted, and now he will have his revenge against Bluefall. He accompanies his message with pictures of his new fleet, which includes not only human and alien ships but also bizarre hybrid human-alien ships.

Where Are the Alien Fleets?

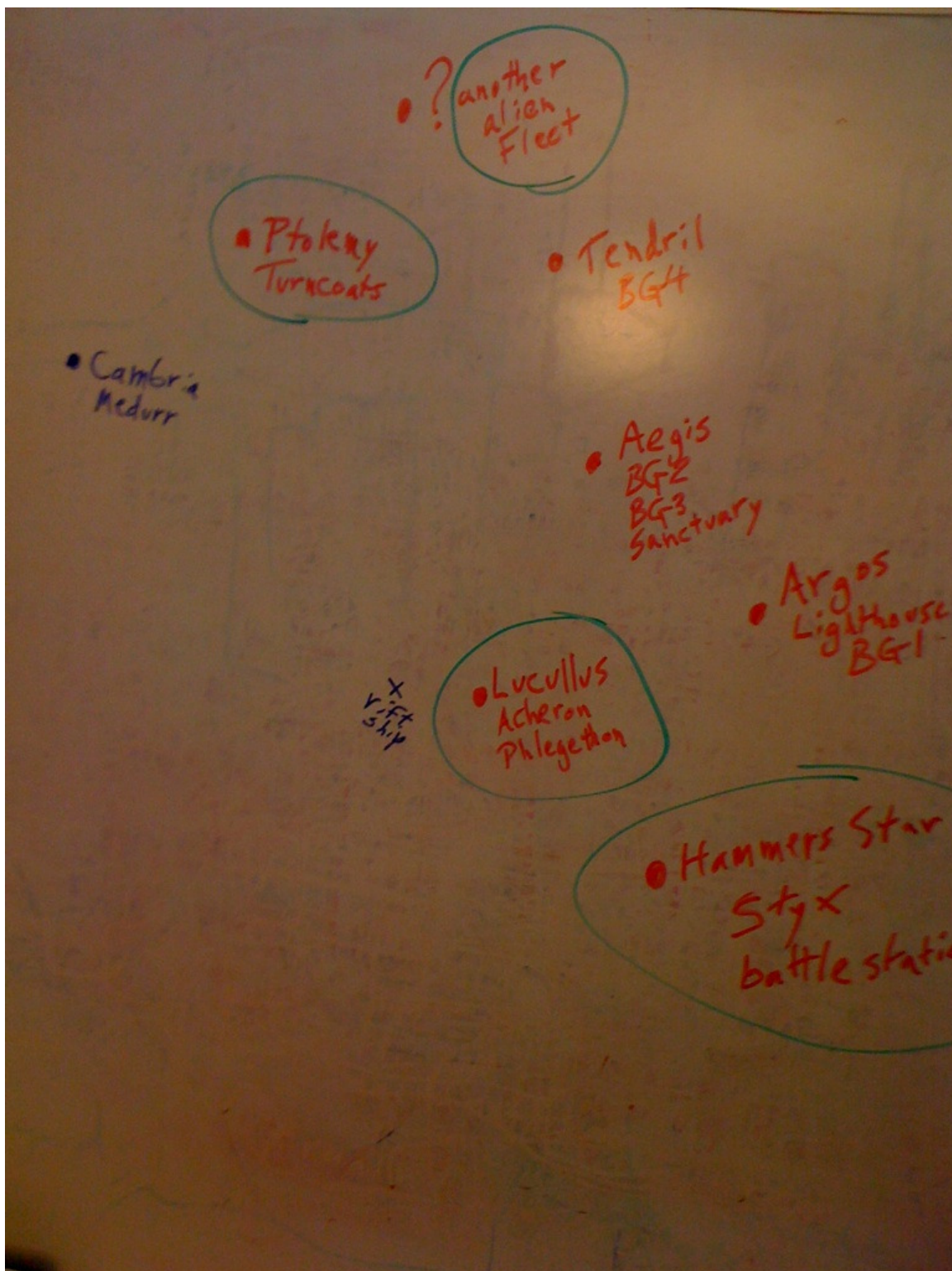
The Alliance listening post at Hammer's Star is still reporting and confirms that the third Externals Fortress Ship, the *Styx*, remains under repair at Hammer's Star. The massive station the Externals are constructing there is still showing progress. The entire fleet that showed up in Lucullus warped out of Hammer's Star some time before that. Alliance analysts on board the *Lighthouse* synchronize the departure and arrival times of the fleet to calculate that the Externals are able to travel at a rate of about one light-year per hour. This is performance similar to the *Lighthouse* and substantially better than almost all other human ships.

Admiral Takashi orders his crew to start the process of developing secure communications links with the various friendly factions throughout the Verge. Taveer works to develop encoding systems that can work with the strange psychic communications schemes Peppin makes possible. Admiral Takashi indicates that it is a priority to ensure both that as much good propaganda is distributed to everyone (e.g., the horrors of kroath conversion chambers), and that accurate situation briefs are sent to specific loyal groups (like the Overmind and the Hammer's Star listening post).

There are some smaller actions going on, including a successful action on Vieron by an all-Weren Marine contingent named Jo-rika, the "Happy Bayonets" (it sounds fiercer in the weren tongue) against a kroath force, and successful efforts by a Hatire mindknight in rallying his people to defend Grith against External attack.

We Need Some Strategy

Admiral Ken Takashi convenes a Command Staff meeting to discuss strategy to counter the new I'krl moves. After some discussion, the characters determine that the best strategy is to get the medurr involved enough to get two Rift Ships on the Alliance side. The key risk is that if the Alliance moves on Lucullus (or any other system) by stripping its fleet from Aegis, the I'krl fleet could jump out of Lucullus and completely bypass the Alliance ships to find an almost undefended system. With a Rift Ship stationed in Aegis and another one traveling through drivespace attached to the *Lighthouse*, the Alliance fleet could remain on station until it was needed for the attack, and could subsequently return to Aegis if the I'krl attacked there.



The Tactical Situation in the Verge

Speculation moves to the I'krl interstellar transportation system. It is faster (on average) than the human stardrive, but may require significant recharge time. Interrogation of captured bareem and kadarans indicates that the I'krl use a space-folding scheme directed by the thaal priests. Generating a space-fold requires all of the thaal priests on a ship to assemble in a central ritual chamber and hold a religious ritual. One space fold is able to transport not just the central ship but also surrounding vessels.

Peppin theorizes that the reason the I'krl are constructing a huge station at Hammer's Star may be to centralize their priest staff to allow them to perform remote space folds and increase their range. If this theory is even remotely accurate it means that destroying the station must be a huge priority. *Taveer* suggests that the Alliance attack it with small one- and two-man snub fighters, traveling along the equatorial trench until they are in range to fire a photon torpedo into the otherwise unprotected thermal exhaust vent. The others push him back into his seat and tell him to be quiet.

Espionage and Double Espionage

To add an additional complication, the *Lighthouse* CIB handler wants to assign *Martin St. John* to an assignment as a double agent: get him to infiltrate the gardhyi spy rings active in the Verge so the CIB can feed false information to the I'krl. This sounds very much like a suicide mission, but St. John is quite used to being sent on missions like this. St. John agrees instantly.

Then the problem becomes how to persuade the gardhyi that he might be a good agent, in light of the fact that he has previously been portrayed as the Hero of the Concord. The characters develop a clever plan: they will use Peppin's video crew to broadcast a documentary that casts St. John as an officer who has been treated badly by his superiors, an officer whose tremendous contributions have been belittled or ignored. And then they bait the hook by using the local Grith sesheyans to send word back to their homeworld that they have an agent available for the gardhyi network.

Another Act of Desperation. Insane Desperation.

The characters decide that they need to have another ace up their sleeves, as it were. Only one name comes to mind: the *Red Queen*. Ten-zil Kem has long possessed a

means to signal her via radio (he suspects that she's got some kind of hyperspace relay nearby to sense the signal), but to date he has never actually tried to call for her.

It doesn't take her more than an hour to answer his call. Alice shows up in innocent holographic display, talking of how she and her handmaidens have defended her castle with powerful magics to confound the forces of darkness. She also has a very strong invisibility spell to ward off their gaze. And beyond that, she knows that the N'sss methane breathers are lurking in the gas giants of the Alliance systems. She cannot reliably detect them when they are stealthed – she only sees them when their stealth fields are off, when they attack targets or drop something off. Her stealth is better than theirs, and better than their sensors: she lurks in the same places they do, and they do not see her.

She presents the characters with a map that is a weird fantastical version of the local star chart, including markings for N'sss lurkers and some (but not all) I'krl ships. The characters have quite a bit of a time figuring out how the map corresponds to the navigational schemes they understand. They are saddened by the fact that she doesn't seem to know where the fourth I'krl Fortress Ship is.

Peppin proposes putting a human crew on board the *Red Queen*, or using her to move player characters around. The other characters see the drawbacks to this plan more clearly than he can, but are still willing to explore it. There is some discussion on what a suitable volunteer crewman for the *Red Queen* might look like. All the descriptions sound so much like player characters that they finally bend to the inevitable and make plans to use the *Red Queen* to take a team of player characters into conquered I'krl space.

Psychic Contact with the Ancient Bird-Man Traders

There is another psychic contact Peppin needs to make: he builds a psychic contact with a representative of the avian evrem people. He is able to make contact with an evrem identify that refers to itself as *Raphael*. He isn't at all sure that Raphael is a singular entity, or even an actual evrem: it might be a psychic evocation created by an evrem meditation circle. Raphael is very surprised by the contact: Peppin has clearly been touched by one of the falkri, but it had thought that all the falkri passed on millennia ago.

The evrem are familiar with the I'krl space gods, but see them with a very different perspective than that of the sifarv and their thaal priests. Raphael explains that the Precursor races gave rise to successor races of great power, senior spacefaring races like the I'krl and the falkri. The falkri helped the evrem imprison the I'krl in drivespace more than 10 millenia ago.

Most of the evrem have transcended since then, only a few remain. Other elder races include the blix, the thaal, and the gardh. By the evrem measure, humanity and t'sa are about to become mature races and the sifarv (who are responsible for all of the current troubles) are a young race, as are the medurr. Their major measure of maturity is the amount of time a race has had access to space travel. Ten-zil Kem mutters, "That doesn't stop some of these so-called 'mature' races from acting like complete bastards."

Ten-zil Kem observes that the fact that the Orlamu worship a deity that lives in drivespace. The possibility that they may worship the same entities as the (political confederation of) the I'krl is likely to create all sorts of controversy. Another interesting tidbit is that the deepfallen on Bluefall may have moved all the first colonists on that world into drivespace. Peppin has always believed that the deepfallen had the characteristics of a forgotten weapon more than anything else.

Raphael explains that something happened within the last century. Some I'krl were partially able to escape from their drivespace prison. The I'krl contacted the thaal, established themselves as space gods, then used the thaal to establish their huge theocracy with the sifarv as the folks on the front lines. Raphael either does not know more detail, or is unwilling to tell lesser beings about it.

The evrem are quite mystified by the Verge. It has a tremendous density of habitable worlds, far more than most areas in the galaxy. One theory is that the Verge might have been the home for one of the great Precursor races (or several): Glassmaker and Stoneburner artifacts, among others, attest to the presence of Precursors at one time. The Precursors might have enviroformed many worlds to their tastes before they passed on to greater things. Comparing the Verge against Old Space, there is a similar density of habitable worlds right around Sol but only because many of those worlds were terraformed in the early days of space exploration.

Raphael explains that the evrem have been subtly helping the Concord and the Alliance against the I'krl threat. They pushed the medurr Rift Ship closer to Lucullus deliberately, to allow the medurr to contribute to the fight against the I'krl.

In case the characters feel that the evrem are unwilling to risk themselves on behalf of lesser races, Raphael explains that there were originally three evrem crystal ships in human (Verge) space. One was destroyed by the kroath years ago. The surviving crew were mostly blix, and the evrem arranged for them to be transported to various human worlds. The second ship was recently destroyed by the I'krl warfleet at Lucullus. The third is still out in space.

There is also a fraal Nomad city-ship drifting near Aegis. The evrem will provide the characters with coordinates, but are not hopeful that the fraal Nomads (who are the descendents of the fraal who decided not to help out humanity centuries ago) will join into the fight.

Peppin asks Raphael if the evrem would consider sharing their technology with humanity. They politely refuse, on the grounds that the knowledge would destroy our minds: all of their technology is based upon advanced psychic disciplines.

According to Raphael, the blix more or less do as they will. They are given to pretending that they are a subjugated race. There is some discussion on the relative wisdom of putting blix on board the *Red Queen*. The builders of the *Red Queen* were another ancient race, killed by the original I'krl before their banishment. The vessel is certainly damaged and unstable, but there is legitimate reason to be concerned about what the blix might remake her into. Or, she might just kill them all and turn them into blix zombies.

Raphael also tells Peppin that the gardhyi are outcasts from the Gardh Technarchy, and the Technarchy is dominated by machines. The gardh have a belief that they will transcend through technology. The characters get the idea that the gardh could destroy the I'krl Theocracy if they actually wanted to. Fortunately, the only gardh involved with the I'krl are the criminal and outcast ghardyi, individuals without access to the majority of gardh technology. Gardh technology is not similar at all to evrem technology: the gardh use hard tech and AI, in contrast to the evrem reliance upon psychic powers.

The Admiral's Plan

Admiral Takashi hatches a plan to send the Alliance Battle Group 4 along with the *Red Queen* to Ptolemy to destroy the pirate gang there that cast in with the I'krl. This seems like a low-risk way to achieve both a victory (for public relations purposes) and to provide an object lesson on the cost of selling out humanity for short-term gain.

One risk to this plan is that the people at Ptolemy are pirates and likely to have contingency plans in the event of invasion. The simplest contingency plan is, of course, to starrise out to some pre-established remote location. The direct answer is to let them, as a bunch of under-organized, under-gunned pirate vessels are not that much of a threat, whereas they will need to leave a lot of infrastructure behind. All of that can be bombed into ruin, leaving the pirates with no home to come back to. Any survivors of the bombardment can be relocated to an “internment camp” on some hell-hole world.

Taveer, Markus, Ten-zil Kem, Lenny and Haggernak will board the *Red Queen* and travel to Ptolemy along with the assault. The characters will attempt to round up a few blix onto the *Red Queen* to boot. Nobody is certain that this is a good idea, but all agree it will be interesting. Admiral Takashi suggests that it should counteract the effect of putting Taveer on board.

At the same time, Battle Group 1 will travel to Ignatius, leaving a token force behind at Argos just in case.

The *Lighthouse* will go to Cambria to negotiate with the medurr for two Rift Ships, carrying Admiral Takashi, Martin St. John, Peppin, Drest and Lambert Fulson. Many of the scientists on Argos will be evacuated to the *Lighthouse* for the occasion.

The Battle of Ignatius

The I'krl fleet does not stay long at Lucullus – they swiftly leave, splitting their numbers and jumping straight to Ignatius and to Mantebron. The alien ships at Ignatius run straight into the Alliance Battle Group 1 and are soundly defeated. The Fortress Ship *Acheron* is destroyed in the battle after a critical hit to its drive section. The remainder of the battle continues for two days, but the loss of the *Acheron* makes the outcome a foregone conclusion. Losses on the Alliance side are quite limited.

The Fortress Ship *Phlegethon* was among the ships that jumped to Mantebron, so it does not take part in the battle.

The Red Queen Travels to Ptolemy

The *Red Queen* requires more than a single jump to reach Ptolemy, so it will not arrive for about fourteen days – days after the Battle of Ignatius is concluded.

The Klick Egg Tyranny

The Verge Alliance offers to pay Lambert Fulson a suitcase full of money for the use of a disposable starship, the *Duty-Free Goods*. Its mission is to transport the captured kadaran scientists to the klick renegades on Bauble in the Oberon system. Their mission is to undo the genetic modifications to the klick eggs that leave the entire klick species in thrall to the sifarv.

The End of the Session

Each player gains 5 experience points, to be split between their characters as they desire.