



Fleet Intelligence Personal Logs - Xellos :: 12/31/2000 ::

Prologue

Fleet Intelligence Personal Log

All roads eventually lead back to where they began, and those on it begin their journey again.

The war for Hiigara has left the galaxy in turmoil. The past fifteen years have seen the birth of new possibilities ... and the festering of old grudges. The once dominant Taiidan Empire has fractured under the strain of civil war. The new Taiidani Republic tries to hold the old territories together. Forces loyal to the old Emperor lurk in the new bandit kingdoms, waiting for their chance to strike back.

While the Taiidani struggle between past and future, the Kushan people have established themselves on Hiigara. Building new cities. Repairing the damage done by the final battle for their homeworld.

Even a fragile peace has its politics. The Kiith council has been reestablished, and the future of Hiigara is now debated amongst the gathered Kiith-Sa. Even amongst equals, there are power struggles.

The Mothership still orbits high above Hiigara. Pressed into the role of shipyard, she now builds new carriers to the specifications of each individual Kiith. The need for new ships and the crews to man them is a desperate one. Military and economic pressure on the new Hiigarans is intense.

Resources and technology are at the command of the council. Kiith, with little or no political power, have been forced to purchase technology from the Bentusi and other races. Hiigaran ships of exotic design now seek their fortune amongst the stars.

The war for Homeworld is over now. But the galaxy remains a dangerous place...

In the fifteen years since the final battle, much has changed for me. For us. I've not been the head of Fleet Intelligence, or even officially associated with it or the military for 15 long years. Because I am a war hero, I have not had as much trouble getting land as many Sleepers have. Most of the land Jaana and I received we gave to the Somtaaw. We have kept a small bit for a house and a garden. And we've raised a family.

For once, Jaana's visions didn't speak the full truth. We've had more than two children. We have two sons and four daughters. Each is as spirited as their mother, and inquisitive as their father (that being

me, naturally.) And I have managed to work some small influence in shaping this new world. It is difficult, as I have no direct influence. But Jaana and I are still close to Karan Sjet, and the crew of the old Fleet Intelligence is still loyal to me above their ki'ithsa. Though that is a carefully kept secret.

Still, occasionally we feel the need to kick up our feet and return to the stars above. The children remain home, watched by friends. Someday they will go to the Stars as well... but for now, I want them to build their roots here. Let them know what they fight for.

To be honest, it's not wanderlust that has brought Jaana and myself out here this time. Jaana's had several disturbing dreams of late, focusing on one of the Somtaaw mining vessels, the Kuun-Lan. It's been a year since we last sailed the sea of stars (as our oldest son, Jamal, likes to call them).

I suppose that my old kiith realizes that I advised the Somtaaw to organize the strike that resulted in them (and the other lesser Kiith) getting access to the shipyards on the Mothership. Fortunately, if they do know, they have kept it from the other kiith, else I'd have been visited by the Naabal to voice their... appreciation of my suggestions.

As it is, two assassins already lie under the soil, fertilizing it; one a Taiidan Imperialist. The second, sadly enough, a Kushan agent sent to silence my protests over the Daimaid's treatment of the lesser kiith. Jaana doesn't know of him, though she knows of five others I've sent back after I finished breaking their legs, feet and toes. Jaana disapproves, but they stopped targeting my children at least. And it keeps them off their feet (and out of work) for several months as well.

We approach the Kuun-Lan. She's nothing beautiful. She's a workhorse, pure and simple. While she has the capability of gravity (as do all ships with a hyperdrive), often it appears that is turned off through the ship to conserve energy; the primary crew sleeping quarters use centrifugal force to create a sensation of gravity (and reducing calcium-depletion of bones from exposure to long-term weightlessness).

In my eyes, the crew quarters are unnecessarily open; during an assault, a concentrated Ion beam burst could lead to tragic results. Parts of the hanger bay retain their gravity at all times; Jaana and I will stay there for the length of our visit.

There is a sizeable contingent of Somtaaw in cyrostatic; these tanks are located in the upper deck, protected by the mass of the engines. Over 2,000 Somtaaw remain in the Sleep tanks; I'm of a mixed mind over this. The Somtaaw will not grow without more families and children... but the mining vessel is no place for a family. Also, the two mining ships spend months away from Hiigara while gathering resources.

The Somtaaw have done well with the limited resources they've got. We are in an arms race with the Taiidan Imperialists, and it has been decided that all kiith who wish access to military blueprints should pay equally for it. Unfortunately, this is beyond the means of many lesser kiith, including the Somtaaw.

The old Scout ships proved inadequate for Somtaaw purposes (seeing they are more interested in finding useful deposits of resources instead of enemy ships), and they created their own fighter, the Recon. Over 60% of the ship is sensors; the remainder is engines and life support. There is a very

small mass cannon mounted on the fighter, but the Recon is not meant to fight; the cannon is for defensive purposes only.

The Somtaaw were forced to turn to the Bentusi for their primary fighter, the Acolyte. It is actually a marvel of engineering; while the Bentusi obviously removed all traces of weapon schematics from the craft, what is left is still a very hardy little craft.

Of primary importance is the improved fusion drive the fighter uses. This allows the fighter to operate on a minimum of fuel, even at high speeds and under combat conditions. The Somtaaw reverse-engineered the Acolyte from the Bentusi fighter, and traded the drive schematics to the Kushan military. While this has helped give our fighters an extra edge, it is especially vital for the Somtaaw, who thrive on self-sufficiency.

There are no Acolytes currently with the Kuun-Lan. They are out on long-range support patrols guarding several Processors and Workers. A patrol of three Recons just passed us... I hear that they're called Heartbreak Patrols, as the women who tend to fly the Recons tend to go through men faster than a Kadeshi Swarmer goes through fuel.

Also, we have passed one of the Worker-class mining ships on the way in. It's a squat little vessel, having much in common with our old shuttles used to reenter the atmosphere before we learned how to manipulate the hyperfield in a way to achieve limited anti-gravity. Apparently it is well suited for mining thick asteroid belts, and is designed that if the Somtaaw ever decide to purchase the technologies for it, can be used to also repair and even salvage ships. The crews of the Workers complain over the unimaginative name, but then again they complained when I referred to the mining ships we used coming to the Homeworld "mining ships". That's what they are. I see no reason to give them a fancy name.

Jaana disagrees of course. We tease each other about it from time to time. I can set her off just by looking at her, smiling, and saying "mining ship". Of course, those "fights" usually end up with me losing as she starts tickling me (how she ever found out about that weakness of mine...) but they're still fun.

We've landed on the Kuun-Lan and have been given a tour. This ship's got a bit of potential. She's limited in that she can only support so many ships before communications begin to break down; while Karan Sjet's experiments in linking to a ship with a neural web was a success, few people wish to go through what she went through. Rumor has it the Bentusi are linked to their ships in the same way. (I still wish I had been on the corvette that had docked with the Bentusi trading ship, 15 years ago.)

Of course, one thing I dislike about it is that half the hanger is exposed to open space. Thus any Processor being built (or any other Destroyer-class vessel or larger) would be exposed to enemy fire. It also opens up the possibility of sabotage.

We're being brought up to meet Captain Sjaar Somtaaw, who is Fleet Command of the Kuun-Lan and all ships under its control. He works with Colonel Sareni Somtaaw, the Tactical Officer in charge of the combat elements of the Kuun-Lan; in essence, she's got the same job as I did on the Mothership, though her crew is significantly smaller than my own was.

They handle themselves professionally and seem to know what they are doing, though Sareni seems a little distant; I suppose that being responsible for the lives of the pilots fighting for you could be stressful. But she seems to have pulled away from the rest of the fleet to compensate. The problem is that you can end up making cold decisions that have unforeseen consequences if the rest of the crew disagree with you. Hopefully she will never face such a situation.

We've just picked up a transmission:

This is Kiith Nabaal Carrier VEER-RAK, to any Hiigaran ships in range. Imperialist Taiidani forces are attacking. They are attempting to break through and raid Hiigara. We cannot hold them! Require immediate assistance! This is Kiith Nabaal Carrier VEER-RAK (transmission breaks up)

Captain Sjaar took a few seconds to hastily confer with Colonel Sareni and then sent out a message in return:

This is Sontaaw Fleet Command to all ships. Prepare for emergency Hyperspace. Set course for the Homeworld.

There's one thing about the Kuun-Lan... it is definitely faster and more maneuverable than the Mothership was. We are headed out toward a LaGrange point where we can safely hyperspace. Estimated time to hyperspace is 25 minutes, estimated time to the Homeworld is 1 hour 45 minutes.

Chapter 1: Hiigara

Fleet Intelligence Personal Log

It is said that dreams are worth dying for. When two dreams collide, the bloodshed can be immense.

Three times the Taiidan Imperialists have invaded, twice reaching Hiigara. This is the fourth time, including the first battle to take Hiigara, that we have fought above the blue bauble we now call home.

The Kuun-Lan has emerged from Hyperspace outside the field of combat. We immediately alerted the Veer-Rak to update our intelligence and find out where we could be most useful with the limited firepower at our disposal.

*Tactical Officer: Tactical Officer online. We need to contact the Veer-Rak to update our Intelligence

Fleet Command: Understood Tactical. Attention Carrier Veer-Rak. This is Kiith Somtaaw mining vessel Kuun-Lan. We have arrived in sector 112 and request targeting data.

Veer-Rak: Good to have you, Kuun-Lan. We've got a strike fleet needing cover in sector 109. Can you assist?

Fleet Command: We'll send everything we've got. But be advised we are a mining vessel. It would be best if we do not have to move directly into the main battle.

Veer-Rak: A strike wing of Firelance frigates are under attack from Taiidani Bombers at this position.

Tactical Officer: Without fighter support the frigates will be destroyed and that flank will collapse. Send out a squad of Acolyte fighters ASAP to assist the frigates.

Jaana soon after dragged me away from Tactical. I must admit, I'm annoyed by Colonel Sareni's tendency to state the obvious. While many of the Somtaaw were Sleepers in the journey to Hiigara, I think everyone knows that Ion frigates are ineffective against fighters and bombers.

Recons were sent on a circular path around the Kuun-Lan while a flight of nine Acolytes were put into production, along with an additional two Workers. The two Workers that accompanied us to Hiigara were sent to begin harvesting a local patch of asteroids.

The first Worker and five Acolytes were finished (and launched) when we detected a flight of Taiidan Interceptors (through the sensor reports of the Veer-Rak, which was providing support for the battle group involved in an intense conflict with a Taiidan Heavy Cruiser, a pair of Destroyers and three Ion frigates, as well as assorted fighters).

The Interceptors immediately broke off from combat and started at full speed toward the Kuun-Lan. They were apparently investigating our hyperspace signature and to ascertain what threat we would be. (Tactical echoed this theory as well, which shows that even if she's a tad distant and has a problem stating the obvious, she does have potential.)

Captain Sjaar immediately moved the Kuun-Lan closer to the Workers and the patch of meteors that they were harvesting. The Kuun-Lan is well-armed, and easily a match for even a sizeable fighter swarm. Our Acolytes, while a tad faster and more maneuverable than Taiidani Interceptors, are outgunned and have thinner armor than their foes. (Fortunately, the Somtaaw are more likely to encounter Turanic Raiders, whose fighter craft is weaker than the Acolyte, than Taiidan Imperialists.)

Nine Acolytes were built by the time the Taiidan arrived. They immediately engaged the Interceptors, who ignored the Kuun-Lan and Acolytes in order to attack our Workers. The Acolytes focused their firepower on one Interceptor at a time; in under a minute, all five Taiidani fighters were space dust. One Worker had suffered light armor depletion but nothing serious.

Work on a Processor started soon after, along with five additional Acolytes. Alpha Squadron was dispatched to assist the endangered Ion frigates. (Yes, I know. The name doesn't catch the imagination, as did Wraith Squadron or Hammer Squadron... but the Somtaaw are not warriors. They're engineers and miners. They would be happy if the Taiidan never attacked us again. Still, Alpha Squadron? I'll have to talk to Captain Sjaar after all this is through... giving our fighter Squadrons interesting names helps build a sense of pride that helps the fighters work together and stay alive in the field.)

Jaana had been rather quiet. I now know she had another of her visions, though I must admit to having been distracted and not recognizing the symptoms. Captain Sjaar must have noticed, however, for she spoke briefly to him and he immediately started work on a Heavy Tug. The Heavy Tug (or as the crews piloting them like to call them, Ramming Frigates) is an older design, from back on Kharak. The Somtaaw have modified it with improved technologies and adding a cutting laser to the bow. It's primarily used to push asteroids out of thick clusters of asteroids where Workers cannot safely work. However, some brazen souls, finding themselves under attack by Turanic Raiders and not wanting to lose the valuable asteroids they had discovered, found that they are also quite useful in destroying enemy corvettes, as well as pushing smaller frigates around. Jaana dragged me off the bridge and let me know that we were taking command of the Ramming Frigate.

Maybe I should rephrase that. She was captaining the frigate. I got to go along for the ride and stop annoying the bridge crew.

What happened next is amusing, but quite in character with my wife. As soon as we launched, she immediately set course for the inner proximity sensor belt, where no enemy ships were located.

Tactical Officer: Major Jaana, you are moving out of position. Please return to the Kuun-Lan until we need you.

Major Jaana: Sorry, Tactical, I cannot comply with that order. Pilot, remain on course for the sensor grid. We'll be needed there.

Tactical Officer: Jaana, you are not needed there. There are two wings of fighters currently patrolling that sector, and no sign of enemy action. Return to the Kuun-Lan. Now.

Major Jaana: Sorry, Sareni. I'm telling you, we're needed there. If I wait until you realize that, it'll

be too late.

Tactical Officer: Damn it Jaana! Colonel Kaalal. Make your wife turn that ship around right now. She's relieved of command.

Colonel Kaalal: Colonel Sareni, I have no more control over my wife than you do. You should realize that considering how often she turned my life over on my ear on the journey to Hiigara.

Tactical Officer: By Sajuuk's Sword! Jaana! Turn around now! Pilot Joyren, I order you to turn that ship around right now.

Fleet Command: Belay that order. Major Jaana is in command of the frigate Vision Quest. If she feels we are needed out there, then she can go out there.

Tactical Officer: But...

Fleet Command: That's an order, Sareni. We have more important things to deal with right now. Jaana knows what she's doing.

I reviewed the tapes of what happened after we returned (eventually) to the Kuun-Lan. Alpha Squadron had reached the Firelance frigates, and Captain Sjaar ordered them to concentrate their fire on the trio of Interceptors providing fighter cover (apparently the remaining Interceptors had been destroyed when they initially destroyed the fighters protecting the Strike wing). Again, by focusing firepower, they were able to destroy the Interceptors without suffering any damage. The remaining bombers (around a dozen) were scattered, not attacking in formation or concentrating their attacks on any particular ship; I suspect the Taiidani were doing this more to torment the crews of the frigates than any other reason.

But then, I've always said the Taiidani are insane. Though the Taiidani Republic is fortunately less extreme (and also not trying to destroy us every few years).

As Alpha Squadron tracked down and killed every last Taiidani bomber, the Veer-Rak contacted the Kuun-Lan and requested some additional aid.

Veer-Rak: Attention KUUN-LAN. The first Imperialist attack wiped out our sensor grid. We need you to scout enemy positions with your Recon ships. We are planning a counterattack.

Alpha Squadron and Beta Squadron started toward the region indicated to provide backup for the Recons in case they found anything. Meanwhile, our three Recons started toward the sensor shadow. Within a minute, we discovered Taiidani ships.

Tactical Officer: We have picked up a convoy of enemy Resourcers with escorts in this area. They must be re-supplying the Imperialist attack fleet. Engage and destroy them.

The Recons remained outside the sensor range of the enemy mining ships; there were a trio of enemy Defenders located there. (In recent years the Defenders have become quite potent, with an increase in firepower and armor. While they are still slower than sand slugs and easily targeted even by Ion frigates, they are pure death to other fighters.) Alpha and Beta Squadrons went in on an attack vector, focusing firepower on one Defender at a time. Beta Squadron suffered moderate damage

while Alpha Squadron suffered only light damage from the Defenders on the first pass.

Unfortunately, Fleet Command misjudged one of the explosions, which left the third Defender damaged but still a threat. Three Acolytes were severely damaged before the Acolytes managed to turn and destroy the remaining fighter.

The most severely damaged Acolytes started to return to the Kuun-Lan, while the remaining Acolytes started attack runs on the Taiidan mining ships. Each ship was briefly attacked to disrupt harvesting efforts (and ensure that more resources would be left to our own Workers, which were en route to the meteor belt), before the Acolytes focused their fire on the mining ship closest to them.

During this time, a second Taiidani squadron attacked our Workers. The Processor did a fine job of providing covering fire, and managed to destroy three of the Taiidan Interceptors. The remaining two were taken out by the returning Beta Squadron.

The Somtaaw do not have corvette-class ships. The primary reason for this is there is insufficient room in the hanger bay to store corvette class ships. However, for the past few months the Somtaaw have (off and on) been researching a way to link the Acolytes together, which would result in a small turretless corvette. The initial design for the Acolyte was created with the view of eventually upgrading the fighters so they can link in the field, without having to dock with the Kuun-Lan. Final research on this was resumed and would soon be complete.

Alpha Squadron succeeded in destroying two mining ships before they detected a Taiidani Carrier in the area. The remaining mining ships fled toward it for repairs. At least 12 Defenders were surrounding the Carrier (which by itself would likely tear apart our fighter wings). Alpha Squadron remained out of range of the Carrier and waited for the mining ships to emerge again.

I'm not sure why the Taiidani did not send out extra fighters to deal with our Acolytes. They did not even send any of their Defender escorts. Instead, the mining ships were sent out and each was destroyed in turn. More proof that the Taiidani are insane.

The Engineering teams just finished the final research as the Acolytes were taking out the last Taiidani mining ships. Beta Squadron underwent a refit allowing them to link together, and an additional Acolyte and two new ACVs (Acolyte Corvette Vessels) were built. Initial tests were starting when a new threat appeared, one that Jaana had foreseen.

A pair of Taiidani Multigun corvettes and two Squadrons of Interceptors were detected by the sensor web separating Hiigara from the conflict. Tactical immediately sent out a message to all Somtaaw ships. Fortunately, (due to Jaana) we were in position to deal with the threat.

Tactical Officer: Warning! The proximity sensor net is under attack in sector 110. If the net fails, the Taiidan force can run their entire fleet through the hole. We must defend the net immediately.

Jaana immediately ordered us to engage the enemy corvettes, while the two Hiigaran Interceptor Squadrons raced up to attack the enemy fighters. Beta Squadron also scrambled, moving at full speed to assist us, while Alpha Squadron returned to the Kuun-Lan (which was being repositioning to decrease the time needed for Alpha Squadron to dock and undergo repairs and refits).

While the Ramming Frigate may lack in effective weaponry (having only an arc-laser for cutting into asteroids or enemy ships), the front of the frigate is heavily armored and reinforced. The first Multigun corvette didn't know what hit it; it is doubtful that even if the Taiidani used ejection systems (which they don't in a foolish belief that their warriors will fight harder even when the ship's almost dead because they cannot escape) that anyone would have survived impact with the Vision Quest.

The second corvette and a Squadron of Taiidani Interceptors immediately turned their guns on us, while the remaining squadron finished off a second Proximity Sensor. Fortunately, the two patrolling Hiigaran squadrons reached our position and started firing upon the second Squadron; while this left the Spirit Quest alone to face the remaining Taiidani fighters, the sensor web is a higher priority (during this battle at least) than a lone frigate. Also, it is doubtful that the Interceptors realized the lack of weaponry on the Vision Quest.

We succeeded in destroying the second Multigun corvette and immediately started retreating from the battlefield (toward the approaching Beta Squadron). The Taiidani Interceptors followed us initially, but then returned to the battlefield where the Hiigaran squadrons were starting to get the upper hand. Jaana and I briefly considered going back, but damage reports showed a couple of fires that were just now being brought under control, and engine efficiency had dropped 12%. Armor depletion was at 62%.

Beta Squadron continued past us and was able to catch the Taiidan from behind. Unfortunately, the Hiigaran fighters still suffered massive losses, and only had a total of 3 fighters left, all badly damaged.

We were docking the Vision Quest with the Kuun-Lan when the Veer-Rak contacted us again:

Veer-Rak: Our forces have taken the upper hand. The Imperials are pulling back. One of their damaged Cruisers is in this area.

Tactical Officer: Track it down and make sure it never threatens Hiigara again.

Unfortunately, while we were doing well against the Taiidan, several of the other kiith's ships were badly damaged. While the Kuun-Lan had a nice reserve of resources available, the Veer-Rak was out of resources and unable to build additional bombers to deal with the burning Cruiser.

All Acolytes linked together to form two flights of ACVs, while additional ACVs were built, up to the maximum that the computers of the Kuun-Lan could effectively handle. The Vision Quest underwent emergency repairs in the main hanger bay while the Kuun-Lan approached the battle where the Veer-Rak was located (and the Heavy Cruiser had last been seen). Recons went ahead and located the Cruiser, which had eight Defenders providing fighter cover.

The Vision Quest launched and the two flights of reinforced ACVs formed up to escort her. We continued on an intercept course with the Taiidan Cruiser (which appears to have had damaged its hyperdrive engines in the fight, as it was trying to escape using its fusion drive instead of hyperspacing out).

As we approached the Taiidan Cruiser, Alpha and Beta Squadrons went ahead and engaged the

Defenders. With the added mass of the second Acolyte giving them more support, the ACVs proved a bit more resilient to enemy fire, and the Defenders were soon destroyed. However, the Cruiser would prove to be more dangerous.

The Cruiser was armed with the new energy cannons, an innovation born of the plasma bombs used in bombers and Assault frigates. While the energy cannons are slower than traditional mass drivers, they can accurately track their target, including fighters. Several ACVs were struck by cannon fire from the Cruiser, and had to retreat out of range, and wait for the Vision Quest to arrive.

We approached from behind and rammed near the rear turret. The arc-laser proved quite effective against the hull of the Cruiser, and we must have damaged the energy cannon system as they did not fire upon our ACVs when they came closer to add their fire to the mix. The Taiidan cruiser died soon after; fortunately, the front blast shield that the Vision Quest uses to ram asteroids or ships protected us from the shockwave, though several ACVs suffered moderate damage from the explosion.

The Vision Quest joined the Hiigaran fleet in attacking the remaining Taiidani Destroyers while the ACVs underwent repairs. We did not score any additional kills; the Taiidan Imperialists finally activated their hyperdrives and fled from Hiigaran space.

All that was left was cleaning up. Sadly, close to 200 Hiigarans died in this conflict.

Finally, as all of the kiith started rescuing survivors, identifying where the dead were, and salvaged those ships that could still be repaired, the Veer-Rak broadcast their thanks.

Veer-Rak: Attention Hiigaran Ships! We have thrown back the Imperial attack fleet. Hiigara should be safe once again. Kiith Naabal would like to thank our brothers and sisters from Kiith Manaan, S'jet and Kaalel for their aid in battle. Hiigara is in their debt, as are we.

Needless to say, some on the Kuun-Lan were... less than happy at our anonymity. I stayed in our quarters in the Hanger until the Somtaaw cooled down a bit. While I might be the husband of their "Oracle", I've never been a part of the Somtaaw in their eyes. Many of my kiithmates in Kalaal act the same way. Except for Jaana and the children... even the Soban have each other. Sometimes I wish I could just gather those who did not Sleep to Hiigara and form our own kiith. All of us are, in one way or another, outsiders in our own kiith.

Jaana just told me that the Maanan have a favor to ask of us. Seems they are missing a Destroyer, the Bushen-Ra. The Kuun-Lan is going to track it down and render aid. Or confirm her destruction. Jaana shows no sign of wanting to return to Hiigara just yet... and the children are all busy at school right now. There's nothing for me on Hiigara right now. And Jaana needs me to keep her out of trouble.

And who knows? Maybe I can get Colonel Sareni to actually relax and start anticipating instead of reacting to situations around her. Now if only I can get her to stop stating the obvious...

Chapter 2: The Bushan - Re

Fleet Intelligence Personal Log

I remember the punchline of an old joke: With ki'ithmates like these, who needs enemies. While I don't remember the joke itself, it still holds true.

Kiith Mana'an asked for our assistance on a search and rescue mission. The last word the Bushan-Re sent was of a power-plant failure. We had reports of Turanic Raider ships operating in this region, so all pilots were put on combat alert.

Recon craft started on a spiral path outward from the Kuun-Lan, with two Recons traveling on opposing vectors on an X/Z-vector to increase our effective sensor bubble. The third Recon traveled on a Y/Z-vector in case the Bushan Re had drifted significantly from its last reported path. Mining craft and the Mining Processor Hard Luck started to a nearby patch of asteroids, escorted by Tooth and Fang Acolyte squadrons.

Actually, their official designation is still Alpha and Beta Squadrons, but I had a word with the Squadron leaders. They agreed with me that it would be a morale boost to have more... combat-oriented code-names. While Tactical might insist on calling them by generic squadron names, Colonel Sareni cannot force the squadrons to use the names among themselves.

We did have one small problem facing us. The Somtaaw has never had reason to build their own salvage or repair corvettes. Repairs would be done in the hanger bay of the Kuun-Lan itself, and the Somtaaw have not had occasion to salvage enemy ships. In addition, the Kuun-Lan does not have sufficient docking space for corvettes; part of the incentive behind the ACV program was the fact the ACVs could be converted back into easily-stored fighters when docking.

It was decided that we would need to build an Engineering Module and modify the Worker ships for Repair and Salvage duty. (To be honest, I found the idea rather innovative. One of Karan Sjet's greatest difficulties was keeping track of multiple ships. While having specialty ships was easier for engineering and repair purposes, it would strain resources. Multi-speciality ships allows us to use fewer ships for more purposes. And while the ships will not be quite as effective for each role as a specialty ship, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.)

The Kuun-Lan had to jettison the upper ore canister to make room for the Module. Fortunately, the Kuun-Lan (and its sister ship, the Faal-Corum) are modular in design. Any section from the Hanger to the Engines to even the lower decks of the ship can be jettisoned. The upper ore canister was destroyed to keep it out of the hands of the Turanic Raiders, and work on the Engineering Module began.

Sensors soon detected fast moving meteor belts in the region. The first belt of meteors was a threat to the Kuun-Lan, and we had to move position. After a brief discussion, we decided that our fighters should have no problem maneuvering through them. The problem posed by the meteors was if the Bushan-Re drifted into one of them it could be easily destroyed.

The mining ships soon attracted trouble of their own with the attention of two flights of Turanic Bandit-class fighters (consisting of five fighters for each flight). Recon-045 reported contact with

a third flight of Bandits and retreated toward the Kuun-Lan. Tooth and Fang Squadrons promptly engaged the Raiders as ACVs.

While the hybrid corvettes were slower and less maneuverable than the Bandits, the Raiders concentrated their initial fire on the Workers. This gave the ACVs the edge in the fight, allowing them to escape with minimal damage. (ACV Tooth-01 did need to return to the Kuun-Lan for repairs, but this was more a precaution against future Raider attacks than a critical need.)

The Tough Luck also proved quite apt at protecting the Workers. For a bunch of miners, they're good shots. I'll make warriors of them yet. To be honest, the Processors the Somtaaw designed are much better craft than the Resource Controllers we used 15 years ago. (I argued for over a month during our journey to Hiigara that the Controllers needed mass drivers to assist in defending our own mining ships; however, I was overruled in the belief that if we armed those ships, they'd become military targets. While they were ignored by Turanic and Taiidani fighters, they were easy prey for bombers that the fighters were escorting.)

A second wave of Bandits joined the first in chasing the Recon, and we ordered her back to the Kuun-Lan. The Raiders were soon met by a wave of mass driver fire from the Command ship. We suffered minor damage fighting the Raiders. In addition, Recon-045 was lost when she approached too close to the combat; the Raiders seem to take a perverse joy in destroying our Recon craft. Luckily, Lt. Saena survived, and was recovered by a Rescue & Recovery shuttle when the battle had ended.

Five minutes after the battle ended, construction crews reported that the Engineering Module was completed. Cyrogenics reported that the Engineering crew who were to man the Module had awakened from stasis, and after an additional 10 minutes testing the systems in the Module, the Engineering crew began research on how to modify our Workers with repair technology. It was also decided to modify the Processor; the Engineers felt it could have four repair modules, two situated on each side of the Processor.

We fought off four further attacks from Turanic fighters. I calculated their approach vector and found that most of the Raider fighters had come from one specific region; it was likely a Turanic Carrier was out there, reinforcing the fighters. I suggested to Colonel Sareni that it was unlikely the Bushan-Re was along our positive Z vector. The Raiders appeared to be searching for something; it was likely they were hoping to capture the Bushan-Re and use the ship in their own fleet (or ransom it and the crew back to Hiigara).

After focusing our sensors along the negative Z vector, Tactical reported that faint comm echos had been detected along an X/-Z vector. Recons 048 and 062 went to the region to investigate. Unfortunately, Recon-049 was intercepted by another flight of Bandits and was destroyed. The pilot survived, and Tooth Squadron unlinked into Acolytes. Half of the Acolytes escorted two R/R shuttles to the site, while the remainder stayed with the mining ships along with Fang Squadron.

Engineering soon reported that Repair specs had been complete. The modifications were easy enough to be made in the field, and soon the Tough Luck begin building repair modules. The Workers continued to harvest the patch of asteroids they had found while engineers on the Workers started putting together a repair module; it was believed that with the proper components together,

that Engineers could install the package in under a minute. The Workers need to be powered down in order to install the Repair module. Engineering started researching how to upgrade the Workers to perform salvage duties as well.

10 minutes after reaching the region with the comm echos, Recon-062 detected the Bushan-Re. She had suffered serious damage, and had several fires burning around the engines and on the lower deck. We were able to tight-beam a message to the Destroyer, and learned that they had been able to evacuate the damaged sections; only five fatalities were reported, though over half of the crew had suffered injuries. The Recons took up holding positions around the Bushan-Re while waiting for backup.

The Processor Tough Luck immediately started toward the Bushan-Re with Fang Squadron, while Fang Squadron stayed with the Workers, who shut down and immediately started upgrading with the Repair module. The Kuun-Lan and the Spirit Quest also started moving toward the stricken Destroyer. After finishing their upgrades, the Workers immediately set course for the Bushan-Re as well; with their higher speed, they soon overtook the Tough Luck.

We reached the Bushan-Re without further incident and began repairs on her. We also successfully recovered Lt. Marlie without incident, and Tooth Squadron relinked into ACV mode. After 10 minutes, sensors detected four Hiigaran Support Frigates emerge from hyperspace. They indicated they wished to assist us in repairing the Bushan-Re and started toward our position.

Tooth Squadron diverted course to protect the Frigates from any Turanic fighters in the area. I soon received a tightband communique from Captain Kensar Soban, who was assisting the Somtaaw pilots as a squadron leader. (Kensar was one of the Soban who was revived from the Sleeper tubes en route to Hiigara when his cyropod started to fail. I hired him to help train the Somtaaw's fighter training program.)

Kensar told me that the Frigates were giving off an ion trail, like that from fighters and corvettes. While one Frigate might have a drive malfunction that could cause this, for four to have the same problem was a matter of curiosity. The four Frigates showed up on both sensors and visual scans (looking at the ships through the cockpit), but I let Kensar know privately to keep the squadrons on alert. Kensar also alerted the Captain of the Spirit Quest to position his ship in position to push the Frigates away in case there were problems.

The frigates approached to under a kilometer before they stopped. At that point, Fleet Command noted that the Frigates were not transmitting any kiith recognition codes. As we started trying to visually identify the Frigates, sensors went wild. The ships appeared to twist and change shape before our eyes, reforming into four Thief-class Raider corvettes.

Having been alerted by Captain Kensar, our ships immediately started firing on the corvettes. The Bushan-Re also immediately fired with its Ion Cannons; I later learned that Captain Kensar had tight-beamed a message to Captain S'tarl Manaas, warning him to be ready for a trap. (Captain Kensar has not informed either Tactical or Fleet Command of my involvement in this; Colonel Sareni was displeased with his failure to inform her of the situation, but accepted his reason that he was worried the ships would detect his message.

I realize that I need to be given an official standing within the Kuun-Lan. Just being the Oracle's consort (a phrase that still makes me want to laugh) is not suitable in a military environment. And while the Kuun-Lan is not a military vessel, there is a chain of command, and I need to be placed within it. Otherwise we risk dividing the crew when some turn to me for advice.

Five additional flights of Turanic Raider craft were detected when the Thief Corvettes showed themselves. This included a flight of six Brigand-class Missiles corvettes, as well as several flights of Bandits, each lead by an additional Brigand corvette. These were all on an intercept course with the Bushan-Re and the remaining vessels. Our Recon fighters immediately fled the battleground; the Somtaaw have noticed that the Raiders seem to take a perverse pleasure at destroying our Recon fighters.

The Spirit Quest rammed the first Thief corvette, destroying it, while the Bushan-Re focused firepower on a second corvette. In a matter of 20 seconds, the remaining Thiefs were destroyed, and we were able to shift our focus to the incoming fighters and corvettes. Before they closed to attack, Recon-062 reported the presence of the Turanic Raider Carrier. The ship remained outside of the Kuun-Lan's sensors, and seemed to be there primarily to reinforce the fighters and corvettes attacking the Bushan-Re.

With our presence, it seemed unlikely the Raiders would be able to capture the Destroyer, and the Raider Captain must have come to the same conclusion. The next wave of fighters was sent after our Recon craft, chasing them away from the Carrier.

I realized the Raiders were trying to hide their next actions from us. At the time, I believed they intended on attacking us directly with the Carrier, and try to drive us from the Bushan-Re. I soon realized I was mistaken. Fortunately, I did have time to inform Captain Sjaar of my suspicions. When I approached, I overheard this communique between Fleet Command and the Bushan-Re:

Fleet Command: We're picking up a dual signal on the emergency channel. Attention Bushan-Re! Did you send out a distress beacon?

Bushan-Re: Negative, Kuun-Lan. We've been picking up that signal since we drifted into the region. It must be some kind of derelict.

Recon-062 soon reported contact with the derelict.

Tactical: Source of anomalous signal located. It may be of some value. Recommend sending a Worker in to investigate and retrieve source of signal.

Engineering reported that they had finished preliminary research on modifying the Workers to perform Salvage duties. While they were still working on the VOP (Viral Override Protocols), magnetic grapplers had been designed to allow the Workers to tow small ships without engine assist from the captured vessel. As we were looking at a derelict vessel, and likely something small enough to not be picked up by the Kuun-Lan's sensor array, it was felt that the magnetic grapplers would be sufficient. Workers 152 and 146 were taken off repair-duty and started work on increasing the efficiency of existing magnetic grapplers used to dock the Workers within the Kuun-Lan.

Within two minutes, the upgrades were complete and Worker-152 started toward the derelict.

Worker-146 was put on escort duty to repair 152 in case of Turanic attack, or to assist in towing if the derelict was too massive to be moved with just one Worker. Tooth Squadron and the Spirit Quest were also put on escort duty. This proved fortunate as soon Tactical detected Turanic Raiders on an intercept course.

Tactical: Picking up Turanic Raider comm transmissions. They must be after the derelict as well. Engage and destroy.

The Tough Luck and remaining Workers reported that exterior repairs to the Bushan-Re were complete. Weapon systems were also on-line, as was their hyperdrive engine. Captain Sjaar decided to ask the Bushan-Re for assistance against the Raiders.

Fleet Command: Attention Bushan-Re. Was wondering if you might be able to help out?

Bushan-Re: Sorry Kuun-Lan. We barely have Nav restored to the point that we can hyperspace. Besides, even a mining Kiith should be able to handle a few pirates. Thanks for the help. Bushan-Re out.

The Bushan-Re then activated hyperdrive engines and fled back to Hiigara.

I suppose I can understand the Bushan-Re's position. They were still damaged, with many injured crewmembers. But their final comment could be considered insulting. Captain Sjaar's reason for asking for assistance was to minimize the chance of losses on our side. Even after 15 years, with new technologies to assist us, we are not a numerous people. Every life lost is a life we could not afford to lose. If we of Hiigara do not stand together... then we risk losing to the Taiidani Imperialists in a war of attrition; a war they are much better suited to fight than we are.

Recon-062 soon reported five Thief corvettes on an intercept course with the derelict and Worker-152. Fang Squadron was dispatched to assist Tooth Squadron. We soon detected multiple bogeys as several more flights of Bandits with Brigand Missile corvettes leading them in. This is when the wisdom of the ACV program was proven; the Brigands started a missile volley against Tooth Squadron which would have decimated a fighter squadron. Tooth Squadron took heavy damage, but was able to destroy the Brigands. Fang Squadron focused on the Bandits.

Worker-152 was attacked several times, but soon docked with the Kuun-Lan. Unfortunately, at that time we received a distress signal from Recon 048 and 062. Recon-048 had just been destroyed (though Lt. Jeslai has ejected and was still alive). Recon-062 had taken damage and Capt. Yebail felt she would have to eject soon. Her last report was that several Raider ships were docking with the Carrier; it seemed likely that the Turanic Raiders were pulling out, having lost their chance at the derelict.

Tooth Squadron docked with the Kuun-Lan to undergo repairs, while Fang Squadron escorted three R/R shuttles to the last reported location of the lost Recon fighters. Worker-146 also successfully retrieved one of the derelict Thief corvettes; Engineering was told to start work on duplicating the Turanic holographic technology after they finished the VOP programs and finished the Salvage routines for the Workers.

Colonel Sareni also informed us that the derelict appeared to be a message pod of some type, but

with a completely alien technology. It seemed likely to predate the initial conquest of Hiigara by the Taiidani, though we would need to run further tests to determine the actual age of the pod.

The message within the pod also defied translation, though linguists were continuing to work on it. A message was sent to the Somtaaw High Council for advice on what to do next. (My personal feeling was to contact Kiiths Sjet and Kalaal and work on translating the message before dissecting the pod, but I decided to practice some tact and mentioned it to Jaana instead. She seemed... distracted, however. She... well, it's hard to describe. I've been married for 15 years, and I've only seen her look like this a few times before; it was as if she was scared, but when I asked her, she denied it. Jaana said she'd mention my advice if a chance rose where it would not be taken the wrong way, but I suspect she's going to forget. I wish I knew what was eating at her....)

We resumed mining the remaining harvestable asteroids in the region while the R/R shuttles recovered our lost Recon pilots. Fang Squadron reported contact with one Bandit flight, but destroyed them with no losses.

Finally, we received word back from the Somtaaw High Command:

Fleet Command: Honored Greetings, Somtaaw Kiith-Sa. Did you receive our data regarding the anomalous artifact?

Somtaaw Kiith-Sa: We have. Our researchers agree the signal and design matches nothing currently used by known Galactic races. Where is the pod now?

Fleet Command: We have brought it aboard now and are securing it in the main Hangar bay. What should we do with it? We're just a mining vessel. We are not equipped to study anything like this.

Somtaaw Kiith-Sa: We are transmitting design specs so that your manufacturing unit can construct a science module.

Fleet Command: Excuse me Kiith-Sa, but would it not be easier to seek help from another Kiith? We are still within hailing range of the Naabal Command Carrier. Surely they would have the staff to-

Somtaaw Kiith-Sa: NO! A find like this could lead to alien technology that surpasses anything used by the other Kiith. Somtaaw needs this advantage.

We have a science vessel, the Clee-San, studying stellar phenomena in the Coruc-tel system. They have been ordered to meet with you at these coordinates and transfer over a research team with analysis equipment. This matter must be kept within Kiith Somtaaw. Is this clear?

Fleet Command: Yes, Kiith-Sa. Very Clear. Kuun-Lan out.

We are preparing to hyperspace to the Coruc-tel system now to meet with the Clee-San. I have a bad feeling about this... I still think this should be handled with Kiith Sjet and Kalaal... but I cannot mention this now. I am barely trusted as it is. If I state my opinion... then I wonder if even being the consort of the Oracle would be enough to save me. At the very least I'd find myself in the brig until Somtaaw has finished dissecting the pod.

Also... I don't know. Something just doesn't feel right. Jaana is... that alien artifact appears, and Jaana starts acting odd, like she's waiting for something to happen. I have to be with her. She needs me.

I look back at this paragraph and the cynic in me snorts. I'm starting to sound like my wife now. Sheesh. Still, I suppose someone has to keep her out of trouble. Well, more trouble.

Chapter 3: The Coruc-Tel System

Fleet Intelligence Personal Log

It is said that the more things change, the more things stay the same. With the Turanic Raiders and the Imperial Taiidan, this is definitely the truth.

Immediately upon arriving at the Coruc-Tel system, we realized something was wrong. The Clee-San was not visible to our sensors. We did pick up a transmission from them, but it was being jammed.

Clee-San: Thi-. . .-ee-San. We have be-. . .-aider for-. . .-inned down behi-. . .

While the transmission was jammed, the Kuun-Lan was able to approximate the location of the Clee-San. Recons 070, 071 and 072 were dispatched to investigate. The three fighters split up into a wide triangle formation with a 50 km between each fighter, and traveled toward the signal source.

At this time Tactical decided to put Engineering to work and started work on an upgrade for the Ramming Frigates. The Engineers were to create an afterburner system to help increase the power (and speed) of the Ramming Frigate when it strikes. It was hoped that with this upgrade that the Spirit Quest would be able to push even large capital ships.

Recon-071 detected a minefield after traveling 75 km. Soon after, the remaining Recons also detected mines as well. These were anti-capital ship magnetic mines, often used by the Turanic Raiders. Thief Corvettes would tow the mines into position, and then activate the IFF, which would target any non-Turanic (or Imperial Taiidani) ship. They also chase after fighters, but have a limited range that many fighters can easily outrun, though corvettes would prove vulnerable with their lower speeds. Ramming a mine would be instant death for any fighter or corvette; in fact, even a Ramming frigate would suffer heavy damage after hitting one.

It was unlikely the Turanics had created a globe of mines around the region. Instead, they probably lay several walls of mines in different regions. The minefield was within 20 km of two clusters of harvestable asteroids (it is by belief that the Turanics had not mined the field as they dislike doing actual "work"; it's much easier for them just to capture a mining ship or a Worker with a full load than to do the work themselves. They also tend to exchange captured ship crews for resources, and (depending on the tribe of Raiders) tend to honor their exchanges. That is not to say they won't come back 15 minutes later with a strike force to try and capture both former prisoners and their rescuers.

The Tough Luck was dispatched to the asteroid belt, along with the four Workers and both ACV squadrons. I find it almost amusing; the Somtaaw, even when not on an active mining mission, will take advantage of any resources found and harvest them. Jaana points out that we did the same on our trip to Hiigara, and that was part of the reason we came into conflict with the Kadeshi. I still see a major difference between the two situations; we were actively at war with the Taiidani as we traveled toward Hiigara and needed every advantage we could get. The Somtaaw use their resources in trade with the Bentusi and to purchase land on Hiigara (which is quite expensive).

20 km outside the minefield, Recon-071 reported contact with two squadrons of Turanic Raider Bandits. She altered course to evade them, and 15 km later detected two additional squadrons of

Bandits. At that point she altered course to flee back toward the Kuun-Lan. Tooth and Fang Squadrons were dispatched to wait on a negative Y vector under the asteroid fields to wait for the enemy.

Lt. Stelfai proved quite cunning with her pursuers. She stopped her Recon several times to let the Raider forces almost catch up. Unfortunately, one point she stopped under the minefield and had a mine almost collide with her Recon fighter. She was able to evade it, however, and soon skimmed past the ACV squadrons, which had powered down their ships to hide from Turanic sensors.

The trap was successful. The Raiders had just begun to pass the ACVs when they powered up and fired upon the Bandit squadrons. Five Raider fighters were destroyed before the Turanic Raiders even realized they were being ambushed. The remainder were destroyed before they could adjust their attack vector to deal with the ACVs.

This appears to be a further bonus for the ACV program. While the lack of a turret makes the ACV less effective than traditional turrets (and in fact, the ACV acts more like a heavy fighter instead of an actual corvette), its maneuverability and speed make up for this drawback.

The remaining two Recons continued toward the Clee-San, keeping a distance of 55 km between them. Recon-070 encountered another minefield but was able to avoid the mines easily. Finally, both Recon craft were approximately 20 km behind the suspected location of the Clee-San. They started to return toward the Kuun-Lan, with an approach vector that would bring the transmission contact within range of the Recons sensors. On their inbound vector, the Recons detected several Brigand corvettes and a number of mines in a spherical location. Finally, the Recons spotted the Clee-San

Captain Sjaar studied the sensor reports and moved Recon-072 as close to the mines as possible without activating them. The Clee-San was then able to tight-beam a message to the Recon.

Clee-San: Repeat. . . This is th-. . . -lee-san. We have been atta-. . . by raider for-. . . -and pinned down behind. . . -all of mines. . . -ave code but canno-. . .

Tactical: The Raiders have pinned the Clee-San in a globe of mines. If the Clee-San moves the mines will activate and destroy her.

The Clee-San is trying to transmit some kind of coded data but the jamming is too strong, we need to send a mimic in past the mines to establish a direct link

The jamming was still too intense for us to break through, though we were able to decipher more of their message. The Recons had to immediately leave as the Brigands powered up their engines, and two additional squadrons of Bandits started pursuing the Recons.

The possibility of another ambush was too tempting, and Recon-070 was soon playing cat-and-mouse with the Brigands, slowly luring them and the Bandits toward the Spirit Quest, and Tooth and Fang Squadrons. The Bandits were the first to fall to the ambush; within minutes the first three Brigands had arrived. The Spirit Quest proved effective at destroying Brigand corvettes, though she had to perform some emergency maneuvers to avoid drifting too close to the minefield.

Final combat reports claim six Brigand corvettes and 10 Bandit fighters. While it seemed likely we

had destroyed the majority of the Turanic forces guarding the Clee-San, Colonel Sareni felt that the possibility of an ambush from Turanic Assassin-class Ion Arrays and additional Brigand corvettes was too great without further information that our Recons were unable to bring us.

This is a legitimate concern. I have heard rumors from my contacts within Fleet Intelligence that the Raiders have modified the Ion Arrays, possibly with improved ECM packages to hide them from long-range sensors. Captain Sjaar has told me that the Kuun-Lan's computers are currently strained keeping track of our current fleet

Captain Sjaar ordered the retirement of Recon-072, and ordered the launch of Mimic Prototype-000. Test runs show the ship should be able to duplicate the IFF signatures of enemy ships. Unfortunately, the laser holograph technology takes up too much room; the Mimics are unarmed.

I truly feel that the Mimic program should have been using a Corvette-class chassis. It would not be incredibly difficult for the engineers on the Kuun-Lan to design an effective corvette for the Mimic; we could even plagiarize the design from the Raiders Thief corvette (where we gained the Mimic technology in the first place). Captain Sjaar and Colonel Sareni were unwilling to risk a more expensive ship on an unproven technology. And considering that all we needed to do was send the ship inside the mines around the Clee-San and establish a direct link to them, I suppose their decision has merit. For now.

Mimic-000 took the form of a Brigand Missile corvette (which was logical, seeing how we had a recent run-in with these ships, and the Raiders could assume one escaped destruction) and headed toward the Clee-San. During the flight of the Mimic, Captain Sjaar examined the battle schematics of our fight against the missile corvettes before deciding on a course of action.

Fleet Command: We're a big target for those Raider Missile Corvettes. We need some more firepower of our own. Have engineering pull up whatever they can find on missile technology and have them begin researching it now.

Construction was started on a Weapons Module, where the Somtaaw would work on missile technology. I naturally assumed the Somtaaw would create a missile corvette of their own (I keep forgetting about their lack of docking space for corvettes) or possibly a missile frigate. I was surprised when the Weapons Module was completed and plans were initiated to install missile launchers in the wings of the Acolytes.

The placement of the exhaust vents for the missile launchers on the Acolyte wings would unfortunately keep the ACVs from using missiles. When linked, the exhaust vents would vent into the ACV rather than into space.

In addition, the Acolytes would only carry two missiles, and would need to return to the Kuun-Lan to reload. This limited the effectiveness of the missiles to one larger target; it was doubtful that the missiles would be an effective anti-fighter weapon. It would increase their effectiveness against capital ship.

As with all JOATMAL (Jack of all Trades, Master of none) fighter designs, the Acolyte will prove outperformed by specialized craft; Bombers will be more effective than Acolytes against capital ships, while Interceptors would be more effective than Acolytes in dogfighting. And naturally,

corvettes with their turreted design improves their versatility compared to the ACVs.

Research on modifying the Acolytes to carry missiles had started when Mimic-000 reached the Clee-San. The science frigate was able to establish a direct link to our ship.

Clee-San: Thank the Maker you got through to us, Kuun-Lan. We've been able to use our advanced scanners to access the mine transponder codes. Now you'll be able to see all of them on your sensor manager.

If you're going to break us out, it will have to be soon though. This Raider force is just pinning us until a larger fleet can get here and board us.

Tooth and Fang Squadrons immediately moved forward to clear a path for the Kuun-Lan. While this put us at greater risk, Captain Sjaar felt it would take too long for the Clee-San to reach our position. In addition, the Kuun-Lan would prove better able to resist attacks from enemy frigates; it was likely that the Turanic Raiders would sooner destroy the Clee-San than let us recover her. To maximize their effectiveness, Tooth Squadron was unlinked into Acolyte fighters, while Fang Squadron remained in ACV form.

The squadrons began destroying the larger mines directly in front of the Kuun-Lan. While this drew the attention of the surrounding mines, the Acolytes were able to shift fire against each mine in turn. We suffered minimal damage and no casualties in clearing out a large hole in the mine wall.

Beyond lay several walls of mines created from the Taiidan minelayer corvettes. This would prove to be much more dangerous to the Acolytes than the larger, unwieldy capital-ship mines that the Turanic Raiders favor. In the initial pass, Tooth-04 had an unfortunate collision with a light mine. These mines are easily powerful enough to destroy an Acolyte; unfortunately, Lt. Dlaan's Acolyte was struck in the cockpit, killing him instantly.

Soon after, Lt. Forban was badly injured and had to eject from his Acolyte, Tooth-07, after a collision with another mine resulted in his engine overloading.. Fortunately, the R/R shuttle was able to retrieve him and return to the Kuun-Lan. There was not enough left of Lt. Dlaan to recover.

Work was started on two replacement Acolytes while Tooth Squadron continued on minesweeping detail. They eliminated four additional groupings of mines when Tooth-03 reported a sensor contact: six Taiidan Minelaying corvettes on an intercept course.

Tooth Squadron ignored them while eliminating another mine field, and then when the Taiidan approached within 3 km, turned and concentrated fire on one corvette. The Taiidan immediately retaliated with a forced drop of mines; one corvette took moderate damage when its own mine slammed into its hull. The Acolytes ceased fire and started concentrating on the new mine threat.

Fang Squadron was called off mine sweeping detail (it was focusing on larger mines off to the side, which were considered a minor but possible threat to the Kuun-Lan when we passed) to assist Tooth Squadron, but I knew that the battle would be over before they reached their squadron-mates.

Tooth Squadron proceeded to chew through the new minefield and turned on the fleeing Minelayer corvettes. They remained on evasive patterns to avoid any new mines dropped; the corvettes were

more interested in fleeing than dropping additional mines. Even with concentrating firepower on one corvette at a time, it took nearly two minutes to destroy the first corvette.

I suppose this is another reason for loading a small number of anti-capital ship missiles on the Acolytes, instead of a larger number of anti-fighter missiles. A traditional bomber squadron would likely take time reaching an enemy location, while the Acolytes could easily perform a missile run, softening up their target. I still argued with Colonel Sareni about a dedicated bomber for the Somtaaw. Her arguments that limiting themselves to three fighter designs is logical. Until you realize the third fighter, the Mimic, cannot fight at all.

Research on modifying the Acolytes was finished at about the same time that the Acolytes destroyed the final Taiidan corvette. Curiously, no additional fighters had joined the fight. It appears the Turanic Raiders had enough faith in their minefields that they left the Clee-San undefended. While the eight missile corvettes would have proven a danger had they attacked all at once in formation, the Raiders are not known for their military precision. We are just fortunate that the only Taiidan presence was the minelayer corvettes (which remained in formation even while fleeing; sometimes military discipline is not so suitable for the situation. If the corvettes had divided while fleeing, some of them would have survived).

Tooth Squadron went forward to the mines encircling the Clee-San and destroyed the six between the Kuun-Lan and the Clee-San, allowing the research ship to join us. After docking with the Kuun-Lan and sending a science team over to us to examine the alien probe, Clee-San undocked and our fleet hyperspaced out. There were no signs of a larger fleet. We were likely fortunate to escape before they reached the system. I just hope they are unable to track our hyperspace wake.

While the scientists work on the alien probe, I am going to get some sleep. While it's early... I've had disturbing dreams lately, and haven't slept well. I'm not as young as I used to be! And... I guess I've just been around my wife too much. Still, I have an uneasy feeling, like something is going to happen.