

WARSPITE:

A PROGRAM OF REVOLUTION

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Having discovered that the Genex survived the war they waged against the Commonwealth, the heavy cruiser *Warspite* is vulnerable and the Genex leadership want is destroyed before it can reveal their continued existence. However, factions within Genex society have plans of their own that depend on the survival of the *Warspite* and its commanding officer...

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PROLOGUE.

Most of the people in the Genex command centre were of the leader caste including all of those in the white of officers' uniforms. In addition to the leaders in the room there were also workers sat at the various control and communication consoles as well as a number of thinkers there to assess the information coming in. Many of the officers present wore the markings of admirals, all of them summoned to deal with the fact that the Commonwealth that the Genex had spent one hundred years hiding from now likely knew that they had survived the destruction of their capital at the end of the war. Reports from the Eta Indi system indicated that the forward base operated there by the Genex had been discovered and attacked by a Commonwealth warship. Now the Genex government wanted that Commonwealth vessel destroyed before it could discover the locations of any of the Genex colony worlds.

"You're certain that it's a heavy cruiser?" the most senior admiral present asked, looking at one of the few leaders present not wearing a military uniform.

"That's right Admiral Dressler. An Essex-class vessel, the *CSV Warspite*." Kane replied. Kane was an intelligence operative, normally responsible for trying to undermine the Commonwealth and as such he monitored the actions of the Commonwealth military closely.

"State of the art." Dressler commented, "But not invincible. The *Flaming Sword*, *Kingdom* and *Revenant* will be able to hunt down and kill her."

"Three light cruisers?" a voice said and both Dressler and Kane turned to see an old man entering the command centre in the company of a much younger woman and also a team of four muscular warrior caste bodyguards who eyed up the fleet guards standing just inside the entrance to the command centre.

"You have an alternative idea?" Dressler asked as the old man sat down in a nearby chair.

"I'm sure Commander Kane's report has included a section on the Commonwealth task force that engaged the Ticik in the Epsilon Pavonis system. The *Warspite* was part of that task force and it is quite possible that its captain sent word to the commander of that force. The *Warspite* may not be the only Commonwealth ship in the Eta Indi system by the time your three light cruisers arrive admiral. I'm sure that those cruisers are enough to take on one Essex-class ship but an entire Commonwealth task force? I think not." the old man said.

"My orders are to destroy the Commonwealth ship before it can discover our location. The longer we delay the more likely it is that the cruiser will escape. I don't have the time to assemble an entire fleet on the off chance that the Commonwealth task force has been able to get to Eta Indi. What exactly would our intelligence service recommend that the fleet does?" Dressler said, sneering at the old man, "Remember that while your subordinates may cower in fear of you and your pet assassin, I have no need to fear reprisals from you."

"If the *Warspite* is alone then it will probably be hiding. I've seen the same reports as you Admiral Dressler, she was damaged in the battle. Possibly seriously and that means that she will hide from rather than rush to confront the forces you send, meaning that your ships will need to hunt her down. You may mock my position with our intelligence service but remember that I studied with the fleet as well when I was younger and like you I hold the rank of admiral. Hunting a target like the *Warspite* is a job for destroyers, not cruisers. Send a small squadron of them to search the system. If they find a large Commonwealth force present then they can withdraw, otherwise they can spread out to search every part of the system quickly and join together to overpower the injured *Warspite*. In the meantime you can be assembling that fleet to respond just in case the Commonwealth have reinforced the system."

Admiral Dressler turned to look at a large viewscreen on the wall nearby that showed diagrams of the three light cruisers that he had been planning to send against the *Warspite*.

"Destroyer group seven." he said, looking at a worker caste technician sat close by, "What is their status?" "Scheduled to depart in six hours on a standard patrol on a four light year radius admiral." the technician replied and Dressler nodded.

"Send to Captain Medina aboard the *Keystone*, divert to the Eta Indi system. Hunt down and destroy the Commonwealth cruiser present. If the vessel has received reinforcements then the squadron is to gather as much information about the enemy's strength and withdraw." Dressler ordered. Then he looked at the old man and added, "I assume that meets with your approval, admiral?" emphasising the old man's official rank. "Excellent, yes." the old man replied, reaching out so that the young woman accompanying him could help him back to his feet before they began to walk back towards the doorway they had entered the command centre through. The old man paused just before reaching the door though and he turned back around to face Admiral Dressler, "Oh and by the way admiral," he said, "don't think that your rank and position puts you outside my reach if you cross me. You would do well to be afraid of me every now and again. I'd give you the names of few people you could ask for advice about that but very few of them are around any more."

Once in the hallway outside the command centre the young woman looked at the old man.

"Are you sure it was wise to speak to Admiral Dressler like that in his own command centre grandfather?" she asked and he smiled.

"My dear it was the best possible place to speak to him like that. Admiral Dressler feels most secure in his command centre and threatening him there lets him know that I don't think that his security is at all threatening to me. Now what about our friends?" he said.

"Jennifer Hayes will be out of surgery soon." his granddaughter told him.

"Excellent. I do hope her recovery is speedy. What about our other guest? When can we expect her to arrive?" the old man added.

"That took some doing. The fleet considered her their prisoner and were reluctant to release her." his granddaughter said.

"No doubt planning to beat answers out of her. Their methods are so crude. I take it you were sufficiently persuasive though?"

"All I had to do was mention your name grandfather. Admiral Dressler may consider himself superior to you but the officers at fleet intelligence are familiar with your work. The prisoner will be delivered straight to our headquarters as planned."

"Excellent. That just leaves us to arrange a meeting with Professor Tanner to discuss the final implementation of our plan." the old man said.

"What about the *Warspite*?" his granddaughter asked.

"Oh think we can count on her crew not to let us down now." the old man replied.

Aboard the Lincoln-class battleship *Ashford's Fury* in the Epsilon Pavonis system Rear Admiral Kim Sung-ho looked at the computer tablet he had been handed and frowned. With the death of Admiral Mitchell aboard the carrier *Jericho* in a battle with the alien Ticik, command of the Commonwealth task force in the system had fallen to him and when the courier drone from the *Warspite* had arrived its contents were delivered straight to him..

"You know fleet tradition commander." he said to the officer who had provided him with the file he was now looking at, "Anyone that suggests that the Genex still exist buys a round of drinks for everyone on the ship. Do you know how big the crew of this ship is, including marines?"

"A little over two thousand admiral." she replied, "But that message is genuine. We've double checked it. The drone that came in from the *Warspite* states that Captain Reeves and his crew tracked that unidentified ship to the Eta Indi system where they confirmed the presence of the Genex. There are even frozen tissue samples contained in the drone as proof. Our MO is running a full genetic scan to make sure but it seems likely that the report is telling the truth."

"And does the Commonwealth know?" Admiral Kim asked.

"Probably not yet. The message in the drone stated that one had also been sent directly back to the Commonwealth but we're closer than they are. It'll be at least another day before the drone gets to Gamma Pavonis. Should we set a course for Eta Indi?"

"No, not yet."

"But admiral if the *Warspite* needs our help-

"Commander we've got ships scattered across more than a dozen nearby systems searching for any signs of life that may have survived the collapse of the Sissusk Empire. I can't risk leaving them out here to fend for themselves if the Ticik come back. Inform navigation to plot a course by all means but we wait here until our ships return." the admiral ordered.

"And the *Warspite*?"

"I'm sure that Captain Reeves can take care of himself commander."

1.

The Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite*, an Essex-class heavy cruiser was a state of the art warship, fast and well armed it was designed to be capable of operating alone and that combined with the experience of her captain and crew in operating far from Commonwealth territory had made it the ideal choice for the mission to the Eta Indi system in pursuit of a mysterious scout ship that had been shadowing the *Warspite* in earlier missions and it was here that the cruiser's crew had discovered that the Genex had survived.

More than a century earlier the Genex, products of genetic engineering that had originally been intended to create designer babies had attempted to overthrow the Commonwealth in a bloody war. However, the Genex had underestimated the ability of the rest of mankind to work together when faced with a common foe and after several years of fighting their capital had been besieged. The Genex had responded to this by detonating their stockpile of nuclear arms and the Commonwealth had believed that apart from those they had captured, the Genex had been wiped out. Now though the truth had been learned, that the Genex somehow survived and had moved far beyond human space.

The *Warspite* had sent drones back to the rest of the task force it had been a part of and also directly to the Commonwealth to warn them of the Genex's survival but during the battle with the outpost present in the system the cruiser had suffered damage that had left it unable to travel faster than light, effectively stranding it in the system and now it lurked in the ice rings around the same gas giant that the Genex outpost had orbited while repairs were being made.

"Come in." Captain Reeves, the *Warspite's* commanding officer said when someone knocked at the door to his quarters and when the door opened it revealed Commander Bernard, the ship's chief engineer.

"Captain." Bernard said, "I've brought you an update on repairs."

"So how much trouble are we in?" Reeves asked.

"Not nearly as much as we could be but it's still pretty bad. Thankfully the courier ship that brought Nexus' ambassador here is state of the art and has true FTL and artificial gravity. His suggestion is that we make use of the particle inductor aboard it to make up for the loss of our own. Of course a courier is a far cry from a heavy cruiser the size of the *Warspite* so we can't rely on the ambassador's ship long term without burning out its particle inductor but at least we don't need to worry about losing artificial gravity in the short term."

Bernard said.

"I take it we can't use it to get to FTL and get out of here though?" Reeves said and Bernard shook his head.

"No captain, sorry. The damage to our FTL system goes beyond just generating enough tachyons to get us out of here. Sections of our hull can't be ionised so we can't form a stable tachyon shell. I'm sure we can repair the damage but it's going to take time." Bernard said.

"Time is a luxury we may not have much of commander. The Genex will likely know that we are here by now. They may even know that we are damaged. They'll be coming for us." Reeves said before the intercom sounded and Reeves reached out for the handset, "Reeves." he said.

"Captain our workpod is back with the drone. It just touched down in the forward hangar." the voice of Lieutenant Commander Goldman said and Reeves looked across at Bernard as she spoke.

"Thank you commander. Bernard is here with me now. Let the hangar know that we're on our way." he said before hanging up the intercom, "Adam your new toy has just arrived." he added and Bernard smiled back at him.

"Good, I've been waiting for this." he said.

Among its defences, the Genex outpost had housed a large number of remotely operated combat drones, more than enough to overwhelm the *Warspite* and its own attached fighter and drone squadrons. Fortunately drones required orders to be issued to them from a central command centre, in this case the Genex outpost and by infiltrating an assault team the transmitter used to command them had been destroyed and the drones rendered inert. To prevent an Genex reinforcements from reactivating the drones and using them against the *Warspite*, Reeves had ordered them destroyed by their fighter squadron while the cruiser itself found somewhere to hide. One of the drones had been deliberately left largely intact though and now it had been brought back to the *Warspite* so that its technology could be studied.

By the time they reached the *Warspite's* forward hangar Reeves and Bernard found that it had already been fully re-pressurised they were able to go straight inside. Here they found one of the cruiser's workpods on the hangar deck with the recovered Genex drone still clasped in the large grasping claws mounted to the front of the pod.

Given that a workpod was capable of only very low speed one of the *Warspite's* compliment of humanoid robots had been selected to pilot this one and as Reeves and Bernard approached they saw a pair of the hangar's ground crew directing the robot out of the pod. There was a second humanoid machine present in the hangar as well but this was not part of the *Warspite's* equipment, instead this was the ambassador from Nexus. Nexus was the only truly self aware artificial intelligence known to exist and to the Commonwealth it

was considered to be a member nation in itself. On those occasions when Nexus needed to communicate beyond the system it occupied it created ambassadors such as the one in the hangar, robots far more capable than ordinary ones that could contain a small portion of Nexus itself. Then once their tasks were complete the ambassadors' experience could be uploaded back into Nexus.

"Ambassador I wasn't aware that you'd be here." Reeves said while the ambassador was inspecting the exterior of the Genex drone.

"I was sent to gather as much information regarding the party behind arranging the encounter between the Commonwealth and the Ticik. Just because you have been able to identify them does not mean that my task is complete." the ambassador responded without turning away from the drone.

"Any initial impressions ambassador?" Bernard asked, walking up to the drone as well and looking at it closely, focusing on the markings along one side that identified it as a 'Mark 77 Attack Drone'.

"It appears to be based off the Golovin Anvil pattern drone although much further developed." the ambassador replied.

"Anvils? They were phased out decades ago." Bernard replied.

"Indeed. Although they saw heavy use during the Genex War on both sides. When the Genex were able to hijack the Tsar Nicolas it had a complement of over five hundred Golovin Anvils." the ambassador said.

"That figures." Reeves commented, "The mining ship we captured was developed from a Gatherer-class."

"Yes and what we were able to learn from it should prove useful in studying this drone. The changes to the operating system specifically." the ambassador said. Then he looked up and turned towards Bernard,

"Commander Bernard I would recommend that you leave the examination of this drone to me while you and your men focus on the repairs to the *Warspite*."

"Ambassador the study of this drone is a matter of military intelligence." Reeves said.

"Yes captain. However, since your intelligence officer was a casualty in the assault on the Genex base that position aboard your ship is currently vacant. I would suggest that I fill the role until a more permanent replacement can be found." the ambassador told him.

Lieutenant Jessica Lucas, the *Warspite's* intelligence officer had joined the *Warspite's* marines when they attacked the Genex outpost with the intention of accessing their computer core. However, she had failed to return when the base had self destructed, making her the most senior member of the *Warspite's* crew to be lost.

"Ambassador if you're going to take on the role of one of my officers then that means you will have to follow the chain of command. You'll be answerable to several more senior officers." Reeves pointed out, up until now he had been able to make requests of the ambassador of Nexus and as far as he knew the self aware machine had been fully co-operative with him but appointing him to a position aboard the *Warspite* no matter how temporary would alter that. Reeves would be able to issue orders that the ambassador would have to follow.

"That is understood captain. I was tasked to provide my full co-operation with you in any case." the ambassador replied.

"Very well ambassador. I'll inform the crew that I'm issuing you with a temporary field commission of lieutenant. Now if anyone needs me I'll be on the bridge." Reeves said and the ambassador turned his attention back towards the drone.

"Yes captain. I will issue an initial report in one hour." he said.

When Reeves entered the *Warspite's* bridge he found several of his senior officers gathered around the central console. He had expected his first officer Commander Knight, flight operations officer Goldman, navigator Lieutenant Commander Thomas and helmsman Lieutenant Commander Ash to be present but for all of them to be away from their normal duty stations was out of the ordinary, as was the presence of the *Warspite's* fighter squadron leader Lieutenant Commander Shaw and her navigator Lieutenant Mori.

"Something interesting you all?" he asked before any of them noticed his presence and they all turned towards him.

"Captain we weren't expecting you." Shaw said.

"I hope you don't think that an excuse for avoiding work." Reeves said, "Now let's see what's interesting you all."

"Sorry captain this was my idea. I thought it would make a pleasant surprise for you." Knight said, stepping aside so that Reeves could join them at the central console.

"So what am I looking at?" Reeves asked when he saw what was obviously a partial analysis of an energy waveform.

"Kaz spotted it when we were picking off those drones." Shaw said.

"It's a digital pulse signal in the microwave range." Mori added.

"Two gigahertz." Thomas added.

"So not natural then?" Reeves commented and Knight shook his head.

"No it's definitely artificial in origin." he said.

"The microwave range is what SETI looks for captain. Or at least it was supposed to be." Goldman added,

referring to the sabotage that had been discovered rendering all of the deep space monitoring stations operated by the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence useless.

"Is this a Genex transmission?" Reeves asked.

"I don't think so captain." Goldman answered.

"They've been trying to keep a low profile. Sending out messages that basically say 'here we are' doesn't fit with that." Shaw pointed out.

"Besides if the Genex are that far out but can easily travel here then we're in trouble," Thomas added and Reeves looked at him.

"Where does it come from?" he asked.

"HD two-oh-five eight-seven-seven sir." Thomas replied, "It's a binary system almost five hundred light years further out from here. The latest observations do indicate that it has a planetary system."

"It would take us two months at top speed to get there." Ash added.

"If we were stupid enough to think about going that far out." Shaw commented.

"There's no way that the Genex could have got that far out that long ago. They barely existed back then." Knight said.

"We're probably only picking this up because we're way out here and there's no interference from our own sources." Goldman said.

"So five hundred years ago someone out there sent this message into space." Reeves said, looking at the representation of the signal on the console display.

"We haven't fully processed the signal yet but it looks like a standard greeting that our scientists have been sending into space for centuries." Goldman said.

"This is our first evidence of a previously unknown civilisation. Make sure everything is backed up. I don't want to lose any of it. We'll load it into a courier drone and send it back to the Commonwealth." Reeves ordered.

"Planning on us not getting back captain?" Shaw asked.

"Just making sure commander." Reeves replied, "Oh and you might want to show this to the ambassador as well. I'm sure Nexus would love to get his neural net around this. Plus I've just appointed him as our new intelligence officer. Then I want three more of those courier drones we've been loaded with prepared for long range operation."

"How long?" Thomas asked.

"About five hundred light years." Reeves said.

"You're going to respond to this signal captain?" Knight said.

"We are." Reeves replied, "After five hundred years these aliens may have discovered particle induction or not but our drones can send them a radio message from within their own system. I believe that we have a first contact package in our computer?" and he looked at Goldman.

"Yes captain." she said, nodding, "I've just never had any need of it before."

"Well load it into the drones. I also want a warning added about that alien computer virus. For all we know these aliens are already gone but if not then maybe we can prevent it."

"That might be difficult captain." Knight said, "That first contact package took a lot of scientists a long time to figure out. You're asking us to communicate an idea that could be unknown to these aliens."

"Yes, I realise that I'm asking-" Reeves began before he was unexpectedly interrupted.

"Captain I think I've got something." one of the nearby sensor technicians suddenly announced.

"Another radio signal Cortez?" Reeves said but the young woman shook her head.

"No sir. I'm picking up tachyons, nothing like the scale of that Ticik fleet we faced at Epsilon Pavonis but I think there is definitely someone heading this way." she said.

"Let's see it." Reeves said, bringing up a copy of her console

"Where from?" Knight asked.

"Either deeper in the Indus Sector or from the far side of it commander." Cortez said.

"Then they aren't ours. Sound action stations." Reeves ordered and the officers gathered around the central console all hurried back to their regular duty stations while Shaw and Mori ran from the bridge entirely as they headed for the hangar where their fighter waited.

"Bridge this is engineering." Bernard's voice said over the intercom, "What's with the alarm?"

"We have incoming and it doesn't look friendly." Reeves told him.

"Just remember that we're not in the best shape captain." Bernard said.

"Combat will be a last resort commander." Reeves replied.

"Captain we just picked up a tachyon surge. It looks like they're here." Cortez announced.

Although the squadron commanded by Captain Medina was considered a destroyer group, his flagship the *Keystone* was a frigate designed to provide defensive firepower instead of a missile armed destroyer intended to hunt down and destroy other spacecraft. Since the early days of mankind's history of interstellar warfare this had been a common arrangement with one or two frigates acting as the focal points for

destroyers that were then left free to target the other side without needing to worry about their own defence.

“Report.” Medina ordered as soon as his task force had dropped out of FTL in the Eta Indi system.

“Just as we were told captain.” one of his officers responded, “The outpost is gone, as are all of its defensive stations and the tachyon communications satellites orbiting the star. I'm reading debris in all those locations.”

“What about the Commonwealth vessel?” Medina asked.

“Not showing up on any of our sensors captain. I'm not reading any EM emissions that aren't from natural sources.” the other bridge officer answered and Medina nodded.

“They are probably running silent. Deploy the squadron. The enemy vessel will likely be hiding close to the location of the outpost. If they enemy lacked FTL they won't have been sure of reaching another planet in the system before our arrival.”

“Captain that still leaves more than two dozen moons that the enemy could be hiding behind.” Medina's first officer pointed out.

“Then we had better get started hadn't we? Navigation I want us positioned above the gas giant's northern pole far enough that we have a full view of the planet's moons. I don't want the enemy slipping away when they see us coming. Operations order our destroyers to commence their search. Start with the outer moons and work inwards.”

2.

"Captain I'm picking up another tachyon surge." Cortez reported.

"It looks like they're preparing to jump again." Goldman added.

"Of course they are. They jumped in and had a quick look to see if they could see us out in the open. They couldn't so now they're going to start searching all the potential hiding places." Reeves said just as the ambassador of Nexus arrived in the bridge and made his way straight to the intelligence console, "Just in time lieutenant. It looks like we have company."

"They dropped out of FTL about two light hours away so all we have is the tachyon burst from their arrival." Goldman added.

"They're jumping again." Cortez said, "No wait I've got them. Captain they just arrived here."

"How many?" Knight asked.

"I've picked up five distinct tachyon sources commander." Cortez said, "One one half light second directly above the planet's northern pole, the others within the orbital plane."

"Captain I believe that there are two other vessels not visible to us." the ambassador said and Reeves looked towards him, "The deployment of the vessels we can see suggests an even placement around the planet with a single vessel positioned above where it has a direct line of sight to all of the others. To make this pattern fit two more vessels are required to complete it."

"The upper vessel is four hundred and sixty metres long, the ones occupying the orbital plane are all four hundred and twenty." Goldman said.

"Destroyers led by a frigate or heavy picket?" Knight suggested.

"If it was a Commonwealth squadron then I'd say 'yes' and the Genex may have changed in the last hundred years but they still learned what they know from us to begin with." Reeves replied.

The Genex warships were now close enough for the *Warspite's* optical sensors to detect them and Goldman distributed images to Reeves, Knight and the ambassador. Unsurprisingly the vessels all possessed an identical design pattern to one another, with a flat sloping central hull that had drive modules mounted against it at the wider rear while the narrow tapered front was covered in antennas for the ships communications and sensors. This was an arrangement that kept them as far away from the interference that could be caused by their engines as possible.

"Captain all of the destroyers visible to us appear to be of the same class." the ambassador said, "Thermal imaging indicates similar power consumption profiles and visual imaging shows similar details. They are also all emitting significant radio and laser energy pulses."

"Hunting us using active radar and lidar." Knight commented.

"I agree." the ambassador said.

"Any idea of their capabilities?" Reeves asked.

"Each destroyer appears to have six forward facing missile launch tubes with a calibre no more than one point two metres. The size and number indicates magazine fed medium launchers." the ambassador answered.

"So a limited rate of fire but they can reload their magazines from spares in a regular cargo hold." Knight said.

"Indeed." the ambassador said, "These appear to be supported by two light turrets per vessel. The design of the weapons these mount suggest that they are directed energy weapons of some kind. Most likely free electron beam lasers similar to the ones mounted on the *Warspite*. There also look to be external mountings for six drones on each destroyer. If they carry fighters then these are launched from their shuttle hangar. I see no signs of dedicated launch tubes."

"And the other ship?" Reeves added.

"Judging by the lack of sensor antennas and launch bays it is most likely a frigate. From our angle of observation I can make out a protrusion that is likely to be a single medium fixed gun plus three ventral turrets. I would expect three more on the dorsal surface of the ship but I cannot confirm that. Nor can I tell whether any missile launchers have been included to give the vessel any secondary ship to ship capability or any form of attack craft." the ambassador said.

"Since there are no missiles flying towards us I take it that they haven't seen us yet among all this clutter." Ash commented.

"It does not appear so. However, I would not expect a vessel that detects us to immediately attack." the ambassador said.

"So what will they do?" Goldman asked.

"They'll try and attack as a swarm." Reeves said.

"Yes captain." the ambassador agreed, "We should watch for thermal blooms coming from their sub-light engines indicating a redeployment. Given the short distance an FTL jump is highly unlikely. It would require

targeting that was far too precise and the time taken to build up the necessary tachyon field would largely negate the benefits of the superior speed attained."

"Weapons I want firing solutions for our missiles against each of those destroyers. Target them with two rounds each." Reeves ordered.

"Cold launches?" Knight asked and Reeves nodded.

"We'll stagger them a couple of minutes apart so they can't trace them all back to a single point. Then we'll light them all up together. If we do this right that will leave us up against just two destroyers and a frigate." he said.

"Unless they have more ships that we haven't seen yet." Goldman pointed out.

"Such unpredictable factors are impossible to plan for lieutenant commander." the ambassador responded.

"I'm more worried about how good that frigate captain is." Reeves said, "He'll be the squadron commander and he may have something up his sleeve for us if we see him first."

"I take it we'll use our own guns against the frigate?" Knight said and Reeves nodded again.

"If the ambassador is correct then we've probably got a big advantage over him in terms of range and firepower. Strip away four destroyers and he's got nothing to be distracting us with missiles while we move in for a broadside to broadside engagement."

"What about those other two destroyers on the other side of the planet?" Knight asked.

"Our attack craft should be able to deal with them. We're carrying enough right now. They'll probably have deployed their drones when we see them as well." Reeves said and then he turned to Goldman, "What's the state of our attack craft commander?" he asked her.

"All drones ready for launch. Hangar reporting fighters and interceptors fuelled, armed and manned. The first two are already in the tubes ready to go."

"Weapons let me know when you have those firing solutions." Reeves ordered.

"Firing solutions plotted captain. Ready to release missiles." one of the *Warspite's* gunners responded.

"Helm rotate us so that we can run a cold launch of missiles without having to send them out into free space." Reeves said and Ash nodded.

"Aye captain. Minimal thrusters firing." he replied as he began to slowly turn the *Warspite* within the ice rings so that instead of the heavy cruiser's dorsal missile system pointing out of the ring it instead pointed along it, facing in the opposite direction to the direction of the *Warspite's* orbit.

At the same time a number of the missile doors mounted on the cruiser's dorsal hull swung open. The *Warspite's* primary missile system provided each missile with its own launcher, enabling the ship to launch any number of its missiles at once. On this occasion the ship's gunnery crew released missiles in pairs using low strength magnetic pulses to eject the weapons from their silos in the same way as the ship's gauss cannons launched their projectiles. Under normal circumstances the missiles would be accelerated rapidly by these magnetic pulses before their own drives were ignited and took over the propulsion of the missiles. However, this time the acceleration out of the silos was much more gentle so that the strength of the magnetic pulse would be harder for the Genex to detect. After this the missiles were simply left to drift, their engines remaining inactive in expectation of a command to activate. Even though the strength of the launching pulse was limited it was enough that the speed at which the *Warspite* was orbiting the planet was significantly different to that of the first pair of missiles that it had released and the distance between them increased steadily before a second pair of missiles was released in the same manner just over a minute later.

Reeves watched on the display in front of him as the missiles continued to drift away from the *Warspite*, waiting to see the third pair of missiles ejected. However, just before this could happen one of the sensor operators suddenly looked up from his console.

"Someone just bounced a lidar pulse off our hull." he announced.

"Confirmed captain." Goldman said, "A single initial pulse followed by two more in rapid succession."

"They've seen us." Knight commented.

"Captain the *Evolution's Hand* reports a contact." one of Medina's officers announced suddenly.

"Show me." Medina ordered and he looked at his console as the display changed to show a diagram that combined all of the sensor data being transmitted from the six destroyers in his squadron. This indicated the presence of another vessel hidden within the ice rings around the gas giant and although the clutter made identification of the vessel difficult it was obvious that it was not one of Medina's, "Send to squadron, form up on the *Evolution's Hand* and engage. Deploy all drones. The *Proximity* and *Cannonfire* don't have line of sight yet because of the planet. I want them to duck below the ice rings and come around together from a counter orbital direction. Cut off his retreat."

"Weapons light up those missiles and launch the final two pairs." Reeves ordered and the gun crews sent the command that would activate the missiles that had already been cast adrift in the ice ring. Almost instantly Reeves saw the traces for the missiles on his display suddenly change course and accelerate out of the ice

rings as they began to home in on their assigned targets. At the same time four more missiles were launched from their silos, this time ejected with a full strength magnetic pulse and their engines ignited the moment that they were clear of the *Warspite*.

The Genex captains did not sit idly by as they were fired on though. The destroyers began to close their scattered formation and the moment that the *Warspite's* missiles fired their engines the Genex brought their defensive turrets on line. The first pair of missiles to have been launched were already relatively close to their target when they began to accelerate and its turrets were only able to shoot down one of them before the second slammed into the side of the destroyer and the shaped charge warhead it carried detonated on impact. Designed to inflict serious damage on ships more than twice the size of the *Warspite*, the effect of the warhead on a destroyer that was barely more than half the cruiser's length was catastrophic. The blast of molten metal that bored through the hull where it reached one of the internal magazines for the ship's missile launchers. This triggered a series of secondary explosions that ripped the destroyer apart from within in a massive if brief lived ball of flame.

On the other hand the second pair of missiles had much further to go to reach their target and these came under fire not only from their intended target but also another of the destroyers as the two ships came closer to one another. Once again one of the missiles was shot down before it got anywhere close to the destroyer it was heading for but the second exploded just metres away from its intended target and the destroyer was still sprayed with molten fragments, one of which struck one of the destroyer's turrets and destroyed the weapon.

The final four missiles launched by the *Warspite* then exploded in rapid succession, all well short of their targets as the Genex frigate *Keystone* entered the fray. Moving down from its position above the planet's pole, the frigate sped towards its accompanying destroyers while firing all of its turrets at the missiles to protect them.

"Captain the enemy is deploying drones." Goldman reported.

"Helm take us down under the ice rings before those destroyers start hurling missiles our way. Scramble everything we've got the moment we're clear." Reeves ordered.

Ash promptly fired the *Warspite's* engines again only this time he used the main sub light drives instead of just its manoeuvring thrusters. These produced vastly more power than the thrusters and the cruiser turned rapidly to face what the crew regarded as downwards through the ice ring before accelerating forwards, smashing through chunks of ice as Ash ignored their presence to get clear of the ring as quickly as possible. The *Warspite* was fitted with a pair of magnetic launch accelerators used to propel its attached fighter squadron from the vessel faster than their own engines could manage without the back blast causing damage to the cruiser. One of the first pair of fighters in these tubes was the one piloted by Shaw and Mori and the moment that the *Warspite* left the ice ring Shaw's console warned her to standby for the accelerator to activate.

"Okay Kaz, hang on to your lunch. Here we go." she said and then the fighter shot forwards down the tube and out into space, "Okay so do you see anything?" she added.

"Nothing yet." Mori responded from behind her, "Looks like the captain had us come down under the rings. The Genex are still on the other side.

"Good. That gives us more time to deploy and form up. Send to all squadrons stick with the *Warspite*, no-one goes wandering off until we have a target." Shaw ordered.

Normally the *Warspite* carried a single squadron of space superiority fighters such as the one flown by Shaw and Mori but following a recent battle the cruiser had also taken on a number of attack craft from the carrier *Jericho*, leaving it with elements of another squadron of superiority fighters as well as a number of lighter single seat interceptors and these two were being shot out into space along with the *Warspite's* own squadron.

"Not too far Mister Ash." Reeves said when the *Warspite* broke through the lower layer of the ice ring into open space, "I don't want the Genex getting a clear line of sight to us when they follow us through."

"Particle beam?" Knight said and Reeves nodded, "Gunnery charge neutral particle beam and watch for a target. Fire as soon as one appears."

For direct fire against other targets in space the *Warspite* was fitted a pair of massive neutral particle beam cannons, each of which ran for more than half the length of the eight hundred metre long cruiser. One of these had been damaged and not yet repaired but against frigates or destroyers even one such weapon was enough to inflict major damage very rapidly. However, when the first of the Genex task force appeared it was not one of their destroyers or the frigate commanding them.

A lone attack drone sped down through the ice ring and without adjusting its course turned to track the *Warspite* and its escorting attack craft before a swarm of identical drones followed it through the ice and all changed course to charge directly at the Commonwealth cruiser.

"Fire all turrets. Send our drones to intercept." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain, what about our own fighters?" Goldman asked.

"Instruct Archangel to hold her position just in case the Genex have anything else up their sleeves." Reeves

replied, using Shaw's call sign rather than her name.

"Captain I'm picking up a new group of signals. Eight marks closing fast." one of the sensor operators called out.

"More drones?" Reeves asked.

"No sir, they look like missiles coming around the planetary horizon." the sensor operator told him.

"The two missing destroyers." Knight commented,

"Captain given the position of the first drone to have come through the rings I believe that it is sending targeting telemetry to the destroyers not yet in sight." the ambassador of Nexus said.

"X-ray lasers bring down that drone. Aft turrets realign for counter missile fire." Reeves ordered.

Ash had to spin the *Warspite* so that its two dorsally mounted X-ray laser turrets could target the first of the Genex drones to have appeared. These medium turrets were larger and more powerful than the free electron beam lasers or gauss cannons carried in light mounts and this made both their effective range and destructive power superior. Both turrets turned to track the drone before one of them fired and a stream of focused X-rays was projected at the speed of light. The beam hit the tiny drone dead on and easily sliced the machine in half. This did nothing to deflect the eight missiles currently flying towards the *Warspite* that had already locked on with their own sensors but it did mean that the two destroyers closing from beneath the ice rings could not fire any further volleys while the planet continued to block their line of sight.

"Exiting the ring now captain." the helmsman of the *Keystone* reported just as the frigate and the three accompanying destroyers exited the ice ring.

"Turn us towards the enemy cruiser. Don't get too close though. I want to limit their attacks to missiles as much as possible. All destroyers may fire at will." Medina ordered.

The four Genex capital ships all turned towards the *Warspite* together and while the cruiser was still picking off the wave of attack drones heading towards it the three destroyers unleashed a wave of missiles as well.

"Incoming." Goldman said when she saw the launches on her console.

"All turrets switch to counter missile fire. Order the fighters to deal with the drones and bring us around for a shot at one of those destroyers." Reeves ordered.

"Lining us up for a shot now captain." Ash responded.

"Enemy vessel targeted." one of the gunners added, "Firing."

The *Warspite's* operational neutral particle beam cannon fired and the beam of high energy particles shot across space towards a Genex destroyer positioned beside the commanding frigate. The beam struck close to one of the destroyer's missile launchers and there was an explosion as a round that had just been loaded into the launcher exploded inside it. The blast also disabled the two other launchers on that side of the ship but the vessel itself remained operational.

"*Warspite* this Archangel, the drones are launching missiles." Shaw's voice suddenly announced over the radio.

"Confirmed captain. Multiple launches detected." the ambassador of Nexus said.

"They're trying to overwhelm our defences." Knight said.

"And at this rate they will." Reeves said, glancing at the display on his console that gave him a full breakdown of the weapons still available to him, "We only have nine conventional missiles left and with that frigate out there most of them will be shot down before they hit their targets. I want our main gun and X-ray lasers to focus on that ship."

"Captain we've got more contacts to stern. Looks like the other two destroyers and their drones." Goldman announced.

"Agreed captain." the ambassador of Nexus said.

"With no frigate cover." Knight pointed out.

"Missiles target those destroyers behind us. Three rounds per ship." Reeves ordered.

"That's two thirds of our remaining missiles." Knight commented.

"I am aware of that commander but we need to take some of them out quickly or it won't matter how many missiles we have left." Reeves said.

"We could always try hurling a few nukes at them." Thomas suggested.

"I may still consider that." Reeves said. He had ordered the use of nuclear weapons before but that was not considered a tactic to be entered into lightly.

"Targeting solution acquired captain." one of the gunners reported.

"Fire." Reeves ordered and in unison six more missiles flew from the dorsal launcher and all of them arced towards the two destroyers that had just appeared around the planetary horizon.

The crews of the Genex destroyers reacted quickly, engaging their defensive turrets and the crew of one ship also redirected their drones to try and intercept the missiles. These drones flew into the path of the missiles to form a defensive screen between them and the destroyer. The onboard guidance systems of the missiles themselves reacted by trying to avoid the drones but one of them still collided with one of the Genex

machines and exploded. The blast was easily enough to totally destroy the drone and in addition it produced a cloud of molten fragments that tore through three more of the machines, limiting their manoeuvrability and making it easier for the other missiles to slip past them.

This still left the destroyers' own turrets and a free electron beam laser cut one of the missiles in half before it got anywhere near either destroyer. The next missile found its target though and it slammed into the ventral hull of a destroyer close to its stern. The exploding warhead then sent a plume of molten metal into the destroyer's main fusion reactor and there was a brilliant flash of light that enveloped the entire ship as the reactor containment failed and the plasma within it spilled out. With only one of the two destroyers left all four of the remaining missiles had their guidance updated to focus on this vessel, coming at it from several different angles.

In response to this the destroyer turned away, heading up towards the ice rings in the hope of losing the missiles among the clutter while continuing to fire its turrets at them. This was only partially successful, with one more missile being hit by a laser while a second hit a chunk of ice and detonated prematurely. However, the third missile hit one of the destroyer's drive units, triggering an explosion that shut down all of its main acceleration drives and leaving the ship hurtling onwards in a straight line through the ice ring while the final missile followed in its path. Protected by the destroyer's own hull, the defensive turrets were unable to target the missile before it hit the ship directly from astern and there was a massive explosion that turned the already damaged destroyer into nothing more than a tumbling wreck heading towards the gas giant.

"Can we recover their drones?" Medina asked when he saw the destruction of the second destroyer. "I've established a link to the remaining two from the *Proximity* but the command and control access for the *Cannonfire*'s drones has been locked out." one of the *Keystone*'s officers replied and Medina scowled. "That fool must have thought someone would end up using his own drones against him." he said in reference to the captain of the *Cannonfire*. Assassination of rival officers had been a fact of life among the Genex going back as far as their attempted uprising against the rest of humanity. In that conflict a number of critical battles had even been lost because valuable resources were withheld to prevent rivals from gaining the prestige that would come with victory, "Very well, establish a command path to the accessible drones but don't send them any commands yet. I don't want the Commonwealth vessel realising that they are still active then have the squadron press the attack. Drones and missiles. Give that cruiser too many targets to defend against."

The *Warspite* had suffered numerous hits from the missiles carried by the Genex drones but the effect of these was minimal. The missiles were the same types as carried by manned attack craft and designed for use against targets the same size as they were and this meant that the explosive yield of their warheads was insufficient to stand a realistic chance of piercing the heavy cruiser's thick armour plating. This did not mean that the missiles could be ignored though, any one of them could still strike a vulnerable component and the number of these missiles was keeping the *Warspite*'s turrets busy when the destroyers unleashed another volley.

"Turrets focus on those missiles from the destroyers." Reeves ordered, "Goldman order Lieutenant Commander Shaw to take her squadrons into the ice rings. See if they can get close enough to one of those destroyers to attack without that frigate cutting them apart."

"What about our drones?" Knight asked.

"How many are left?" Reeves said.

"Eight. Still engaged against the Genex drones captain." Goldman told him and he nodded.

"Then keep them there, it'll keep some of the heat off us." he said before another missile struck the cruiser, this one from one of the destroyers.

"Captain I have a red light on the main guns." one of the gunners said and Knight reached for the intercom.

"Engineering this is the bridge. We've just lost the main guns. How soon can we get them back?"

"It looks like a power coupling issue." Bernard responded, "Normally I'd say ten minutes but with the state we're in now it could be an hour."

"An hour of this and we won't have a ship left." Knight commented, looking at Reeves.

"Ambassador can you give us an estimate of how much ammunition those destroyers may have left?"

Reeves asked, turning towards the intelligence console.

"If they are dedicating a similar amount of their internal volume to missile storage as a Commonwealth destroyer would then I estimate that they have expended less than a third of their available rounds." the ambassador answered.

"Then they aren't going to be backing off any time soon to resupply." Knight said.

"We need to get closer. Helm lay in a course towards the centre of the enemy formation." Reeves said.

"The frigate?" Knight asked.

"Yes, maybe if we can take it out of the equation the squadron will lose command and control. At the very least they'll become more vulnerable to what missiles we have left." Reeves said, "Weapons continue to target incoming missiles with our turrets but as soon as a clear shot can be made against the frigate with our

X-ray lasers take it.”

“Course set, firing engines now.” Ash said and the *Warspite* began to accelerate towards the Genex squadron that for the time being had held its distance.

“Captain the enemy is closing on our position.” one of the Keystone's bridge officers reported.

“The Commonwealth captain is desperate. His main guns are damaged and we can shoot down his missiles. He wants to engage our destroyers with his turrets.” Medina said, smiling.

“No captain I mean he's heading right for us. Our ship.” the officer said and Medina's face fell.

“Pull back. Have our destroyers form a line in front of us and fire everything they've got.” he ordered.

“Captain that will limit our ability to provide anti-missile cover to the destroyers.” his first officer pointed out.

“We can't provide cover to anyone if we're dead!” Medina snapped, “Now fall back and have the destroyers cover us.”

“Archangel the Genex are moving. Looks like they're falling back.” one of the *Warspite's* fighter pilots reported.

“The frigate is pulling back and the destroyers are moving to protect her.” Mori added.

“Exactly the opposite of what those ships should be doing.” Shaw said, “Do any of those destroyers look vulnerable?”

“It looks like they're forming a line so either of the end ships is further out from the frigate and will block their line of sight.” Mori told her.

“Okay then we hit the one on the left. All fighters this is Archangel. Target the destroyer at the left of the line. Keep it between you and the frigate as much as you can. Good hunting everyone.” Shaw broadcast to the squadron and then she quickly turned her fighter to point towards the destroyer and fired its engines.

The mix of superiority fighters and interceptors flew down out of the ice ring and fired their gauss cannons at the destroyer, peppering its hull with magnetically accelerated projectiles. The vast majority of these did no damage at all, unable to pierce the destroyer's armour but there were plumes of vapour in places as a few lucky shots pierced weak points in the capital ship's protection.

The destroyer's two turrets turned to engage the Commonwealth attack craft and a pair of them were blasted apart in rapid succession but without cover from the Keystone the destroyer had little defence against such a numerous enemy force.

“We've got a lock.” Mori said suddenly as a tone in Shaw's ear told her that her fighter's sensors had locked onto the destroyer and that she could fire her missiles at any time.

“Not just yet Kaz. I want this shot to count.” she replied as she turned the fighter while not adjusting its course, leaving the tiny attack craft facing a different direction to its travel. “There. Mark that point.” she added as the cross hairs of her heads up display settled on one of the destroyer's missile launch doors.

“Marked and locked.” Mori said and only then did Shaw release a missile from the fighter's weapons bay.

“Fox one.” she said, grinning as the missile sped towards the destroyer and exploded on impact with the launch door. There was no secondary blast from a missile exploding inside the launcher, let alone a chain reaction that would rip apart the destroyer but Shaw could see from the mangled metal where the missile had hit that the launcher was now out of action.

Shaw saw more missiles fly from the other fighters and hit the destroyer as the more than twenty fighters and interceptors flew past it, each one adding a little bit more damage to the total and she let out a sudden cry when she saw one of the ship's turrets explode thanks to a fortunate missile impact.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, “Kaz make a note of who did that so I can buy them a drink when we get back.” but before Mori could respond the fighter that had fired the missile suddenly exploded as well when it was hit by the destroyer's second turret, proving that the vessel was not out of the fight just yet.

As the fighters sped past the destroyer one of the *Warspite's* two X-ray laser turrets fired and the blast struck the forward section of the Genex frigate. However, although the beam was able to cut through the frigate's hull the section hit was just a forward hangar and the ship promptly returned fire with its main gun, a powerful free-electron beam laser that hit one of the *Warspite's* engines.

“Captain that hit took out one of our drive units. We're losing power.” Ash said before there was the sound of a distant explosion.

“Missile hit to the port wing assembly captain. Looks like one of the fuel tanks ruptured.” Goldman said.

“Captain I'm picking up more tachyons. I think there are more ships coming in.” Cortez added.

“More?” Thomas exclaimed.

“Either one big one or several more frigate or destroyer sized vessels.” Cortez said before her instruments detected a sudden surge in tachyons as another large ship dropped to sub-light speed close by.

“Captain we have a single contact.” Goldman said, “She's big. Must be two thousand metres.”

“Is it another Genex ship?” Knight asked.

“I don't know commander. She's heading this way faster than I've seen anything that big move before.”

Accelerating almost as fast as we can move at full thrust. Wait I think I've got a transponder signal. A Commonwealth one." Goldman said and then she looked past Reeves and Knight at where the ambassador of Nexus sat.

"There is no need for alarm captain." the ambassador said, "I am here."

B.

"Captain we have an unidentified warship approaching at high speed. I'm picking up multiple launches from it." a bridge officer aboard the *Keystone* told Medina.

"Attack craft or missiles?" Medina asked.

"Both I think."

"Don't think! Be sure." Medina snapped.

"Definitely both. We have incoming attack craft and missiles. Hundreds of them." the officer said.

"How is that possible?" Medina said as he called up the available information on the newly arrived warship. The mysterious vessel was around two kilometres in length and had a near constant width and height along all of this. The most obvious deviations being the eight large drive units that protruded from it towards the rear while smaller variations in size were caused by the numerous light turrets and railings that formed external mounting points for the massive swarm of drones that had detached from the vessel almost as soon as it had dropped out of FTL. A large portion of the ship's surface was covered in familiar looking hatches and several dozen of these had already sprung open to release the missiles hidden behind them. However, despite the size of the vessel the sheer number of these missile launchers was staggering. No ordinary spacecraft could dedicate so much of its internal volume to its armament and still have enough room to include everything else that was needed for it to operate, "A dreadnought." he said.

"Captain we have incoming missiles." another bridge officer warned.

"Adjust turret facing, shoot them down before-" Medina began. His gunners had already been in the process of turning their weapons towards the newly arrived threat but the sheer number of missiles that the massive warship had launched were too much even for the frigate's multiple defensive turrets and before Medina could finish his order one of them hit the side of the *Keystone* and blew a large hole in the frigate. The damage caused by this shut down two of the *Keystone*'s turrets and this created a gap in the ship's defences that another pair of missiles flew through before also slamming into it. This time the missiles hit towards the rear of the ship one after another. The first cracked open the frigate's superstructure and this enabled the second to enter the interior of the ship before it exploded and the blast of molten metal the warhead ejected punched into the bridge itself where the entire command staff was killed instantly.

With the *Keystone* destroyed the Genex destroyers were stripped of most of their defensive screen against missiles or attack craft and the crews of those ships instantly saw that they were outclassed in both the quantity and strength of their weapons and all three began to retreat away from the dreadnought, starting the process of generating a tachyon field to leave the system. The destroyers could not outrun the missiles launched by the dreadnought at sub-light speed though and before any of them could complete the process of accelerating to faster than light speed they were struck by multiple missiles that blew them all apart. The dreadnought then began to change its course and speed, matching that of the *Warspite* and positioning itself alongside the Commonwealth cruiser.

"Would you look at that?" Knight said as the *Warspite*'s command crew all stared at the image of the dreadnought shown on the bridge's view screens.

"The *Nexus Dreadnought*." Reeves said before turning towards the ambassador, "A ship I understand has never left the Luhman Sixteen system before now."

"Correct captain. There has never been a need to deploy it beyond the central system of Nexus. However, the current circumstances require the presence of Nexus in a more significant capacity than what this body is capable of." the ambassador replied.

"I'd heard that the *Nexus Dreadnought* was controlled by a full version of Nexus." Knight commented.

"Captain I would like to meet with you in person to discuss the current situation. Commander Bernard, Lieutenant Commander Goldman and Doctor Thundercloud as well." the ambassador said and Goldman frowned.

"Aren't you doing that right now?" she said.

"He means we need to go over there commander." Reeves said, pointing to the image of the *Nexus Dreadnought* he was looking at.

"Correct. That will allow for a more efficient exchange of information than is possible by relaying communication through this body." the ambassador said.

"And you?" Reeves asked.

"I will remain here. Although the link between this body and the full Nexus consciousness aboard the *Nexus Dreadnought* is imperfect it still provides a more efficient link between our vessels than ordinary communication channels." the ambassador said and Reeves nodded.

"Very well. Have Commander Bernard and Doctor Thundercloud meet us in the hangar." he said.

When the Genex had captured her while she was attempting to gather information from their computer network, Lieutenant Lucas had been strip searched and then left bound in a cargo hold under guard for the duration of the flight back to the Genex home world. Upon their arrival the Genex had untied Lucas but not returned her clothing, therefore the first thing she did when thrown into a cell was to take the blanket from the bed and wrap it around her before taking a closer look at her surroundings.

The cell itself appeared conventional with three of the four walls being constructed of a transparent polymer that would allow guards to see inside from almost any direction and allowed for no privacy of any kind. The fourth wall, located at the back of the cell was instead solid concrete and there were no windows that would tell her whether this was an external wall. The transparent walls also meant that Lucas could easily see the cell block beyond her own cell and she saw that instead of being a large prison block she was in a cluster of just six cells, all identical to her own and arranged in a ring around a central guard post that for some reason was unmanned. However, several prominent security cameras suggested to Lucas that she was being monitored remotely instead.

Unsurprisingly there were no clocks visible from inside her cell and Lucas guessed that this, combined with the lack of windows was a means to disorientate prisoners held here. Either of these features would enable someone held here to tell the passage of time but without them it could any time of day or night and Lucas would have no idea. Had there been anyone in any of the other cells then Lucas would have tried questioning them about their prison but all of the other cells were as vacant as the guard post and she considered the possibility that this was a facility intended for prisoners taken from the Commonwealth that she was the first inmate of. Therefore, with nothing else to do she chose to start inspecting the construction of the cell to see if there were any weaknesses she could exploit.

INTERLUDE.

"She's planning an escape grandfather." the old man's granddaughter said when he entered the office to find her monitoring the cell block where Lucas was being held.

"Of course she is my dear." he replied, walking towards her while his two bodyguards took positions either side of the door, "No animal likes being caged. Now what about Jennifer Hayes?" he asked and the young woman checked a secondary display.

"She's been in surgery for three hours now. The surgeon's report indicates that-" she began before the intercom sounded and the old man reached out to activate the speaker.

"Yes?" he said simply.

"Admiral, Mister Tanner is here to see you." one of the old man's assistants told him.

"Ah excellent. Please send him in." the old man replied before turning off the intercom and then he sat down behind his desk before the door to the office opened again and a thin man entered the room.

"Admiral." he said nervously as he looked at the warrior caste bodyguards looming over him.

"Professor please take a seat. There's no need to worry about them. They are here only for my protection." the old man said.

"Of course. But I've seen how enthusiastic some warriors can be. Sometimes I think we thinkers went over the top with their aggressive instincts when we engineered them." Tanner said and the old man's granddaughter studied the two warriors for any sign of a reaction to this statement. Unsurprisingly there was none. The old man had chosen his security detail very carefully.

"And that is why you needed us leaders to control them properly." the old man said as Tanner sat opposite him, "Now what can you tell me about this alien signal?"

"I've had the chance to go through the notes made by the late Doctor Horst. It seems that despite your specific orders to the contrary she had been carrying out a detailed analysis of the computer code it contained. Specifically how to isolate different sections of it."

"Not surprising." the old man's granddaughter said, "You thinkers never can resist a mystery but unleashing an alien computer virus that may have destroyed at least three civilisations is something even you would have to be wary of."

"Three?" Tanner commented, "I was only aware of-"

"The Sissusk Empire has fallen professor. As did an unknown civilisation that once inhabited the planet Verne and also the original owners of the vessels discovered in the Tau-six Eridani system before the war." the old man said.

"You do remember those, don't you professor? They are the reason the thinker caste pushed for the war against the Commonwealth in the first place. Now look where we are." his granddaughter added.

"Of course." Tanner said, averting his gaze from the young woman, "Admiral I have been able to isolate the sections of code contained within the signal that allow it to bind to technologies created by entirely different species. It really is remarkable you know. This sort of programming must have taken-"

"Spare me your admiration for the aliens who have spent thousands of years killing and enslaving other species professor." the old man interrupted, "All I want to know is whether you can give me the information that I need to make their computer program work for me."

"The answer to that is a simple 'yes' admiral. With what I know you can use the interface elements of the code to gain access to any Commonwealth computer systems." Tanner said.

"Firewalls won't stop it?" the granddaughter asked.

"Delay perhaps but the code is adaptive in a way I've never seen before. In fact I think that we may be able to modify this code to produce an unbeatable security program for our own computers. Their firewalls would reconfigure themselves faster than a hacker could process the changes." Tanner said.

"Even Nexus?" the old man asked, smiling.

"Ah, well of course Nexus is something of an unknown quantity. No-one really understands how it came into being. Not even Nexus itself." Tanner replied.

"It's hostility towards us has been proven. It refused our offer of an alliance during the war. An alliance recommended by the thinker caste if I remember correctly." the granddaughter pointed out.

"An alliance that still could have come to pass if the leadership caste hadn't decided to attack as soon as Nexus said 'no' when first approached." Tanner said.

"Please professor, I am not here to go over arguments more than a hundred years old. I want to know how soon I can put this code into use." the old man said.

"Oh not for several weeks at least. You see the problem is that there are calls to the more destructive AI elements in numerous places. Unsurprising really. After all that is what the signal was designed to deliver." Tanner explained.

"You can't just extract that section of code then?" the old man's granddaughter asked and Tanner shook his

head.

"No. You see we don't actually have the original source code here anyway. Even if we did it's highly unlikely that we could understand enough of it to identify the parts relating to the AI without at least a decade of study by a full research team. With the compiled code and a quarantined computer system however, I can study how the code interacts with the outside world and it is my opinion that the AI is fragmented and self authoring." he said.

"In English professor." the old man said.

"The AI exists as small pieces. Activating any one of these will cause the code to rebuild the entire program. A feature I suspect was designed to make doing what I am trying to do more difficult. I only need to miss one part of the AI for it to recreate itself entirely." Tanner said.

"I see. That is interesting." the old man said, "So what progress have you made in isolating the surface functionality of the program professor?"

"Well as I said we are still several weeks away from having a successfully purged infiltration program." Tanner answered.

"But you've separated out that part of the code?" the old man's granddaughter said.

"Yes. In our trials the program penetrated the same firewall that is used to protect our defence systems and the AI took over the host operating system in a matter of minutes. Of course I had the infected machines physically destroyed to remove any chance that the AI could spread."

"I take it that this information is in your logs, yes?" the old man asked.

"Of course." Tanner said.

"Then I must ask you to remove it." the old man told him and he frowned.

"Remove it?" he said

"Yes professor. Like anyone else with my rank I have enemies and rivals and I would be sorely disappointed if at least some of them didn't think our little research project worthy of spying on. Now imagine the consequences if someone were to break into your files and take that code for themselves." the old man said and Tanner's eyes widened.

"It would be a disaster." he said.

"Quite. I want all of your research material removed from your system whether it is quarantined or not. Copy it to portable drives that can be physically secured and destroyed if tampered with. I will retain back up copies for you. Secured where I can guarantee no-one will have access to them." the old man said.

"Of course admiral. I'll see to it immediately if I may." Tanner said and the old man nodded.

"You are dismissed professor." he said and Tanner got up to leave. The old man and his granddaughter waited until he was out of the room and the door closed behind him before looking at one another.

"So we'll have the code." the young woman said.

"Yes and in a usable weaponised form." her grandfather said.

"We still need to make sure that it can be delivered without destroying ourselves in the process." his granddaughter replied.

"Yes and for that we have to hope that Jennifer Hayes will be co-operative." the old man said.

4.

The door to the cell block opened unexpectedly and Lucas looked around to see who was entering. She had expected a military officer to arrive to question her but instead she saw a pair of men in white coveralls and face masks pushing in a wheeled stretcher to which an unconscious woman had been strapped. As she was wheeled past her cell Lucas saw that the woman on the stretcher was wearing a hospital gown while her hands were covered by thick padded mittens that were part of the strapping that held her down, denying her the use of her hands at all.

The two men pushing the stretcher took it to one of the other cells and wheeled it inside. Lucas expected them to unstrap the woman but instead they simply left the stretcher in the cell as well before turning around and leaving, testing to make sure that the cell door was locked properly after closing it and then heading back towards the exit from the cell block.

"Hey, what's going on? Who is she?" Lucas called out as the men waked past her cell but neither of them responded to her, both of them instead just walking out of the room and closing the door behind them and Lucas turned to look at the woman on the stretcher.

Even lying down it was obvious that the woman was much taller than Lucas was but that was about all that she could tell while the woman remained unconscious.

"Who are you?" Lucas said to herself, wondering how long it would be before the other woman awoke.

"Hayes. Jennifer Hayes." she said, suddenly opening her eyes. Hayes then lifted her head as far as she could, inspecting her bonds. She could see that she was secured to the stretcher by simply padded wrist and ankle cuffs but that she had been placed in further restraints that pinned her arms to her sides and covered her hands completely, "So what about you?"

"Jessica Lucas." Lucas replied, then she considered that this woman could be a plant intended to solicit information from her under the guise of being a fellow prisoner, "Lieutenant. Serial number-"

"Oh give it a break Lieutenant Jessica Lucas. I suppose you must be the officer from the Commonwealth ship, the *Warspite*. Yes, I heard they were bringing you back before my fall from grace landed me here." Hayes interrupted.

"So why not tell me all about that then? Come on, I want to hear your cover story." Lucas said.

"Do you know what a drone is Jessica? May I call you Jessica?" Hayes replied.

"No and no." Lucas told her.

"Very well Lieutenant Lucas, you see Genex society has something of a problem with demographics. I'm part of the leader caste and the simple thing is that there are just too many of us. When we were driven out here at the end of the war our government knew that it needed to rebuild the population so it encouraged us all to have big families. Lots of children from an early age and let me tell you not having done that carries far more stigma than you can believe." Hayes said.

"So you're here to get knocked up?" Lucas said.

"You know that might almost be preferable but no, in fact pretty much the opposite. You see before the war there were far more thinkers, workers and warriors than leaders but even then we didn't exactly get along with one another. Then when Langley was evacuated right under the noses of your fleet every leader pulled whatever string they could to get a place in the evacuation instead of having to stay behind and be nuked. Combined with the loses that the warrior caste suffered during the war, this meant that there were far more of us proportionally after the war than before it." Hayes continued.

"Now there are too many leaders and not enough leadership positions." Lucas commented.

"Exactly. We may have expanded our roles to include lower ranked positions, the thinkers need monitoring closely for example to make sure they don't get any ideas above their station but competition for advancement is tough. You really need to stand out to get promoted and every leader is watching those below them for any signs of a coup."

"So you tried to get rid of your superior?" Lucas said.

"Oh no, I just tried to make myself look better than my peers. Unfortunately my plan went awry and I was removed from my position. Everyone else involved in the project was killed outright but I'm to be made an example. A warning to everyone else about what happens to those who fail like I did. I'm to become a drone, a lobotomised puppet who does whatever they are told to do. Sterilised to make sure my genes aren't carried on any further." Hayes said.

"The man on the *Edwin Kane*." Lucas commented naming the Genex mining ship that the *Warspite's* marines had seized so that it could be used to infiltrate the Genex outpost.

"What?" Hayes asked.

"When we seized the *Edwin Kane* it was crewed almost entirely by workers but there was a single warrior and also another man who had been castrated and had parts of his brain removed. The other Genex killed him before he could be captured." Lucas told her before wondering whether she should have discussed how

the *Warspite* had taken the Genex outpost while in a cell that was obviously being monitored.
“That sounds like a drone and it's hardly surprising they killed him. If you'd taken him alive he'd have spilled his guts as soon as you asked him anything,” Hayes said, “and unless I can get out of here soon I'll end up like that as well.”
“Can you see this?” Lucas said, holding up her thumb and forefinger, rubbing the ends of them together.
“Yes, why?”
“Because it's the galaxy's smallest violin playing just for you.” Lucas said.

A shuttle was already prepared when Reeves and Goldman arrived at the aft hangar where Major Willis, the commanding officer of the *Warspite*'s marine company was waiting for them with a squad of his men.

“Is something wrong major?” Reeves asked.

“Yes captain. We're in a war zone and you're about to leave the ship. I've put together a security detail to protect you.” Willis answered.

“We're just going to another Commonwealth ship.” Goldman pointed out, “I doubt that Nexus will attack us.”

“Of course not. From what I've heard that ship could crush us in a minute without giving it a second thought. But supposing the Genex slip a stealth ship into the system? There could already be one here for all we know. They could try and put a boarding party aboard that dreadnought instead of trying to match its missiles. What sort of security detachment does it carry?” Willis asked.

“Your point is taken major. Though I suspect that Nexus has the means to protect us you and your men can tag along as well. But if you're asked to stay aboard the shuttle then I expect you to follow that order. I'll take a sidearm if it makes you any happier.” Reeves said and Willis smiled.

“Much. Thank you captain.” he said before noticing Bernard and Doctor Thundercloud, the *Warspite*'s chief medical officer entering the hangar, “Caught by surprise were you commander?” Willis said, watching as Bernard finished tying his tie and then took his tunic from Thundercloud.

“I wanted to make a good impression on the super intelligent artificial life form and I didn't think that grease covered overalls would do the trick.” Bernard replied.

“Are we expecting trouble captain?” Thundercloud asked when he saw the marines boarding the shuttle ahead of them.

“Just a precaution doctor. Major Willis has convinced me that it is better to have them and not need them than need them and not have them.” Reeves said and Thundercloud sighed.

“If you say so captain. Though I just hope we don't offend the intelligence in control of that dreadnought parked beside us.” he said.

“Don't worry doc. My men and I will be on our best behaviour.” Willis said.

“Then it's a good job Nexus doesn't have a daughter.” Goldman commented.

Reeves sat beside the shuttle pilot as the small craft carried him and his team from the *Warspite* to the nearby *Nexus Dreadnought* and he saw a large hatchway open in the side of the two kilometre long warship.

“Shuttle, please approach and dock. You will be given further instructions once aboard.” the voice of Nexus announced over the radio and the pilot glanced at Reeves.

“Do as it says ensign.” he said.

By necessity a hangar would be de-pressurised before a shuttle could land or take off and the same applied with the *Nexus Dreadnought*. However, whereas aboard most vessels this meant that the ground crew would have to evacuate the hangar during a launch or landing there were numerous robots of various sizes visible inside the hangar as the shuttle from the *Warspite* touched down. As soon as the shuttle touched the deck a wheeled robot rolled towards the craft, pulling behind it a fuel line that it connected as soon as the pilot shut down the engines.

“Standby for hangar pressurisation.” Nexus told the occupants of the shuttle while the large external door closed behind it and Reeves watched the console where the external air pressure was shown increasing from zero to standard Earth pressure at which point Reeves turned around.

“Open the door please corporal.” he said to a marine sat beside one of the shuttle's hatches.

Reeves stepped out of the shuttle ahead of the other occupants and looked around the hangar. Had this been an ordinary Commonwealth ship there would have been an officer waiting to enter the hangar as soon as it was safe to greet them and guide them to where they needed to be. However, on the fully automated *Nexus Dreadnought* things were handled differently.

“I see you have brought a security detail with you as well Captain Reeves.” the voice of Nexus announced out loud, “They are unnecessary but not unwelcome. Please follow the indicated route.” and then an internal door slid open.

“I guess we go this way then.” Reeves said to the others before he began to lead the way towards the open doorway.

After passing through this doorway the party from the *Warspite* found themselves in a corridor that had several other exits leading from it and one of these slid open to indicate the route they should take. In turn this led to a chamber that was dominated by a large circular table that had chairs all around it along with

ordinary looking computer terminals in front of each seat while numerous larger monitors lined the walls. Aside from the door that the party had entered through there were two others in the room, both of them clearly labelled. One identified the room on the other side as a galley while the second led to a bathroom. The only feature in the room that did not have an obvious purpose was located at the very centre of the table where three plastic blocks of different colours sat upon a raised section. One of these was bright red, another blue and the third yellow.

"Please sit down all of you." Nexus said, "You may help yourself to refreshments from the galley if you wish. The selection is somewhat limited though since use of the guest facilities is rare. No organic being has set foot aboard this vessel in more than sixty Earth years."

"Perhaps you could tell us why you asked us here." Reeves said as he took a seat.

"Prior to your encounter with the Tick in the Phi Two Pavonis system I had no knowledge of any non-human species that had a level of technology that rivalled that of the Commonwealth, yet it rapidly became clear that several such species existed beyond our borders and that a faction of humanity already possessed knowledge of them." Nexus said.

"You mean the Genex." Thundercloud said.

"Yes doctor. By the way, might I state that I enjoyed reading your book on comparative alien biologies. I do hope that you are able to produce a new edition that includes the species recently encountered in the Chi Draconis system." Nexus replied.

"Looks like you've got a fan doc." Willis commented.

"Thank you." Thundercloud said, tilting his head back to look upwards as most humans did when addressing automated interface systems.

"You are welcome doctor. Now returning to the issue of the Genex, I would like to know what information you have regarding them. I only have access to the information contained in the courier drone that arrived in the Gamma Pavonis system while I was present just beyond the system's limits." Nexus said.

"So that's how you managed to get here in under two weeks." Reeves commented.

"Yes captain. I wanted to be in a position to get updates from Admiral Mitchell's task force as quickly as possible but agreed with the idea that its departure would be monitored. Therefore, knowing that my presence there would undoubtedly attract a great deal of attention I chose not to enter the Gamma Pavonis system openly when I arrived shortly after the task force departed. Of course when the drone arrived with the news of the Genex survival I immediately set a course for this system to see for myself." Nexus explained.

"So where do you want us to start about the Genex?" Bernard said, "Their technology or their biology?"

"Whatever you think is most relevant commander." Nexus responded.

"Well all I studied was their technology, which seems to be pretty much the same as ours. I'd say that wherever they've been hiding for the last hundred years or so they've been developing the technology they had during the war in parallel with us rather than going off in a radically different direction." Bernard said.

"Yes, that information was contained in your initial report on the Edwin Kane. Did the outpost yield no further information?" Nexus said.

"I'm afraid that we didn't get much chance to study it before it was destroyed. All I can tell you is that the weapons the Genex used to defend their base seemed pretty standard again. No exotic energy beams or anything like that. Major Willis was present for the surface assault though, he may be able to give you more information." Reeves said.

"There isn't much to tell." Willis said, "Like I said in my report, it wasn't much different to any of the raids I've taken part in on other human ships and bases. Of course they have true artificial gravity now the same as us. They didn't have that during the war did they?"

"No. That technology was exclusive to the Commonwealth during the later stages of the conflict. According to my information both Captain Reeves and Commander Bernard had relatives who took part in the first engagement where artificial gravity was a deciding factor." Nexus said and Bernard smiled.

"We drink a toast on the anniversary every year." he said.

"Interesting." Nexus commented.

"We also have a drone." Bernard added.

"After the battle I ordered one recovered for study." Reeves said.

"That is interesting. My ambassador has informed me of this. Would it be possible to transfer the drone to this vessel for analysis?" Nexus asked and Reeves looked at Bernard.

"I can't say I don't want to pull that thing apart personally to understand exactly what it does captain but frankly I've got enough on my hands with trying to put the *Warspite* back together. If what we've seen of this ship is anything to go by I expect that Nexus could carry out the analysis far quicker than my people can. Especially right now." Bernard told him.

"Very well, we can arrange to have the drone transferred to your ship." Reeves said.

"Excellent. Now Doctor Thundercloud perhaps you can tell me more about the Genex themselves. You said in your report contained aboard the courier drone that one of them encountered aboard the Edwin Kane had been surgically altered. Have you determined the purpose of this and were any further altered individuals

encountered in the outpost?" Nexus said.

"Why anyone would have carried out any of the surgical procedures the man had been subject to is still a mystery. It doesn't match anything we know about the Genex, their history has them creating warriors to fill a precise need but I don't see what need that man could possibly fill. He would have been capable of carrying out only the most basic tasks and would be less capable than an ordinary worker." Thundercloud answered. "Most of the crew of the *Edwin Kane* were workers." Willis commented, "It was when we stormed the outpost we encountered warriors in serious numbers."

"A genetic test indicates that the surgically modified man was a leader. That means that we've confirmed the existence of three of the four known castes." Thundercloud said.

"That just leaves the original Genex then, the thinkers." Goldman added.

"The development of technology such as artificial gravity strongly suggests that the thinker caste still exists as well." Nexus said, "All data indicates that the leaders lack the psychological capacity to co-operate on a project as complicated as the development of particle inductor technology to the point where it can produce gravitons in addition to tachyons. The Genex leadership caste may be able to direct such a project but they would require the thinkers. Captain Reeves is there any indication of where the Genex may now be based?"

"A ship was able to escape the outpost and left the system before it could be intercepted. My navigator has been checking its departure vector to see if it would take it to any nearby system but it's likely that the Genex will have used the same pattern of a short initial jump followed by a course correction to throw off pursuit as we would." Reeves responded.

"There's a chance that we might be able to recover something from the wreck of one of those destroyers or the frigate that attacked us." Bernard suggested.

"We can run some scans and see if there's anything that looks like a computer in the wreckage." Goldman added and Reeves nodded.

"That sounds like a plan to me." he said before he looked upwards, "What do you think?"

"I think that Commander Bernard and Lieutenant Commander Goldman are correct. I am already beginning scanning. Now there is the matter of the *Warspite* itself. Your vessel appears heavily damaged." Nexus said.

"It is. Our particle inductor is off line and there's a hole in our hull big enough to stop us jumping to FTL even if we get the tachyons from that courier of yours." Bernard said.

"Our weapons are also heavily depleted." Reeves added.

"We're down to just three missiles unless you count our nuclear weapons." Goldman added.

"All of these are issues I can help with. You may have noticed that only a small portion of this vessel is required to maintain an environment in which humans can survive unprotected. With little need for the resources that must be dedicated to maintaining such an environment I am able to dedicate the internal volume normally associated to such things to other purposes." Nexus said.

"You mean like all those missile launchers?" Reeves said, remembering the hundreds of missile launchers covering the exterior of the *Nexus Dreadnought*.

"Correct. I carry more than three times as many missile launchers as a Bellator-class missile dreadnought, including those one can carry on its external mountings. My cargo holds can also carry enough spare missiles to reload all my weapons twice over." Nexus said.

"That's more than three and a half thousand missiles captain." Bernard pointed out.

"Three thousand six hundred to be precise. All of which are compatible with the launchers aboard the *Warspite*. It makes sense for me to provide you with fresh ammunition. Given how far we are from Commonwealth territory I would recommend that such a transfer includes missiles for your secondary launching system." Nexus said and Reeves smiled. The secondary launching system Nexus had referred to were external hard points mounted under each of the *Warspite*'s wings that added an extra sixty-four missiles to the cruisers standard capacity of ninety-six in vertical launchers.

"That would be greatly appreciated." he said.

"You are welcome Captain Reeves. In addition my onboard workshops stand by to produce spare parts you cannot fashion yourselves in a reasonable time." Nexus continued.

"That could slash our repair time from weeks to days." Bernard said and Reeves nodded.

"Again thank you." he said, "But we also need to consider our next move. When that destroyer squadron fails to report in the Genex are going to come looking for it and I expect that there'll be more of them than just seven small capital ships."

"Agreed captain. At best I estimate that we will have a week until a larger Genex task force arrives." Nexus said.

"That is about how long it took those destroyers to show up." Goldman commented, "Seems reasonable that if they were gathering a larger force then it could get here just as quickly."

"Probably quicker." Bernard said, "Given how fast the Genex destroyers arrived I'd estimate that their base isn't much more than twenty light years away. Possibly even less if their engines are significantly slower than ours. They probably came here after that ship that escaped reached that base but I wouldn't be surprised if the destroyers were just supposed to confirm our destruction via tachyon transmission."

"So instead of it taking three days or so for the Genex to notice that they're missing they'll have figured it out in a few hours." Thundercloud commented.

"I doubt it would be that quick. The fact that they found us orbiting the first planet they searched was at least partially good luck on their part. If we'd moved to a different location they'd have to keep searching. We may get a couple of days grace out of that but I doubt we've got a week." Bernard said.

"Your reasoning is sound commander." Nexus said, "Unfortunately while I was able to destroy the vessels present when I arrived a full task force may be another matter."

"Didn't you take care of a full task force during the war? A pretty big one if I recall correctly." Willis said.

"That was prior to the construction of this ship and was against a largely carrier based force launching attack craft against my planetary facilities. The Genex underestimated the number of drones I could deploy to defend myself. They may not repeat that mistake." Nexus replied.

"I think you should prioritise getting our FTL system back up and running." Reeves told Bernard, "If we can't fight then we've got no choice but to run."

"A logical decision Captain Reeves." Nexus said, "Although I do not have the full engineering specification of your ship I do know the model of particle inductor it is fitted with and I have the specifications for that in my library. I shall prepare to produce any spare parts you require."

"In that case I suggest we return to the *Warspite* and get to work. Unless anyone else has anything they want to say?" Reeves said and Willis raised his hand, "Yes major?" Reeves asked.

"What's with the toy blocks?" Willis said, pointing to the three coloured blocks.

"They are a puzzle Major Willis. One that I have been contemplating for centuries." Nexus responded, "I may share many characteristics of human sentience but there are still parts of it that elude me. Ever since I first became self aware I have observed that many humans react more favourably to certain colours than others and for this reason I have been studying these blocks. Each of them is the same size, shape and mass. The only measurable difference between them is their colour. I am attempting to determine whether I have a preference for one over the others."

Thundercloud smiled.

"You mean you're trying to figure out what your favourite colour is?" he said.

"Yes doctor. Exactly that." Nexus answered.

"Status of fleet?" Admiral Kim said as he sat down on the bridge of the *Ashford's Fury*.

"The last ship is signalling ready now admiral. As you ordered our fleet will move in two groups. The fast group will enter the Eta Indi system to support the *Warspite* while our slower support ships will arrive later and hold beyond the system limits until called for." said the battleship's flight operations officer.

"Very good. Helm charge our hull. Commander Trent instruct the fleet to do the same and then execute a synchronised jump. Let's remind the Genex of the beating they took in the war." the admiral ordered.

Replenishing the *Warspite's* stocks of missiles and drones from those carried aboard the *Nexus Dreadnought* took just a few hours, by the end of which the cruiser was carrying a total of a hundred and sixty heavy missiles including those fitted with nuclear warheads. Repairs to the ship were taking longer though, even with support from the extensive workshops aboard the *Nexus Dreadnought* supporting those aboard the *Warspite*. While this repair work was being carried out Reeves took the opportunity to get some rest and returned to his quarters. However, he had only just begun to have something to eat when there was a knock at his door.

"Come in." he called out and the door opened to allow Knight and Thomas to enter his quarters.

"Douglas, I thought you were watching things on the bridge." Reeves said.

"I left it in the capable hands of Goldman." Knight replied, "Thomas and I have something we'd like to discuss with you in private."

"Away from the ambassador." Thomas added. Since the arrival of the *Nexus Dreadnought* the ambassador of Nexus had not left the *Warspite's* bridge at all, meaning that any conversations that took place there would be overheard by Nexus itself.

"I wasn't aware that there was a problem with the ambassador." Reeves said, frowning.

"Not yet there isn't. But Thomas has made an observation that could change that." Knight said and he and Thomas sat down.

"Go on." Reeves said.

"It's about Nexus itself." Thomas said, "It's a true AI, right? More than just the basic systems in robots, it actually thinks for itself."

"Yes, is that supposed to be a problem?" Reeves said.

"My point is that maybe Nexus isn't so unique captain." Thomas said.

"You're thinking about the AI contained in the alien radio signal?" Reeves asked and Thomas nodded.

"In part, yes." he said, "We don't know who's sending that signal, only that the process of stripping worlds is entirely automated. Maybe we're looking at the act of a truly sentient AI."

"There's also the issue of the Ticik captain." Knight added, "Most of our information about them comes via the Sissusk Empire and according to them if anyone has ever actually seen a Ticik in person they didn't come back to tell about it. That limits us to studying the way their ships operate."

"Those gunships are pretty advanced for something that doesn't have room for a crew but isn't controlled like a drone. Plus we saw a section of a critically damaged Ticik dreadnought eject and attach itself to another. What if the Ticik are a society of AIs?" Thomas said.

"They are supposed to have a caste system. That could indicate the creation of AIs for specific tasks." Knight commented.

"I'm concerned that if either do turn out to be true AIs then Nexus could side with them against us." Thomas said.

"Nexus has always been loyal to the Commonwealth. The Genex tried to convince it to side with them and look where it got them." Reeves pointed out.

"Maybe captain but in that case it was just a war between two human groups. What if Nexus sees the Ticik or the originators of the alien AI signal as kindred? Would it be so keen to help us fight a war against either of them?" Thomas responded and Reeves leant back in his chair and sighed.

"You two had to pick now to bring this up?" he said.

"Sorry captain but it only occurred to me after you'd left for your meeting aboard the dreadnought." Thomas said.

"Well for now at least Nexus is a Commonwealth member that is helping to fix this ship. Plus of course the *Nexus Dreadnought* could have destroyed us as easily as it did those Genex ships so I'm not going to do anything that might change that." Reeves said.

"Of course not captain but I thought you ought to hear what Lieutenant Commander Thomas had to say." Knight replied and Reeves nodded.

"The idea of us facing purely artificial enemies is an interesting one and something that I'll pass up the chain of command." Reeves said before the intercom sounded and he reached out for the handset, "Reeves." he said.

"Captain it's Goldman."

"Yes commander, what is it?" Reeves asked.

"Captain I thought you ought to know that we're picking up a tachyon wave. It looks like there's a large number of ships heading this way at FTL." Goldman told him.

"The Genex?" Reeves said.

"I don't think so sir. The bearing is wrong, it looks to be coming from Sissusk space. It could be Admiral Kim and the rest of the fleet. An active tadar sweep would tell us what we were dealing with but I want your permission before I order that." Goldman said.

"No it's too risky. The reflections from a tadar sweep could be picked up by the Genex and alert them to our survival. Is the ambassador still on the bridge?" Reeves said.

"Yes captain. He says that despite the tactical superiority of the *Nexus Dreadnought*, Nexus will follow your lead in this." Goldman answered.

"What's the ETA of those ships commander?"

"If our estimates of their speed are correct then they're still two days out sir." Goldman said.

"Two days. That's not enough time to reach another planet at sub-light. How long does Commander Bernard estimate it will take us to restore FTL?" Reeves said.

"Seventeen hours to fix the damage to the hull so we can ionise it but at least four days to bring the particle inductor back on line." Goldman responded.

"In that case see what you can do about getting tachyons from the ambassador's courier and the *Nexus Dreadnought*. I'm on my way back to the bridge now with Knight and Thomas. I want a new hiding place before those ships make it here." Reeves ordered and then he hung up the handset.

"I don't like the sound of what I just heard." Knight said.

"If we're lucky then Admiral Kim got our warning and is bringing his fleet to join us." Reeves said.

"And if we're unlucky?" Thomas asked.

"Then the Ticik returned to the Epsilon Pavonis system and wiped out the admiral's command before they intercepted our drone. Now they're on their way to finish us off." Reeves answered.

INTERLUDE.

"Ah admiral, there you are." Secretary LeClair, the head of the Genex's government said when the old man entered the meeting room that was filled with an assortment of government officials and senior military officers. All of the military officers were from the leader caste like himself but several of the civilians were thinkers obviously brought in in an advisory capacity. Normally the old man would not consider entering a room containing so many other Genex leaders without his usual warrior bodyguards but the security surrounding Secretary LeClair meant that only his guards were permitted to be present, "Now we can begin. Admiral Dressler I understand that the squadron you despatched to destroy the Commonwealth cruiser has failed to check in."

"Yes mister secretary. My original plan was to send a force of light cruisers but acting on advice from-" Dressler began and he looked towards the old man.

"I pointed out that Admiral Dressler was sending cruisers to do a job they are not suited for. He was of course totally free to ignore my advice if he so wished." the old man interrupted, "Perhaps the commander of the squadron you sent-"

"Captain Medina is a good man. Braver and more experienced than anyone who has spent their life in the shadows." Admiral Dressler said.

"Has deep space tracking detected any other Commonwealth activity?" a man in the uniform of an army general asked and another admiral shook his head.

"No but we'd only be picking up stray tachyons from ships heading straight for us, not on an oblique course for the Eta Indi system." he said.

"So the Commonwealth could have deployed an armada on our doorstep." the general said, looking at LeClair.

"Yes General Ronson I am aware of that possibility and that is why I have summoned all of you here now. I want to know what our options are. The Commonwealth likely knows that our destruction at Langley was faked and will be hunting for us. I want your opinions on how we should respond." LeClair said.

"Mobilise the fleet." Admiral Dressler said, "The longer we can hold them in space the better. The Commonwealth won't know exactly where we are so they'll have to go system to system. We can set up false beacons to draw them in and ambush them."

"Why not attack?" another admiral asked, "If Commonwealth members are threatened then their fleet will have to stay close."

"And where would you suggest that we attack admiral?" LeClair asked and the admiral looked at his tablet.

"The Zeta Tucanae system." he said, "Location of the planet Hydrax that is home to two Commonwealth member nations. It's a little under seventy-seven light years from here so an assault force could be there in two weeks. An attack in the Tucana Sector would divert attention away from the Indus Sector while still appearing to be a credible origin point for our ships."

"So you would ask our crews to spend four weeks travelling to and from Zeta Tucanae while they might be needed here?" LeClair asked.

"It may have escaped your attention admiral but the Commonwealth fleet is much larger than ours. More than two thousand ships according to information they make publicly available and that doesn't include the ships that individual member nations operate." the old man said.

"Commonwealth members aren't going to lend their ships to any expeditionary forces while they're threatened and the Commonwealth fleet has to protect more than a hundred worlds." Admiral Dressler said.

"We also have our automated forces." an air force general commented, "Aren't they supposed to even out our lack of numbers?"

"Yes, we could send a large automated task force with orders to attack Zeta Tucanae and then press deeper into Commonwealth space. A single manned cruiser or heavy picket could act as a command ship and guide the robot ships accordingly." the admiral who had brought up the option of attacking the Commonwealth added, "In the mean time we should ramp up production of robotic combat units."

"So now instead of a few raids you're planning an all-out invasion?" the old man said, "If only we'd realised that we had the power to do that before then we could have just wiped out the Commonwealth entirely."

"I take it that you disagree that we should be attacking the Commonwealth then admiral." Secretary LeClair said, looking calmly at the old man as many of the other military leaders glared at him angrily.

"We have several strategic analysts here with us. Ask them what they think the chances are of us surviving a military conflict with the Commonwealth are." he said and LeClair looked at the woman sat directly to his right.

"Less than six percent." she told him.

"And what does it take for us to get that lucky?" the old man asked.

"A collapse in Commonwealth morale that triggers mass civilian unrest." the thinker answered.

"And what would our losses be by the time this happened?" the old man added.

"At least forty percent." the thinker said.

"We can lose forty percent of our forces if-" Admiral Dressler began.

"I'm sorry admiral." the female thinker interrupted nervously, "Not forty percent of our forces. Forty percent of our population. The projection is based on public revulsion in the Commonwealth at widespread bombardment of our civilian population centres. As long as they limit their attacks to military targets it is estimated that our forces will collapse completely within twenty months."

"Those are the reports I've been reading for decades. There are simply too few of us to defeat the Commonwealth." the old man said, "Those robotic combat units we've been building and stockpiling offer us breathing room. If the Commonwealth attacks they can be sacrificed while we prepare contingency plans for an evacuation."

"If the Commonwealth attacks? Why wouldn't they? No armistice was ever signed between us so we're still at war." an army general said.

"Perhaps but even I'm not old enough to have been born before the fighting ended. It may still be possible to avoid an armed conflict with the Commonwealth." the old man said.

"You have an alternative strategy to offer admiral?" Secretary LeClair asked.

"Yes as a matter of fact I do and it doesn't include risking any of the resources we've spent so long building up. We keep doing what we've been doing for the past century." the old man said.

"You mean hide? In case you haven't noticed admiral the Commonwealth have found us." Admiral Dressler said.

"Have they? I see no Commonwealth assault cruisers dropping bombs on any of our colonies while your ships burn in space Admiral Dressler. The Commonwealth found and destroyed the forward operating base we were using for our infiltration missions, that is all. Furthermore I personally have taken steps to eliminate everyone involved in Commander Hayes' ill considered attempt to provoke a war between the Commonwealth and one of its alien neighbours. She may have been responsible for exposing our existence to the Commonwealth but she also offers us a way out of this situation. For now we remain hidden. Place our forces on a war footing, yes and also boost production of robotic combat units of all types but do nothing that could provoke the Commonwealth any further. There is still a chance that they will not find our colonies, space is big after all. They may not even bother looking if a war does begin between them and the Ticik after their engagement in the Epsilon Pavonis system. The number of ships involved in that makes it hard for either side to overlook. Even if they do happen to locate our colonies we should not fire on their ships immediately. Simply ask them to leave." the old man said and an admiral sat close by snorted.

"Ask them? Shall we say please while we're at it?" he snapped.

"It might help." the old man replied.

"Admiral do you honestly believe that the Commonwealth can be dissuaded from attacking us just because we ask them not to?" Secretary LeClair said.

"Possibly. If we can convince them that all we want is to be left in peace. We're a long way from the Commonwealth and fighting a war over the distances involved will not be easy for either side. We admit what Hayes and her people did and disavow them. Tell the Commonwealth that they were a rogue unit that we dealt with. At the same time the intelligence assets we have within the Commonwealth can be used to whip up anti-war sentiment. At the very least it could buy us time to put a few more of those combat robots some of the people in this room seem so proud of into production." the old man said.

"What about the ships we sent to destroy their cruiser?" another admiral asked.

"A mistake. A patrol investigating why they were unable to establish contact with the outpost." the old man said. Then he looked straight at Secretary LeClair, "Alternatively mister secretary you can prepare for a war we most likely can't win and you can prepare yourself for the consequences of failing in your role as our leader." then he just smiled, knowing that LeClair and everyone else in the room would understand that he was hinting at the possibility of assassination should any of them be associated with defeat or failure. During the original war against the Commonwealth a number of high ranking Genex had been killed in such a way.

"I will announce to the Assembly that I am enacting emergency powers to direct production towards war material." LeClair said after a few moments hesitation. "In addition I want our armed forces brought to full readiness as soon as possible. However, no ships are to be sent beyond our borders."

"What about our regular patrols mister secretary?" a Genex admiral asked.

"Send no more until further notice. From this point on our space is on total lock down. We'll do what we can to avoid or at least delay a war but I want us ready to fight if it becomes necessary." LeClair ordered and then he looked around the table at the gathered military officers and added, "Is that clear?"

"Absolutely mister secretary." Admiral Dressler said and Secretary LeClair smiled.

"Then this meeting is adjourned." he said and the old man noticed that as he spoke Admiral Dressler and General Ronson were looking at one another.

"How long will it take for them to get into position?" Dressler asked Ronson as they left the meeting together

via a side door.

"My men are already in position. They'll carry out the hit as soon as their target presents himself." Ronson replied.

"And security?" Dressler asked.

"Loyal to me. What about your forces?" Ronson said.

"I'll be sending drones to our patrol groups to update them on the secretary's orders. One of them will be altered so that the force heads for Eta Indi instead of returning here. I don't care what the old man says, the Commonwealth is not going to be put off by a few pleasant words."

"We do need more time to strengthen our position though." Ronson pointed out and Dressler nodded.

"Yes and by taking out that cruiser we'll buy time. The Commonwealth can't drop bombs on colonies they haven't found yet and the cruiser is the only ship close enough to try finding them." he said.

"The secretary will very foolish having given an order not to fight a battle that your ships win." Ronson said, smiling, "Foolish enough for me to challenge him. Are you still sure about the support I'll get from the fleet?"

"They'll fall into line, I'll see to it. At least as long as you keep to your end of the bargain general." Dressler said.

"Don't worry, you'll get that cabinet post but we're going to need someone we can rely on to fill your position." Ronson said and Dressler smiled.

"Don't worry. After this we'll have no end of admirals wanting to join us." he said.

Leaving the meeting room the old man rejoined his granddaughter and his bodyguards beyond the security cordon in place to protect Secretary LeClair.

"How did it go grandfather?" his granddaughter asked as they walked towards the nearest elevator.

"About as well as can be expected. The military are almost eager to fight a war, so much so they almost ordered the forces we need here to be sent off to the front lines." he told her as the elevator door opened and they stepped inside.

"Were you able to talk them out of it?" his granddaughter said.

"Of course I was. However, it was clear that I upset a number of people and we need to be prepared for their reaction." the old man said.

"You think that they'll move against us?" his granddaughter responded.

"Undoubtedly, the only question is how soon they will make their move. We may get lucky and they'll delay long enough for us to move to the final stage but then again they may not." the old man answered, "Have you been monitoring Jennifer Hayes and Lieutenant Lucas?" he added and his granddaughter nodded.

"So far they've not taken any action. Are you sure that they'll do what is needed?" she said.

"It will be easier if they do. If not then we will have to take riskier action." the old man said before the elevator door opened to reveal the building's parking lot with their vehicle waiting a short distance away.

The old man, his granddaughter and the two bodyguards were just walking towards it when his granddaughter heard the sound of a metallic footstep.

"Down!" she yelled, pushing her grandfather to the ground behind another car just as a warrior Genex wearing an exoskeleton that allowed him to wield a belt fed machine gun in one hand stepped into view and opened fire. The hail of bullets hit the car they were using for cover repeatedly, most of them easily passing through the chassis before passing just over the old man, his granddaughter and their bodyguards.

"This is faster than I expected them to move." the old man said, "Did you happen to notice whether he is army or marines?"

"I'm sorry grandfather I didn't get a chance to look." his granddaughter replied as she and the bodyguard drew the pistols they carried under their jackets.

At the same time two more warriors emerged from the car that the group has been heading towards, both of them carrying assault rifles that they pointed towards the enhanced warrior and fired. Although the exoskeleton itself offered no protection against gunfire the warrior was wearing body armour and the rifle rounds that struck his armoured chest plate failed to slow him down as he advanced. Turning his machine gun towards the two riflemen the enhanced warrior fired his machine gun again and they both ducked behind their vehicle. Unlike the car that the old man's party had taken cover behind, the old man's vehicle itself was armoured and the machine gun fire was no more effective against it than the rifle bullets had been against the warrior's body armour.

"Now!" the old man's granddaughter snapped and she and the two bodyguards leapt up and fired their pistols at the warrior in his exoskeleton.

The rounds fired by their pistols were much less powerful than the rifles carried by the guards in the car and they too were incapable of piercing the armour that protected his head and body. However, his limbs were unprotected and when a bullet hit his leg the warrior staggered for a moment. The exoskeleton acted as a brace for his leg and so he did not collapse but he still felt the impact before he steadied himself and turned back towards his original target. Firing his machine gun again the Genex warrior hit one of the old man's bodyguards in the neck.

There was the roar of an engine and the two bodyguards beside the old man's car rolled out of the way as the vehicle suddenly began to reverse, accelerating as fast as the driver could make it. Seeing the vehicle heading towards him the enhanced warrior used his exoskeleton to leap upwards towards the ceiling of the parking lot. However, the driver had expected this and he braked quickly so that the car came to a halt directly beneath him. Then when the driver heard the loud 'clump' as the warrior landed on top of the roof he backed up again, causing the warrior to roll off the front of the car onto the ground and before he could get up the driver put the car into forward gear and accelerated again.

The armoured car drove straight over the warrior before he could get back to his feet and despite the armour he wore he was crushed beneath its significant weight. The old man's granddaughter and remaining bodyguards then all rushed to where the dead warrior was lying on the ground, their weapons held at the ready just in case he had survived.

"There'll be more." the old man called out from where he still sat.

"Grandfather you should get into the car." his granddaughter replied, rushing to his side and she reached down to help him up. However, instead of letting her help him to his feet the old man pulled her down beside him just as three more of the warriors in exoskeletons appeared. Two were armed with machine guns like the first had been but the third instead had a large power pack mounted on his back to supply the anti-armour laser he aimed at their car. There was a momentary flash as the energy weapon was fired and the beam burned through the car's frontal armour into the engine. A wave of heat washed over the old man and his granddaughter as the car exploded, the blast killing all of the warriors protecting them.

Seeing a rifle that had landed nearby the old man's granddaughter leapt towards the weapon and grabbed hold of it. Returning to her grandfather's side she checked the weapon, pulling back the bolt to make sure there was a round in the chamber. Then a burst of gunfire flew over their heads.

"I can probably take out one or two of them grandfather." she said, "But I think we're better getting out of here." and then she rushed to the elevator and pressed the call button. However, instead of the doors sliding open the display beside them simply flashed up the word 'ERROR'.

"I suspect that whoever sent these men has taken precautions against our escape my dear." the old man said, "That likely includes the prospect of building security arriving before we are killed. I think we should move towards the exit. We shouldn't get too close though. That would be very bad for us."

His granddaughter then helped the old man to stand and the pair of them fell back away from the advancing warriors in their exoskeletons, crouching below the level of the cars in the parking lot to stay out of sight as their assailants hunted for them.

As they got close to the ramp that led out of the underground parking lot the old man and his granddaughter peered around a car towards the exit and saw a four strong group of Genex warriors all wearing exoskeletons and armed with machine guns.

"Four ahead of us and three behind. Do you have any advice grandfather?"

"Yes my dear. Keep your head down. They should be here any moment." the old man said before there was a loud 'crash' as a wheeled armoured personnel carrier smashed its way through the entry gate, triggering a klaxon.

The four warriors guarding the exit dived out of the way before the APC could run them over and it raced past them before coming to a sudden stop. The turret mounted on top of the vehicle turned towards its rear and the light cannon it carried opened fire, keeping the enhanced warriors pinned down while the ramp at the rear of the vehicle dropped open to reveal the squad of soldiers it carried. Like the warriors sent to kill the old man and his granddaughter, these troops wore exoskeletons that enhanced their speed and strength.

However, theirs had also been upgraded with superior power plants to support the additional weight of the armour plating that covered their entire bodies. Also armed with machine guns that they wielded one handed, the power armoured troops marched from the APC and opened fire. The lighter enhanced warriors attempted to return fire but the newly arrived soldiers were using their machine guns just to lay down suppressing fire as they advanced until they were in better positions to use the grenade launchers they carried under their other arms. These were fitted with shaped charge rounds that detonated on impact, blasting through both the lightweight construction of the cars their foes were using for cover and the ceramic body armour they wore. Hearing the firing coming from the direction of the exit, the three warriors who had been hunting for the old man and his granddaughter began to run towards it and there was another brief flash of light as the laser armed warrior fired his weapon at one of the power armoured troopers. Unlike the machine guns his comrades carried this weapon was easily able to penetrate the heavy body armour and one of the warriors from the APC collapsed, a hole burned all the way through him and his armour.

A hail of machine gun fire was shot back at them and one of the three enhanced troopers fell as a bullet punched through his helmet and tore off the side of his skull. This was followed up by the cannon mounted on the APC itself as the turret turned to face the two enhanced warriors and opened fire. Seeing the warrior armed with a laser as the most pressing threat to his vehicle and the power armoured troopers, the APC's gunner targeted him first and a magnetically accelerated shell punched straight through him and the bulky power pack on his back, the force of the impact sending him flying backwards and sliding across the ground

when he landed.

The final enhanced warrior began to back away, firing short bursts from his machine gun to try and dissuade the old man's reinforcements from following him. The rifle calibre rounds presented little threat to the heavily armoured troopers though and they formed a line side by side as they advanced with bullets bouncing off their armour before they opened fire in unison again and the enhanced warrior collapsed in a heap.

Cautiously the old man's granddaughter stood up straight and raised her hands.

"Friendly." she called out as the power armoured warriors turned in her direction.

"Is the admiral safe?" one of them asked.

"Quite safe thank you soldier," the old man replied as he straightened up. Then he looked at his granddaughter while holding the powerful communication beacon hung around his neck before adding, "and grateful that this is good for more than if I fall over in the shower."

"Grandfather we should leave." his granddaughter said and the old man looked around at all the ruined vehicles in the parking lot and nodded.

"Yes, I think I'll let the security manager who was obviously a party to this attack explain to the owners of all these vehicles why they are full of bullet holes." he said and then surrounded by the power armoured warriors they headed towards the safety of the waiting APC.

6.

"Are you still trying to pretend I'm not here?" Hayes called out, twisting her head to try and look into Lucas' cell.

"Does it really matter?" Lucas replied.

"Yes because I can get us out of here," Hayes said, "but only if we move quickly. Wait until after they start cutting into my brain as well as my ovaries and there's a real good chance that I won't be in a position to help you."

"Oh really and why should I believe that you'd want to help a lowly human like me?" Lucas snapped back at her.

"Because in case it has escaped your notice I'm tied down to this stretcher. I can open the cell doors but I can't exactly walk out of here now can I?" Hayes said but Lucas just snorted. Hayes then sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. Then she opened them again and spoke in a calm voice, "Better to die free number two."

All of a sudden there was a 'click' and when Lucas looked around she saw that the door to Hayes' cell had unlocked and popped open. However, as Hayes had pointed out she remained unable to leave her cell while she was strapped down.

"How did you just do that?" Lucas asked, getting to her feet and moving to the front of her own cell.

"I've spent more than a decade working in this building among people who would quite literally stab me in the back to gain some advantage over me Lieutenant Lucas. Do you really think that I didn't plan for needing to make a rapid exit from any part of it? An associate called Enrico was able to place a series of voice commands in the system for me. Now about us both getting out of here." Hayes said.

"I doubt I'll get very far without any clothes." Lucas said.

"I'm sure we'll find something. Now the same command that opened my cell door also swapped the security feed for a recorded loop but the security office will notice that sooner or later."

"I'm still locked in." Lucas pointed out.

"Better to die free number five." Hayes said and almost instantly Lucas saw the door to her cell release, "If you're thinking about just leaving me here then you might want to remember that you can't open the door to the cell block without me," Hayes added.

Lucas stepped out of her cell cautiously, looking around in expectation of a group of Genex warriors suddenly storming into the cell block but nothing happened.

"Hurry up and untie me." Hayes told her and Lucas hurried into the other woman's cell.

The restraints holding Hayes to the stretcher were not designed for high security use and Lucas only had to undo a number of buckles before Hayes was no longer strapped down. However, her arms and hands were still bound as she struggled to sit up, "Well what are you waiting for? Get these off me." Hayes said, staring at Lucas but she shook her head.

"I don't think so." she said.

"What? You don't think you can get out of here without me do you?" Hayes said, staring at Lucas.

"No but I think that if I untie you then I may be the one who ends up being stabbed in the back. On the other hand right now you still need me." Lucas said.

"Don't be so ridiculous. Untie me." Hayes said sternly.

"Only when I have to. Now how do we get out of this cell block?" Lucas asked, still clutching the blanket around her as she headed towards the exit from the cell block.

"I can't believe you don't trust me." Hayes said as she followed Lucas from her cell.

"I trust you to look out for your own interests ahead of mine. You said it yourself, the people in this building will stab you in the back to benefit themselves and you worked in this building so I guess that you'd turn on me just as easily. Now how do we get out of here and find something for me to wear?" Lucas said and Hayes sighed before she answered, realising that Lucas was making certain that they both needed one another's help to escape.

"The code I used to open the cell doors also disabled the lock on this one. It should just open. Just don't open it too wide until we know that the coast is clear outside." Hayes said and Lucas nodded.

Opening the door just wide enough to be able to see through, Lucas peered out into the corridor outside the cell block. Then when she saw no-one there she opened the door wider and leant out into the corridor.

"Okay no-one's here. Which way?" she said.

"Left. There are stairs that way. We're on a basement level and we need to go up." Hayes told her.

"To an exit right?" Lucas asked.

"Oh right because nothing is as inconspicuous as a naked woman with a blanket around her and one in a hospital gown and restraints. No, we need to go right up to the floor my old office is on. I'm hoping that we can find a few things there that we can use." Hayes answered.

"Such as what?"

"A gun. Money. Clothes. Fakes Ids and that sort of thing. Oh and my car keys. We need to get out of the city and I don't know about you but I prefer the idea of driving to walking." Hayes said.

"How many floors?" Lucas said as they exited the cell block and hurried towards the stairs.

"Twenty four." Hayes replied.

"Twenty four? Isn't there an elevator or something instead?"

"Of course there is but if we use that then we risk being seen by anyone standing outside it when the doors open. The stairs will take longer but they're safer. Trust me, the genetic engineering my ancestors carried out wasn't just intended to make me stunningly good looking. I'm supposed to be physically fit as well but I'd rather not walk up all those flights of stairs if I don't have to." Hayes told her and Lucas frowned before continuing along the deserted corridor.

The staircase that Hayes guided them to was intended for use in an emergency when the elevator would shut down but access to it was not alarmed, thus allowing it to be used as an alternative to the elevators by anyone who wished to. However, as a part of the building that was not expected to see great use it was not heated and Lucas gasped when she first stepped onto the cold floor with her bare feet.

"How many floors did you say?" she said.

"Twenty four." Hayes replied and Lucas frowned.

"I better not get frost bite." she muttered as she started to climb the stairs.

Scaling the stairs took considerable time even without the delays added each time Lucas and Hayes heard any sound that suggested that they might not be alone and pressed themselves against the wall as far from the centre of the stairwell as possible, waiting to see whether anyone else would appear and by the time they reached the floor Hayes' office was located on Lucas was eager to leave it. However, she did not dare risk exposing them now that they were so close to their destination so she hesitated.

"The door to the stairs is in an alcove that's not visible from the security desk." Hayes said.

"Security desk? How the hell are we supposed to get past that?" Lucas responded.

"It's only manned during office hours. We'll have to wait until after-" Hayes began as Lucas opened the door slightly.

"The lights are out." she said and Hayes smiled.

"Then we're in luck. It must be after hours. The office areas will be largely empty, let's go. My office is off to the left then second door on the right." she said.

The two women exited the stairwell and moved cautiously towards the security desk located where all of the different hallways met. The desk itself was shaped like a horseshoe, open at one end so that guards could get in and out easily. There were two computer terminals on the desk but both of these were dark, obviously shut down for the night when the guards went home. As they reached the desk they heard the sound of a door opening and Lucas quickly dragged Hayes down into the middle of it where they listened to the sounds of someone approaching.

"Untie me now." Hayes whispered, "We may need to fight." but Lucas shook her head and Hayes frowned. Then she saw the man walking past the desk and her eyes widened, "Alex." she said softly.

"Friend of yours?" Lucas asked as she watched him pass by without noticing either of the women hiding under the desk and Hayes shook her head.

"Alexander Kane? Anything but. Remember I said that this place was full of people who'd stab me in the back to get ahead? Well he's the one most likely to try, He stood back and watched while I was dragged away to be turned into a drone. All he was interested in was whether he could have my office. He must be working late. This department will be up to its neck right now." she said.

"I thought we were supposed to be going there. What if it's his now?" Lucas asked.

"Then I guess you'll have to untie me so I can beat him senseless when he gets back." Hayes replied before she heard the sound of another door closing, "He's going to the bathroom, come on we need to move quickly."

Lucas and Hayes emerged from under the desk and dashed towards Hayes' office before Kane could return and Lucas noticed light coming from under the door of the office opposite the door to the one Hayes had told her was hers.

"Is someone there?" she said.

"That's Alex's, now hurry up." Hayes responded and Lucas tried the door to her office.

"It's locked. What now." she said.

"Keypad at the side. The override code is nine four, six four, eight nine." Hayes said.

"For once I'm glad you Genex were engineered to have a good memory." Lucas said as she typed the numbers into the keypad.

"It wouldn't matter. Those are my measurements." Hayes said and Lucas glared at her.

"Seriously?" she said.

"Never mind, just type them in." Hayes said and as Lucas finished entering the code the door unlocked.

Rushing into the office the two women found it in darkness and Hayes looked around, trying to see whether

anything appeared to have been disturbed since she had been removed from there by the old man and his security detail.

"So where's this bug out kit of yours?" Lucas asked.

Hayes had kept the kit in a bag that she could easily pick up and leave with. She had had this over her shoulder when she had been taken into custody but it had been moved from where it had been dropped and it took her a few moments to locate it in the corner of the room.

"That bag," she said, nodding towards the holdall and Lucas walked over to it, crouching beside it as she opened it and looked inside.

"Clothes, good," she said, pulling out a pair of trousers and shirt. Hayes was significantly taller than she was so she had to roll up both the legs of the trousers and the sleeves of the shirt but she still much preferred this to having to make do with holding a blanket around her. Unfortunately Hayes' shoe size was also significantly larger than Lucas' and so she had to remain barefoot. "That's better. Now let's see what else is in here," she said when she had finished dressing and she turned her attention back to the contents of the bag. As Hayes had suggested there was money and a pouch that held a number of identification documents in different names but all displaying Hayes' face. However, the weapon that Hayes had said would be in the bag was not there. "I don't see a gun," she said.

"The old man must have taken it after I shoved it in his face," Hayes replied.

"Ah but I take it that these are your keys," Lucas added, holding up a bunch of keys and Hayes nodded.

"We should wait for Alex to head back into his office and then get down to the parking lot," she said, "Before then you should check out that cabinet over there," and she nodded towards a low cabinet.

"Why? Might there be another gun in it?" Lucas asked as she approached the cabinet.

"No, snacks. There were some bottles of water and food in there. They might come in handy. Oh and is there any chance you could give me that coat hung up over there?" Hayes said and she looked towards a coat stand that had a jacket hung on it.

Once Lucas had taken the food and water from the cabinet and wrapped Hayes' coat around her the two women positioned themselves by the door, listening for the sound of Kane's office door being opened and closed.

"How long is he going to take?" Lucas whispered as she became impatient, "Didn't you say that the security office would notice that we were out of our cells eventually?"

"Yes they will but I didn't realise that we were in the night shift at the time. They'll trust the electronic security system and just run a check before handing over to the day shift in the morning," Hayes told her before hearing the sound of a door closing, "That's it. Let's go," she said and once again Lucas began by opening the door just enough to check the hallway before she and Hayes hurried out of the office.

"Elevator," Hayes said.

"What about other people being outside it when it opens?" Lucas pointed out.

"One of my keys invokes an executive express mode that will ignore other calls. The benefits of rank," Hayes told her.

"Better than those stairs again I suppose," Lucas replied.

The two women stood back from the elevator, hiding themselves just in case the elevator was already occupied but when it became clear that it was empty they both rushed inside and Lucas began to fumble with the bunch of keys, searching for the one that would engage the express mode. Then when she found it she inserted it into the lock beneath the floor selection panel, turned it and pressed the button labelled 'Parking'. Just as Hayes had promised the elevator went all the way down to the building's parking lot without stopping along the way and when it finally stopped and the doors opened Lucas looked out to see that there were a large number of empty spaces.

"Doesn't look like there's a lot of cover," she said as she exited the elevator, remembering to bring the keys with her and she winced again as she stepped onto the cold ground, "I'll be glad when I find some shoes that fit," she added.

"My car is this way. It's not far," Hayes said, following Lucas from the elevator and Lucas turned to follow her instead. It was then that she realised that as was only to be expected none of the vehicles she could see were of models she recognised.

"Do your cars still work the same way as ours?" she asked.

"If I say 'no' will you finally untie me?" Hayes responded.

"I'll take that as a 'yes' then," Lucas said before Hayes stopped beside her car.

"Nice," Lucas said as she inspected the vehicle. It was larger than the compact car she owned and looked expensive, "So are there any special features to suit a paranoid megalomaniac owner?"

"No, they're optional extras. Now get me in this thing and let's go," Hayes replied.

Inside the car Lucas found that it was laid out in the same way as vehicles in the Commonwealth and she quickly adjusted the driver's seat to match her height instead of Hayes before starting the engine and putting it in gear.

"At least it's an automatic. I can't drive stick," she commented.

"Just go. Drive up to the gate and punch in the same code from my office to the keypad. That will open the gate and we can get out of here." Hayes told her.

"Where to after that?" Lucas asked.

"Out of the city somewhere. I'll direct you. Then we can consider our next move and perhaps you can finally get me out of these cuffs." Hayes answered.

As Lucas drove the car out of the parking lot she did so unaware that its departure was being studied closely on a tablet connected to the security feed and when the car had gone the old man's granddaughter turned off the device and took out her phone.

"They're on the move. I'll make arrangements to track them." she said into it.

"This is it captain. The best hiding place in the system." Thomas said as he Reeves, Knight and Ash gathered around the bridge's central console.

"A comet?" Knight said and Thomas smiled.

"It has a core about twelve kilometres across, around that a corona of four and half thousand kilometre radius and most importantly an ion tail more than twenty million kilometres long." he said and Knight looked at Reeves.

"Never mind the *Warspite*, we could hide an armada in there." he said.

"The ionisation of the tail will kill our FTL so we can't jump right in there captain but I'm pretty sure I can land us within a million kilometres." Ash added.

"Then we just fly right inside and go dark." Reeves said, nodding slowly. Then he looked towards the intelligence station, "Ambassador will entering the tail of the comet have any adverse effects on you?" he asked.

"No captain." the ambassador responded, "The electronics of this body and the *Nexus Dreadnought* are no more vulnerable to ionisation effects than the *Warspite* is. The only complication is that the requirement to maintain communications silence will necessitate severing the direct link between this body and the full version of myself aboard the *Nexus Dreadnought*. This will inevitably limit my ability to advise you."

"We can't use a comm laser either captain." Goldman added from her station, "All that particulate matter in the tail will scatter the beam too much to maintain a decent link."

"What about our sensors?" Reeves asked.

"There'll be some loss of resolution thanks to the ionised nature of the tail and active radar will be right out even if you wanted to risk using it but we should still be able to pick up the arrival of whoever it is that's heading this way and pick up enough detail to identify them as soon as we can get some EM data." Goldman answered.

"How long will it take for us to get that?" Reeves asked.

"Assuming that they drop out of FTL with the planetary subsystem we're in now it will take about two and a half hours for the electromagnetic signature to reach us in the comet's tail." Thomas said.

"I assume you've plotted the jump? Have you spoken to Commander Bernard about it?" Reeves asked.

"He's confident that entering the tail won't cause any damage although we won't be able to carry out any EVA operations while we're in there so further repairs will be limited to whatever can be carried out inside the ship only." Thomas said.

"In that case there is no point in delaying." Reeves said, "Ambassador I take it that *Nexus* already knows what we've talked about here?"

"Correct captain. My link is still live." the ambassador replied.

"Good. In that case he ought to be able to co-ordinate a jump with us. Goldman please inform Commander Bernard that we are about to jump. Commander Ash, Commander Thomas, when you are ready." Reeves said and the officers gathered around the console all returned to their stations,

"Transferring jump data now." Thomas announced.

"Confirmed. Beginning hull ionisation." Ash added.

"Captain we're picking up hull ionisation from the *Nexus Dreadnought* and she's turning towards the comet. Looks like *Nexus* is mirroring our jump." Goldman said.

"That is correct captain. The *Nexus Dreadnought* will jump once the *Warspite* has completed its own jump." the ambassador of *Nexus* said.

"Hull fully ionised, tachyon shell deployed." Ash announced, "Jumping in five. Four. Three. Two. One. Mark." Firing the *Warspite's* main engines while the cruiser was enveloped in a shell of tachyons with an imaginary mass of greater magnitude than the real mass of the ship itself accelerated it to faster than light speed. With sufficient tachyons around it, the *Warspite* could travel at up to seven point eight light years per day, or more than two thousand eight hundred times the speed of light. However, for such a short jump Ash had limited the amount of imaginary mass applied to the ship so that the journey from orbiting the gas giant to just outside the tail of the comet that the crew of the *Warspite* intended to use as a hiding place took a little over a minute.

"We're right on target captain." Thomas said as an image of the comet and its brightly glowing tail appeared

on the displays in front of the ship's senior officers.

"Well done Commander Ash. Stand by to-" Reeves began.

"Tachyon surge to port captain." Cortez said suddenly as the *Nexus Dreadnought* completed its jump towards the comet. Unlike Ash, Nexus had not limited its speed. Its ability to carry out rapid calculations and direct control over every system aboard the ship that was its physical form meant that there was little chance of an overshoot even at such high speed and so the larger vessel had been able to follow the *Warspite* without a delay lasting more than a few seconds.

"I am prepared to follow you into the comet's tail captain." the ambassador said.

"Mister Ash ahead slow. Take us in." Reeves ordered.

"Aye captain, entering the comet's tail." Ash responded as he fired the *Warspite's* engines again.

This time without the shell of charged tachyons to propel the ship at faster than light speed the *Warspite* advanced more slowly into the gaseous tail that extended directly away from the star Eta Indi. Once inside the tail Ash turned the *Warspite* so that it faced towards the solid core of the comet and gradually took the ship closer.

"Holding at one thousand kilometres captain." he said as he brought the ship to a relative halt, matching the orbit of the comet around the star so that the *Warspite* would remain hidden within the tail.

"Captain the *Nexus Dreadnought* is two hundred kilometres off our starboard side." Goldman added.

"My data link has already been severed captain." the ambassador of Nexus said.

"Nexus is running silent." Knight commented.

"Time we did the same." Reeves said and he activated the intercom, setting it to address the entire ship, "All hands this is the captain. We are concealed within the tail of a comet while we await the arrival of a group of ships we have detected coming this way. Until these can be identified and confirmed as non-hostile we will be running silent. No equipment that radiates an energy signature beyond the ship is to be activated without permission from the command staff and there is to be no EVA activity until further notice. Reeves out."

"So what now captain?" Knight asked.

"Now we wait for those ships to show themselves." Reeves responded.

7.

Hayes squirmed in her seat. The combination of the restraints binding her arms and the car seatbelt fastened across her body allowed her almost no movement and her arms were aching. She and Lucas were now beyond the edge of the capital city and this section of road was lined with trees that blocked out most of the limited starlight, leaving the car's headlights as the only source of illumination.

"What are you doing?" Lucas asked from beside her, glancing towards her for a moment before returning her attention to the road ahead of the car.

"Being tied up like this isn't exactly comfortable you know. I may as well still be strapped down to that stretcher. Why not just untie me?" Hayes replied.

"Because I still don't trust you not to turn on me in a moment." Lucas said.

"Well do you trust me enough to do as I say when I tell you to keep your speed under thirty-five? There's a speed trap ahead." Hayes told her.

"You know this section of road then?" Lucas commented as she slowed the car down.

"No but this car is fitted with a radar detector. Look at the console." Hayes replied and Lucas glanced at the dashboard in front of her where she saw a small icon that looked like a simple radar dish.

"Handy. I wish I had one. It would have saved me a seventy dollar fine." Lucas commented before driving past a sensor unit mounted on the top of a pole at the side of the road, "So where are we going?"

"Well I had considered a small town I know of on the coast. I was going to bribe my way onto a fishing boat and get them to take me across the Raven Sea."

"Won't your government look for us there?"

"Of course they will but by the time they would have done we could have been long gone." Hayes said.

"Could have been?"

"Yes, could have been. My plan relied on me walking up to a worker and waving a lot of cash under his nose. Not having a barefoot woman dragging me up to him while I'm tied up and we're both barefoot. Workers expect leaders like me to want to get away from the Elysium continent all the time so they don't ask questions. They just take the money. On the other hand something that looks like a kidnapping is going to attract more attention. The sort that will have them running off to the nearest police post and even if you did untie me I doubt I could take on the police that would be sent to investigate and win. You'll either be shot or locked in a cell I can't get you out of and I'll be joining you as soon as they figure out who I am." Hayes explained.

"And if I do untie you? What then?" Lucas asked.

"Then we find a shop where we can buy some clothes before getting on that boat. Then once we're across the ocean we'll be within five kilometres of a shuttle port. There are a lot of refining plants for organic polymers there and the base strands are grown in micro gravity vats in orbit. We get aboard one of the shuttles and get off world. Then we swap to a freighter heading out to one of the colonies where we can disappear. You'll have to pretend to be my maid of course." Hayes said and Lucas scowled.

"Your maid? Are you kidding?" she responded.

"Well what else are we supposed to tell people? The only way we can explain you is as someone who has mundane human blood in them and that means a worker. It's obvious that I'm a leader so I'll have to be the one in charge." Hayes told her.

"Can't you just pretend to be one of those lobotomised drones?" Lucas suggested.

"And why would a drone be travelling anywhere? They get assigned to jobs by the government, not traded as private property." Hayes said and Lucas sighed, her lack of knowledge about Genex society leaving her unable to offer any alternatives. However, she was still reluctant to turn Hayes loose. It was then that she noticed that the radar warning icon on the car's dashboard was still lit and she frowned, "How many speed traps are there around here?" she commented.

"Not another one this close." Hayes replied as she turned her head, trying to see the source of the radar pulse that was triggering the alarm, "Someone's tracking us. We need to get off the road."

Lucas simply brought the car to a sudden stop and Hayes winced as the seatbelt pressed her arms tighter against her. Then without even bothering to turn off the engine Lucas exited the vehicle, grabbing the holdall as she got out.

"Hey don't leave me like this! You still need me." Hayes called out, still trapped in her seat and Lucas ran around the car to let her out. Then the two women stood beside the car and looked around for any signs of what was following them, "Listen." Hayes said and she looked up into what of the night sky was visible between the trees.

"Rotor-craft." Lucas said when she heard the familiar sound of rotor blades although whether this came from a helicopter or tilt rotor aircraft was unknown.

"It's coming from the way we came. They must have been tracking us after all." Hayes replied.

"So which way?" Lucas asked.

"Let's just get as far from here as we can for now. We can figure out where to go once we're sure we're not being followed any more. But untie-" Hayes answered but before she could complete her latest request to be untied Lucas began to walk briskly away from the still running car and Hayes snarled as she followed Lucas into the woods.

The first of the tilt rotor craft hovered above the stationary car, its commander studying the image on his sensor display from the craft's thermal imaging system. With the engine still running the entire forward section of the car showed up brightly while the rear was duller.

"No signs of life." he said using the intercom to address the troops carried in the rear of the craft, "Deploy and secure the target vehicle."

The squad of light infantry carried in the rotor craft's passenger compartment disembarked from it by sliding down ropes deployed from both side hatches, landing in two groups one after another. Each man wore body armour fitted with night vision goggles and carried a shotgun that they pointed at the car as soon as they landed. Although their intelligence indicated that the women they were hunting were unarmed they still advanced on the car cautiously until the squad leader signalled for them to stop, at which point he crouched down low enough to peer beneath the car just in case their targets were making use of the heat of the still running engine to conceal themselves from the tilt rotor vehicle's thermal imager. However, he instantly saw that there was no one hiding beneath car and stood back up.

"They aren't here. Spread out and look for tracks." he ordered and the warriors under his command began to spread out around the car while the tilt rotor vehicle that had brought them here remained overhead, searching the surrounding area with its thermal imaging sensors.

"Over here." one of the warriors called out after a short time and the squad leader came to see what he had found. Looking down at the ground at the side of the road he saw that where the tarmac gave way to dirt there was a slender footprint that had obviously been left behind by someone wearing no shoes.

"We've found tracks leading into the woods." the squad leader said into the radio built into his armour, "We'll need support to follow them."

"Understood sergeant. Tracker units are on the way. Commence your search immediately." the voice of the old man's granddaughter responded and the warriors began to advance into the trees at the side of the road, using their night vision goggles to search the area ahead of them and holding their shotguns to their shoulders.

Hayes stumbled as she tried to keep up with Lucas. Running with her arms bound was hard enough without also having to worry about the uneven and occasionally sharp terrain.

"Jessica wait." she said and Lucas suddenly halted.

"Don't call me that." she snapped.

"Then what am I supposed to call you?"

"How about you just don't speak to me at all? I'm sure I can figure out a way off this planet and back to the Commonwealth without you."

"Are you crazy? Even with my help you're never getting back to the Commonwealth. Do you know how many civilian ships there are in the empire that can make that jump? None, that's how many. The government isn't exactly keen to have ships blundering into any of your patrol routes so their navigation systems are restricted. Face it, you need-" Hayes began before they were interrupted by a disturbing sound from behind them.

It was dogs barking.

"You have dogs here?" Lucas asked.

"Of course we have dogs, Dogs, cats, horses and other livestock were all brought on the evacuation ships with my ancestors." Hayes said.

"Genetically engineered I expect." Lucas commented.

"Of course. Humans have been engineering those species for thousands of years. Why stop just because gene splicing replaced selective breeding?" Hayes said.

"So what can we expect? Do they spit acid or something?"

"Of course not. But they can see in the dark far better than we can, their hearing is sharper and they can probably already smell us. We might be able to lose them if we can get to a river but it's doubtful. We need to find something that will mask our scents." Hayes said.

"Come then, no time to hang around." Lucas said before she began to run once more and leaving Hayes struggling to catch up.

The sound of barking from behind the two women continued as an unknown number of dogs guided the Genex warriors towards them and Hayes risked a glance over her shoulder. This proved to be a mistake as she suddenly tripped and fell forwards. Unable to use her hands to break her fall Hayes landed face first on the ground and struggled to get back to her feet. By the time she did the sound of barking was getting louder

and she could not see Lucas anywhere. Calling out would undoubtedly lead her pursuers right to her so instead she just began to head directly away from the sound of the dogs, hoping that Lucas had done the same thing.

The tilt rotor vehicle that the old man's granddaughter was using as a mobile command post flew low over the trees along with four other craft that had been deployed. All five did what they could to search the forest from the air but the density of the tree cover limited their usefulness. From her command post the old man's granddaughter watched the feeds from the warriors on the ground, their night vision goggles transmitting footage of what they saw directly to her.

"Target acquired." one of the warriors signalled and she looked at his feed specifically. Just at the limit of the range of his vision she saw a figure moving between the trees with a bag slung over their shoulder.

Magnifying this she saw that it was Lucas, the Commonwealth officer looking around her as she moved through the forest on her own. The old man's granddaughter's console told her the exact deployment of the warriors on the ground and so she knew which were closest to the warrior who had just discovered Lucas. Looking at each of these she hunted for Hayes, expecting the fleeing leader to be close by. However, there appeared to be no sign of her anywhere near Lucas.

"Engage." she ordered as she continued to check the other feed for Hayes and she muttered to herself, "Where are you Jennifer? Are you hoping to sacrifice her to ensure your own escape?"

Lucas could hear the sound of the dogs getting much louder behind her as she ran. Uncertain of where she was heading she ducked behind a particularly large tree and looked around, hoping that she would spy some means of escape. However, all she saw other than the trees was a shaft of bright light that suddenly shone down through the trees as the sound of a rotor craft came from above.

Slowly she edged away from the light, keeping close to the tree she was leaning against when all of a sudden she heard the unmistakable sound of a shotgun being fired. Almost immediately after she felt something strike her hard in her side at the base of her ribs but before she had chance to react to this her entire body suddenly felt as if it was on fire down that side and she screamed as she collapsed. It was obvious to her that she had just been shot with a solid round from the shotgun but something did not feel right. She had lost all feeling around where the round had hit her and she could not move her leg at all. Looking down at where she had been hit Lucas saw that the shotgun round was now lying on the ground beside her. It was a bright yellow cylinder and from the end that had hit her a pair of fine coiled wires extended. Lucas easily guessed that these wires would lead to a pair of metal spikes that were still embedded in her side and had been used to deliver the current from the electrical stun round into her. The implication of this was clear. The Genex wanted her alive.

Moments later Lucas heard the sound of running and looking around she saw four large men wearing tactical gear and carrying shotguns come running towards her out of the darkness with a large dog that was barking continuously.

"Target two acquired." one of the warriors said into his radio while another slung his shotgun and took a set of plastic handcuff ties from his vest. Then without saying a word to Lucas he just reached down and grabbed one of her wrists, fastening the handcuffs around it before repeating the procedure with the other. The warrior then dragged Lucas to her feet as a second stepped forwards with a black hood that he pulled over her head, plunging her into total darkness before finally she felt a metal collar being fastened around her neck.

"Prisoner two is secure." a warrior reported and the old man's granddaughter smiled.

"What about target one?" she asked.

"No sign yet." the warrior responded.

"Then keep looking. There were two people in that car. She must be close by."

Hayes flinched when she heard the sound of the shotgun in the darkness, followed by a woman's scream and given how unlikely it was that there would be anyone else out in the forest with them she knew that this meant Lucas had either been recaptured or killed. This presented a dilemma for Hayes, Lucas had had all of the money she had planned to use to purchase new clothing and supplies as well as pay bribes. Worse still, by refusing to untie Hayes, Lucas had left her helpless. There was no way she could remove her restraints herself and she would be at the mercy of any stranger she came across to ask for help. However, despite this she had no intention of giving up. Being returned to the capital as a prisoner meant transformation into a drone, a process that some stories claimed left the person's original personality simply suppressed rather than destroyed and meaning that she would spend the rest of her life as a prisoner inside her own body. Therefore, despite the risks to her safety she carried on through the forest, hoping that Lucas would at least have provided enough of a distraction that she could evade her pursuers.

"Target one acquired." a warrior reported and the old man's granddaughter turned to his feed, watching the footage of Hayes moving through the forest, oblivious to the troops who had just discovered her. The old man's granddaughter was about to order the warriors to move in and capture Hayes when she suddenly hesitated, "Do we have permission to engage?" the warrior asked when she failed to respond. "No." she said abruptly, "Follow target one but do not engage. Do not let her know that you are there. I'm coming down to deal with her myself."

The tilt rotor vehicle that the old man's granddaughter was riding in descended over the trees, hovering just above a gap that was large enough for her to slide down a line through after donning a set of night vision of her own. As she slid down the line a pair of the warriors on the ground walked towards the gap to meet her as she landed.

"Where is she?" she asked.

"That way about six hundred metres ma'am." the warrior responded, pointing into the darkness and the old man's granddaughter set off walking. The warriors who had met her followed a short distance behind, the trio forming a triangle as they headed towards the troops trailing Hayes.

The warriors still following Hayes turned when they heard the old man's granddaughter approaching.

"The target is just up ahead." the squad leader said softly and the old man's granddaughter looked past him. Using her night vision goggles could just about see Hayes moving through the trees, heading away from her. She could see that Hayes had a jacket draped over her and from beneath this the medical gown she had been wearing in the cell was visible. Strangely though Hayes did not appear to have her arms in the sleeves of her jacket and this puzzled the old man's granddaughter.

"Wait here." she told the warriors, "I'll deal with her myself." and then she strode forwards.

Rather than simply rush right up behind Hayes, the old man's granddaughter moved at an angle so that she could try to circle around Hayes and then confront her head on. She paused frequently to monitor Hayes, checking if she had changed her behaviour in any way that would suggest she knew that she was being followed. Hayes continued to head in a straight line though, moving slower than someone fleeing pursuit typically would and the old man's granddaughter studied her more closely, trying to determine why this was. It was only when she started to pull ahead of Hayes that she saw the other woman's jacket was not just draped over her shoulders, it was fastened at the front. This of course meant that her arms were entirely within the jacket and the old man's granddaughter smiled as she realised what this meant. Rather than continue to circle around Hayes she instead changed direction, now heading directly for the other woman. "Jennifer." she called out towards Hayes and she came to a sudden stop and turned around, "Oh Jennifer I was thinking about asking you to raise your hands but I'm guessing that isn't something you can do right now, is it?"

Hayes glared at the old man's granddaughter.

"Why not just put a bullet in me now?" Hayes replied.

"My my you are a mess aren't you?" the old man's granddaughter said, looking at the mud that covered Hayes' face and the front of her jacket, "I suppose that's what happens when you try running through the forest at night with your hands tied. Isn't that so."

"What are you waiting for?" Hayes yelled, "Just shoot me. I'm not going back."

"Of course you aren't Jennifer." the old man's granddaughter said as she walked towards Hayes, looking straight into the taller woman's eyes, "But you are going to come with me. You and that Commonwealth officer. My grandfather is waiting for the pair of you." then all of a sudden she lashed out with her foot and kicked Hayes in the side of her leg so that she fell over. Then she pounced on top of her as she struggled and pulled a hood over her head, after which she fastened a collar around her neck just as had been done to Lucas. The old man's granddaughter was just getting back to her feet when she heard the sound of the nearby warriors approaching and leaving Hayes on the ground she walked towards them, "Get them both into the carriers. My grandfather does not like to be kept waiting." she ordered.

The purpose of the collars Lucas and Hayes had been fitted with became clear as soon as the two women were dragged aboard one of the tilt rotor vehicles after it had landed. They were both pushed to the floor where their collars were linked to hooks built into the plating, preventing either of them from getting up. The two women felt the craft take off but nothing was said to them as it flew towards wherever the old man was supposedly waiting for them, any passengers aboard the craft remaining silent for the duration of the trip. It was only when the tilt rotor craft landed again that anyone spoke.

"Okay get them up." someone said before Lucas and Hayes were unhooked from the floor and picked up.

"What's going on? Where are you taking me?" Lucas said from under her hood as they were then both dragged from the tilt rotor vehicle. Still barefoot, the two women could tell that they had been brought somewhere that had a hard concrete surface but it was impossible to tell whether they were outside or inside a large structure such as a hangar.

"Get them aboard." another voice said, indicating that they were being transferred to another vehicle of some kind and soon after they were led up a set of metal steps to somewhere with a solid metal floor. They were

then led a short distance further before both Lucas was forced down and strapped into a chair while Hayes had her jacket removed before the same thing was done to her. Only then did someone pull the hoods off their heads from behind and they got their first look at their surroundings.

Lucas and Hayes had been brought aboard a spacecraft of some kind and were now sat in a pair of seats in the cockpit. Judging by the size of the compartment they were in the ship was not very large and strangely the seats were positioned right in front of the main flight console as if they were expected to pilot the vessel despite neither of them being able to move their arms.

"What's going on?" Lucas asked, looking at Hayes.

"How the hell should I know?" the other woman replied.

"What's going on is that you are going home Lieutenant Lucas." a man's voice said from behind them both and then the old man walked into view, his granddaughter beside him and he smiled as he leant on the flight console and looked at Hayes, "So tell me Jennifer, why were you still tied up like this when my granddaughter caught up with you? Did your companion not trust you enough to be willing to risk setting you free?" and Hayes scowled back at him.

"Who are you?" Lucas said.

"I am Jennifer Hayes' former superior lieutenant. She has worked for me in one form or another for more than ten years. Now I need her and you to undertake a mission for me." the old man replied.

"Like hell I will." Hayes hissed.

"If you don't want to help then all you have to do is get up and leave Jennifer." the old man's granddaughter commented.

"What are you going to do with us?" Lucas asked.

"Like I said, you're going home Lieutenant Lucas. Or at least back to the Eta Indi system where I believe your ship, the *Warspite*, is still located. Thankfully your captain and his crew seem to have been competent enough to fight off the squadron of destroyers sent to hunt your ship down and finish her off." the old man said, "I must apologise for the discomfort though. This courier will make the trip on autopilot so you'll both have to remain strapped into those seats to make sure that neither of you try to tamper with the controls."

"But why?" Lucas said.

"Because there is someone aboard the *Warspite* that I would very much like to meet. I think that we may have some common goals and I want to arrange a meeting to discuss them." the old man told her.

"Eta Indi is twenty light years away. It'll take days to get there." Hayes said.

"Yes it will and I'm afraid that will mean more discomfort for you both obviously. Although you needn't worry about food or water. I've got that covered." the old man said and he looked behind the two women where a small group of workers were setting up metal support stands for bags of liquid food. At the same time both Lucas and Hayes found their heads grabbed by warriors who forced open their mouths so that curved plastic tubes could be forced into them deeply enough that they slid down into their throats and both women reacted by trying to cough them back up only to find that they were jammed in place.

"Now hold still." the old man's granddaughter told them, "If this goes wrong the lines will go into your lungs and they'll get infected."

The workers who had set up the bags of food then slid narrow plastic tubes down the throats of Lucas and Hayes so that they would be force fed a steady drip of the liquid nourishment.

"The feeding tubes are in position admiral." one of the workers said while Lucas and Hayes both squirmed as they instinctively tried to dislodge the tubes in their throats.

"Excellent. Is the ship ready for launch?" the old man asked and the worker nodded.

"Yes admiral. The ship is fuelled and the flight path has been programmed into the autopilot." he said.

"In that case there is no point in delaying any further. Jennifer we may well meet again soon. Until then I shall wish you both a safe journey." the old man said, looking at Lucas and Hayes. Then he looked at his granddaughter and added, "Come along now my dear. These two ladies have a long journey ahead of them." Exiting the courier the old man and his granddaughter walked across the landing field that the courier ship currently stood on to a mobile tracking vehicle and climbed the steps leading into the back.

"Admiral." a Genex officer inside the back of the vehicle said when they entered, "The ship is sealed and we have priority clearance for launch."

"Very good commander. You may engage the autopilot whenever you are ready." the old man told him.

"Yes admiral." he replied and he reached down to the console beside him and opened the cover of a large button before pressing it. The courier's engines then roared as they ignited and the twenty-five metre long vessel rose up off the landing field before suddenly accelerating away.

Unable to move, Lucas and Hayes watched through the cockpit viewport as the courier continued to ascend, passing through layers of cloud before eventually flying out of the atmosphere altogether. Once in space the two women were able to see the multitude of other vessels and orbital facilities that surrounded the Genex's new home planet and Lucas was horrified to see orbital defences and berths holding squadrons of warships that surpassed those that orbited the Commonwealth planet of Centaur in the Gamma Pavonis system where the *Warspite* was based. Until that point she had clung to the idea that perhaps the Genex lacked the

numbers and infrastructure to offer any real threat to the Commonwealth but what she saw through the viewport suggested otherwise.

The courier did not remain in orbit though. Instead it continued to speed away from the planet, the transponder code being broadcast by the vessel automatically clearing it for passage through the various layers of planetary defences until it was in open space. It was then that the autopilot let the courier drift and began to charge the exterior of the ship before channelling tachyons from the onboard storage jars outside the ship so that they clung to it and shifted its mass into a complex form. Then when enough tachyons surrounded the courier the autopilot fired the engines again and the courier rapidly accelerated far beyond the speed of light and left the Alpha Indi behind on its way to Eta Indi. Seconds after the courier departed a second craft, this one much smaller than the courier also sped away at FTL, following the same route as the vessel carrying Lucas and Hayes.

Safely hidden within the comet's tail, the crew of the *Warspite* waited for the approaching fleet to arrive. With help from the *Nexus Dreadnought* the cruiser was almost fully operational by the time the unidentified fleet was expected to arrive and the crew were at action stations, ready in case it became necessary for them to fight.

"Tachyon burst." Cortez suddenly announced as the fleet dropped out of FTL.

"Where?" Knight asked.

"Just beyond the sub system around the gas giant." Cortez responded.

"So they're probably responding to the information in our drone." Knight said to Reeves.

"From these readings the ships are pretty spread out. There must be at least thirty of them." Goldman added.

"Unless the Ticik have something a thousand kilometres long." Thomas commented.

"I'm not reading any more tachyons captain. Whoever they are they've switched to EM signalling only."

Cortez added.

"In that case we'll have to wait the two and half hours for that to reach us to find out who they are." Reeves said, "We'll stand down from action stations for a couple of hours before we go back on alert but I want to know if there is any tachyon activity from that fleet in the meantime."

Standing down from action stations gave most of the crew the chance to have a break while they waited to find out who had just arrived in the system but throughout this time Reeves remained on the bridge, standing beside the central console and waiting for more data to come in. However, when the *Warspite's* sensors picked up more data it was not what he had expected or hoped for.

"Captain I'm picking up more tachyons." Cortez said.

"From the fleet by the gas giant?" Reeves asked.

"I don't think so captain. These look more like stray tachyons from ships moving at FTL. I think we've got another force closing in on us." Cortez answered.

"I agree." Goldman said, "Tachyon wave heading into the system along roughly the same vector as the one the Genex ship from the outpost left on."

"Then the Genex are coming to find out what happened to their destroyers. Can you give me an ETA?"

Reeves said.

"From the spacing of these signals it looks like they're closing at about seven light years per day and they're about five light years out." Goldman said.

"That gives us a little over seventeen hours." Thomas said.

"The question is can we count on that fleet at the gas giant to back us or do we need to stay hidden in here and watch while they both fight it out?" Knight said and Reeves looked at the time display on the console in front of him.

"I guess we'll find out in forty minutes." he replied.

As Reeves had ordered the *Warspite* returned to action stations half an hour before the light from the arriving fleet reached the comet where the cruiser was hidden and the bridge was fully manned when the moment finally came.

"Picking up EM readings now captain." a sensor operator reported.

"There's a radio signal with it was well captain." Goldman added.

"Commonwealth?" Reeves asked.

"The data formatting pattern is ours, yes." Goldman replied, "Audio only."

"Let's hear it then." Reeves said and Goldman played the transmission that had been received.

"*Warspite* this is the *Ashford's Fury*. We received your drone message and are here to support you. Please respond if you are able." a voice said.

"That's not Rear Admiral Kim's voice." Knight pointed out.

"No but it could be one of his officers." Reeves said and he turned to Goldman, "Do you have positive ID for me?" he asked.

"Yes captain." Goldman said, smiling, "We're picking up Commonwealth transponders. The *Ashford's Fury*, *Solar Flare*, *Lord Hoffer*, *Venomous*, dozens of them. It's our fleet alright captain."

"Can you get me a channel to the *Nexus Dreadnought*?" Reeves said, no longer worried about emissions being detected by the newly arrived fleet.

"Yes captain. I can put you through." Goldman told him.

"Good. Sensors I want a single active tadar pulse to confirm the position of the *Ashford's Fury* then give me a tachyon link to the admiral. I want to talk to him in real time. Patch the *Nexus Dreadnought* in as well."

"Tadar active. Location of *Ashford's Fury* plotted captain." Cortez said.

"Aligning the antenna now. We have a link." Goldman added.

"This is Captain Reeves aboard the *Warspite* calling Rear Admiral Kim aboard the *Ashford's Fury*, do you read me?" Reeves said.

"Loud and clear captain." the admiral's voice responded, "We picked up that tachyon pulse but we don't see you anywhere. Where are you?"

"We retreated into the tail of the comet that is two and a half light hours from your position admiral. I wanted to be sure who you were before revealing ourselves." Reeves said.

"Smart move. I wouldn't want to be caught alone in enemy territory either. We've picked up some debris in the area though, have you had company?" Admiral Kim asked.

"You could say that admiral, yes. A squadron of Genex destroyers hit us while we were still making repairs." Reeves answered.

"So it really is the Genex? I was still hoping that I'd end up berating you for a bad joke and insisting that you buy every man in the fleet a drink." Kim said.

"Yes admiral. We were able to destroy the Genex outpost in the system but took heavy damage. Fortunately when their ships arrived to investigate not all of our company was hostile." Reeves told him.

"I'm not sure what you mean captain." Kim responded.

"I mean we're not alone in here admiral." Reeves said.

"This is the *Nexus Dreadnought*." the voice of Nexus added on the same channel, "I am holding position beside the *Warspite*."

"Reeves what was that?" Kim asked when heard this. Like every other Commonwealth captain he had heard of the *Nexus Dreadnought* and the most commonly known fact about the powerful vessel was that it had never once left Nexus's home system in its decades of service.

"I was as surprised as you admiral but I wasn't complaining when I saw that ship trash the Genex vessels that were about to destroy my own. Thanks to Nexus we're ready for action again and it looks like that could be just in time." Reeves said.

"You mean the tachyon wave heading for the system?" Admiral Kim said.

"Yes admiral. The direction that that signal is approaching from is similar to the course taken out of the system by a Genex vessel that launched from the outpost shortly before its destruction. We knew that eventually they'd realise that the destroyers they sent had failed to report in and send a larger force to investigate. This must be it. If they follow the pattern of the destroyer squadron then they'll arrive on the outer edge of the system and then perform another jump to the gas giant your fleet is currently orbiting." Reeves explained.

"Sounds like we should be deploying to ambush them when they arrive." Admiral Kim said.

"Yes admiral, that's what the *Warspite* did with the destroyers but I'd like to suggest a slight modification to that plan." Reeves said.

"Go on captain, I'm listening."

"Use the *Warspite* as bait." Reeves said and around him everyone in the room apart from the ambassador of Nexus looked at him when they heard this, "The Genex are expecting us but they don't know about the *Nexus Dreadnought* or your fleet. I recommend that we remain hidden until we've got a good look at the Genex fleet to see what they've got then we position the *Warspite* so that they can see us."

"Let me guess, you'll be positioned right where the rest of the fleet can surround the Genex when they jump in to attack you and take them by surprise." Admiral Kim said.

"Exactly admiral. The *Warspite* is fully stocked with missiles and drones, we should be able to hold the Genex off for a few minutes." Reeves replied.

"Very well captain I'll agree to your plan. Where do you intend to deploy the *Warspite*? Admiral Kim asked.

INTERLUDE.

The old man plugged the memory sticks that Tanner had given him into a tablet computer and studied the contents.

"That tablet isn't remote networked is it?" Tanner asked nervously.

"No professor, you see I actually paid attention to your warnings. I don't want to risk accidentally releasing the alien computer virus into my network." the old man replied, looking up from his tablet for a moment.

"Good, because if that virus can be activated in any piece of technology, tablets, desktop computers, starships, robots-" Tanner began.

"Yes professor I get the message. Though I take it that the virus is in a dormant state right now?" the old man said.

"Yes admiral. The files can't self execute, they need to be specifically opened. As soon as they are then the alien AI will reconstruct itself and spread, hunting for suitable technologies to turn to its own purpose." Tanner answered.

"Very good. Now I should warn you that an attempt has already been made on my life." the old man said and Tanner's eyes widened.

"Someone tried to kill you?" he said.

"Yes, within the Department of the Armed Forces building itself if you can believe it. Someone with significant influence within the army from the looks of the warriors they sent. Of course I am not without influence myself and my own security force was able to respond in time where that of the building failed to do anything. I wanted you to know this just in case you suspect that you may be being targeted. I can provide you with protection if necessary but it needs to be discrete. If our association becomes too prominent then it could increase the risk to you while I seek out the perpetrator." the old man explained before the door to his office opened and his granddaughter entered, "I'll be with you in a moment my dear. Professor Tanner was just leaving." he told her and then he smiled as he watched Tanner get up to leave.

"Thank you admiral." he said.

"Do make sure that the professor gets back home safely." the old man said to one of the guards standing just inside his office. Following the attempt on his life his security staff now wore prominent body armour over their suits rather than discrete protective vests beneath them and had personal defence weapons slung across their chests.

"Yes admiral." the guard responded and he accompanied Tanner from the office, closing the door behind him.

"Did the professor give you what you wanted grandfather?" the old man's granddaughter asked and the old man smiled back at her.

"Oh yes." he told her and he held out the tablet, "This now contains a complete copy of the alien computer virus. Self extracting, self building and self replicating it represents the ultimate weapon against any civilisation that has developed digital computer networks. Even if that civilisation lacks elements such as advanced robotics and particle induction this program will create whatever it needs."

"A poisoned chalice." his granddaughter commented.

"Quite. Amazing isn't it that what I hold in my hands is a weapon more destructive than any nuclear warhead? But what brings you here my dear? I thought you were hunting for our attacker. Was the head of security for the armed forces building co-operative?" the old man asked.

"He hadn't revealed anything specific when I left but I'm certain he knows something and I think he can be persuaded. I left him in good hands though. I came here on a different matter. There's been a worrying development. Admiral Dressler has been sending out drones to patrol groups with new orders."

"Yes, they need to know to remain close to home." the old man said.

"Yes but not all of them have those orders. The chief of security may not have acted to prevent the attempt on our lives but he has been busy monitoring communications and I was able to access several from Admiral Dressler, including the list of orders sent to our fleet patrols. At least four squadrons have been ordered to form up and proceed to the Eta Indi system." his granddaughter answered.

"What sort of ships are we talking about?" the old man said.

"A mix grandfather. The squadrons I saw orders for went to a patrol group of a pair of heavy pickets and their corvette escorts, a destroyer group and two light cruiser squadrons. Just over thirty ships in total with a sizeable number of attack craft between them. Easily enough to overwhelm an Essex-class heavy cruiser. Especially one that is damaged and probably low on ammunition."

"We know that the *Warspite's* captain is resourceful and we know that he has the assistance of an avatar of Nexus. He proved that when fought off the destroyer squadron Dressler sent previously but this presents us with a dilemma. Do you know how soon those ships will reach Eta Indi?" the old man said.

"No exact times were given in the orders Admiral Dressler sent, it was all on the basis of acting as soon as ships could rendezvous with one another. On the basis of the speeds that the ships involved are capable of

though I'd say that they'll arrive at Eta Indi in a matter of hours. Given the number of ships involved I don't see how the *Warspite* can't have seen them coming from stray tachyon emissions. That means they'll either hide or run before they get there. That leaves us in a precarious position." his granddaughter said, "When the courier carrying Jennifer Hayes and the Commonwealth lieutenant arrives it will run right into Dressler's ships."

"Yes which means that even if the *Warspite* is still in the system she won't respond to the signal when the courier arrives." the old man added.

"Do you think the autopilot will function if she doesn't grandfather?"

"Oh yes. If the *Warspite* fails to respond in time or if any of our warships approach the ship then it will execute a jump out of the system and return to us at the rendezvous point. We will be safe enough but the problem lies in finding another way of getting it where it needs to be. At the very least we will have to delay the next stage of our plan and if the *Warspite* is destroyed we may need to look for an alternate way to reach the Commonwealth before we release this." the old man said and then he held up his tablet again.

"It took years to get to where we are now grandfather." the old man's granddaughter pointed out.

"Yes my dear but this time the Commonwealth knows we still exist and we may be able to use that to our advantage. Even after the damage caused to our intelligence network after the debacle at Verne, Commander Kane still has reliable lines of communication into the Commonwealth. Perhaps he can offer some suggestions for viable candidates. I will set up a meeting with him as soon as possible." the old man replied.

Despite having expected to meet with the old man, a shudder still went down Kane's spine when his office door opened and a pair of armoured and heavily armed warriors entered before the old man and his granddaughter appeared behind them.

"Admiral." Kane said, getting to his feet.

"Commander thank you for seeing me on such short notice." the old man responded.

"My pleasure admiral. Now what can I do for you?" Kane asked.

"I need an assessment of the Commonwealth's likely response to finding out about our continued existence and how we can manipulate it commander." the old man said.

"Ah, yes well that seems to be everyone's priority right now. Unfortunately there is no specific information available right now. I've been told that the Commonwealth cruiser that destroyed our outpost in the Eta Indi system likely sent drones back to the Commonwealth and they will have arrived there by now. However, there just hasn't been enough time for any of the groups I've been handling to pass any data back to me. The same goes for everyone else around here. We've all been putting in extra hours to try and make sense of what's happening but the distances involved are just too big."

"Plus you're all fighting over the spoils of Jennifer Hayes' accumulated resources." the old man's granddaughter commented and Kane smiled.

"You've already promised me her office. That's all I really wanted. I've heard about what you did to her backers and support network anyway. It doesn't seem like there's much left to fight over." Kane said.

"Yes it was a shame that Enrico Vale had to be killed. He was very good at his job but on the other hand even if Stein hadn't been backing Commander Hayes I think I would have had him dealt with. I found him such a tedious man." the old man said, "But even if you don't have current data you have been monitoring and manipulating the Commonwealth for many years. What is your assessment of the likely outcome of them finding out that we are still alive out here?"

"They'll want to know where we are." Kane replied immediately, "The Commonwealth won't accept that the survivors were limited to one tiny outpost. Right now I expect that their fleet will be planning for a series of expeditions beyond their borders. When they realised that the Sissusk exited they sent a squadron of cruisers to survey the extents of the territory. We should expect at least that level of response again directed at us. There is the added complication of the Ticik though."

"Do you think that the Ticik and Commonwealth will go to war?" the old man's granddaughter asked.

"It's a possibility. Jennifer asked for my help in stoking pro-war opinions in the Commonwealth and the fact that there was a major fleet engagement between the two in the Epsilon Pavonis system will inevitably have angered both sides. Of course having the Commonwealth identify our ship is likely to trigger doubts about going to war among their leadership. They'll suspect that we somehow engineered the confrontation." Kane answered.

"Which is exactly what Jennifer Hayes did." the old man pointed out and Kane smiled.

"Indeed but right now I think that the actions of the Ticik will determine whether or not there is war between them and the Commonwealth. All humanity in fact, I doubt that the Ticik will make any distinction." he said.

"When it comes to the Ticik everything has to be doubted. After years of intermittent contact with us and even open war against the Sissusk Empire and no-one has ever seen one of them and made it back to tell the tale, only their machines." the old man replied.

"Yes that's right but it has been observed that they challenge any attempt to encroach on what they see as

their territory. Obviously the battle took place well outside Ticik space but the sheer size of it and the losses they suffered, I don't think I've ever heard of them losing so many dreadnoughts in a single engagement before. That means that they won't be able to see the Commonwealth as anything other than a potential threat. The one thing in the Commonwealth's favour right now is distance. The two factions are separated by dozens of light years and it will take time for them to find one another. The Commonwealth may see that as a waste of resources as well as dangerous. The more of their ships head towards Ticik space the more likely it is that the Ticik will follow them back. Plus they are going to want to find us." Kane said.

"That is what I thought. I advised Secretary LeClair that we should try to avoid conflict. Simply ask the Commonwealth ships to leave our space if they do manage to locate us. How well do you think they would react to that?" the old man said and Kane paused to consider this.

"Initially I think they would. A few cruisers against an entire world? Even our smallest colony could defeat an attack like that. In the longer term things could get more difficult though. The scale of our interference over the years is just too big for them to ignore completely. It may still be possible to avoid a full scale war but we shouldn't count on it. In fact I think that we should expand our operations against them." he said.

"Even if that triggers a war we aren't in a position to win?" the old man's granddaughter asked and Kane nodded.

"Yes even then. Espionage and sabotage may trigger a war but they will also divide the Commonwealth's attention. Forces that they could have used to invade our space will instead have to be kept at home to protect their own infrastructure." Kane said and the old man smiled.

"Thank you commander. Now I think that we have taken up enough of your time and will be leaving. I will bear in mind your suggestion that we step up the amount of covert action carried out against the Commonwealth." the old man said as he started to get to his feet and his granddaughter stood up to help him, "Thank you my dear." he added.

Exiting Kane's office the old man, his granddaughter and their security detail walked directly to the elevator and as soon as they were inside the old man's granddaughter looked at him.

"What now grandfather?" she asked.

"Now we try to obtain a ship from our allies in the fleet. Most front line warships will be in high demand right now but I'm sure that we can find a heavy picket somewhere that can be officially loaned to the intelligence service. That will have adequate hangar space for the courier and drones to stay in touch with us while its sensors will enable it to track any Commonwealth vessels." the old man said, "Hayes and the Commonwealth officer may be difficult to handle though. We can't exactly keep them as they are now but we can't have them talking to fleet personnel. I think we're going to have to come up with something more creative for them."

B.

The engineering section of the *Warspite* was often a hive of activity. Keeping an eight hundred metre long starship running was difficult at the best of times and having to repair battle damage only added to this. However, when Reeves entered the massive main engineering compartment he got the feeling that things were returning to normal despite the bundles of exposed cables running between different pieces of machinery that were not normally present.

"Captain I didn't expect to see you down here." Bernard said when he saw Reeves.

"I was just on my way up to the bridge and thought I'd stop by to see in person how things are going on down here." Reeves said, looking around at where engineers were still working.

"Almost back to normal. I think we'll still need to dry dock when we get back to Centaur to fix a few things but I'm happy for the *Warspite* to go into action and travel at FTL. She won't just fly apart on you." Bernard told him.

"That's good to hear commander." Reeves replied.

"Of course having Commander Knight to help with the particle inductor was very useful. He knows more about them than even I do and it let me focus my attention elsewhere. Plus we'd never have been able to build the new parts this quickly without Nexus." Bernard said.

"So there's nothing else you need then?" Reeves asked.

"A holiday? A nice long one on a private beach somewhere where my wife can ask me to help rub sun tan lotion on her?" Bernard answered and the two men smiled at one another.

"I think we're about fifty light years from a beach." he said, "I'm afraid that will have to wait until we get back home."

"And why exactly aren't we heading back there now captain? We identified that scout ship that was shadowing us and we destroyed the Genex outpost. Aren't we done here?" Bernard said.

"Admiral Kim and I both want to try and determine where the Genex have their main base of operations or colony or whatever it is that they have out here. Those ships heading towards us now are probably Genex and we may be able to track them back to their point of origin." Reeves explained.

"Of course captain but do me one favour, okay?"

"Name it." Reeves said.

"I just put this ship back together captain. Could you try and keep it that way?" Bernard said and Reeves smiled at him.

"I'm not promising anything commander." he said before turning around and leaving the compartment.

The *Warspite's* bridge was located just a few levels above the main engineering compartment, still buried deep within the cruiser's superstructure for protection against battle damage and it took less than two minutes for Reeves to make his way up to it, finding all of the control stations fully manned when he arrived.

"Commander Knight, Commander Bernard passes on his thanks for your help with the repairs." he said as he walked over to the central console where Knight stood with Thomas and the ambassador of Nexus.

The console had been set to show a large map of the Eta Indi star system with all of its planets and asteroid belts plotted on it while brightly coloured icons showed the deployment of the Commonwealth battle group in the system. The *Warspite* itself was orbiting the gas giant around which the Genex outpost had been constructed, positioned very close to the debris field that was all that was left of the outpost moon and the orbiting asteroid defence stations. This debris offered a degree of concealment for the cruiser but would not hide it as effectively as the ice rings had. This would give the impression of a ship trying to hide while still making it visible to a determined searcher. Meanwhile most of the rest of the battle group, including the *Nexus Dreadnought* had been deployed within the rings while a few smaller ships had actually landed on some of the gas giant's solid moons, ready to launch when needed.

"He's welcome." Knight replied before Cortez spoke up.

"Captain I'm picking up multiple tachyon surges." she said.

"Send it through to this console chief petty officer." Reeves ordered and a new cluster of icons appeared on the map. These were located on the very edge of the solar system, several light hours away from the gas giant. Each of these icons represented the epicentre of a sudden burst of tachyons that occurred when a spacecraft dropped to sub-light speed and the shell of charged tachyons surrounding its hull had to be dispersed. A bigger surge meant that the ship was either larger or travelling faster, a greater part of the total magnitude of its mass being imaginary so the icons varied in size according to the strength of each surge. One other icon had appeared on the map as well though, indicating that a single ship had entered the system away from the main fleet, just a few light minutes from the *Warspite's* location. The icon representing this ship was small, suggesting that the Genex had sent a scout ship ahead of their main fleet to locate the *Warspite* before they committed any capital ships.

"They're being cautious." Knight commented.

"We're in luck though." Thomas added, "Look at how far out that main fleet is. If they'd come out of FTL just one light hour further out then with decent optics they'd have seen Admiral Kim's ships before they got into the rings."

"Are these signals confirmed as individual ships yet?" Knight asked.

"Yes commander." Goldman answered, "We're looking at forty-seven enemy vessels including the lone scout inside the system."

"Comparing the strengths of these surges to the speed at which they approached I can determine the size ranges of the ships we are facing captain." the ambassador of Nexus said, "I calculate that the largest vessel is no bigger than the *Warspite*. Another heavy cruiser or possibly an escort carrier. There are five more vessels only slightly smaller, again cruisers or escort carriers. Twenty-two are smaller capital ships such as destroyers while the remaining nineteen are light vessels. As you have already deduced the nearest vessel is one of these. The arrangement of the fleet suggests that it is made up of six smaller squadrons that have been combined for this mission."

"So we're about even in numbers but we've got bigger ships at our disposal." Reeves said, "Helm move us away from the enemy scout. Use the main drives at low power. That should give them something to see if they haven't noticed us already."

"Firing engines now captain. Ten percent power." Ash responded as the *Warspite* began to move around what remained of the nearby moon, making it appear as if the cruiser was attempting to conceal itself from the Genex scout while ignoring the larger fleet. This inevitably produced a release of thermal energy that was picked up by the sensors of the scout. Seeing the energy release from the *Warspite* the scout's crew immediately signalled the rest of their fleet, using a tachyon transmission to get the information to them in real time. The tightly focused nature of the transmission made it undetectable by any of the Commonwealth vessels in the system. However, the subsequent release of stray tachyons from the Genex fleet as their ships prepared to make another FTL jump.

"Here they come." Goldman announced.

"Weapons hot. Turrets may fire as soon as targets appear. Scramble all fighters and drones." Reeves ordered.

While the *Warspite* was launching its fighters and drones Admiral Kim watched from the bridge of the *Ashford's Fury*. Still hidden inside the gas giant's ice rings the Commonwealth fleet was able to communicate without giving away their presence by relaying messages from ship to ship using communication lasers and the admiral used this system to give his orders.

"All ships prepare to attack. Wait for the enemy to complete their jump and launch all attack craft. Stand by to receive full deployment orders once we have identified the enemy vessels." he broadcast.

"Admiral the enemy fleet is jumping now." one of the admiral's command staff told him. Then moments later the officer added, "Tachyon surges detected. They're here."

"Show me." Admiral Kim said, looking at the large tactical display in front of him. This showed that the Genex had deployed themselves in six distinct clusters beyond the remains of the moon that the *Warspite* was using for cover. These clusters formed a ring aligned to face the moon so that they could loop around it from all sides if necessary. It was clear from the pattern of deployment that the ships of the Genex fleet had differing mission profiles, with some of them positioned further away from the *Warspite* where they could be protected from its fire. Two capital sized and two smaller ships were deployed behind a screen of eight other small craft in one group while in another the largest Genex vessel and three small ships protected another five smaller vessels.

"Admiral we're picking up launches. Looks like they're scrambling attack craft." another officer announced as more signals appeared on the tactical display. Admiral Kim saw that a large number of these were coming from the capital ships that were holding back as well as the smaller vessels alongside them, indicating that these were a pair of heavy pickets and cutters. However, the other five smaller ships the Genex were keeping back showed no signs of launching attack craft and these were instead proceeding slowly forwards along with the rest of their fleet.

"Monitors." Kim said, pointing to the icons that represented these five ships on his display, "I want them taken out before they can bring their weapons to bare. What is the status of our attack craft?"

"All ships launching now admiral. Using minimal power to avoid detection. The *Warspite* has already launched everything they have."

"All ships stand by to move out on my command." Admiral Kim broadcast to his fleet.

"Captain Schaar the enemy vessel has moved behind the remains of the moon." a sensor operator reported as Captain Leader Schaar checked that her force had completed the jump from the edge of the system correctly. Normally command of a task force of this size would be assigned to an admiral but the haste with which Admiral Dressler had been forced to assemble it meant that he had instead had to entrust command to a captain he knew could be counted on to be loyal to him, the commanding officer of the heavy cruiser

Defiance.

"What structural data do we have on the lunar debris?" Schaar asked.

"Mainly silicon with some metallic traces captain."

"In other words our monitors should have no problem torching what is left. Then we'll have a clear line of fire at the enemy cruiser. Relay to fleet, all ships advance. Target that debris field with forced plasma beams and acquire missile locks. Report in when firing solutions are plotted. We'll do this the easy way." she ordered.

"Captain I'm detecting launches from the enemy cruiser. The number and assortment is odd though. There seem to be more than our intelligence indicates are carried by an Essex-class vessel and there are both fighters and interceptors." another bridge officer said.

"Ignore them. Our attack craft still outnumber them and if any get through our point defences can handle them. Just instruct the *Well of Obedience* to hold her bombers back. We won't be needing them." Schaar ordered.

"I'm also picking up some odd readings from the gas giant." the sensor operator added, "Multiple low level magnetic bursts."

"Probably just emissions from the gas giant itself." Schaar responded.

The Genex fleet began to move towards the remains of the moon that the *Warspite* was hiding behind and the monitors that were part of the *Defiance's* squadron repositioned themselves so that they had a clear line of fire. Each of the monitors was built around a powerful forced plasma beam that functioned by venting energy directly from their main fusion reactors. Although destructive the range of these weapons was significantly less than that of other heavy beam weapons the monitors needed to move closer before employing them. At the same time the majority of the Genex fleet's attack craft sped forwards. These were a mix of interceptors, fighters and drones while the single squadron of larger bombers that had been launched by the heavy picket *Well of Obedience* remained close to their base ship.

"*Warspite* we're seeing two hundred plus attack craft heading this way." Shaw transmitted as she saw the swarm of Genex craft heading towards her squadrons.

"Understood Archangel. Stand by for support." Goldman's voice responded.

"Stand by?" Shaw commented, "Can you believe that Kaz?"

"Just another glorious day in the star fighter corps." Mori commented before there was a brilliant flash of light as one of the Genex monitors fired its main gun, "Whoa!" he exclaimed when the beam of plasma struck a large lump of rock that had been part of the moon on which the Genex outpost was constructed and it shattered, sending much smaller pieces of glowing debris flying in all directions.

"Monitors. Everyone watch out for those plasma beams." Shaw broadcast to the other attack craft, "They probably can't target us accurately but there's no way you'll survive if you get caught in the path of the beams."

The destruction of the large piece of debris opened a path between the *Warspite* and the Genex fleet and the cruiser's gunners saw that they now had a clear line of fire.

"Captain we are clear to fire the main guns now." one of the gunners reported, "I have a lock on one of their cruisers."

"Can we launch missiles?" Knight asked.

"No commander." another gunner responded, "There's too much debris between us to guarantee they won't be triggered early. We could always use a drone to establish a lock and fire around the debris."

"No, the field is too dispersed. The Genex would have too much time to prepare their defences. Main gun only." Reeves said, "Mister Ash hold us on target. Weapons may fire when ready."

Both of the *Warspite's* neutral particle beam cannons fired together and the twin energy beams leapt across space. These vaporised several more pieces of debris that drifted into their path but the beams were powerful enough that this did little to blunt their destructive power by the time they hit one of the Genex light cruisers. The twin beams of energy burned through the ship's armour plating and one of its turrets was blasted off but the cruiser remained operational, advancing with the rest of the fleet.

"Captain the *October's Sunrise* has been hit. She's reporting moderate damage." one of Schaar's officers told her.

"There's still too much debris for our missiles to get through. Helm align us on the enemy vessel and fire the main gun. Let's see if we can keep them busy while the monitors do their work." Schaar ordered.

The *Defiance* was fitted with a linked array of eight X-ray lasers as her main direct fire weapon. The individual beams from this weapon lacked the hitting power of the *Warspite's* neutral particle beam cannons but they were designed to fire in unison so that the total hitting power would be greater. However, the lack of individual firepower meant that the weapons also suffered from a reduced range as the energy of the beams dispersed more rapidly. Even so the hull of the *Warspite* glowed brightly when it was hit, only its thick armour preventing the beams from penetrating even at extreme range.

"Captain we have incoming missiles!" one of the sensor operators exclaimed.

"They must be using their attack craft to relay targeting data. How long until ours can engage them?" Schaar said.

"About thirty seconds captain but the missiles aren't coming from the primary target. They're coming from the other Commonwealth ships coming out of the ice rings."

Schaar watched in horror as the display in front of her showed dozens of Commonwealth capital ships escorted by hundreds of attack craft. As was to be expected most of the Commonwealth capital ships were destroyers and frigates but there were also several cruisers among them and more significantly a pair of Lincoln-class battleships as well as another massive vessel that Schaar could not identify and it was this vessel that had just fired a wave of missiles towards the Genex.

On numbers alone it seemed that Schaar's force was superior but the average size of the Commonwealth ships was much bigger. This advantage was not overwhelming though and Schaar quickly considered her options. Ordering a withdrawal now would mean abandoning all of her fleet's attack craft, including the pilots from her own ship and that could make her a target for any disgruntled officer whose friend got left behind. Delaying a retreat long enough to recover the attack craft would inevitably mean the fleet taking damage and possibly losing some of her ships before they could escape as well. That left actually standing and fighting and Schaar knew exactly what that could mean for her. Victory over a Commonwealth fleet would inevitably lead to promotion while the blame for defeat could be passed off onto the fleet intelligence analysts that had determined there would be only one Commonwealth ship present. All she had to do was make sure that she personally survived the battle and unlike her opponents in the Commonwealth fleet Schaar knew that she was willing to sacrifice any number of other Genex ships and crewmen to make sure that happened.

"Signal the *Well of Obedience*. Tell her to send her bombers against the primary target. All other ships are to come about and engage the Commonwealth fleet. Weapons free. Fire at will." she ordered.

The Genex ships immediately began to redeploy, altering their formations to counter this new and far more serious threat from the Commonwealth fleet. Obtaining rapid and random missile locks on Commonwealth ships a number of the Genex destroyers and cruisers released a wave of missiles. These were not expected to inflict serious damage on any of their targets but they would focus the Commonwealth captains' attentions away from the Genex ships for a short while.

While the Genex warships were moving to engage the main Commonwealth fleet their attack craft continued to speed towards the *Warspite*, with a squadron of heavily armed bombers moving up behind them while the attack craft launched by the *Warspite* formed a screen in front of them.

"Break and engage." Shaw ordered, "Stay in the debris field though, there are too many of them for us to fight in open space." and then she turned her fighter sharply, firing its engines to take it behind a spinning lump of rock.

"Hey! A little warning next time." Mori exclaimed as the sharpness of the turn proved too much for the fighter's artificial gravity field and he felt himself suddenly pushed to one side.

The first of the Genex attack craft to enter the debris field were a flight of drones and the lead machine exploded almost instantly as several rounds from an interceptor's gauss cannon ripped it apart. This caused the other three drones to turn and chase the interceptor as its single pilot broke off his attack. This turned out to be a trap, however as a pair of the *Warspite's* fighters pounced on the drones from behind a large piece of debris as they flew past. Firing rapid bursts from their own gauss cannons they destroyed all three drones before their controller aboard a Genex warship could update their orders.

Shaw saw several plumes of dust erupt from one of the larger lumps of rock in the debris field as a Genex fighter opened fire on another member of her squadron and missed, the projectiles slamming into rock instead.

"Kaz I need a lock. Quickly." she said as she turned her fighter again, this time keeping the craft's heading the same so that it flew sideways from behind the piece of debris between it and the oncoming Genex fighter. With the Genex fighter dead ahead and Mori forewarned it took less than a second for him to get a missile lock on the enemy craft and he smiled as he responded.

"Lock achieved." he said and Shaw immediately released a missile from the fighter's internal weapons bays. The Genex pilot turned his own fighter aside and began to accelerate away but the missile turned to track him and its proximity fuse triggered its warhead right behind the fighter, spraying it with shrapnel that turned the entire rear section into a short lived inferno before what remained of it crashed into another large piece of debris from the destroyed moon.

"Captain our fighters are engaging the enemy attack craft." Goldman reported.

"What about the enemy warships?" Reeves asked.

"They all appear to be concentrating on the rest of the fleet." Goldman answered, "Looks like both sides are hurling missiles at one another but it's all opportunity fire rather than for serious effect."

"Captain there is another group of attack craft closing from the Genex fleet." the ambassador of Nexus

added, "From their size and speed I believe that they are bombers."

"The Genex admiral must intend for them to take us out while he keeps his bigger ships back to handle the rest of the fleet." Knight commented and Reeves nodded.

"Helm pull us back from the debris field another thousand kilometres. Weapons I want our turrets ready to fire on anything that comes out without broadcasting a Commonwealth transponder." he ordered.

"Captain I can give you another shot at the Genex." the gunner for the *Warspite's* main guns said.

"Is it the same target as before?" Knight said but the gunner shook his head.

"No sir it's one of the smaller capital ships close by the cruiser." he said.

"That's a pity." Knight commented.

"Yes but slight damage to two ships is better than slight damage to one." Reeves replied before he added, "Fire when ready."

The *Warspite's* main guns fired again but this time one of the beams struck a large piece of debris that drifted into the path of the beam. This broke the debris up further but this time it also blocked enough of the beam that it had no effect on the Genex destroyer being targeted. On the other hand the second beam burned a long hole down the side of the enemy warship and there was a plume of vapour as atmosphere began to escape before there was an explosion from inside the vessel when some of its stored ammunition detonated.

"Captain we have a lock on the Commonwealth battleship." one of Schaar's gunners told her.

"What about Drake's squadron?" she replied.

"Positioning to engage the enemy dreadnought now." her flight operations officer responded.

Captain Drake commanded a squadron consisting of four heavy destroyers and a pair of heavy frigates.

Between them these ships had more firepower than her own *Defiance* and she thought that they offered her the best chance of taking out the mysterious dreadnought at the heart of the Commonwealth fleet. The destroyers carried missiles that were as powerful as those on her own ship while the heavy frigates as well as possessing the usual array of turrets for close protection also mounted powerful main guns that could be used to fire on the dreadnought directly.

"Good. Have his destroyers launch their missiles but be sure not to expend too many while the dreadnought can still defend itself. Just keep it busy long enough for his frigates to target it with their main guns. In the mean time I want us to fire at that battleship. Missiles. Three volleys rapid." Schaar ordered.

The *Defiance* mounted six forward facing missile launchers, each one fed from a common magazine and these each fired three missiles as rapidly as they could towards the battleship *Vengeful*. The flight path of the missiles took them close enough to a pair of Commonwealth frigates that they were able to engage them, shooting down the entire first wave and one from the second but the remaining missiles got past them and it was then left to the *Vengeful's* own weapons to defend the battleship. Turning its light and medium turrets towards the missiles the *Vengeful* fired a barrage of energy beams at the oncoming missiles that destroyed four more and sent two spinning harmlessly out of control but this still left five more closing. One of these detonated early, its control systems confused by the battleship's electronic defences but the other four all found their target. One of the missiles failed to penetrate the massive warship's thick armour while a second hit only a cargo hold and did nothing more than destroy a stockpile of spare parts and rations. On the other hand the final missile struck the rear of the battleship and there was a massive explosion as one of its drive units was utterly destroyed.

"Admiral the *Vengeful* is reporting serious damage to her engines." one of the *Ashford's Fury's* officers told Admiral Kim and he frowned.

"Damn it." he muttered. When the task force had left Commonwealth space it had included four Lincoln-class battleships but the battle against the Ticik at Epsilon Pavonis had seen one destroyed and one badly damaged enough that Kim had ordered it to return to the closest safe port. Now he faced losing another of the powerful vessels, "Do they still have weapons?" he asked.

"Yes admiral."

"Good. Signal the *Nexus Dreadnought*. I want her to form up with us and the *Vengeful* to provide long ranged fire support then have the frigates *Canopus*, *Regent* and *Winding Road* position themselves to give us cover."

The *Ashford's Fury* and *Nexus Dreadnought* moved closer to the damaged *Vengeful* as the Commonwealth fleet began to return fire against the Genex. Only the most powerful of their weapons were in range of the Genex so far but this did not prevent the Commonwealth crews from firing at targets of opportunity. The damage caused by most of these was limited, with just one corvette from the squadron based around the two heavy pickets being destroyed as a blast from a turret mounted neutral particle beam cannon aboard the *Ashford's Fury* burned through it and it was ripped apart by a series of internal explosions.

The Genex themselves had fewer such long ranged weapons but they quickly brought those that they did have into play. The squadron commanded by Captain Drake aligned themselves on the *Nexus Dreadnought* and the squadrons four heavy destroyers all launched salvos of heavy missiles. The size of these missiles

meant that each destroyer could carry only a limited amount of them and so they limited the quantity of missiles in their salvoes. In response the *Nexus Dreadnought* brought its defensive turrets to bear and fired a succession of free-electron beam lasers that shot down all of the incoming missiles. Had the *Nexus Dreadnought* been a conventional Commonwealth starship these missiles may have had the desired effect of distracting the command crew while the squadron's two heavy frigates manoeuvred into position to fire their bow mounted heavy X-ray lasers. However, Nexus was able simultaneously target the incoming missiles while also tracking the movements of the two frigates and plotted that when they fired their main guns they would likely strike a section of the *Nexus Dreadnought* that was packed with missiles. Instead of taking evasive action Nexus chose instead chose to remove the risk of internal detonations and the entire bank of two hundred missile silos suddenly sprang open and the weapons inside them were ejected into space. When the concentrated beams of X-rays then hit the *Nexus Dreadnought* they hit only empty missile silos and thick armour plating that they failed to penetrate. Meanwhile Nexus locked onto the six ships and sent their positions to the guidance systems of the ejected missiles. In unison the engines of these missiles activated and in one great swarm they turned towards the Genex squadron and accelerated towards them. The six crews immediately stopped firing on the *Nexus Dreadnought* and instead prepared to face the incoming missiles. Other nearby Genex vessels also targeted the missiles, recognising the threat that two hundred heavy warheads presented to the fleet. However, even though dozens of the missiles were shot down before they could reach their targets many more got through the barrage of defensive fire and missile after missile slammed into the four heavy destroyers and their accompanying heavy frigates. Then in one rapid succession of massive explosions all six warships were destroyed, reduced to nothing but steadily expanding clouds of debris as in one fell swoop the Genex fleet lost almost all of its long ranged heavy firepower.

Shaw flinched when she saw the brilliant flashes of light that marked the destruction of the Genex squadron, her helmet visor darkening to protect her vision.

"What the hell was that Kaz?" she exclaimed.

"You know that Genex squadron that was hurling missiles at the *Nexus Dreadnought*? Well it's not there any more. I think Nexus just sent about two hundred missiles back at it." Mori said.

"Remind me never to piss off that AI." Shaw commented, "Now if only it could help us out against these Genex fighters." she added as she rolled her fighter out of the way of an oncoming Genex craft, both fighters firing rapid bursts from their gauss cannons that failed to strike one another.

The Genex fighter suddenly suddenly exploded and Shaw turned her head to try to see what had happened and she saw another Commonwealth fighter zooming past behind hers. Several more of them followed and Shaw realised that the main force of Commonwealth attack craft had just arrived in the debris field.

"Whoever that pilot is I'm going to buy him a drink." she said.

"Looks like they got here just in time. I'm picking up bombers dead ahead." Mori told her and Shaw looked forwards again to see a larger and more bulky attack craft pass between two large pieces of debris.

Obviously intended for combat in space only from its lack of wings the craft had a ring of wide cylinders mounted around its hull, each one obviously housing a missile powerful enough to damage a capital ship. Although a heavy cruiser like the *Warspite* could easily withstand the impact of one of these missiles the bomber appeared to carry a dozen of them and it was just one of a squadron of twelve. Taken together these relatively small craft had enough firepower to destroy any ship in the Commonwealth fleet if they were able to get close enough to deliver them.

"I see him. Going in now." she said as she accelerated towards the lumbering bomber. Before she could get a clear shot at the larger craft though a Genex drone flew past the bomber from behind and fired at Shaw. Pulling hard on her controls she turned her fighter aside but several of the gauss cannon rounds from the drone clipped the side of the craft, one of them punching through through the fighter's wing while another hit the fuselage. Shaw swore under her breath as she started to turn the fighter back towards the bomber but Mori called out a warning.

"No! The AG field is-" he began before the sudden force of the acceleration hit Shaw and everything went black.

9.

Schaar gasped when she saw Drake's entire squadron destroyed, knowing what the loss of those six ships had just cost her fleet. Then she looked at her tactical display, focusing on the region of space that the destroyed squadron had occupied. When the six warships had exploded the blast had taken with them most of the remaining missiles fired by the *Nexus Dreadnought*. However, about twenty of the missiles had survived and these were now speeding through space past where the Genex squadron had been destroyed. "Where are those missiles heading now?" she asked, knowing that they still posed a threat to her ships. "It looks like they've been steered towards one of the gas giant's moons." her navigator told her, "They could have been ordered to hit it so they can be disposed of but they could also use it to loop around and come right back at us without burning all their fuel."

"We need to get closer to the gas giant." Schaar said, "Can we jump inside the orbit of the ice rings?" "I wouldn't advise it captain." her navigator answered, "There's too much mass in our path."

"We can't stay in open space. We need to get somewhere that forces the Commonwealth ships to get closer to ours and brings them into range of all our weapons. Suggestions?" Schaar said.

"The debris field from the moon captain." her first officer responded.

"It's too small for the entire fleet." Schaar pointed out.

"Maybe but our monitors can get behind its shadow and use it for cover while the rest of the fleet makes a run for the ice rings." her first officer said and Schaar smiled.

"Send to fleet, all light vessels are to advance towards the debris field. Use it for cover while engaging the enemy. All attack craft should remain engaged as long as they have ammunition and the fuel to do so. All other ships form up on the *Defiance* and lay in a course for the ice rings."

The *Warspite's* turrets fired as a pair of Genex drones came speeding out of the debris field and both machines exploded in rapid succession.

"Any signs of those bombers yet?" Reeves asked as he studied the tactical display on the central console. "Not yet Captain but it looks like the Genex fleet is on the move. It looks like they're splitting up." Goldman replied.

"Where are they going?" Reeves said, focusing on the way that the Genex ships were now rearranging their formation.

"The light warships are all coming this way. The capital ships look like they're about to break off." Knight said from across the console.

"They're looking for somewhere to hide." Reeves said, "Their commander doesn't want to face our fleet at long range so he's looking for a way to force our ships to get closer. If it was me then this moon over here would have been my first choice."

"Those missiles heading towards it probably rule that out though." Knight commented and Reeves nodded.

"Yes and even their monitors could reach it without getting caught out in the open. The Genex admiral is going to make a break for something else." he said.

"I guess being on the receiving end of a two hundred missile volley kind of takes the fight out people." Thomas commented.

"Unfortunately launching such a volley is not an easily repeatable tactic." the ambassador of Nexus added, "If the Genex switch to using their own missiles to counter ours they could too easily trigger a chain reaction that would destroy the entire volley in one go."

"Thanks but I studied space combat theory at officer training school ambassador." Thomas responded.

"I meant no offence lieutenant commander." the ambassador said.

"Forget it." Thomas replied.

"The ice rings." Reeves said suddenly, a smile spreading across his face, "The Genex will head to the ice rings. That will force our ships to move along them or through them where they can't fire at long range."

"Err captain the easiest course to the ice rings will bring the Genex right past us." Thomas pointed out.

"He's right. They'll pass within five thousand kilometres of the debris field." Knight added.

"Weapons I want missile locks on as many of the Genex ships as possible. Helm rotate the ship for a cold launch of eight missiles. We'll send them out looking like debris and light them up when the Genex pass by. With any luck they'll be too close to react quickly enough to intercept them." Reeves ordered.

Eight of the *Warspite's* internal missile silos opened as the cruiser rotated in place and a missile was magnetically propelled from each. Concealed from the Genex's line of sight these drifted behind the debris field while the Genex fleet steered en masse towards the ice rings around the gas giant. The Commonwealth and Genex fleets continued to exchange fire at long range and another Genex vessel, in this case a destroyer, exploded when hit by the combined fire of two of the *Ashford's Fury's* heavy turrets. On the other hand, unwilling to waste her limited supply of heavy missiles Captain Schaar held her fire as the *Defiance*

turned aside and separated from the monitors and corvettes of its squadron and left it to her fleet's destroyers to target the Commonwealth ships with their medium missiles. These lacked the powerful engines of heavier missiles and meant that their flight time to target was correspondingly longer. In turn this gave the Commonwealth ships more time to target them with their defensive turrets and not one of them reached the Commonwealth fleet.

Admiral Kim saw the Genex fleet redeploying and although he kept his battleships and the *Nexus Dreadnought* in place he had all of the smaller capital ships and light warships in his fleet move to follow the Genex in the hope that they might be able to cut their enemy off before they could reach the relative safety of the rings.

The Genex continued to speed towards the ice rings, easily staying ahead of the Commonwealth fleet but as they rounded the debris field the eight missiles launched by the *Warspite* suddenly came to life, their engines flaring as they accelerated towards the ships that had been assigned to them as targets. As Reeves had hoped the Genex were taken completely by surprise when the missiles activated and even the frigate that was closest to them when this happened failed to respond before one of the missiles struck it and the warhead blew a massive hole deep into the ship. This hole went deep enough to reach the frigate's bridge and its entire command crew were wiped out in an instant. The surviving crew found themselves having to contend with widespread fires, decompression and the loss of many vital systems. All of this was compounded by the abrupt loss of leadership and many of the crew panicked, fleeing to escape pods and abandoning the ruined frigate as it now tumbled through space.

Another missile locked onto one of the two heavy pickets and although the powerful sensors easily detected the ignition of the missiles' engines the crew were still unable to respond before the missile hit their vessel. Luckily for them it hit the ship's cavernous hangar deck that at that time was devoid of attack craft. The blast did ignite several pallets of stored munitions for the picket's fighter squadrons but the flames were rapidly extinguished by the explosive decompression before they could spread to other areas of the ship.

Two more missiles homed in on one of the Genex light cruisers and struck it in rapid succession. The combined damage caused the collapse of the containment field around one of the warship's fusion reactors and the resulting explosion vaporised the entire vessel before its crew even realised what had happened to them.

The *Defiance* itself was also targeted by the *Warspite's* missiles. As the largest vessel in the Genex fleet it was an obvious target and two more missiles flew towards the heavy cruiser. One of the missiles struck one of the *Defiance's* own launchers and there was a double explosion as the warhead also triggered the missile inside the launcher while the second detonated early thanks to the cruiser's electronic defences. This still showered the *Defiance* with shrapnel that tore open one of its defensive turrets. However, the cruiser remained intact and manoeuvrable and it continued towards the ice rings.

This left just two other missiles and both of these headed for Genex destroyers. One of them struck its target's primary magazine and there was a series of secondary explosions that ripped the ship apart while the second hit the aft section of the targeted destroyer and the engines on one side of the ship suddenly flared out, sending it into a spin before its crew cut power to the remaining drives.

"Confirming two targets destroyed and three damaged captain." the ambassador of Nexus said as he studied the results of the missile detonations, "One of the damaged vessels appears out of control but their primary cruiser is still operational."

"Excellent shooting none the less." Reeves said, smiling, "Helm turn us to follow the Genex and-"

"Captain we've got enemy attack craft exiting the debris field. I think they're bombers." Goldman interrupted suddenly.

"What about our own attack craft?" Knight asked.

"No sign of any Commonwealth craft in intercept range." Goldman replied.

"Firing free electron beam laser." one of the *Warspite's* gunners announced as the cruiser's turrets turned to target the Genex bombers.

The first two bombers were blasted apart by the *Warspite's* lasers, one of them destroyed when one of its own missiles was destroyed while still in its launcher but the other bombers kept coming.

"Incoming!" Goldman exclaimed as the number of sensor contacts from the bomber squadron suddenly multiplied as each of the survivors released a pair of missiles towards the *Warspite*.

The *Warspite's* gunners knew instantly to target the missiles and as they opened fire the bombers veered off, trusting in their munitions to do their work against the heavy cruiser. The turrets blasted one missile after another but even though the *Warspite* had pulled back from the debris field to give itself more time to intercept them there were still too many missiles in the salvo for them all to be stopped and the cruiser was struck multiple times along its starboard side. Thankfully the missiles did not all impact at the same point and thus the explosive power was spread more widely instead of being concentrated in one spot. The small warheads of the missiles could barely penetrate the *Warspite's* thick armour and only minor damage was caused but this still triggered alarms as sections of the ship began to decompress.

"Damage report." Knight said.

"Minor only commander." Goldman replied, "Eight impacts recorded. Looks like we have a few pressure leaks but the Genex missed everything vital. All systems still on line."

"Bernard will be furious. His people have only just finished putting the ship back together again." Reeves commented, "What's the status of the Genex fleet?"

"Their capital ships are still running for the ice rings captain." Goldman told him.

"Should we go after them?" Ash asked.

"No. Leave them to Admiral Kim. The Genex monitors and other light ships are still behind this debris field. I don't want them firing on our fleet the same way we did to theirs. Helm take us around the debris field. Weapons are to fire as targets appear. Recall all our attack craft. Drones and fighters. They are to escort us and intercept those bombers if they make another run while we're lining up on their warships." Reeves ordered.

Ash turned the *Warspite* again and angled the ship to fly around the debris field, putting it between the cruiser and the main Genex fleet. The smaller Genex warships were all positioned on the opposite side of the debris, using it as cover from the Commonwealth ships. The Genex expected the Commonwealth to send ships around it to engage them and had deployed themselves to defend against this. Not knowing exactly which direction the Commonwealth would attack from they had adopted a circular formation with the lumbering monitors and lightly armed cutters and scout at the centre while the corvettes formed a ring around them.

The Genex corvette directly in the *Warspite's* path detected the heavy cruiser moments before it was detected itself, the *Warspite's* stronger energy emissions making it more visible and the corvette immediately launched a pair of missiles. In response the *Warspite's* forward dorsal free electron beam lasers fired, shooting down the missiles while Ash lined the *Warspite* up on the corvette directly and the heavy cruiser's main guns fired. Designed to inflict serious damage on the largest and most heavily protected of targets, the twin neutral particle beam cannons easily burned through the entire length of the corvette, triggering secondary explosions throughout the ship that completely destroyed it in an instant.

The Genex now knew that the *Warspite* was closing on them though and the heavily armed monitors turned towards the Commonwealth ship.

"Missiles target those monitors. Two rounds per ship." Reeves ordered. A single heavy missile was easily enough to destroy a monitor but he could not take the chance on any of them being shot down before reaching their targets and so ten missiles shot out from the secondary launch pylons located beneath the *Warspite's* wings. As expected the Genex opened fire on the missiles, the two cutters and the scout ship using their turrets to try and defend the monitors while two more corvettes moved to engage the *Warspite* themselves. Two of the missiles targeted against a single monitor were hit, one of them exploding while the second veered off into the debris field before hitting a piece of debris and detonating on impact. This forced the *Warspite's* gunners to divert one of the remaining missiles at the last moment but this could not turn rapidly enough for a clean strike and instead of exploding on impact its proximity fuse was triggered as it was about to pass by its new target. The blast of molten metal was still enough to crack open the small warship's hull and destroyed its main fusion reactor. Without this there was no power for the monitor's engines or main gun and the entire ship went dark as it began to drift. The other monitors were struck directly by at least one missile each and the powerful warheads were enough to shatter them, destroying all four vessels instantly and killing their crews before they could get to escape pods.

The *Warspite* continued to head into the centre of the already ruined formation and the remaining Genex warships opened fire with their fixed and turreted guns. Individually these were only light weapons and the Genex hoped that the sheer number of them would allow them to inflict some damage before the *Warspite* wiped them out. It was at this point that the *Warspite's* medium turrets sprang into action. The twin X-ray lasers out ranged the light weapons carried by the smaller Genex warships and while the Genex weapons fire was still failing to penetrate the *Warspite's* thick armour the concentrated beams of X-rays blasted through the corvettes moving in from either side of the heavy cruiser. At the same time another of the corvettes came into the field of fire of the *Warspite's* two ventrally mounted light gauss cannon turrets and the two weapons fired bursts of magnetically accelerated projectiles at the enemy vessel. The corvette was struck repeatedly, with multiple holes being punched through its hull. The corvette was not destroyed but both of its turrets immediately ceased working. While an internal explosion destroyed its main gun. With the loss of all of its weapons the corvette's commanding officer decided that it could not continue to stay in the fight and the ship turned away, accelerating as fast as possible under the circumstances.

"I'm picking up a build up of tachyons from that corvette captain." Cortez announced.

"She's running." Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Let her go. We've more than enough targets left here." he added.

As the Genex fleet continued towards the ice rings Admiral Kim saw that its two frigates began to pull back, forming a screen to protect the other capital ships from the missiles being fired after them by the Commonwealth forces. The Genex ships were still too far away to be engaged by direct fire with anything but

the heaviest of the Commonwealth's guns and unfortunately most of those were carried by the two Lincoln-class battleships that remained to the rear of the fleet where the energy from their attacks would dissipate too much to inflict serious damage by the time it reached the Genex. However, there were still a number of ships that mounted heavier weapons in fixed forward mounts.

"Send to all heavy cruisers and frigates. Lock onto the Genex frigates with your main guns and open fire. If we can bring them down then we can target the rest of their fleet with our missiles." he ordered

It did not take long for the first Commonwealth ship to fire its main gun at one of the Genex frigates. At optimum range the energy blast would have inflicted critical damage to the frigate but even the forward elements of the Commonwealth fleet were at extreme range from the Genex and the beam had only just enough power to penetrate the frigate's hull, decompressing an entire section but not inflicting any serious damage to its systems. However, this was followed by several more such energy blasts from neutral particle beams and enhanced X-ray lasers and the succession of hits caused ever more damage. The tipping point came when a particle beam hit one of the frigate's drive units and this exploded. This explosion further damaged more of the frigate's engines and the crew shut down all that remained before the ship could be sent out of control. No longer able to keep up with the rest of the fleet, the frigate's crew knew that their stricken vessel would come under further fire as the Commonwealth ships advanced and the captain gave the order to evacuate their ship.

Abandoning the idea of protecting the rest of the fleet from missile attack, the surviving frigate accelerated, attempting to rejoin the other Genex capital ships in the hope that it would not be considered a priority target among them. However, the frigate could not accelerate fast enough and it was hit repeatedly by fire from the Commonwealth fleet and rapidly turned into a burning wreck that suddenly exploded before the surviving crew could escape.

"Missiles. Fire at will." Admiral Kim ordered when he saw this.

Knowing that they were badly outclassed by the size and power of the *Warspite*, the remaining Genex corvettes opted to take advantage of their superior numbers and in unison they launched a volley of missiles at the heavy cruiser. Although larger than the missiles launched by the Genex bombers the warheads of these weapons were no larger, instead being fitted with better propulsion that enabled them to accelerate faster. They were not fast to evade the *Warspite's* attack craft though and in the absence of any Genex craft to target they added their firepower to that of the *Warspite's* light turrets and one after another the missiles exploded before reaching it. While the light turrets were defending the *Warspite* the larger medium X-ray lasers continued to fire on the Genex warships. They began by firing on the two cutters. Without their squadrons of drones these ships posed less of a threat than the better armed corvettes but by eliminating them first Reeves hoped that it would also shut down any of their drones still functional before they could be recalled. The cutters were hit in rapid succession by the powerful weapons. One of them broke in half with the forward and aft sections spinning away from one another while the second suffered a massive internal explosion that demolished the vessel's engineering section and bridge, leaving the remains dead in space. "Weapons shift targeting to the corvettes. Guns only though, I don't want to waste our missiles on them." Reeves ordered.

"The ships to port are bunching up." Knight commented, "If we turn towards them we might get more shots off with the main guns." and Reeves nodded.

"Helm try to line us up on the enemy. Main guns are to fire as soon as they have a shot." he added.

"Turning now captain." Ash replied as the *Warspite* turned towards where the Genex corvettes were starting to concentrate. Even as the ship was still turning its medium turrets also turned to acquire more targets and they continued to target the Genex ships and a simultaneous shot from both hit another corvette and it vanished in a flash of light as its reactor overloaded.

Moments later another corvette exploded as it passed in front of the *Warspite* and the cruiser fired its main guns.

"Captain it appears the Genex have exhausted their supply of missiles." the ambassador of Nexus said as the constant rain of desperate missile fire from the corvettes suddenly petered out.

"Light turrets switch to engaging the corvettes, but watch for any further launches. This could be a trick to draw us in closer." Reeves said.

"They're turning." Knight added and Reeves looked at the tactical display again.

"Confirmed captain. All of the nearby Genex are increasing their engine power and we're registering increased magnetic readings as well."

"They're ionising their hulls for a jump." Knight said.

"Maintain fire as long as they are still here. Helm standby to take us to the rest of the fleet as soon as these ships go to FTL." Reeves ordered.

"Captain our light vessels are all withdrawing." the *Defiance's* flight operations officer reported as the Genex scout ship and remaining corvettes all engaged their FTL systems and vanished from the system in rapid

succession.”

“What?” Schaar exclaimed, furious. All of the light warships that had been a part of her own squadron had already been destroyed so none of the commanding officers of remaining corvettes and scout were loyal to her but it still took her by surprise that they would abandon the battle without warning her. More pressing though was the lack of frigates to cover her remaining capital ships. The destroyers and heavy pickets mounted only minimal defensive weaponry and would be easy targets for Commonwealth missile attacks if they were used a screen so that only left her cruisers. However, Schaar was loath to risk the valuable ships on screening duties, “How long until we reach the ice rings?” she asked.

“Three minutes captain.” her helmsman responded.

“Three minutes?” Schaar repeated, looking down at the display in front of her, “We’re moving faster than that.”

“We need to slow down or-” the helmsman began.

“No!” Schaar snapped, “It’s just ice. Take us in at full thrust if you have to but get us into cover as fast as possible.”

“Yes captain.” the helmsman responded, sighing as he pushed the *Defiance*'s engines as hard as he could.

“Captain the *Reap the Whirlwind* has just been destroyed.” the flight operations officer said suddenly when another of the Genex's destroyers was hit by a missile and Schaar realised that she had no choice but use her cruisers to protect the other surviving ships of her fleet.

“I want all light cruisers to reposition themselves closest to the Commonwealth fleet.” she ordered, consciously omitting her own vessel from this new strategy, “They are to lay down covering fire for the fleet until we enter the ice rings.”

“Captain they’ll be just as vulnerable to the Commonwealth's heavy guns as-” her first officer began.

“I know that!” Schaar snapped at him, “But if we don’t do something then we’ll lose the entire fleet before we reach the ice rings.”

“They’re changing formation.” Knight said while he watched the Genex light cruisers changing their position so that they could intercept missiles fired by the Commonwealth fleet before they could reach their other ships.

“The strategy is sound.” the ambassador of Nexus said, “Captain after analysing our sensor readings of the Genex light cruisers I believe that they are capable of providing an effective screen until their fleet reaches the ice rings. However, that appraisal is based on only the ships from Admiral Kim's fleet engaging them. We on the other hand have a different angle of approach.”

“Their cruiser screen is in the wrong place to intercept our missiles.” Knight added, grinning as he looked at Reeves.

The ships of the main Commonwealth fleet were approaching the Genex fleet from the side whereas by circling around the debris the *Warspite* would end up behind them instead, giving the heavy cruiser a clear line of fire past the Genex light cruisers.

“Notice how that heavy cruiser is keeping out of the way?” Reeves said, pointing at the tactical display.

“A command ship?” Knight suggested and Reeves nodded in agreement.

“That’s what it looks like. Weapons I want a firing solution against the heavy cruiser. Six rounds.” he said.

“Six? You’re not taking any chances.” Knight commented.

“Cut off the head and with any luck the other Genex captains will start arguing over who gets to take over.” Reeves replied.

“Firing solution plotted captain.” a gunner announced.

“Launch missiles.” Reeves ordered and in unison six missiles shot from under the *Warspite*'s wings and sped towards the fleeing Genex ships.

Being showered with missiles from the main fleet, none of the Genex light cruisers could divert to try and intercept them. Some of the Genex destroyers attempted to offer defensive fire but most of their commanding officers were more concerned with making certain that their own ships were out of the missiles' paths. One of the destroyers was still able to shoot down one of the *Warspite*'s missiles but this still left five of them speeding towards the *Defiance*.

“Incoming missiles to stern captain.” the *Defiance*'s flight operations officer called out.

“Turrets aft.” the first officer ordered and all of the heavy cruiser's turrets that were capable of firing to the rear of the vessel turned and opened fire on the rapidly approaching missiles and another of them exploded almost immediately.

“Where did they come from?” Schaar demanded.

“The Commonwealth heavy cruiser we were sent to destroy captain.” the operations officer answered, “She’s coming in dead astern.”

“Damn!” Schaar hissed. With the *Defiance*'s missile launchers optimised for forward firing returning fire against the *Warspite* would require the Genex missiles to loop around, giving the Commonwealth ship more

time to prepare its own defences.

It was then that the first of the *Warspite's* missiles struck the *Defiance*. The missile hit the heavy cruiser's upper hull and the blast tore a large hole in it, ripping away one of the ship's vital turrets and reducing its defensive power. As fortune would have it the next missile closed in on one of the ship's drive units and exploded early as it entered the wake of the engine operating at full power. The explosion still sprayed debris into the *Defiance* but this failed to penetrate the ship's armour and the cruiser continued onwards. The third missile also failed to find its target, being hit by one of the *Defiance's* turrets and it tumbled away before self destructing harmlessly.

The last two missiles both found their mark though and in rapid succession they slammed into the Genex heavy cruiser. One missile hit a drive unit, destroying it utterly and the cruiser rocked as its acceleration changed too quickly for its artificial gravity field to compensate immediately. But worse came when the final missile punched a hole deep into the *Defiance* that briefly filled the entire main engineering compartment with flames before all of the air inside was blown out into space and the fire was extinguished leaving all of the engineering staff dead and the ship without main power.

"All primary systems failing captain!" the flight operations officer exclaimed.

The *Defiance's* back up power supply left the ship with enough power to operate a few of its systems for a short time but that was only a temporary measure and it would not include the main drives or weapons, making the heavy cruiser a sitting duck for further attack.

"Do we have ship to ship and FTL communications?" she asked.

"Yes captain. All communication systems still on line for now." the operations officer answered.

"Order the fleet to recover lifeboats and retreat. We can't win here. Then sound evacuation, all hands abandon ship." Schaar ordered.

"Captain we still have attack craft-" her first officer began.

"I know that!" Schaar snapped, "If they can make it back to their mother ships before they retreat that's fine but otherwise we have to sacrifice them to save everyone else."

A klaxon began to sound as the evacuation order was given and on every deck of the *Defiance* the crew rushed to get off the crippled vessel. Schaar herself ran from the bridge to the hangar where she heard the sound of gunshots as she approached. Entering the hangar she saw the bodies of a pair of junior officers, both of them members of the leader caste, lying on the deck where they had been shot by the two warriors in marine uniforms and armour standing either side of the entrance to a courier ship. Equipped with its own FTL drive this had always intended to be Schaar's own escape vessel so that she did not need to rely on a potential rival captain being willing to rescue her if a situation like this ever arose.

"Is the ship ready for launch?" she asked the pilot as she climbed aboard and the two warriors followed her, sealing the hatch behind them.

"Yes captain. We can leave as soon as the doors are opened." he replied as Schaar sat beside him.

Schaar leant forwards and typed a six digit code into a keypad that released the hangar doors outside. The hangar had not been de-pressurised yet and the result of this was to blow all of the air inside out into space, along with unsecured equipment and several members of the crew who were rushing to try and get aboard some of the heavy cruiser's other auxiliary craft. Ignoring this the courier's pilot flew the ship out of the hangar into space and immediately began to ionise the hull. The courier lacked the particle inductor necessary to give it true FTL capability or artificial gravity and so instead relied on a limited store of tachyons and gravitons to maintain these capabilities, however this did not mean that the pilot intended to risk a direct journey back to a Genex world that would allow the Commonwealth to determine its location by extending the courier's exit vector until it intersected with a star system and so he began by plotting a rapid jump that would take the ship out of the system before dropping back to sub light speed in order to make a second jump along a different course.

"How long until the jump is plotted?" Schaar said, growing impatient to escape and knowing that right now the greatest danger to her came from the surviving Genex warships, any of which could turn their weapons on her tiny unarmed courier at any moment.

"Course laid in for initial jump. Tachyon shell at target mass. Engaging now." the pilot responded and all of a sudden the courier accelerated past the speed of light and left the Eta Indi system behind.

"Captain someone else just jumped away." Goldman said when the *Warspite's* sensors detected the departure of the courier.

"That wasn't one of their capital ships." Knight commented.

"No sir. It looked like a smaller vessel launched from the heavy cruiser." Goldman replied and Knight and Reeves looked at one another.

"The Genex admiral making sure he was the first one to escape." Reeves said and Knight smiled.

"Remember what's said happened to their admiral after losing the Battle of Atlas?" he said, referring to a large engagement during the Genex War during which a vastly superior Commonwealth task force destroyed more than a hundred Genex warships. In the aftermath of the battle it was rumoured that the Genex admiral

had been assassinated by a rival for his failure.

"Maybe he has some secret bolt hole to head for." Reeves replied.

"Captain I'm picking up more tachyon surges across the Genex fleet. I think they're all preparing to jump." Cortez announced.

"Captain that means they'll be leaving all their remaining attack craft and dozens of escape pods behind." Goldman pointed out.

"Sacrificing them to save their capital ships." Knight said.

"They're jumping." Cortez added as one by one the surviving Genex capital ships began to vanish in flashes of light as they all accelerated to FTL speeds, each one taking a slightly different course as they retreated to prevent their departure being used to track their eventual destination.

"Captain I've got Admiral Kim broadcasting fleet wide." Goldman commented.

"Let's hear it." Reeves said and Goldman played the message.

"This is Admiral Kim to all ships. Remain at action stations while recovery operations are planned. All attack craft with fuel reserves greater than thirty percent are to remain on station and locate remaining Genex craft. They are to be ordered to divert to orbit around the gas giant's fourth moon where we will organise recovery. Any that refuse to comply may be treated as still hostile and fired on. All other ships are ordered to sweep for Genex escape craft and report their positions to the *Ashford's Fury*. Any Commonwealth escape craft should be recovered immediately. This is Admiral Kim out." the admiral announced before the channel went dead.

"Do as the admiral says." Reeves ordered, "Pull us away from the debris field again just in case those bombers come back for another try now that they've been left behind. Scramble S and R craft as well. It's not just Genex escape pods out there. We should recover our people as quickly as possible."

General Ronson watched the workers moving between the rows of combat robots, arming the machines ready for deployment. For centuries mankind had shied away from the development of fully autonomous fighting machines but this had not stopped the Genex from employing them to support their outnumbered warriors during the war and after being driven from Commonwealth space at the end of the war the survivors had immediately set to work designing and making as many as they could, seeing them as a means to redress the vast imbalance in numbers between themselves and the rest of humanity. Standing just over two metres tall each robot stood on a pair of legs but had two pairs of arms that ended in human-like hands that allowed them to use any weapon that an ordinary soldier could, thus simplifying the supply chain. Right now the workers were arming most of the robots with a machine gun for each hand but a small number were instead being issued with anti-armour weapons in one arm instead. In addition to these arms the robots were fitted with hard points on their backs for mounting further weapons and most of them were already fitted with automatic grenade launchers while at the far end of the vast chamber surface to air missiles were being prepared for the rest. More than five hundred of the machines stood motionless in this chamber alone and Ronson knew that not only were there many such storehouses of identical combat robots scattered around the four Genex colony worlds there were also others that contained more powerful machines that could fulfil the role of everything from tanks and artillery up to starships ranging in size from gunships to frigates and destroyers.

Hearing footsteps from behind him Ronson turned around, as did his bodyguards and they saw Admiral Dressler approaching in the company of a pair of marine bodyguards. The two sets of warriors glared at one another suspiciously, each awaiting the order to attack but none of them raised a weapon just yet.

"We've got a problem." Dressler said and Ronson frowned.

"What?" he asked.

"We've just received word from the Eta Indi system. The task force sent to destroy the Commonwealth cruiser found an entire battle group waiting for it. It included battleships and a dreadnought, our ships were totally outmatched." Dressler told him.

"So the fleet withdrew?" Ronson asked.

"Eventually yes. But not before that idiot Schaar decided that she could take it on and lost more than two dozen ships including her own heavy cruiser." Dressler said.

"Damn it! You assured me that she could be relied on." Ronson snapped.

"Relied on to deal with a lone cruiser she outnumbered forty to one but she's not a fleet commander." Dressler replied.

"So what do we do now? People are going to start asking questions about those ships, especially now. We can't keep a lid on this and you know what LeClair will do to us for violating his orders." Ronson said.

"Don't worry I can still take care of this." Dressler told him.

"Like you took care of that cruiser?" Ronson said, scowling at him and he smiled.

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing but I will need your help. I need warriors, about a hundred of them at least. Heavy infantry if you can get them. More if they are light or enhanced troops." Dressler said.

"I'm a general. Of course I can get them. I'd have had them to take care of the old man if you'd given me more than two hours notice." Ronson said.

“Well this time I'm giving you about three days. I want every ship from the task force met by a fire team of your warriors. We'll justify it by saying that the army is investigating the failure of some elements of the fleet to follow an executive order. We'll arrest every surviving captain and first officer.” Dressler said and Ronson smiled as well now.

“Ah, so they take the fall. Executed for treason.” he said.

“Most of them, yes. Schaar though I think I still want to keep around for a while longer yet.” Dressler said.

“Fine, whatever. Just make sure she doesn't talk and I'll have the heavy company of the Forty-third Regiment transferred to the orbital docks first thing tomorrow. You'll have to stand down your own security of course.”

“I know but all my marines are light infantry and if any of the survivors decide to resist then I don't have enough men to deal with all their warriors.”

INTERLUDE.

"Grandfather I just heard." the old man's granddaughter said as she rushed into the private office he maintained at home. The old man himself was standing behind his desk checking the contents of his briefcase.

"About the engagement at Eta Indi?" the old man responded and his granddaughter nodded, "Yes if Admiral Dressler thought he could keep a lid on that debacle he was sadly mistaken. Of course I'm sure he'll have already come up with some means by which to deflect the blame away from him. The advanced reports about the Commonwealth fleet are interesting though. It seems that Nexus has decided to take a more personal interest in what is going on than we thought. The presence of the ambassador aboard the cruiser *Warspite* we knew about of course but the data sent back by our ships that survived the engagement show a missile dreadnought they could not identify. I think that it is the *Nexus Dreadnought*."

"You managed to get access to the data from the surviving ships?"

"Some of it. Not everything mind you but a summary of the events at Eta Indi is already starting to leak out. Now I need you to assemble a small strike force. Find out what Dressler is planning to shift the blame away from himself and make sure that you're there to stop him. Thankfully he didn't involve any of the ships that we need in his operation.

"Of course grandfather." his granddaughter said, "But what about you?"

"I've managed to get an emergency meeting with Secretary LeClair. Things are moving quickly now and we need to be prepared. When the courier carrying Jennifer and Lieutenant Lucas arrives at the Eta Indi system we can at least be guaranteed that it will be met by Commonwealth ships. The difficulty now though is predicting who will pick it up. Hopefully our message will provoke the correct response from the correct individual and we need to be ready for that. Going to the fleet right now is out of the question so I'm going to personally ask Secretary LeClair for a ship. In fact I have the perfect one in mind."

"Admiral your car is ready." one of the old man's staff said as he entered the office and the old man nodded.

"Thank you I'm ready now." he said before looking back at his granddaughter, "And I will see you later my dear." he added.

Even someone as high ranking as the old man was subject to strict security checks before he was shown into see Secretary LeClair but the Genex leader smiled as he was shown in.

"Admiral it is good to see you again." he said.

"I wish it could be under better circumstances mister secretary." the old man replied as he sat down, "I'm afraid that I have to tell you that some of our most senior military officers may be plotting against you. Already your executive order to recall our fleet has been violated and now more than twenty ships have been destroyed by the Commonwealth."

"Impossible. Admiral Dressler-"

"I fear Admiral Dressler may be one of the conspirators mister secretary." the old man said.

"Then I'll have him arrested immediately. I'll see him mopping floors as a drone by this time next week."

LeClair said.

"Perhaps we should not be too hasty mister secretary. I doubt that Admiral Dressler is acting alone and we need to find out how deep his support runs. I want to take a ship out myself and double check that our fleets are where they are supposed to be." the old man said.

"Which ship did you have in mind?" LeClair asked and the old man handed him a tablet.

"This one." he said and LeClair's eyes widened when he saw which ship the old man wanted.

"One of the alien ships found at Tau-six Eridani." he said.

"The light cruiser." the old man replied, nodding.

"Those ships are our greatest asset admiral."

"They've been sat in dock since the end of the war. The only use they've been so far is as objects of study by the thinkers." the old man said.

"Without them we wouldn't have artificial gravity for our ships." Secretary LeClair pointed out.

"True, but even that took twenty years of reverse engineering. Mister secretary I need a ship that is fast and capable of operating independently. You know that the real reason those alien ships have never been assigned to a regular fleet is because none of our admirals would ever accept a rival having control over them."

"What will you do for a crew?"

"The ships have crews. The workers and thinkers that have been maintaining them can operate their systems and I'm sure I can find enough officers loyal to me among the fleet that I can put together a command crew. Mister secretary, those alien ships are the reason we went to war with the Commonwealth in the first place. Perhaps now one of them can help prevent a second by preventing the military from staging a

coup.” the old man told him and LeClair paused to think. Then he leant forwards and activated his intercom. “Instructions for the dock master at the special projects facility. The alien light cruiser is to be prepared for launch. I will be sending an officer to take command of it soon.” he said and the old man smiled. “Thank you mister secretary. You won't regret this.” he said. “Oh there is just one thing I'd like to ask before you leave admiral.” LeClair said. “Yes mister secretary?” the old man responded. “I understand that two prisoners escaped from the intelligence service headquarters. A Commonwealth officer and one of your former officers who for some reason was being processed into a drone there instead of at the central facility. Has any progress been made in tracking them down?” LeClair asked. “The vehicle they used to escape in was found abandoned and it looks like they may have fled on foot from there on. They can't hide forever though mister secretary. It's only a matter of time before we discover where they have got to I promise.” the old man said, smiling at LeClair again.

Shaw's eyes flickered open and she found herself lying in the *Warspite's* infirmary.

"Hey doc she's awake." Mori said from beside her and Thundercloud hurried over to her side.

"What's going on? What happened?" Shaw asked as she sat up.

"Easy now." Thundercloud told her, "The artificial gravity aboard your fighter failed and you blacked out when you tried to pull a high-gee turn. Thankfully Mori here stayed awake long enough to eject your cockpit before you ploughed into a lump of rock."

Shaw turned to Mori and he smiled at her.

"Our fighter got wrecked though." he commented.

"A fighter can be replaced." Thundercloud added as he shone a light into Shaw's eyes and she flinched.

"Hey doc I need these eyes to see with. The promotion prospects for blind fighter pilots aren't very good." she said.

"I just need to make sure that you didn't get hit so hard on the head that it knocked some common sense into you." Thundercloud said, putting the light away, "The good news is that you seem normal."

"Normal everywhere doc? I notice someone got me out of my flight suit and into this gown." Shaw commented.

"In a strictly professional manner I can assure you." Thundercloud replied.

"You mean I wasn't worth taking a peek at? I'm insulted." Shaw said before she noticed that there was a fire team of marines standing outside a treatment room, "What's with the grunts?" she asked.

"We have guests." Mori told her, "Genex."

"The Genex fleet withdrew." Thundercloud added.

"After getting its ass kicked." Mori commented.

"They lost more than twenty warships and not all of the crews were able to make it to other ships before they jumped to FTL and left the system. Now our fleet is recovering their lifeboats. We've got six of them aboard the *Warspite* now. One is obviously a warrior so he's down in the brig but the other five all claim to be workers. So far they've been well behaved so they're here while we treat their injuries but I'm running genetic profiles on them all to make sure that none of them are thinkers or leaders trying to avoid being noticed."

"So can I go now?" Shaw said.

"None of my tests indicate that you've suffered any serious damage but I'd still like you to remain here for a while yet just to be on the safe side. As Mori said your fighter was destroyed so it's not like you'll be called on to fly." Thundercloud said.

"And what am I supposed to do in the mean time?" Shaw said and Mori handed her a tablet computer.

"Here." he said, "It's your wedding planner. By the time we get back home you can be fully prepared to be a proper bridezilla." and Shaw smiled as she took the tablet from him.

"I'm getting married aboard the *Warspite*. You're both going to find out what a bridezilla I can be." she said.

Reeves was not the only captain to have been summoned to the battleship *Ashford's Fury*. As he disembarked from his shuttle with Major Willis he saw several other craft that had markings belonging to other cruisers in the fleet.

"Looks like the admiral's calling in all the senior captains." Willis commented and Reeves nodded.

"And if he's also calling in marine officers he must be intending to deploy you." he said.

"Captain Reeves." a junior officer from the *Ashford's Fury* said as he walked up to Reeves and Willis and stood up straight in front of them.

"Lieutenant." Reeves replied.

"If you'd like to come with me Admiral Kim is waiting." the lieutenant told him.

"Of course." Reeves said and the lieutenant turned around and led the officers from the *Warspite* out of the hangar.

Reeves and Willis were escorted to a briefing room where officers from many of the fleet's other light and heavy cruisers were present as well as Admiral Kim himself.

"Ah Captain Reeves. Major Willis. Please sit down and we can begin." he said, "I'm going to hand you all over to my intelligence officer, Commander Shields." he added before stepping aside and allowing the woman behind him to move forwards and address the gathered officers.

"As you all know we've been recovering the survivors of the Genex ships we destroyed that weren't able to escape the system with what was left of their fleet." she said, "So far we have about thirty warriors and a number of the other castes. Aside from the fighter pilots who are obviously leaders all of these others have claimed to be worker caste but we strongly suspect that there are thinkers and especially leaders trying to hide among them so all prisoners will have to be subject to genetic profile testing."

"You brought us here for that?" one of the other marine officers commented.

"No. The purpose of this meeting is to deal with the Genex ships that were crippled but not destroyed." Shields responded, "In total there are four such ships. A monitor, a frigate and two destroyers. When the Genex fleet left the system they jumped in different directions so trying to track them back to their base from their exit vector is impossible, we've no way of knowing whether any of them went directly back to their base or not. However, since all the ships in the Genex fleet possessed FTL capability it stands to reason that they must have navigational charts in their computers. We are proposing to put boarding parties aboard these four ships to take control of them. Then we'll use engineers to see whether the Genex left any useful material behind. There could still be Genex active aboard these ships so the boarding parties will need to be large and well armed. The entire interior will need to be checked to make sure that there are no Genex hiding who can ambush the engineering teams that will follow our marines."

"Typical intelligence officer." Willis whispered to Reeves, "Stating the obvious as if we've never done this before."

"I take it that we're going to be assigned specific vessels to search." Reeves said and Shields nodded.

"Yes captain. The *Warspite* will investigate one of the disabled destroyers. This one here." she said and she pointed to a large display behind her that showed the current positions of the ships in the system, "You'll be accompanied by the *Ceres* just in case your marines need additional support. The *Constitution* and the *Bayonet* will take the second destroyer, the *Battleaxe* and *Salutation* will take the frigate and the *River Nile* will deal with the monitor on its own. We doubt that there could be enough Genex aboard to defeat a full company of marines. Each boarding action will be handled individually by the ships involved so there's no need for any wider co-ordination."

"And what about the rest of the fleet?" Captain Hale, commanding officer of the *Bayonet* asked and Shields looked back at her.

"The rest of the fleet will remain on standby just in case the Genex send another force into the system now that they know we're here. That's why only cruisers have been assigned to the boarding actions. They can take care of themselves but it still leaves our major assets available." Shields said, the major assets of the fleet she was referring to obviously being the battleships and dreadnought.

It was then that Admiral Kim stepped forwards again.

"I want these ships taken with the minimum amount of damage." he said, "All of them are already disabled and we don't know how bad the existing damage to them is but the less that we cause the more we'll be able to find out about their capabilities for our next encounter. However, the primary goal has to be getting to the computer cores before the Genex can sabotage them so that means going in hard. I don't want the boarding parties taking any chances to preserve equipment aboard the enemy ships at the cost of marine lives. Just get aboard, get to the cores and clear the ships of any surviving Genex. Unless there are any further questions I'm going to end this briefing here."

As soon as Reeves and Willis returned to the *Warspite* they began to make the preparations to board the Genex destroyer. While Willis made his way to the marine barracks so that his company of troops could prepare for the boarding action Reeves headed for the bridge to let his command staff know what Admiral Kim's orders were.

"We've been ordered to seize this destroyer here." he said as Knight, Thomas, Ash, Goldman and the ambassador of Nexus gathered around the central console, "The *Ceres* will be backing us up but our marines will be the only ones put aboard to begin with."

"What's the specific target?" Knight asked.

"The computer. Admiral Kim is hoping that we can shortcut having to survey hundreds of star systems to find where the Genex are based." Reeves answered. Then he looked at Goldman and added, "We don't know anything about the internal layout of the ship or whether there are any Genex still alive over there so before our troops go aboard I want a full spectrum of sensor scans run. See if we can get some clue about where key areas are from thermal imaging and use ADEL to see if it can pick up any signs of life."

ADEL, audio detection by laser, was a means by which sounds aboard a spacecraft could be detected even across the vacuum of space. The sound itself could not travel through a vacuum but any sound aboard a spacecraft would make the hull vibrate. Therefore, by projecting a laser against the hull these vibrations could be detected from the way they made the beam also vibrate.

"Yes captain." Goldman replied.

"I take it we won't be carrying out a hard docking." Ash commented and Reeves shook his head.

"No. The *Warspite* will stand off while the marines go aboard via shuttle. Ambassador I'd like your assessment for how much distance we need to leave between us to make sure that we won't be damaged if the Genex decide to blow up their own ship instead of letting us take it." he said.

"I will do my best captain. Although our knowledge of Genex military craft is limited to the engagements in this system." the ambassador replied.

"I'll take whatever you can give me ambassador." Reeves said before he looked at Goldman again, "Major Willis is getting his men ready now. They'll need transport over to the Genex ship though. How soon can you

have our skips and a shuttle ready to launch? Our marines are short handed right now so three ships ought to be enough for them." he said.

"It's just a matter of fuelling them captain. Right now the ground crews are still working on our fighters but if the skips are a priority-" Goldman began.

"They are." Reeves interrupted.

"Then fifteen minutes should be enough for fuelling and preflight checks." Goldman said.

"Excellent. Lieutenant Commander Ash take us to the target destroyer. For now hold at fifty thousand kilometres but be prepared to adjust our position on the ambassador's advice." Reeves ordered.

Three of the *Warspite's* auxiliary craft were lined up in the rear hangar when Willis marched a large force of his men into it. One of them was an ordinary shuttle while the other two were skips, armed and more heavily armoured versions of shuttles designed specifically for carrying troops into combat.

"All aboard. You know your assignments." Willis called out and the marines began to embark on the three small craft. The marines all wore armoured space suits that were fitted with personal propulsion packs and were armed with their standard rifles and grenades but a small number of them had also been equipped with explosives that would allow them to blast through bulkheads if necessary. Given that his men were all protected against vacuum these charges could also be used to decompress sections of the ship still occupied by the Genex if they offered too much resistance to the marines.

Inside the skip Willis and his men sat down and connected air lines from their space suits directly to the skip's oxygen supply. This would allow them to seal their suits while not having to use up any of their own limited life support.

"All personnel now aboard major." the pilot of the skip Willis boarded announced over the radio link that connected all of the marines together when the craft were fully loaded.

"Understood. Put me through to the bridge." Willis responded.

"Yes major. Putting you through now." the pilot said.

"Bridge." Goldman's voice said over the radio.

"Commander we're set down here. Just open those doors and we'll be off." Willis said.

"Understood major. Beginning decompression procedure now." Goldman replied, "Be advised that ADEL is picking up activity aboard the target."

"What sort of activity?" Willis asked.

"Sounds like hammering and power tools. It could just be service robots still trying to fix the ship but it-" Goldman began.

"Yeah I know. It could also be a platoon of Genex warriors preparing defensive positions. Willis out." Willis interrupted before turning off the radio.

"Stand by to take off." the pilot then announced as the hangar's external doors opened and then the skip's engines roared as the craft lifted off the deck and accelerated.

"Okay everyone seal your suits and make sure you're hooked into the skip's supply. I don't want to lose anyone for something as stupid as running out of air." Willis ordered, lowering his visor and hearing it 'click' into place.

There was little to do but wait as the skips and shuttle accelerated towards the drifting Genex destroyer, listening to the pilot call out distances. On the advice of the ambassador of Nexus the *Warspite* had closed to twenty-five thousand kilometres and the craft carrying the marines were able to cross this fairly rapidly. The pilots decelerated well short of the destroyer though, circling around to inspect it rather than attempting to dock.

"I don't see any signs of life." the pilot of Willis' skip reported, "There are a few lights visible so at least some sections have limited power but no movement."

"Okay take us in closer. Match course and speed for deployment. Marines stand by for EVA. Let's get those breaching locks in place."

The marines' transports closed to within a kilometre of the Genex destroyer before the passenger compartments were de-pressurised and the marines all got to their feet as the hatches slid open. Disconnecting themselves from the crafts' air supplies the marines marched in a line to the hatch before stepping out into space.

Having assault craft dock directly against the hull of a vessel was a far safer way of carrying out a boarding action than by EVA but on this occasion Willis wanted to be able to launch the assault from as many different places as possible so each marine fire team, twenty-two of them in total would be carrying out spacewalks before creating their own entry points.

The marines spread out as they exited their craft, small blasts of gas propelling them across the gap between them and the destroyer. The marines accelerated gradually towards the destroyer before firing more powerful blasts from their propulsion units to slow their speeds enough that they could land on the hull without injuring themselves. By studying the alignment of external features such as air lock doors the marines were able to make a calculated guess as to how the decks inside the destroyer were aligned and

they used this information to land on the sides of the warship.

It was then that they began to deploy the breaching locks they had brought with them. These were basically just very large plastic bags that once opened out could contain several marines and their equipment. The open ends of these were placed against the destroyer's hull and sealed around their edges, trapping the marines inside. At the same time each team unrolled shaped charge cords and fixed them against the hull, ready to blast holes in it. The idea behind this was simple, when the hull was breached air would rush out into the breach lock and inflate it like a bubble against the side of the ship. However, the amount of air that would be lost from inside the ship was limited by the volume of the breaching locks and once filled, the pressure inside the destroyer would stabilise.

One by one the fire teams reported that they were in position and had their charges and breaching locks in place. Then when the last of them reported in Willis activated his radio transmitter.

"Warspite this is Willis. We are in position and ready to go. Awaiting final order." he transmitted. His radio did not have the power to reach the *Warspite* directly but with the skip to relay his signal he could still communicate with the heavy cruiser with minimal delay.

"Major Willis you are cleared to proceed." Goldman responded.

"Breach. Breach. Breach." Willis then broadcast to his men and almost simultaneously the twenty-two shaped charges laid against the hull of the destroyer were triggered, their explosive force directed into the hull while leaving the marines behind them unaffected.

Willis raised his rifle as he looked through the hole into the interior of the destroyer and saw that the hole bridged two decks. This made entering slightly more difficult, with part of the hole being blocked by the structure of the decking between them but there was still enough of a gap for the marines to get through. There were no lights coming from either level so the marines could only see inside using the lamps fitted to their own spacesuits as they pointed their weapons through the hole in the hull.

"Take the upper level." Willis told the men accompanying him as he used a small blast from his propulsion pack to send him forwards. Fortunately there was no-one in either of the compartments that had been breached and Willis was able to climb through the hole without coming under fire. Once through the hole though he discovered that although the decks of the destroyer were laid out along the length of the ship, a configuration that only functioned properly if a vessel had its own artificial gravity field, the interior of the destroyer was devoid of gravity and Willis was still weightless. Willis and the other marines could simply have used their hands to push them along the corridor as they followed Willis into the destroyer but they needed to keep both hands free for combat and so Willis decided on another strategy instead.

"The AG field is out." he broadcast to his men before pushing against a wall so that he drifted down to the deck, at which point he activated the electromagnets built into his boots to clamp himself down, "I want the drive system secured ASAP." he continued, knowing that if the destroyer's engines were still even partially operational then the entire boarding party could be wiped out in an instant by the forces they would be subjected to if the engines were fired.

"This is team seven," a marine fire team leader responded, "we've breached the engineering section. We should have-" but then he suddenly stopped talking for a moment before exclaiming, "We're under fire!" At the same time a figure appeared at the end of the end of the corridor Willis and his team were moving along there was a muzzle flash as it fired an automatic weapon towards them.

"Contact!" Willis snapped as he felt an impact against his armoured chest plate. The round failed to penetrate his armour and Willis returned fire but the figure just retreated further into the shadows.

Willis and his team continued to advance, increasing their pace as they moved down the corridor and when Willis saw movement in the beams from his flash lights he instinctively opened fire with his rifle. The burst hit the figure that had been firing and Willis saw it suddenly start to float backwards, letting go of its weapon so that it too began to float in the weightless environment.

"Think he was alone major?" one of the marines beside Willis asked.

"Let's not take any chances about it." Willis replied as he got close enough to take a good look at the man he had just shot. The dead man was wearing what he had come to think of as a standard Genex fleet uniform but all rank marks had been removed from it, presumably to disguise the rank of the wearer should he be captured. Unsurprisingly the weapon he had been holding was smaller than the rifles Willis had seen the Genex use, explaining why he was still uninjured even after being shot and he guessed that it was an equivalent to a Commonwealth personal defence weapon firing a pistol calibre round.

One of the other marines leant around the corner and saw no-one on the other side.

"Clear." he announced, "Team seven sit rep."

"It was just workers with sidearms and shotguns major. They've fallen back and we're searching for them now." the leader of team seven replied.

"Understood team seven. All teams advance." Willis said as he and his men began to head along the corridor.

Bernard had joined the *Warspite's* other senior officers on the bridge as they gathered around the central

console to study the feeds from the cameras mounted to the marines' spacesuit helmets and when he spotted something that looked familiar he immediately spoke up.

"Major Willis look at that open panel to your right." he said.

"Found something commander?" Reeves asked and Bernard smiled.

"I think so." he said.

"Okay commander I'm looking. What now?" Willis responded from the destroyer.

"Inside do you see that junction box?" Bernard said.

The open panel exposed a number of electronic components and there were also several brightly coloured ducts running into a single sealed junction box.

"Yes I see it." Willis answered.

"Break it open." Bernard told him.

"Commander did you just say to break it open?" Willis asked.

"Yes major. I'm not worried about damage to a junction box but if that is what I think it is then it could help you find the main computer."

"If you say so." Willis responded and then he used the butt of his rifle to strike the junction box several times in succession. The first few blows dented the cover of the junction box before finally one caused it to collapse entirely and come loose, floating in the zero gravity. Willis then batted the floating cover aside and looked into the now open junction box. This was filled with optical fibres in neat bundles that all ran from one of the ducts before splitting up as they exited the junction box down the others.

"Okay follow the duct that those cable bundles all come from. That should lead you to the computer core." Bernard said.

"Err commander, the duct is behind the wall." Willis pointed out.

"Look around for the panel that was covering the junction box. With any luck it needed a special tool to release it and whoever removed it left the tool connected to the panel." Bernard said and Willis and his marines looked around.

Sure enough there was a loose wall panel drifting in mid air and one of the marines reached out to take hold of it.

"No tool major." he said as he examined the points where it would have fastened to the wall and found them all just empty holes.

"No sign of a tool commander. What now?" Willis said.

"Then just head in that direction. Hopefully you'll come across more clues." Bernard told him.

Willis and his marines continued to advance and as they passed by a junction they looked down the corridor leading off to the side and saw a stack of boxes held in a net that had been secured to the floor. As soon as he saw this Willis raised his hand for his men to stop.

"Someone must have done that after the gravity failed." he said.

"To use for cover?" another marine suggested and even though his helmet hid the gesture Willis nodded.

"Makes sense." he said before another Genex appeared from behind the stack of boxes and opened fire with a personal defence weapon. The burst of fire hit one of the marines and he shuddered under the impacts. The first round hit the marine's chest but the recoil of the weapon shifted the Genex's aim upwards as he continued firing until one of the bullets struck the marine's faceplate and punched a hole in it before hitting the marine's head within and blood splattered against the inside of the helmet.

With his magnetic boots still anchoring him to the floor the marine remained upright, now just rocking back and forth as his rifle floated away from him.

"Back!" Willis snapped and while the other marines retreated he disengaged his own magnetic boots and grabbed the controls to his propulsion pack. Dragging himself around the corner, Willis then fired his propulsion pack so that he accelerated along the corridor towards the Genex behind the boxes and fired his rifle in return. The recoil as he fired made Willis spin and he ceased fire before accidentally shooting towards his own men but one of his rounds hit the Genex and the man cried out as he let go of his weapon and began to tumble backwards. Willis was moving faster than the Genex and as he reached the stack of boxes he reached out to grab the netting covering them, using it not only to steady himself but also adjust his direction of travel slightly so that he flew right at the floating Genex and slammed into him.

Injured but still alive the Genex reached out and grabbed Willis. He was obviously wanted to go for Willis' throat but with his helmet in the way the Genex instead tried to reach the release catch. Meanwhile Willis tossed his rifle aside so that the Genex could not grab hold of it and drew the knife from his belt. Then before the seals on his helmet could be broken Willis thrust the blade into the Genex, stabbing him twice in rapid succession and the man let out a sudden gasp as he released his grip on Willis. Willis then reactivated his magnetic boots, clamping himself to the deck while the corpse of the Genex floated away from him and leaving behind behind it a trail of blood that hung in the air in random blobs.

"Willis to all teams. Sound off if you have had contact with the enemy." he broadcast to his men as he returned his knife to its sheath and reached out to recover his rifle that was still floating in the corridor.

"Team four contact confirmed."

"Team sixteen contact confirmed."

"Team nine contact confirmed."

"Team seven contact confirmed."

"Team twenty contact confirmed."

"Now sound off if any of the Genex have been wearing spacesuits." Willis added before waiting for a reply that did not come. Then he transmitted again, "*Warspite* this is Willis." he said.

"Go ahead major." Reeves' voice responded.

"Captain we're encountering resistance from the crew. So far it appears light but they could have something up their sleeve." Willis said.

"Understood major. I take it you have a suggestion to make." Reeves said.

"Yes captain. The Genex aren't wearing spacesuits. I'd like to de-pressurise the entire ship." Willis said.

Reeves looked around the console at the gathered officers.

"Some of the Genex could just be workers." Goldman pointed out.

"Workers can shoot at our marines as well." Thomas commented.

"There could be some Genex in spacesuits. The marines will still have to clear the entire ship." Knight said.

"Agreed." Reeves responded, "Major Willis other than having you fight for every corridor that has a Genex with a gun in it I'm authorising you to use explosive decompression."

"Could you at least try to avoid damaging the ship any further if I'm expected to pull navigational data from its computer?" Bernard added.

"Don't worry commander, I've got an idea that will avoid that nicely." Willis replied.

11.

"Miller this is Willis." Willis signalled as soon as he received permission to expose the interior of the destroyer to space.

"Miller here major." the pilot of the skip Willis had travelled from the *Warspite* aboard responded.

"Miller I want you to target all breaching locks. Hit each one in turn with a single shot to puncture them. We're going to decompress this ship."

"Copy that major. Moving into attack position now." Miller replied.

The skip carried a gauss cannon identical to that carried by most Commonwealth fighters in a small turret mounted beneath its nose operated by the co-pilot and as Miller repositioned the craft he armed and lined the weapon up on one of the breaching locks stuck to the outside of the destroyer's hull.

"Target acquired." he said.

"Open fire." Miller ordered and the co-pilot fired a single round from the gauss cannon.

The magnetically accelerated projectile easily pierced the breaching lock and the bubble burst open, ejecting a plume of escaping atmosphere into space. The co-pilot adjusted his aim and fired again, destroying a second breaching lock and creating another point from which the air inside the destroyer could escape. He continued to do this, taking out one breaching lock at a time until all of them were destroyed and the air was escaping into space in more than twenty places.

"Mission complete major. All breaching locks destroyed. You should all be in hard vacuum shortly." Miller transmitted.

The instruments in Willis' spacesuit monitored the drop in pressure and he knew that around the destroyer other marines would be seeing the same thing and he beckoned for the rest of his team to advance.

"This way." he said using his radio to communicate now that there was no air around him to carry the sound of his voice, "This barrier was probably set up to defend something. Let's go and find out what it is."

The marines had already had to force open a number of hatchways as they made their way through the destroyer but now they had the added complication of whenever they forced their way through another the section beyond would decompress if it had not already done so and instead of standing directly in front of the doors so that they could see through them they had to stand aside to make sure that they were not struck by any debris that was blown through by the rush of escaping air.

Willis instinctively raised his rifle when the second hatchway his team came to was pried open and it appeared that one of the Genex crew came leaping out. Even though he was not wearing a spacesuit it did not mean that he was not a threat. Humans, including Genex could survive a short time in a vacuum, long enough to pull the pin on a grenade or fire a burst from a weapon before they suffocated. However, before he fired he realised that the man was already dead, killed at some point during the recent battle.

The most significant fact about the section of the destroyer beyond the hatchway was that it was partially lit. The main lighting panels in the ceiling were not operational but this was the first section of the destroyer his team had passed through where the emergency lighting still operated, making the light from the marines' spacesuit lamps unnecessary.

All of a sudden another figure came into view as it rounded a corner ahead of the marines and Willis was about to order his men to open fire when he realised that the figure was not a Genex. Instead it was a humanoid machine, similar to the robots aboard the *Warspite*. This robot walked over to a computer terminal that was not functioning and opened it up before proceeding to inspect the circuitry inside.

"*Warspite* it looks like some of the ship's robots are still functioning. I'll leave this one be and maybe Commander Bernard can take a look at it later." Willis transmitted.

"That may not be advisable Major Willis." the ambassador of Nexus responded.

"You think the Genex could be using it to monitor our marines ambassador?" Bernard added, his voice also transmitted to the marines aboard the Genex destroyer.

"I think that the Genex could use it to attack our marines commander." the ambassador replied, "Remember that during the war the Genex did not follow the conventions regarding fully automated combat units the Commonwealth forces stuck to. For them the risk of malfunction was considered acceptable compared to the numbers of troops it could provide them with."

"This definitely looks like a service robot ambassador." Willis transmitted.

"Yes major, I can see the feed from your camera. However, it may have a secondary command set that will allow it to attack. I recommend that you disable it immediately." the ambassador told him.

"Disable it how? I'm not an engineer." Willis pointed out.

"The robot does not appear heavily armoured. The standard seven millimetre armour piercing rounds fired by your rifles should be sufficient" the ambassador said and Willis smiled.

"That I can do." he said, "Okay everyone take aim and on my command open fire. Keep shooting until that

thing is scrap.”

Willis and the other marines all raised their rifles and took aim at the robot that continued to work seemingly oblivious to their presence.

“Fire.” Willis ordered and the marines fired their rifles on automatic, sending steady streams of bullets down the corridor towards the robot.

Struck repeatedly the robot's body jerked and it began to turn towards the marines. However, the marines' bullets were easily able to pierce the robot's outer casing, producing numerous plumes of escaping gas and liquid and before it could become clear what the machine's intentions were it suddenly stopped moving. Like the marines the robot had magnets in its feet that prevented it from floating away from the deck but it now just rocked back and forth.

“Okay that's it. Cease fire.” Willis told his men, ejecting the now empty magazine from his rifle and inserting another before moving on again.

The path that Willis and his team took led them to another closed hatchway and Willis stepped back while two of his men forced it open. This time there was no blast of escaping air though, indicating that either the section on the other side of the door had been damaged during the battle and exposed to vacuum before the marines boarded the ship or another fire team had already forced a way inside and decompressed it then. The marines were also plunged into darkness once more, relying on their own lights to provide illumination. With so little light available it made it easier for Willis to notice a series of rapid flashes coming from around a corner that were accompanied moments later by dull bangs created by vibrations travelling through the structure of the destroyer. Willis knew immediately that he was seeing reflected muzzle flash and hearing the impact of bullets against the hard surfaces of the destroyer. Sure enough moments later one of the other marine teams broadcast a call for help.

“This is team fifteen. We're under fire from multiple Genex in spacesuits. We're pinned down and have two men down. I think we're right outside the main computer core.” the marine said.

From the way that Willis could see and hear the gunfire being exchanged he knew that the fighting had to be taking place very close by.

“Team fifteen this is team one I think we can get to you. Hold on, we're on our way.” he signalled and then he and his marines began to hurry along the corridor as fast as they could manage.

As Willis and his marines rounded the corner the flashes of gunfire from ahead of them became clearer. The corridor led to another junction a short distance ahead and it was in that corridor that the gunfire was being exchanged. It was not possible to see either set of combatants from the corridor Willis was in and he did not want to risk sticking his head around a corner only for it to get shot off.

“Willis to team fifteen you're right ahead of us. I need you to give me a visual signal of your location.” he transmitted.

“Copy that major. Watch for green light.” the team leader responded and moments later a green glow came around the corner as he triggered a chemical light stick. Pressing himself to the wall on the opposite side of the corridor, Willis advanced to the junction and looked towards the marines. There he saw the bodies of two of them swaying back and forth while the other two took what cover they could in a doorway as they continued to come under fire from an automatic weapon. One of the dead marines had been able to turn to face the direction of his attackers before being killed and this gave Willis an opportunity. Willis had a compact table computer that was connected to his spacesuit's communication system and using this he was able to access the video feed from the dead marine's helmet camera. The lens of this had been damaged, producing a wide band across one side of the footage but he could still make out enough detail to see a trio of Genex of armoured spacesuits and armed with machine guns. Seemingly taking advantage of the zero gravity inside the destroyer the three Genex were standing on a wall behind a half opened set of doors. By opening one door and leaving the other closed, the Genex had created a barrier that they could use for cover while the Commonwealth marines had only the limited protection of the recessed doorway.

Normally a grenade would be the ideal way to deal with this problem but the lack of both gravity and atmosphere made using explosive weapons as dangerous to the user as the target, the shrapnel from a grenade would keep travelling, unimpeded by the lack of air to slow it down or gravity to pull it downwards. With the two marines in the doorway a grenade thrown at the Genex would likely kill them as well.

“Can you get through that door?” Willis asked, hoping that they could get out of the way.

“Perhaps. We didn't get chance to try before the Genex ambushed us.” one of the pinned marines replied.

“Okay we're about to give them something else to think about. Stand by to give those doors a go.” Willis ordered as he began to walk up the wall beside him. Copying the Genex, Willis and his marines fired around the corner, using the wall as cover.

The Genex were taken by surprise but the fire from the marines' rifles struck the armoured door rather than the warriors behind it and none of them were hit. However, the attack did distract them from the other marines in the doorway and they turned their machine guns towards the new threat. This gave the two marines trapped in the doorway the chance to try pulling the door open. At first the door did not move but then it suddenly gave way and the two halves opened a few centimetres. This was enough for the marines to

get their hands in and drag them wider apart until they were able to get through them.

"Major we're through." one of the marines signalled.

"Back!" Willis snapped and he and his team ducked back around the corner, leaving the Genex without any targets. At the same time he took a grenade from his load carrying equipment and pulled out the pin. He then hurled the grenade around the corner as hard as he could. With only limited illumination available, the Genex did not see the grenade come flying towards them until the last moment as it flew past them. One of the Genex still tried to grab hold of the explosive when he saw it only to miss it narrowly. The grenade continued all the way along the corridor until it reached the wall at the far end, at which point it bounced off and came flying back towards the Genex again.

By this point the Genex were already scrabbling to get past the door to use it as a shield from the explosion and when the grenade exploded just short of the doorway they were all concealed behind it and protected from the wave of shrapnel that flew over their heads. This shrapnel continued along the corridor and flew past the junction where Willis and his team were taking cover, some of the fragments embedding themselves in the wall opposite while the rest continued on their way. It was at this point that Willis and his marines leant around the corner again and opened fire at the Genex. This time however, the three warriors were still on the nearside of the door, in the process of trying to climb back over before they could be fired upon.

Caught out in the open and facing away from the Commonwealth marines the Genex warriors were now easy targets. One of the bursts of rifle fire hit one of the Genex in his back, a bullet puncturing his oxygen tank and there was a jet of escaping gas. A second round hit the back of the Genex's helmet and he died instantly, the inside of his visor suddenly splattered with blood and fragments of his skull. At the moment he died neither of his feet were attached to anything and so the force of the escaping oxygen from his life support pack propelled him forwards, knocking into the other two Genex as they tried to respond to coming under attack. Meanwhile Willis and the other marines continued firing, taking maximum advantage of the situation and another of the Genex warriors was hit repeatedly. The armoured plate on his chest stopped several of the rounds before one finally shattered it and the warrior wearing it was killed almost instantly, his corpse joining the first in just drifting in the corridor.

This left just one of the Genex warriors remaining in the corridor and he abandoned trying to climb over the door to fire his machine gun towards the Commonwealth marines. Being unsecured, the recoil from this sustained burst of fire pushed him back over the door and further along the corridor while Willis and his team retreated out of the line of fire again. One of the marines was not quite fast enough and a bullet clipped his arm at the very edge of one of the armour plates protecting it. The bullet created a small tear his spacesuit and produced a brief plume of blood before the tear sealed itself again. However, the wound beneath the tear was still open and the marine was bleeding into his suit.

"Baxter see to him!" Willis ordered as he reloaded his rifle and the other marine began to see to his injured comrade, helping him detach the armour plate from his upper arm so that he could apply a tourniquet to limit the loss of blood, "Get him back to the skip and see to that wound." Willis added, knowing that the injured marine needed to get to somewhere where there was an atmosphere so that his wound could be properly dressed.

Using their propulsion packs to move as quickly as possible, Baxter and the injured marine began to retreat, leaving Willis with just one other marine for support as the impacts of machine gun bullets against the wall suddenly ceased. Leaning around the corner again Willis saw that the Genex warrior had emptied the hopper of ammunition for his weapon and was desperately trying to reload it while still floating back along the corridor. Willis immediately raised his rifle and took careful aim before firing a rapid burst at the floating soldier. All three of these rounds hit the Genex in rapid succession and he suddenly let go of both his machine gun and the fresh ammunition hopper he was attempting to load into the weapon, all of them drifting apart in the zero gravity.

"Team fifteen this is Major Willis. What is your situation?" Willis signalled.

"We've found it major. We're inside the computer core and it's secure." a marine from the other fire team responded.

"Understood. The corridor is clear as well, we're coming in now." Willis told him and making their way back to the floor of the corridor, he and the only other remaining marine from his fire team hurried around the corner. The two dead marines still stood swaying back and forth in the corridor although now their bodies were more damaged by the shrapnel from the grenade. Making their way past them, Willis and the other marine entered the room just past them. Inside they found that the room was lined with racks of computer drives while monitoring terminals were located at regular intervals. There was no external power to the room and the emergency power supply was intended only to allow the equipment inside to be shut down without corrupting any of the data so all of the terminals were dark and none of the activity indicators on the drives were lit. However, physically all of the equipment looked intact.

"Willis to *Warspite*, I think we're in the computer core. Are you getting this?" Willis transmitted while looking around so that his helmet camera would capture images of as much of the room as possible. He had to rely on his own helmet lamps for illumination but the camera followed the lamps in any case so Willis was not

concerned about this.

"Copy that major, I see it." Bernard responded moments later.

"Can you hold that position major?" Reeves added.

"There may still be Genex active on the ship captain, but this room is secure." Willis replied before adding, "Team seven what's your situation?"

"Engineering is secure major. No further contact." the leader of the fire team in the destroyer's engineering section responded.

"*Warspite* we hold engineering and the computer core." Willis transmitted and Bernard smiled.

"Captain that's all we need. Taking the bridge would be a bonus but at least now we have something to study and the Genex can't blow up their ship." he said.

"Captain by examining the feeds I have determined that Major Willis and his marines have surveyed forty two percent of the destroyer's internal volume. A further sixteen percent is open to space and visible from external searches. At this rate securing the vessel completely with the forces available to him will take a further two hours and twenty-five minutes to the nearest five minute increment. This assumes that there is no further significant resistance of course." the ambassador of Nexus said.

"I take it that bringing in the marines from the *Ceres* will reduce that?" Reeves asked.

"Correct captain. Given the current strength of the *Ceres*' marine contingent and taking into account the amount of time it would take them to deploy I estimate that the time to secure the ship would be reduced by sixty-five minutes. Additional care would need to be taken to co-ordinate their actions to ensure that there are no blue on blue contacts but I believe that that can be managed." the ambassador answered.

Lieutenant Commander Goldman I need a direct channel to Captain Bertarelli aboard the *Ceres*." Reeves said.

"Putting you through now captain." Goldman said as she established a connection to the light cruiser.

"*Ceres* this *Warspite*. Captain Bertarelli are you there?" Reeves said.

"Right here Captain Reeves." Bertarelli responded from the other ship.

"Captain my marines have secured the main computer and engineering sections aboard that Genex destroyer but our best estimate is that it will still take well over two hours to finish securing the ship at best. I'd like you to deploy your marines to help. The ship has been de-pressurised but there may still be some Genex forces active aboard it." Reeves explained.

"Understood Captain Reeves. I've got three platoons of troops sat in my hangar just itching to do something. They can be aboard that destroyer in ten minutes." Bertarelli said and Reeves smiled.

"Very good captain. I'll let Major Willis know to expect them. *Warspite* out." he said. Then he switched to the marine communication channel and added, "Major Willis."

"Yes captain?" Willis responded.

"Major the marines from the *Ceres* are on their way. According to Captain Bertarelli they're ten minutes out." Reeves said.

"The *Ceres*? Captain we've not encountered anything we couldn't handle." Willis said.

"Maybe not but we don't know what else might be waiting for you aboard that ship and I've been told that bringing in reinforcements will knock more than a hour off the time it will take to finish searching it." Reeves told him.

"Copy that captain. I'll spread the word to be expecting them." Willis replied.

"Very good major. *Warspite* out." Reeves said and then he looked at Bernard, "Commander, it looks like you have just under an hour and a half to prepare your engineering team." he said.

"Don't worry captain, I'll be ready." the engineer replied.

Aboard the *Ashford's Fury* Admiral Kim and his staff monitored the reports coming in from around the fleet. The boarding actions were all reporting only light resistance aboard the crippled Genex warships. Likewise the Genex aboard the escape pods and attack craft that had been left behind were surrendering largely without a fight. Most of the resistance actually came from the escape pods, a number of which held members of the warrior caste whose natural instinct was to fight unless presented with overwhelming opposition. On the other hand the pilots of the attack craft were drawn from the leader caste and their instinct for survival was enough to convince them to surrender. This did not mean that the pilots were being allowed to simply land aboard Commonwealth vessels equipped with hangars though, instead their crews were required to eject before they and their craft could be recovered separately. Although they were keen to surrender though, not all of the attack craft crew wanted their craft falling into the hands of the Commonwealth and they made sure that they were set on courses that would see them crash into anything that would destroy them instead.

"Admiral we've just heard from the *River Nile*. The monitor was completely deserted. It's secure but the damage inflicted by the *Warspite* looks to have destroyed the main computer." one of his aides told him.

"A shame but the monitor was the least likely to have important information in its computer anyway." the admiral responded. Then he turned towards the row of sensor operators at the side of the *Ashford's Fury's*

bridge, "Are there any signs of more Genex ships approaching?"

"Nothing admiral." the battleship's flight operations officer responded, "We had a number of tachyon pulses when some of the Genex dropped out of FTL after their initial exits but if any of them are coming back then we haven't picked them up."

"I want ships deployed along the approach routes just in case any of them have turned around. Even if they aren't coming back to fight I wouldn't be surprised if they send a scout or drone to keep an eye on us. Make sure that the far side of the star is covered as well. They'll need to drop in somewhere we can't see to pick up the tachyon pulse." Kim ordered.

12.

As soon as the Genex destroyer was secured most of the *Warspite's* marines were recalled, leaving behind a small force to protect the engineers sent to recover anything of value before what remained of the vessel would be destroyed to prevent its recovery by the Genex.

"So what did that ship look like inside major?" Shaw asked when Willis walked past the table she was sat at in the officers' mess aboard the *Warspite* following his return from the Genex destroyer.

"A wreck." Willis replied as he placed his tray on the table and sat down opposite her, "It got hit pretty good." Shaw smiled.

"Well it's certainly nice to know that our weapons are up to the job." she said.

"What about you? What did you think of their fighters? Assuming that bang on your noggin didn't make you forget." Willis said and Shaw's expression turned to a frown.

"I wasn't hit that hard." she said, "But to answer your question I get the feeling that they aren't as good as ours. It was just too easy keeping up with them. It was almost as if they were trying to lead us into a trap that was never sprung." she told him.

"I suppose it figures." Willis commented.

"How?" Shaw asked.

"Think about it Lynn, the Genex built the fleet they used during the war by hijacking ships. They built some of their own but their technology wasn't up to the same level of ours even right at the start. They couldn't make their own particle inductors so giving ships true FTL was out of the question for them. After that they didn't advance either while we came up with artificial gravity." Willis said.

"By 'we' you mean us English rather than you Americans?" Shaw commented, grinned and Willis glared at her.

"If you insist, yes. Just remember that the first tachyons were synthesised in Kentucky." he replied.

"Then we're agreed, our two countries are the best in the galaxy." Shaw said and Willis lifted his mug of coffee.

"I'll drink to that." he said and Shaw banged her own mug against his before each took a sip and winced.

"Next time we toast with something good." Shaw said.

"Fine, anyway back to my point. For all their bluster about intellectual superiority the Genex lagged behind us in technology. Obviously they've developed artificial gravity since the war and they've obviously been spying on what the Commonwealth has been up to but if they are stealing from us then that means that they can't develop any technology until after we have. I wouldn't be surprised if they were twenty years behind us. The *Warspite's* technology isn't that old so we're probably more advanced than anything they have." Willis said.

"Well I hope you're right." Shaw said.

The courier carrying Lucas and Hayes dropped out of FTL above the orbital plane of the Eta Indi system, its shell of tachyons spreading out across the system so rapidly that every Commonwealth vessel present detected them at almost the same time. However, the ship was still more than a light hour away from the bulk of the Commonwealth fleet and although they knew a vessel had arrived and from the strength of the tachyon pulse released by its arrival could determine that it was a small ship to most of them the courier remained invisible. One of the scout ships deployed by Admiral Kim was much closer though and it was just a matter of seconds before light and heat from the courier reached the vessel and was detected by its passive sensors.

"Captain we've got a visual contact." one of the scout's sensor operators reported.

"Can you identify it?" the captain responded.

"Sorry captain, this is something not in our database yet. It's small though, smaller than us. It could be a short range scout but if it was I'd have expected it to have made more effort to conceal its arrival." the sensor operator told him.

"Captain we're picking up a radio signal from the ship." another of the bridge crew added.

"Audio? Video?" the captain asked.

"It looks like a text data stream on an open channel sir."

"Can you tell what they're saying?" the captain said.

"Yes captain. It looks like just one word repeated over and over again. *Warspite*." the crewman replied and the captain frowned.

"*Warspite*? That's one of our ships. I need to talk to Admiral Kim." he said.

"Captain I've got Admiral Kim on the line for you." Goldman announced.

"Put him through." Reeves said.

"Captain Reeves." Kim's voice said.

"Yes admiral?" Reeves asked.

"Reeves I take it you've picked up our visitor?" Kim said.

"Yes admiral. We still don't have an ID on it though." Reeves said.

"The *Thomas Howard* is less than a light minute away from where the ship arrived in the system and they're close enough to have picked up EM emissions from the ship. They can't identify it but they have picked up an interesting signal I think you should be made aware of." Kim told him.

"I don't like the sound of this." Knight commented.

"Neither do I." Reeves added.

"The *Thomas Howard* picked up a data transmission that looks like a text stream. It's a one word broadcast over and over again. *Warspite*." Kim said.

"*Warspite*? Is it possible that the Genex have a ship that shares the name of ours?" Knight said.

"Our name is derived from a series of old Royal Navy warships." Thomas added.

"The Genex would have known about those." Knight pointed out.

"And it is kind of an awesome name." Ash said, smiling.

"The signal is being broadcast openly without any signs of encryption. It looks like we were meant to pick it up ourselves. More accurately it looks like that ship is meant for you Reeves." Kim said.

"Do you want us to investigate the ship admiral?" Reeves asked.

"Yes. Take the *Warspite* in closer and see how the ship reacts. If it looks like a threat then destroy it.

Otherwise seize it and find out why it's broadcasting your name over and over again." Kim ordered.

"Understood admiral. *Warspite* out." Reeves said before turning to Thomas, "Commander Thomas we need a short range jump to rendezvous with the *Thomas Howard*. We'll take a closer look at our target before moving in at sub-light speed." he said.

"Plotting the jump now captain. It's a simple one." Thomas replied before moments later he added, "Jump plotted captain."

"I've got it." Ash added, "Ready to jump when you give the word captain."

"Commence jump." Reeves told him.

"Commencing jump sequence. Ionising hull." Ash announced, turning the *Warspite* towards the newly arrived courier as Thomas' course instructions told him to while the hull of the heavy cruiser was ionised so that the charged tachyon shell would adhere to it, "Jumping now." he added when there were enough tachyons to make the jump in just over a minute and the *Warspite* accelerated rapidly away from close to the Genex destroyer to beside the *Thomas Howard*. As soon as the *Warspite* dropped back to sub-light speed it was close enough to the courier that its radio broadcast could be picked up.

"Captain we're picking the data stream now." Goldman said and Reeves looked down at the display in front of him.

"Show me." he said and the text string appeared on the screen.

WARSPITE – WARSPITE – WARSPITE - WARSPITE – WARSPITE – WARSPITE - WARSPITE –
WARSPITE – WARSPITE - WARSPITE – WARSPITE – WARSPITE - WARSPITE – WARSPITE –

"That definitely looks like someone is trying to attract out attention." Knight said.

"Not creepy at all." Goldman added.

"Ambassador can you shed any light on what that ship is doing here?" Reeves asked.

"I am sorry captain but I cannot. I can tell you that from the shape of the ship it appears designed for atmospheric operations and planetary landings as well as travel in space." the ambassador of Nexus answered then a moment later he added, "Interesting. The vessel also appears to have deployed its landing gear."

"Captain I'm picking up odd readings from that ship's fusion reactor." Goldman said.

"A self destruct sequence? Maybe it's intended as a mine of some sort. Lure us in and then destroy us with a fusion explosion." Knight suggested.

"No commander. Just the opposite in fact." Goldman said, "I'd say that the fusion reactor is undergoing a controlled shutdown. If it wasn't broadcasting loud enough for everyone in the system to pick it up then I'd say that it was trying to run silent."

"It doesn't look like it's running at all." Ash commented.

"Ash is right. It's stationary." Thomas added.

"Yes I see that." Reeves said, "Lieutenant Commander Goldman lock a beam on that ship. Let's see if we

can hear what's going on inside.”

“Yes captain. Engaging ADEL now.” Goldman replied, lining the *Warspite's* ADEL laser emitter up on the courier.

“I recommend aiming at the forward section of the ship.” the ambassador of Nexus said, “From the physical configuration I believe that the flight deck is there.”

“Weapons lock onto that ship just in case. All dorsal turrets.” Reeves added.

“All dorsal turrets for that?” Knight commented, “Isn't that overkill?”

“If this is some sort of trap then I want to be sure that we can get out of it quickly.” Reeves replied.

“Captain the laser is aligned, getting an audio signal now.” Goldman said before she fed it through to the *Warspite's* bridge speakers.

“What the hell is that?” Knight said when the rasping sound was heard.

“Sounds like listening to someone be sick through a bathroom door.” Ash commented.

“The sound is most likely organic in origin captain.” the ambassador of Nexus added, “Possibly some sort of medical life support equipment is in use in addition to the ship's normal environmental systems.”

“Organic? Human?” Knight asked.

“There is no way of knowing commander.” the ambassador responded.

“Maybe if we get closer. Commander Goldman launch a drone. I want a close range visual inspection.” Reeves ordered.

“Yes captain, drone launching now.” Goldman replied as one of the *Warspite's* attack drones was ejected from the storage unit at the rear of the cruiser, flying over the ship and accelerating towards the courier.

The remotely controlled craft sped towards the courier, slowing down again as it approached before coming to a complete stop just over a hundred metres away. This far from Eta Indi itself there was little ambient light for visual sensors and so a spotlight built into the drone's nose was activated and shone across the courier's hull.

“There are no identifying markings of any kind captain.” the ambassador of Nexus commented, “Nor is there an identifiable transponder signal. The only deliberate emission is the repeating text stream.”

“So someone sends a ship here, dumps it on the edge of the system and just calls for us to come and pick it up?” Knight said.

“It certainly looks that way.” Reeves replied.

“Captain I think there are people aboard.” Goldman announced suddenly.

“How many?” Reeves asked.

“The drone footage suggests two in the cockpit. The internal lights appear to be out and reflections from the viewport make it difficult to make out but it does look like there's someone there. Only they don't seem to be moving. Both are sat still. Perhaps unconscious.” Goldman said.

“Okay we bring it aboard.” Reeves said.

“Captain it could still be a trap.” Knight pointed out and Reeves nodded.

“That's why I want a platoon of marines ready to secure it once we have it in our hangar.” he said.

“Captain although the fusion reactor has been shut down the vessel could still contain sufficient explosives to severely damage the *Warspite*. A single nuclear warhead could-” the ambassador of Nexus said.

“I don't believe that ship is going to explode ambassador.” Reeves interrupted.

“May I ask why not captain?” the ambassador responded.

“Call it faith.” Reeves replied.

“How interesting.” the ambassador replied.

Ever since the tube had been forced down Lucas' throat every instinct had told her to rip it out again but with her wrists bound she could not reach it. Now she and Hayes had been forced to spend several days in extreme discomfort, unable to speak or move and for most of the journey to Eta Indi also sitting in their own waste in the cockpit that was lit only by the light given off by the control consoles. When the sparkling blue pattern of the charged tachyons surrounding the courier had vanished as the ship dropped out of FTL all that was visible through the forward viewport were stars, meaning that the ship could be almost anywhere in space whether in orbit around a planet that was not visible or between star systems entirely.

This changed only when one particular point of light appeared to move, coming closer to the courier before all of a sudden there was a bright flare of light that shone into the darkened cockpit and Lucas and Hayes both found themselves blinking as the blinding light shone in their eyes. Enough of this light reflected off the courier that when combined with the light given off by the approaching craft's thrusters allowed Lucas to recognise it as a Commonwealth attack drone.

For a moment Lucas was ecstatic, the drone meant that the courier had arrived in a system where Commonwealth forces were present and this had to be Eta Indi where the *Warspite* itself had been when she was captured. However, she was currently in an enemy vessel and was unable to broadcast her presence. At any moment the drone could be ordered to engage the courier with its gauss cannon or missiles and she would undoubtedly be killed. Then the light vanished as abruptly as it had appeared and the cockpit was

plunged back into darkness for what seemed like an eternity but from the darkness outside another light appeared as another much larger vessel approached the courier and in the light given off by its drives Lucas saw the familiar shape of an Essex-class heavy cruiser coming at the courier head on as the *Warspite* arrived to bring her home.

Both of the *Warspite's* workpods were launched to recover the courier, the tiny vulnerable craft escorted by attack drones just in case the Genex vessel had some sort of armament that had not been detected yet. However, the courier made no hostile moves at all as the workpods manoeuvred in close enough to grab hold of it. Then working together they guided the courier into the *Warspite's* forward hangar, setting it down on its landing gear before letting go so that they could also land close by. With this process complete the outer hangar door was closed and air pumped in while the artificial gravity field was restored. The moment that a breathable atmosphere was restored one of the inner doors swung open and Willis and a platoon of armoured marines rushed into the hangar.

"Form a perimeter." Willis ordered as the marines charged towards the Genex courier. At the same time members of the hangar ground crew entered the air lock behind the marines and when the marines had fully encircled the courier Willis waved them forwards, "Get those steps in place." he told them and they moved a set of wheeled steps into position, adjusting them to match the hatch on the side of the courier. Then they quickly withdrew as Willis and a fire team of marines armed with shotguns moved forwards and scaled the steps.

"Major I don't think this air lock is sealed." the marine who examined the controls to the air lock door said, "Everything's lit up like it's just waiting for us to open the door.

"Is it wired?" Willis asked.

"No way of knowing without opening it." the other marine responded.

"Try it." Willis said and as he aimed his shotgun at the hatch the other marine jabbed at the controls.

There was a brief 'hiss' as the door opened and Willis and the other marines found themselves looking into the darkened interior of the air lock. The inner door was already open and this enable air from the rest of the ship to escape, causing the marines to flinch as they smelt it, "Bridge this is Willis. It's pretty ripe in here. This might not be a good sign." he said into his radio headset.

"Understood major. Is there any sign of chemical contamination?" Reeves asked.

"My alarm's not going off captain. I just think this ship stinks inside." Willis said.

"Proceed inside major." Reeves said and Willis flinched.

"If you insist captain." he said and he began to advance into the open air lock.

"Why couldn't they get robots to do this? They don't have a sense of smell." another of the marines commented as they followed Willis inside, flash lights attached to their shotguns illuminating their way.

"Because we're cheaper to replace." another commented.

"Cut the chatter." Willis snapped. Then he looked towards the front of the courier, "Come on, the cockpit's this way."

The doorway leading to the courier's cockpit was also wide open and the marines advanced through it cautiously. It was obvious as soon as Willis entered the cockpit that there were two people sat in front of the flight controls and although they remained seated and largely immobile Willis saw both of them twitching just enough to tell him that they were alive.

"Commonwealth marines." he called out, "Stand up and place your hands on your heads." however, neither of the figures moved, instead just letting out strange grunting sounds and so Willis glanced over his shoulder at his men, "Cover me." he said before he advanced towards the seated figures from behind before suddenly leaping around in front of them and pointing the beam from his shotgun mounted flash light right into the face of the nearest figure only to see that it was Lucas and that she was securely restrained, "Holy crap! Bridge this is Willis. It's Lucas. Lucas is aboard the ship."

"Major did you just say that Lieutenant Lucas is aboard the enemy vessel?" Knight asked from the bridge.

"Yes commander. It's Lucas. Get Doc Thundercloud in here now. I think we may need him. We have two passengers. I repeat, two passengers in need of immediate medical attention." Willis responded, looking at the tube running from the IV bag and down Lucas' throat. Then he knelt down in front of Lucas, looking into her tear stained face, "You're safe now Jessica." he told her, "The doc is on his way and then everything will be alright. You understand?" and Lucas nodded. Then Willis looked at Hayes, "I don't know who you are but the same goes for you. You're both safe now." he added.

Doctor Thundercloud arrived with a team of medical orderlies just a few minutes later and knelt in front of Lucas, studying the tube that ran into her wedged open mouth carefully.

"What is it doc?" Willis asked.

"I think it's been feeding her." Thundercloud replied, "Somebody wanted her kept alive long enough to reach us." then he glanced at Hayes and added, "Both of them."

Reaching out Thundercloud took hold of the tube running into Lucas' mouth and pulled at it gently. Then when Lucas showed no sign of pain being caused by this he pulled on it firmly and the tube came free in his

hand. Once this was done Thundercloud carefully removed the wider tube that was keeping Lucas' mouth open and she coughed violently as it came free before taking several deep breaths.

"Don't try to talk just yet lieutenant." Thundercloud told her. Then he looked at Willis and added, "Okay untie her and get her on a stretcher. I'll deal with her now." and he looked at Hayes.

"Wait." Lucas croaked, the soreness in her throat making it difficult to speak.

"What? Who is she lieutenant?" Thundercloud asked.

"She's a Genex." Lucas gasped.

INTERLUDE.

Schaar had not expected to receive a hero's welcome when she returned to the orbital facilities around Sanctuary but the extent of the treatment she and the other starship captains received when they arrived home came as a surprise. When each vessel docked it was met by fleet police officers supported by a force of army troops in powered armour. These troops boarded the vessels and arrested the captains and their first officers, removing them from their ships.

From there they were all taken to a cargo hold and lined up on their knees. There they were left guarded by fleet military police who stood in a line behind the captives while the army troops withdrew, ready to meet the next vessel to arrive. Schaar herself was the last of the captains to be seized and as such she was placed at the end of the line. Each of the captains was bound and gagged as they were forced to wait in the cargo hold until eventually Admiral Dressler appeared accompanied by more warriors from the fleet military police forces.

"Captain Schaar your orders were quite simple." Dressler said, walking across the hold towards the line of kneeling officers, "Proceed to the Eta Indi system and destroy the Commonwealth cruiser present. Nothing about those orders told you to engage an entire Commonwealth fleet." Dressler calmly walked past Schaar, making his way along the line of officers, looking down at each of them as they passed, "Now we have a very delicate situation that needs dealing with. You see Secretary LeClair gave orders that all fleet units were to return to base and not engage the Commonwealth at all. Now had you followed my orders to engage just a single Commonwealth warship or withdrawn when it became obvious that there was a full Commonwealth fleet was present in the system none of this would be necessary. Now questions will be asked about why your ships failed to return to base as ordered and I can't allow anyone to inform Secretary LeClair or his staff that you were issued alternate orders. Instead I need to be able to tell him that you violated his orders on your own initiative. That way I can justify dealing with you myself."

All of a sudden Dressler withdrew a small folding knife from his pocket and unfolded the blade. Then he slashed it across the neck of the Genex officer at the far end of the line from where Schaar knelt. The officer fell forwards as blood sprayed from the deep wound in his neck. With his hands bound he could not try to stem the bleeding and blood continued to pump from the wound as he lay on the floor convulsing as Dressler moved on to the next officer. Without even looking down at the man, Dressler slashed his throat as well and this time his own uniform was sprayed with arterial blood. This did not seem to bother Dressler though and he just moved on to the third officer in the line before killing him in the same way as the previous two. Along the line some of the other kneeling officers looked towards Dressler, watching as he proceeded along it and slit the throat of each officer he came to in turn while others either turned to look in the opposite direction or just looked straight ahead and hoped that he would stop before reaching them.

At the end of the line Schaar could not help but watch as each of the officers she had led into battle was killed to protect Dressler. She did not regret the deaths of any of them in particular, any one of them could have been killed in battle even if her force had been victorious in the Eta Indi system but she still felt that Dressler was going too far in killing them for following the orders she had given. When Dressler finally came to the end of the line where Schaar knelt he stood in front of her so that his knife was in full view and she saw that there was blood still dripping from it.

"And now we come to you." he said, looking down at Schaar and she looked back up at him, "I'm sure you'll understand that there has to be a specific villain of this Captain Schaar," he said, "and I'm afraid that that has to be you so at least you'll get to live where all these men and women didn't." and then he looked back down the line at the row of bodies on the floor that was now covered in large pools of blood that had mingled together from the separate bodies to the point where they were close to forming just one large red sheet of liquid that ran the entire length of the hold. Then he looked back down at Schaar and smiled. Schaar knew immediately what Dressler meant he had in store for her, he intended for her to become a drone and she shook her head.

"Yes I'm afraid so. Don't worry though, your fleet career isn't going to be over. In fact I think once the process of turning you into a drone is complete I'll have you assigned to my own personal staff. I think it will be good to have someone to be on hand make my coffee and keep my office tidy. Plus of course my wife spends a lot of time away and I think that I'd enjoy having you keep me entertained during her absences." Dressler said. The idea of being reduced from a senior fleet captain to a lobotomised concubine sickened Schaar and she saw only one obvious way out of the situation.

The knife.

Schaar threw herself forwards, hoping to impale herself on the knife that Dressler held in his hand but he saw what she was doing and pulled the weapon away while reaching out to grab hold of her with his free hand.

"Not so fast." he said before looking at the warrior behind her and adding, "Hold her steady."

The warrior then clamped a hand on each of Schaar's shoulders and dragged her back into position while Dressler crouched down to wipe his knife clean on the body of the dead man beside Schaar before folding it up and returning it to his pocket.

"Now where was I?" he continued, "Ah yes, your future in my service."

All of a sudden there was a loud booming sound from the direction of the nearby doorway and Dressler was struck in the back by a projectile. There was no blood at the point of impact though, instead the large calibre round bounced off his tunic and left behind a pair of barbed metal contacts that had wires trailing from them and moments later he shook uncontrollably as the electrical energy stored inside the projectile was discharged through the wires into his body before he collapsed in a heap right in front of Schaar.

The warriors still lined up behind where the captives had knelt all reached for their weapons, as did Dressler's personal bodyguards but as they turned towards the source of the attack they saw the old man's granddaughter standing among a squad of marines in powered armour who were already pointing machine guns back towards their positions.

"Admiral Dressler is a traitor." the old man's granddaughter announced, resting the shotgun she had just fired the electrical stun round from over her shoulder as she advanced towards where Dressler lay and Schaar knelt, "He is to be taken into custody immediately."

None of the warriors reacted to this, all standing still with their sidearms in their hands. The warriors all served under admiral Dressler and were generally loyal to him but they also knew that their pistols would be next to useless against powered armour and so did not open fire out a sense of self preservation.

"So we're going to do it the hard way are we then?" the old man's granddaughter said and she smiled before adding, "Present arms." and the warriors who had accompanied her all raised their weapons, taking aim at the other warriors while she just smiled.

All of a sudden two of admiral Dressler's bodyguards reached down and lifted the stunned man back to his feet, wrapping plastic handcuff ties around his wrists.

"Excellent. Take him away." the old man's granddaughter said, waving her hand and she watched as Dressler was dragged away by his own bodyguards. Then she turned back to look at Schaar who was still being held still, "Now for you captain Schaar. My grandfather would like a word with you regarding your future career path. Now you can either come with me to speak with him or I can order you taken to be processed along with Admiral Dressler. So what will it be? Are you willing to listen to what my grandfather has to say?" she asked and Schaar nodded rapidly, "Excellent. I knew you'd be reasonable about this." she added before looking up at the warrior standing behind Schaar, "Now cut her loose. She's coming with me." she ordered.

Rather than being taken to the headquarters of the intelligence service Schaar was taken by the old man's granddaughter to his private home. Several times along the way she tried enquiring about what was going to happen to her but the young woman who had come to her rescue just ignored her and she soon gave up trying. Led from the car into the large house, Schaar almost stumbled as she was shoved through the doorway into the lounge where the old man waited.

"Ah Captain Schaar I am so delighted you agreed to meet me." the old man said and he pointed to a chair opposite to where he sat, "Do please sit down. Can I offer you a drink? Something to eat perhaps?"

"No thank you. I'm fine." Schaar replied. In fact she was hungry and thirsty, having had nothing to eat or drink since returning to Sanctuary but she was concerned about the possibility of being poisoned so she pretended otherwise.

"As you wish." the old man said and he looked towards a nearby servant, "Bring coffee for myself and my granddaughter." he ordered. Then he smiled and added, "Plus an extra cup just in case Captain Schaar changes her mind."

"Yes admiral." the servant replied, bowing his head before leaving the room.

"Now let me see." the old man went on, looking at the tablet computer he held, "Captain Anna Schaar, commanding officer of the heavy cruiser Defiance for six years. Correct?"

"Yes admiral. I-" Schaar replied.

"Now it seems you have lost your ship captain and your superior Admiral Dressler is not going to help you get another." the old man interrupted.

"Admiral Dressler ordered me to take a task force to the Eta Indi and engage a Commonwealth vessel there." Schaar said, "The cruiser we were told to expect was not alone though. Our intelligence was inaccurate and the force present proved too powerful for the ships under my command to deal with."

The old man smiled when he heard this.

"You know that I work for the intelligence service?" he said and Schaar's eyes widened as she realised that her word may have been interpreted as an attack on his division, "Don't worry though captain, it was on my recommendation that Secretary LeClair issued an order for the fleet to return to port." the old man added.

"As I said sir, Admiral Dressler issued orders that I was to take a force to Eta Indi." Schaar said.

"Of course. You were only following orders. The problem of course is that your ship received two contradictory sets of orders and you chose to follow those issued by Admiral Dressler instead of those issued

by Secretary Leclair. You need a new patron Captain Schaar.” the old man said.

“You?” Schaar responded as the servant returned with a tray on which a pot of coffee stood along with three milk, sugar and cups. The servant set this down on the table and then withdrew to the side of the room to await further orders.

“Perhaps.” the old man said while his granddaughter prepared a drink for him and he looked at the tablet again, “I see you have two children captain. Not enough for the tax breaks that come with a larger family. Did you chose your career over your family?”

“My ex-husband expected me to give up my career. He didn't like my being away on deployment and left me. I always intended to have more children but-” Schaar began.

“There is no need to explain further captain. I myself had only one child before my wife passed away. I just wanted to know if you were the sort of person that would turn your back on those closest to you for the sake of advancement. Still you are young enough to have those extra children if the opportunity arises. Perhaps if you accept my offer then it will.” the old man said, interrupting her again.

“And what exactly is this offer admiral?” Schaar asked.

“Why to command a warship of course. That is your job isn't it?” the old man said then before Schaar could reply he added, “What do you know of the ships recovered from the Tau-six Eridani system?” and Schaar frowned.

“The first evidence of non-human space travel?” she said, “Only what everyone else in the fleet knows, that four alien spacecraft were discovered in the system more than a hundred years ago. They were made operational towards the end of the war against the Commonwealth but never saw action. Since then they've been locked away for research purposes.”

“In theory, yes.” the old man replied, “The simple truth is that the reason those ships have been shut away is that it has proven almost impossible for the government to assign them to any single fleet or research team. We learned something of their technology during the process of making them operational again but since then no-one has been willing to permit a rival to gain control of them and no-one has been in a strong enough position to simply demand their release from the government.”

“Until now.” his granddaughter added.

“You have one of the ships?” Schaar asked.

“I do. The light cruiser in fact. Tests suggest that it can outrun anything in our fleet and its weapons make it a match for any similar vessels of our own. The workers who have been maintaining the ship all these years are quite capable of operating the vessel but what I need is a command crew and especially a commanding officer that I can rely on. Can you be that person Anna? May I call you Anna?” the old man answered and Schaar smiled at him. Then she reached out to pour herself a drink from the tray on the table in front of her.

“Admiral you may call me whatever you want. Especially if we'll be working together.” she said.

“That's excellent. I'm so glad that you have agreed to accept my offer.” then old man replied, “I do hope that ours will be a successful working relationship.”

“Yes, a very successful relationship.” Schaar said, still smiling.

"So what happened while I was gone?" Lucas asked as Thundercloud shone a light down her throat. Her voice was still hoarse as a result of having the rigid tube forced down it for so long.

"Keep your mouth wide open and don't talk please lieutenant." Thundercloud replied, "But to answer your question the *Warspite* was engaged twice by Genex forces since you were captured. The first was a small squadron that was destroyed thanks to the timely intervention of the *Nexus Dreadnought*."

"Nexus?" Lucas said in surprise.

"Yes, stay still." Thundercloud said, "Nexus has taken a major interest in what's going on here and it had its only warship ready to respond. By the time the Genex sent a larger force we had reinforcements from Admiral Kim's fleet. Beyond blowing people up we also detected a radio signal from an alien species about five hundred light years away. The captain had us send a drone with a reply but for now that's all we can do. On the other hand having spoken to some of the officers from Admiral Kim's force it seems that the cover assignment of finding survivors from the Sissusk Empire was successful. No contact was made with the remains of the Sissusk Empire itself but a group of Fedrun survivors were encountered on their home world and are on their way back to the Commonwealth now. Apparently there were more than two hundred of them." and then he pulled away from Lucas and turned off his light

"That's good news." Lucas croaked.

"Yes, at least their species has a chance of survival now." Thundercloud said before adding, "Well I don't think that there's any permanent damage to your vocal chords."

"So can I go now? I'd really like to get cleaned up properly. Oh, but can you give me anything for my throat? It's really sore." Lucas said.

"I recommend lozenges and drinking water or milk. The soreness should go away by itself in a day or two. If it doesn't then come back and see me. Before you go I would like to ask you about your friend though."

Thundercloud said and he looked across the infirmary to where Hayes lay on a bed, still wearing the same gown and restraints that she had been when she arrived on the *Warspite* and guarded by a pair of marines. Lucas shrugged.

"I don't know. She's called Jennifer Hayes and she's one of the Genex leader caste. I think she really pissed someone off though because she told me that they removed all her reproductive organs. You know, like that guy from that mining ship." she told Thundercloud, "Apparently its some sort of punishment they inflict on one another for screwing up."

"Thanks. I'll take a look at her now." Thundercloud replied, nodding and then as Lucas climbed off her bed and left the infirmary Thundercloud walked over to where Hayes was still lying quietly on her bed, "Miss Hayes." he said and she looked at him, "Shall I call you that?"

Hayes nodded.

"It's not like I can still claim to be a commander." she replied, her voice as hoarse as Lucas' had been.

"Good. Now I'm going to remove these restraints so I can examine you properly. You're not going to cause me any problems are you?" Thundercloud asked and Hayes looked at the two armed marines.

"Don't worry. I've nowhere to go even if I did manage to escape." she said before Thundercloud began to remove her restraints. As soon as he opened up the mittens she wore and removed them she held up her hands and spread out her fingers, looking at them. Suspecting something the two marines raised their personal defence weapons and pointed them at her, "I was just checking that they were all still there." Hayes said, "I've lost enough other body parts already to be losing fingers as well." then she returned her arms to her sides and the marines appeared to relax.

"That's better. Now come this way and we'll run a scan on you." Thundercloud told her and then he helped her up off the bed and guided her to one of the infirmary's body scanners, watched closely by the two marine guards.

Hayes lay in the scanner and waited as the emitter passed back and forth above her body, creating a three dimensional image of her internal anatomy while Thundercloud watched closely.

"I understand that you have undergone surgery recently." Thundercloud said as he studied the results of the scan as they emerged.

"Yes. They sterilised me. Just ripped out my uterus and ovaries." Hayes told him.

"I'd like to take a closer look if you don't mind." Thundercloud told her, "This might be a bit uncomfortable."

Following her examination Hayes was given a set of plain combat fatigues and a pair of slippers to wear before being escorted to the *Warspite*'s brig by her marine guards. The brig consisted of several clear fronted rooms designed to hold up to four people in each. However, such were the numbers of Genex already being held aboard the *Warspite* that Hayes was taken to a cell that already contained five other people, four men and a woman all of whom sat quietly on the lower bunks on either side of the cell. These individuals all

looked up as Hayes entered and looked around the room. The docile nature of them all immediately suggested to Hayes that all of her cell mates were from the worker caste. She put this to the test by walking over to the nearest bunk and looking at the two people sat on it. "Move up." she said sternly and both of them obediently slid along the bunk to give her room to sit down. Hayes promptly sat down on the bunk and then looked towards the cell door where the marines who had escorted her from the infirmary were still stood watching her and she smiled and waved at them before they walked away.

"You shouldn't do that." the only other woman in the cell said and Hayes looked at her.

"Do what?" she asked.

"Give an order." the woman said, "It makes it obvious to them what you are. If you'd just stayed quiet then they'd think you're a worker."

"You know they're running genetic tests? They'll figure out who everyone else is sooner or later." Hayes said, remembering the tests that she had seen members of the *Warspite's* medical staff carrying out while Thundercloud had been examining her.

"Maybe but that'll take time. They must have recovered hundreds of us from the fleet. The longer they don't know who we are the better the odds that we'll have an opportunity to do something." the woman said, confirming to Hayes that the other woman was also a leader.

"I wasn't part of your fleet. I was captured in another system and they already know that I'm a leader." Hayes said, then she looked around the cell again to see if there were any obvious surveillance devices in place. Seeing none she concluded that they must be hidden and she looked back at the other woman, "You should be more worried about where the Commonwealth's cameras are. If they see you do anything but sit and stare I bet that will move your test sample to the front of the queue."

When she heard a knock at her cabin door Lucas almost called out for whoever was outside to enter but a sudden pain in her throat stopped her. Instead she walked over to the door and opened it to find Knight and Goldman standing in the corridor outside and she smiled at them.

"Come in." she said softly, beckoning the pair into her quarters.

"Thank you lieutenant. We just thought we'd stop by and see how you are." Knight said.

"I'm great, thanks. Something of a sore throat though but I'm still really glad to be back aboard." Lucas replied.

"The captain would have come himself but right now he's talking to admiral Kim about you and that Genex woman." Goldman added.

"Thanks." Lucas said and Knight noticed the hoarseness of her voice.

"Are you okay to talk? We have some questions as well but we can come back later on if you'd rather." he said.

"No it's okay. I just keep having to suck on these." Lucas replied and she picked up a tube of sweets that she had acquired from the *Warspite's* store, "Do either of you want one?"

"No thank you." Knight said.

"Are they kosher?" Goldman asked and Lucas frowned, looking at the label before smiling.

"Vegan." she croaked, holding out the packet again and Goldman smiled back as she took a sweet.

"Lieutenant has anyone spoken to you about what happened to you since you were captured?" Knight asked.

"You mean did I give away any of the Commonwealth's secrets?" Lucas asked, "You don't need to worry about that. They never got around to asking me any questions or torturing me. The strip search was pretty invasive but after that they seemed to ignore me right up until I escaped. Or rather we escaped. That Hayes woman was the one who got me out of the cell."

"How exactly did she manage that?" Goldman asked.

"She had some secret password that opened the doors." Lucas said.

"So why didn't she just get out on her own?" Knight commented.

"She was tied up just like she was when we arrived back here. She wanted me to untie her. Her plan was for us to run off to one of their colonies and act like her slave for the rest of my life. That was before we were both recaptured and loaded aboard that courier ship that brought us here. Before you ask, no I don't know why that old guy did that."

"Old guy?" Goldman said.

"The Genex who came after us were led by some old man. I don't know why but he wanted us sent back here." Lucas said.

"Possibly he was looking to undermine a rival." Knight said.

"In that case I say hooray for the Genex and their incessant childish bickering among themselves." Lucas said.

"Thank you lieutenant. The captain will want to speak to you later on and I wouldn't be surprised if Admiral Kim had a few questions as well. You can take your time in coming back to work if you need to. For now we've got the ambassador of Nexus himself filling in for you. In the mean time if you do feel you need to

speak to someone other than another member of the crew then Doctor Thundercloud can arrange it." Knight said and Lucas smiled.

"Thanks I'll bear that in mind sir." she said.

"Oh and unless you're after experiencing another strip search you might want to avoid Lynn Shaw." Goldman added, "She's measuring up bridesmaid candidates for dresses and she's being very precise."

After finishing updating Admiral Kim on the return of Lucas and the arrival of Hayes, Reeves returned to his quarters. There he opened up the compact safe that among other things contained his issued service pistol, four magazines and a box of ammunition. Taking the pistol, ammunition and a single magazine from the safe he set them down on his desk and began to load the ten millimetre rounds into the magazine. When it was full he loaded it into the pistol and chambered the first round before inserting the weapon into a holster then he then strapped to his leg. He had just returned the excess ammunition to his safe when there was a knock at the door of his quarters.

"Come in." he called out, closing the safe door and checking that it had locked before turning around to see Hayes being brought into the room by two marines, "Wait outside." he told the marines.

"Captain we-" one of the marines began before Reeves rested his hand on his sidearm.

"I can look after myself corporal." he said.

"Yes captain." the marine replied before they both turned and left the room, closing the door behind them.

"So shall I sit here?" Hayes asked, looking at a nearby chair in front of Reeves' desk, "Or did you ask those marines to leave because I've been brought here to demonstrate my gratitude for being rescued in another way?" she added, looking over towards the bed at the rear of the room.

"Take a seat, please." Reeves said and they both sat down.

Hayes took the opportunity to look around Reeves' quarters, focusing on the personal items as she tried to evaluate him and her attention was caught by the books on his shelf.

"A bible? Are you a believer? Odd for the captain of a warship to believe in peace and brotherly love." she said.

"Do you know who I am Miss Hayes?" Reeves asked, ignoring her question.

"You're the captain of the *CSV Warspite*, an Essex-class heavy cruiser. The badge on your tunic tells me that your name is Reeves but I have to admit that I didn't pay much attention to whatever personal details we found out about you. I left that sort of thing to Enrico." Hayes responded.

"Enrico?" Reeves commented.

"Enrico Vale. One of the best strategic analysts there was. He's dead by the way. I heard the shot that killed him recorded on my message system." Hayes told him.

"I see. Now perhaps you can explain why you are here on the *Warspite*? According to Lieutenant Lucas you were magically able to open the doors to your cells so that you could leave and then after being recaptured you were simply loaded aboard a courier and sent to us. I don't know how things work in Genex society but in the Commonwealth this would be considered unusual. Somehow I doubt that your people would not only let you both go but also give away a spacecraft in the process." Reeves said.

"Trust me captain, it's not normal for Genex either." Hayes said.

"Trust? Unfortunately trust is something you haven't earned yet." Reeves replied.

"How about if I tell you to bump the woman in the cell with me to the top of your list for genetic tests? She's no worker." Hayes asked and she smiled.

"You seem eager to inform on one of your own people." Reeves commented.

"Isn't that what you want from me captain? Or have I misunderstood your motives for bringing me here? Perhaps my early suggestion was closer to the mark." Hayes said and she looked towards the bed again.

"I'm trying to determine the motivation your people had for sending you here and now I'd also like to understand your motivation for so easily exposing one of your own to me." Reeves said.

"Oh I'll tell you why I'll sell out that woman in the cell and every last other Genex in existence Captain Reeves." Hayes said, leaning towards Reeves, "I want to live and I want to live as an actual person not some puppet mopping floors. That's all that's waiting for me back on Sanctuary so right now I'll tell you whatever it takes to keep me here. Or do anything if that's what it takes."

"I take it Sanctuary is the new home world of the Genex?" Reeves asked.

"Yes Sanctuary is our capital. We have four other colony worlds as well. Haven, Refuge, New Langley and Redoubt. Do you want to know what systems they're in?" Hayes answered.

"Eventually, yes. For now though I would like an answer to my original question. Why are you here?" Reeves said.

"Because it suited the old man to send me here, that's all. I don't know what his scheme is but it obviously needs either me or your Lieutenant Lucas to be here or he wouldn't have sent us." Hayes said.

"The old man?" Reeves said.

"My former superior. An admiral who is in charge of all Genex intelligence gathering and covert operations. If there is anyone among us who can be said to be the most dangerous individual alive then it's him. The lucky

ones among his enemies end up dead, the others turned into mindless drones.”

“And what exactly is a drone?” Reeves asked.

“A lobotomised and surgically sterilised slave worker. I was told you found one aboard a mining ship. If I hadn't been able to escape then by now I'd be one as well.” Hayes said.

“Ah yes, the surgery you say was carried out on you against your will.” Reeves said and he reached out for the intercom handset, “Doctor Thundercloud could you join us in my quarters? We're ready for you.” he said before returning the handset to its holder.

“What's going on?” Hayes asked before there was a knock at the door of Reeves' quarters.

“Come in.” Reeves called out and the door was opened by Thundercloud, revealing the continued presence of the two marine guards in the corridor outside, “Doctor could you please tell Miss Hayes what you told me about what you found?” Reeves said when Thundercloud closed the door behind him.

“Of course captain, as you know I conducted a scan of her body when she arrived. The results of this seemed to contradict the information she gave me about a surgical procedure she had undergone so I conducted a physical examination to confirm my findings.” Thundercloud said, reading from his tablet.

“Which were?” Reeves said.

“That her reproductive system is intact and functional. Given her age I would recommend the use of fertility increasing medication to increase the chances of conception but I found no evidence to suggest that she cannot still have children.” Thundercloud said.

“That's not possible.” Hayes exclaimed, “Captain believe me, they strapped me down to that operating table and spread my legs before ripping out my insides. I didn't imagine that.”

“No you obviously didn't imagine the surgery itself.” Thundercloud replied and he handed his tablet to Hayes, “I found clear signs of recent abdominal surgery to your ovaries but nothing that would sterilise you.”

“What did they do to me?” Hayes said.

“I'm sorry I don't know. We'll have to run more tests to find out.” Thundercloud told her.

“Major Willis would you mind stepping in here?” Reeves said out loud and all of a sudden the door to his private bathroom opened and Willis entered with another marine behind him, both of them armed with personal defence weapons.

“You had guards hiding in the bathroom the whole time we were talking?” Hayes said and Reeves smiled.

“Miss Hayes your people have a reputation for deceit and I'm not an idiot. I knew that if you wanted to escape then you'd take any chance for it so I thought I'd offer you an opportunity you couldn't pass up. You probably wouldn't be able to overpower me in a prolonged struggle and in any case the two marines in the corridor could be in here in under a minute but you may have been tempted to try a quick strike to take my weapon and then use me as a hostage. I kept Major Willis on hand to deal with that.” he said and Hayes smiled back at him.

“That's very devious. I think I like you captain. I like you a lot.” Hayes said to him.

“Major Willis we've concluded our interview for now. Please take Miss Hayes to her quarters and keep her under guard.” Reeves said.

“Of course captain.” Willis responded, “Miss Hayes if you'd like to come with us.”

“My quarters? That's a fancy way of referring to your brig.” Hayes said as she got to her feet.

“You aren't being returned to the brig Miss Hayes. This isn't a passenger liner but we do have some spare capacity for people who come aboard. From now on you'll be kept in one of the spare officer's quarters. You won't be allowed to wander around the ship and you'll have no access to our computers but it'll be more comfortable than a cell while you fill in these forms.” Reeves said and he handed a folder to Hayes. Opening this she saw that it contained paper copies of a set of official forms.

“A claim for political asylum?” she said.

“You weren't taken prisoner during battle and you did say that you didn't want to return to Genex space Miss Hayes. Fill in that form and if your application is successful then you can remain in the Commonwealth instead.” Reeves said.

“And if it isn't?” Hayes asked.

“If you've been honest with us then why wouldn't it be?” Reeves answered before the intercom sounded and he picked up the handset again, “Reeves.” he said.

“Captain it's me.” Bernard's voice said, “I've been taking a look at that Genex ship in the hangar like you asked and I've found something I think you should see. Something I think that someone else wanted you to see.”

“I'm on my way.” Reeves replied.

Recalled from the Genex destroyer, Bernard had immediately set to work studying the courier that Lucas and Hayes had arrived aboard. Examining an intact vessel was always more likely to reveal more information than a damaged one, even when the damaged vessel was so much larger and so Bernard had been happy to break off from his previous task. Joined by several other engineers as well as the ambassador of Nexus Bernard had focused on trying to gain access to the courier's main computer. However, while they remained

locked out of most of it one file had suddenly activated when they began their examination.

"Going a little heavy on the deodorant aren't you Adam?" Reeves commented when he stepped into the courier's cockpit smelt the air inside the compartment.

"Sorry captain it was the only thing we could think of." Bernard replied, "Lucas and that Genex woman spent several days tied up in the cockpit and we haven't been able to get rid of the smell, even ripping out the padding from the chairs didn't work."

"I did offer to work alone captain. Although my body does feature chemical sensors that are quite capable of detecting odours even the strongest of them do not bother me." the ambassador added.

"And I told him that there was no way I was passing up the opportunity to take a look at how this ship works." Bernard said.

"And what do you know so far?" Reeves asked.

"That it's not very advanced by our standards, comparable to a lot of ships in civilian service. It has both tachyon storage jars and singularity jars that provide it with both FTL and artificial gravity capability but no particle inductor to replenish them," Bernard said.

"So what is so interesting that you needed me here to see it in person?" Reeves said.

"Because the ship wanted you here captain." the ambassador of Nexus told him and he pointed to a nearby console on which a single display was active and showing a simple message.

HELLO CAPTAIN REEVES. PLEASE CONFIRM YOUR IDENTITY.

"Now how am I supposed to do that?" Reeves asked.

"It seems reasonable that whoever sent this ship would provide a means for you to input information about yourself captain. I suggest either the microphone here or the keyboard." the ambassador of Nexus said.

"I suppose it's worth a try." Bernard added and Reeves stood in front of the console and looked at it. Then he reached down to the keyboard and typed quickly, entering his service number.

"Well this isn't exactly classified information and the Genex seem to have known our every move these past few years." he said.

The moment Reeves finished typing the display went blank except for a sideways pointing arrow.

"Press to play?" Bernard commented and Reeves tapped the screen where the arrow was located.

"Hopefully I am now speaking to Captain Reeves, commanding officer of the Commonwealth Space Vehicle *Warspite*." an image of the old man said as a pre-recorded video file began to play, "I hope that both your missing officer and my former subordinate Jennifer Hayes have reached you safely. I have returned your officer as a gesture of goodwill while Jennifer will provide you with a means to validate my identity and rank. Captain Reeves I must meet with you in person to discuss where we go from here as I think we both know that our two societies cannot co-exist, I may have been able to dissuade the voices here calling for war the loudest for now but I cannot guarantee that that situation will last for much longer. However, I believe that there is still a way by which it is possible to guarantee that there will never again be war between us. This ship has been programmed to take you to a place where we can meet in private and discuss this face to face. The ship's autopilot is set to depart twenty hours after this message is played. That should give you plenty of time to confirm who I am with Jennifer Hayes and for the pair of you to board the ship before it departs. I hope that we shall meet in person soon captain, the stakes are great and the price of failure potentially disastrous."

The screen then went blank and Reeves looked around the console for anything that looked like it would replay the message.

"Can we see that again?" he said.

"It looks like it was a one time message captain." Bernard said.

"Captain I am detecting a radio signal being emitted by this vessel." the ambassador of Nexus said suddenly and Reeves reached out to grab the radio set clipped to Bernard's shirt.

"Bridge this is Captain Reeves, are you picking up a radio signal?"

"Yes captain it was powerful but just a brief burst. Goldman doesn't think it could carry any significant data, just a couple of bytes at most." Knight responded.

"That's enough to act as a trigger." Bernard suggested, "The Genex will have known we might bring the ship aboard so they made the signal strong enough to get through our hull. They could have infiltrated another ship into the system at the same time as this one. A drone maybe."

"Bridge I want a full sensor sweep of the area. There's another Genex ship out there and I want it found." Reeves said into the radio before he returned it to Bernard.

The stealth drone that had accompanied the courier from Sanctuary had shut down almost all of its systems as soon they had both dropped to sub-light speed, the drone using the larger tachyon pulse from the courier to mask it on arrival before going dark. The only system that remained active aboard the drone was its radio receiver, listening for a specific message. This came in the form of a short string of data broadcast by the courier when the old man's message finished playing. This triggered the drone's long range communications to come on line, aligning the transmitter back towards Alpha Indi before sending another brief signal, this

time of charged tachyons focused enough that it was undetected by any of the Commonwealth ships in the system and would be capable of making it the just over twenty light years to the Genex capital system. Its primary mission complete the drone then began a timer before shutting down everything else and once again waiting for something to trigger it.

INTERLUDE.

"Grandfather I just heard." the old man's granddaughter said as she entered his office at home to find him checking the contents of his case, "The signal from the drone."

"Yes, obviously Lieutenant Lucas and Jennifer Hayes reached the *Warspite* as we planned. I'm about to head up to the *Enigma* now, Captain Schaar and her people are already aboard and waiting for me." the old man replied.

"Grandfather are you certain we can trust Schaar? She was loyal to Dressler after all." his granddaughter asked and the old man smiled.

"We've been over this before my dear. Any loyalty she felt to Dressler vanished when he decided to dispose of her to protect himself. In any case she may have selected the command staff but the marines aboard are as loyal to me as it is possible for them to be. Anna won't try to harm me, you'll see." he said.

"Do you think Captain Reeves will accept your invitation?"

"I hope so. Of course I wasn't expecting there to be an entire Commonwealth fleet at Eta Indi when I sent it. Hopefully the right person will come. I would rather not deal with someone who is a totally unknown quantity to us. The bigger question is whether he will bring Jennifer with him. That may depend on how much he knows about her and how desperate she is to discover her role in what is to come. Now what about you? Are you ready to play your part? Do you have everything you need?" the old man asked.

"Yes grandfather. I'll time my strike to coincide with your meeting. While you are meeting with Captain Reeves I'll be deploying the weapon." his granddaughter said and he smiled.

"Excellent. In that case you get to your ship and we'll meet again afterwards. I love you my dear." he said before bending forwards to kiss his granddaughter's forehead. Then he closed his case and walked out of his office.

The alien light cruiser discovered by the Genex and restored to functionality had been dubbed *Enigma* by the thinkers who had first studied it and the name had stuck. No trace of the original crews of any of the four alien vessels had ever been found, leaving their exact appearances a mystery but it had been known that they possessed a radically different body shape to humans from the design of their furniture. Therefore, much of this had been removed by the Genex and replaced with more conventional beds and tables while what had been deduced to be the infirmary had been totally re-equipped to handle human patients. What had been left as it was though was the design of the bridge. This had a two level structure that featured a horseshoe shaped lower section lined with control consoles combined with a raised section that extended from the back to the centre of the bridge where three more control stations for the highest ranking officers were located. Each of these could turn independently, permitting the most senior officers to focus on different sections of the bridge at once.

Two of these stations were occupied when the old man entered through the doorway at the rear of this raised section, one by Schaar and one by the man who she had appointed as her first officer. This left the third station free for the old man himself.

"Are we ready Captain Schaar?" he asked as he sat down.

"Yes admiral. A course is plotted for Redoubt but we'll drop out of FTL after half a light year and turn for Luyten two-twelve nineteen." Schaar responded.

"Captain we are being scanned by multiple vessels in the area." her first officer said.

"Probably captains wondering why none of them were picked to command this ship." Schaar commented and she looked at the old man and smiled at him in thanks for her position.

"Ignore them." the old man said, "They can learn nothing about this vessel from remote scans that our engineering teams have not already learned from physical examination. Break orbit and proceed with the jump."

14.

"I take it she's still in there?" Reeves asked the two marine guards outside the door to Hayes' quarters when he approached with the ambassador of Nexus.

"Yes captain. She's not given us any trouble." one of the guards answered.

"Good." Reeves replied and then he knocked on the door and waited for a response. When none came however, he knocked for a second time and only then did Hayes open it.

"Captain, I'm sorry I thought that'd you'd just come right in." she said as she stepped aside to permit Reeves and the ambassador to enter, "You're not a regular robot are you?" she said, studying the ambassador closely.

"No Miss Hayes. I am a personification of Nexus. A more complete version exists aboard the *Nexus Dreadnought* but we are connected." the ambassador told her.

"I never thought I'd ever meet you in person." Hayes said, still studying the machine ambassador closely.

"That was pretty much the reaction of everyone else aboard. The ambassador is here because he has a recording I want you to take a look at." Reeves said before looking at the ambassador and adding, "This will work won't it?"

"Of course captain. I record everything that I am exposed to, including the video message discovered aboard the courier." the ambassador said and Reeves handed a tablet to Hayes who looked at the screen. The tablet was already configured to receive wireless signals and when Hayes looked at it the screen the ambassador began to replay the message from the old man.

"I take it that this individual is the one you referred to as 'the old man'?" Reeves said and Hayes nodded.

"Yes, that's him." she said.

"So why do you think he wants to meet with the pair of us in an unspecified location?" Reeves asked.

"The same reason any of my people do anything, to advance some plan he has to get ahead of what few rivals he has left. Those not already acting as fertiliser or drooling into the toilets they're scrubbing." Hayes said.

"Is it a trap?" Reeves asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. But if you're going then I sure as hell am as well." Hayes answered.

"You seem eager to meet with this individual." the ambassador commented.

"You think? He knows what was done to me and I want to find out." Hayes said. Then she looked at Reeves, "So are we going?" she asked.

"I haven't decided yet. I wanted to know what you could tell me before I reached a decision." Reeves told her before there was another knock at the door, "Come in." he called out, not waiting for Hayes to respond to the knock and the door opened again to reveal Goldman.

"Excuse me captain but Admiral Kim wants to speak to you and Miss Hayes." she said and Reeves nodded.

"Very well commander. We'll come to the bridge." he said.

"Actually sir I came here because the admiral will be arriving in the forward hangar in about ten minutes.

"The admiral's coming here?" Reeves said in surprise.

"Yes captain. The *Ashford's Fury* is on its way. Major Willis is assembling an honour guard now and Commander Knight is informing the other senior staff." Goldman said.

"I'll go and change." Reeves said and as he turned to leave he spoke to the guards outside Hayes' quarters again, "Make sure she's at the hangar in ten minutes." he ordered.

The *Warspite's* senior officers, along with the ambassador of Nexus and an honour guard of marines were waiting outside the airlock leading to the cruiser's forward hangar bay when Hayes' guards brought her there as well. Instead of the usual fatigue style duty uniforms the officers normally wore they currently their dress uniforms.

"So what do I do?" she asked.

"Keep your mouth shut unless the admiral asks you something." Ash told her, "Same as the rest of us." A light above the air lock door indicated that the hangar had been pressurised and one of the marines opened it.

"Form up." Willis ordered and in unison the marines turned and began to march in a single column into the hangar, arranging themselves in a line extending from the steps that had already been extended from the shuttle carrying Admiral Kim.

Captain Reeves led his senior officers into the hangar as well and while he took up a position at the base of the shuttle's steps Knight stood beside him and the other officers formed a line opposite the marines, starting with Goldman closest to the steps as the next in the *Warspite's* chain of command followed by the other officers in their order of seniority. Meanwhile the ambassador of Nexus stood beyond the ends of the two lines of the *Warspite's* crew and Hayes was escorted by her guards into the hangar to stand beside him.

It was then that the shuttle's outer hatch opened and Admiral Kim began to disembark.

"Honour guard, attention!" Willis shouted and the marines all snapped to attention as Kim descended the steps.

"Permission to come aboard Captain Reeves?" Kim asked from the bottom step.

"Granted admiral. Welcome aboard the *CSV Warspite*." Reeves responded.

"Thank you captain." Kim said, taking the final step onto the hangar deck.

"I believe you know my first officer Commander Douglas Knight." Reeves said.

"Admiral." Knight added.

"Commander." Kim responded as the three men began to walk along the lines of officers and marines, "And this must be the representative of Nexus." the admiral added.

"That is correct admiral Kim." the ambassador responded.

"It's an honour to meet you." Kim said.. Then he looked at Hayes and added, "I take it that this is the Genex woman?"

"Jennifer Hayes." Reeves said.

"Commander." Hayes added, "Formerly anyway."

"That is the ship she arrived in along with Lieutenant Lucas, my intelligence officer who was captured during the attack on the Genex outpost in this system." Reeves said and he pointed towards the Genex courier ship.

"Ah yes, that's what I came here to find out about." Kim said, looking at the courier as well.

"Commander Bernard with me. Everyone else return to your duties." Reeves ordered. Then he turned to the marines guarding Hayes and added, "Bring her along as well."

"Perhaps I should also join you given my experience of the vessel so far." the ambassador of Nexus suggested.

"Yes, good idea ambassador." Reeves said and then he and Bernard accompanied Kim towards the courier, followed by the ambassador and Hayes along with her guards.

"How does the ship compare to our own?" Kim asked as they approached the small vessel and Reeves looked at Bernard.

"If it was a Commonwealth craft then I wouldn't call it state of the art admiral." Bernard said, "I estimate that it performs quite well but our best ships are faster. Plus it lacks true FTL and artificial gravity capability."

"But the Genex have those technologies now?" Admiral Kim said.

"That's what our analysis of their capital ships tells us." Bernard said.

"We made our first particle inductors towards the end of the war." Hayes added unexpectedly, "They could only produce tachyons but we managed to create versions that would produce gravitons less than a decade later." she then noticed Reeves staring at her, "What?" she asked, "The admiral asked and so I answered. Just like your Lieutenant Commander Ash told me to."

"You seem rather co-operative Miss Hayes. It is 'miss', is it?" Admiral Kim said.

"Miss is fine I suppose and yes I am trying to be co-operative." Hayes responded.

"She's applying for political asylum. Unlike the Genex we captured from their fleet it seems she faces harsh reprisals if she returns home." Reeves said.

"Asylum?" Kim commented, "I'm not sure what the Commonwealth will think of that."

"It was granted to the Fedrun and Krawlek refugees from the Sissusk Empire." Reeves pointed out as they reached the steps leading into the courier and proceeded up them.

"You'll have to excuse the smell admiral." Bernard said, "We're doing our best to mask it but it's taking time to clear the air properly."

"I see what you mean." Kim commented as he stepped into the cockpit and smelt the deodorant used to mask the smell that still lingered in there, "The systems are active?" he added, noticing that consoles around the cockpit were illuminated.

"Yes but we're largely locked out of the operating system." Bernard told him.

"Commander Bernard and the ambassador found a message that was apparently left for me specifically." Reeves said and Admiral Kim frowned.

"A message left for you?" he said.

"Yes. Miss Hayes' former superior wants to meet with me." Reeves said.

"And me." Hayes added from behind them.

"Can I see this message?" Kim asked.

"The original would not play a second time, however I was able to record it." the ambassador answered, "Please enable your tablet for wireless access and I shall provide you with a copy."

Kim lifted the tablet that held and allowed the ambassador of Nexus to connect to it remotely before watching the message. Then when it finished he looked at Reeves, "Can this be taken at face value?" he asked.

"Perhaps." Reeves answered, "Miss Hayes seems to think that this individual is just attempting to gain an advantage over his rivals."

"Which is exactly what we experienced with the Genex during the war." Kim said, "Miss Hayes, could factions of the Genex government want to negotiate peace?"

"Easily." Hayes replied without hesitation, "They're a long way from the Commonwealth so fighting a war would be hard enough for them even without the massive disparity in numbers. Your fleet is bigger than ours even before the forces of your member states are taken into account. The robotic units used in the war have been rebuilt but there aren't enough of them to make up the difference yet."

"Yet? So it could just be a play for time? Giving the Genex the chance to strengthen their forces before attacking?" Kim said.

"Possibly." Hayes replied.

"Such a delay would also benefit the Commonwealth admiral. At this point we have little intelligence regarding the Genex and their forces. The longer we are able to postpone any conflict gives us more opportunity to assess them. Especially by debriefing Miss Hayes about the locations of their colonies." the ambassador of Nexus pointed out.

"Something the chief of their intelligence service ought to be well aware of." Reeves said.

"I take it that you think we should accept this man's invitation Captain Reeves?" Admiral Kim said and Reeves nodded.

"I do admiral." he replied, "If the offer is sincere then perhaps we can avoid a conflict that could be very costly, particularly if we are facing the possibility of war with the Ticik as well."

"And if it isn't? It could be an attempt to lure you into a trap. Sending back a lieutenant to ensnare a captain." Kim suggested.

"I don't intend to go in unarmed admiral." Reeves said.

"I'd be happier if you were going in aboard the *Warspite* with her marines to protect you." Kim said.

"Admiral I doubt we'll be able to crack this ship's autopilot and find out where the meeting is to take place in time." Bernard said.

"At the very least take a team of marines with you." Admiral Kim said.

"Admiral this vessel is designed for a crew of two." Bernard said, "There's enough internal space for a marine fire team but they could all run out of air before reaching their destination."

"Admiral might I suggest that Captain Reeves be accompanied by someone who does not require air or food or water?" the ambassador of Nexus said and Admiral Kim looked at him.

"You?" he said, "Captain Reeves needs physical protection, not diplomatic support."

"Which I can provide admiral. Unlike the robots aboard your ships I am quite capable of wielding a weapon and using lethal force if I so wish. I would remind you that the controlling intelligence of the *Nexus Dreadnought* itself is simply a more enhanced version of my own. I am also totally expendable. This body will be discarded when it is returned home. If it should be destroyed by the Genex then any data gathered can still be returned by Captain Reeves for uploading and nothing will be lost." the ambassador explained.

"You'll be taking a big risk captain." Kim said.

"I risk the lives of almost nine hundred people every time I take this ship into combat admiral. Some of them weren't lucky enough to be returned to us like Lieutenant Lucas was." Reeves replied.

"And you are willing to go along as well Miss Hayes?" Kim said.

"The old man had something done to me and I want to find out what." Hayes answered.

"Very well, in that case Captain Reeves I'm approving your request to attempt to open talks with this representative of the Genex government. You will take Miss Hayes and the ambassador of Nexus to wherever this ship is programmed to go and see what he has to say for himself. I doubt I need to remind you that you will not be authorised to give any assurances on behalf of the Commonwealth or any of its member states." Kim said.

"Yes admiral, I understand." Reeves replied.

Not knowing how long it would take to reach the location Reeves packed several changes of clothes, most of these were standard duty uniforms but he also included a single dress uniform for the meeting itself. All of a sudden the door to his quarters opened as Knight entered without knocking.

"How long have we known each other?" Knight said as he pushed the door shut behind him.

"Do come in commander." Reeves responded, "Oh and about twelve years."

"In all that time this has to be the craziest thing you've ever done and that includes all that stuff right after your divorce." Knight said.

"I take it that you disagree with my decision to go to this meeting Douglas?" Reeves asked.

"You bet I do. We're fleet officers not ambassadors. Debrief that Genex woman and send drones to every system she can tell us about. Then let the diplomatic corps handle negotiations." Knight responded.

"In the time it takes to do that we could be at war." Reeves said.

"I think we've been at war for a long time. We just didn't know it." Knight said, "That's why this ship needs you."

Just then there was a knock at the door.

"Come in." Reeves called out and the door opened to reveal Willis.

"Ben how about you try to talk some sense into the captain?" Knight commented.

"Sorry commander, I'm just here to make a delivery." Willis replied as he entered the room with a case in each hand while a robot followed him with a larger one. Willis set the two cases he carried down on the table and Knight saw that each carried the same labelling.

FIREARM, PERSONAL DEFENCE. Mk XX(A3). CALIBRE 10x22mm

"Personal defence weapons?" Knight commented, "Two of them? You're not giving that woman a gun are you?"

"Of course not. I admit she actually seems charming in person but I'm not about to hand her a weapon."

Reeves replied, "I want something more than my service pistol for protection so one of these is the logical choice. The second one is for the ambassador who has indicated his willingness to use lethal force against the Genex if the need arises."

"Charming?" Knight commented.

"Sign here captain." Willis said, handing Reeves a tablet so he could sign for the additional weapons.

"I take it that that's the ammunition?" Reeves asked, looking at the robot and Willis nodded.

"Two thousand rounds and fifty magazines for them to be loaded into. I advise half loading each mag until you have a better idea of when you're going to arrive at your destination. Then finish loading them no more than a day in advance. That should make sure the springs don't get over compressed and cause jams. There are also grenades just in case. Thirty concussive stun grenades with optional fragmentation cups and twenty smoke."

"You were saying about going there to stop a war? That lot sounds like you're planning on fighting one on your own." Knight said.

"You may be right about this being a bad idea Douglas." Reeves responded as he signed the tablet, making the transfer of the weapons from the *Warspite's* armoury to him official and then he uploaded the signature to the *Warspite's* computer before returning the device to Willis, "So I'm taking along some additional firepower just in case I need to get out of a jam. In the meantime the *Warspite* is yours." he continued and then he picked up his own tablet, "If things do go wrong then I've recommended to Commonwealth fleet command that you be made my permanent replacement. In the short term I want you to track the courier when it leaves. Plot my heading and try to determine which system its gone to then follow in the *Warspite*."

"Are you serious?" Knight asked, "I've just been given command of this ship and you expect me to risk it by charging into enemy territory already?" and then he and Reeves smiled at one another.

"Yes, yes I do. So do you have any advice for me?" Reeves said.

"As a matter of fact yes I do." Knight replied and he walked over to Reeves' bookshelf and took the Bible from it, "Prayer." he added, tossing the book on top of one of the cases containing a personal defence weapon, "If you're not taking a team of marines with you then you should at least try enlisting that God of yours."

Although Reeves trusted his crew to correctly load all of the equipment he had requested aboard the courier he still checked each of the cases himself, not only verifying that everything on the list was present but also making sure that he knew where to find each item. Although he was proceeding with this mission on the assumption that the old man's offer was sincere and both he and Hayes would reach their destination safely Reeves was not above taking the precaution of taking a significant quantity of survival equipment with them. It turned out that not all of the supplies were essentials from his though and one of the cases that he opened turned out to contain a bottle of champagne along with a pair of glasses. Also included in this case was a tin of tuna and a hand written note in Bernard's handwriting and Reeves smiled when he read it.

Sorry about the tuna but we don't have any caviar for your romantic getaway with your CHARMING lady friend.

"What's so funny?" Hayes said from behind Reeves as she was escorted aboard the courier. Like Reeves she also brought a bag of spare clothing aboard with her that she tossed onto the floor.

"My engineer's sense of humour." Reeves said, "Although it's not much of a joke." and he showed her the note.

"Is that champagne?" she asked, noticing the bottle inside the case.

"Yes, why?"

"Because where I come from that bottle is worth more than my apartment. When we fled after the war there wasn't much room for luxuries like that and not much has been smuggled in since. Give it to the old man. I don't think he's normally one to take bribes but he might just make an exception for that." Hayes explained before she noticed the two cases containing the personal defence weapons drawn from the *Warspite's* armoury, "Is one of those for me?" she said.

"Not likely." Reeves replied, "You haven't done anything yet to warrant being thrown in the brig again but I'm not ready to trust you with a firearm just yet."

"Then why take two? Who is the other one for?" Hayes said and Reeves pointed through the open air lock behind her.

"Here he comes now." he said and when Hayes looked behind her she saw the ambassador of Nexus

climbing the steps outside the courier.

"Nexus is going as well?" she said in surprise.

"Yes Miss Hayes." the ambassador said as he boarded the ship, "It was determined that I was the only one who could accompany you without risking depleting this vessel's life support capability."

"Ambassador I'd like you to keep an eye on our supplies. Miss Hayes is not to have access to them without my permission." Reeves said.

"Of course captain." the ambassador responded.

"Good. Now it looks like we've got less than an hour left before we're due to depart so let's get this ship out of my hangar." Reeves added.

With no way of knowing whether the courier's autopilot was programmed to determine whether it was inside a hangar or in free space when the twenty hours elapsed, the *Warspite's* workpods were used to move it back out into space before it could activate and potentially trigger its main engines inside the cruiser's hangar. Reeves and Hayes strapped themselves into the two new seats that had been installed the cockpit to replace the badly soiled ones while the ambassador of Nexus braced himself against their backs as they all waited to see exactly what would happen when the time expired.

A minute before the twenty hours was up all of the courier's consoles lit up, a countdown showing prominently on a display right in front of Reeves and Hayes. At the same time the courier's thruster fired to turn it to a specific heading. When he saw this Reeves reached for the radio clipped to his chest.

"*Warspite* this is Reeves. It looks like the final countdown is running and I think we've just been turned to face whatever way we'll be going." he signalled.

"Confirmed captain. We're picking up hull ionisation and growing tachyon levels." Knight responded.

"Just over thirty seconds left." Reeves said.

"How does she look?" Knight asked while sat in the captain's chair, turning towards Goldman.

"Could be going to FTL at any time captain." she responded, using Knight's temporary position instead of his rank.

"The tachyon levels have peaked captain." Cortez added and moments later there was a flash as the courier accelerated to faster than light speed and left the system.

"Did we get a fix on its departure heading?" Knight asked.

"Yes captain." Goldman said.

"Navigation, any idea where the captain is heading?" Knight said.

"Checking now captain. I can tell you that the heading doesn't match any of the five that would lead to the systems that Genex woman identified as being settled by them." Thomas replied.

"Unless they're making a decoy jump to throw us off." Lucas pointed out.

"Engage active tadar." Knight ordered, "Track that ship as long as possible. If it is programmed to make an initial jump maybe we'll spot it drop out of FTL before making its next jump."

"Engaging active tadar now commander." Cortez said, "We have a fix on the courier."

"Feed it to me would you?" Thomas said and when the sensor data was shown on his console he immediately began comparing it with the *Warspite's* three dimensional star charts.

A ship travelling at faster than light speed could only move in a straight line so even with just a few million kilometres worth of tracking data it was possible to project the course that the courier would take simply by extending the line. However, because of the ease of calculating a ship's destination in this manner it had long been standard practice for ships trying to evade pursuit by executing two jumps instead of one, dropping to sub-light speed between them to change course. It was Knight's hope that any such change in course would take place while the courier was still in range of the *Warspite's* active tadar system. This had been left largely inactive during the *Warspite's* presence in the Eta Indi system to avoid attracting attention but now that the Genex knew that there was a Commonwealth fleet present the requirement for stealth was gone and the *Warspite* could make use of its primary FTL detection system.

The *Warspite's* command crew watched as the pulses of reflected tachyons showed the courier travelling directly away from them. Unlike prior to when the compact vessel had arrived unannounced in the Eta Indi system, now its speed could easily be determined.

"Looks like they're covering about six light years per day captain." Goldman said.

"That matches Commander Bernard's estimates." Knight replied.

"Well their current heading just takes them into empty space. Even if they could travel ten times faster than us it would still take weeks to reach a star system along it." Thomas said.

"So either they're going to drop out of FTL and make another jump or they're heading for a rendezvous in interstellar space." Ash commented.

"Captain we could try going after them." Thomas suggested.

"No, not yet. I don't want this old guy the captain's gone to meet picking us up. We'll try and figure out where they're going and then go after them." Knight said.

"And if it is in interstellar space?" Lucas asked, "There won't be anything to conceal our arrival."
"Then we'll just have to hope that they're heading for a specific system after all." Knight replied.
"And that they make their turn at some point in the next twenty hours or so." Thomas added.
"Captain I've got Admiral Kim calling." Goldman announced suddenly.
"Put him through," Knight ordered. Then as the communication system was activated he added, "Admiral Kim."
"Captain Knight." Kim's voice said, "I see you're tracking the Genex courier with tadar."
"Yes admiral. I've been told that the captain's ship will leave our sensor range in about twenty hours. Obviously tracking it by then will be difficult but if it's heading for a star system in range then it will have to change course at some point. We'll follow as soon as we know where it's going." Knight explained.
"Very good captain. I can't risk taking the rest of the fleet deeper into Genex space so we'll be heading back to Commonwealth territory in about an hour. Fleet command needs to know everything that has happened here and our ships may be needed to form a defence. You are authorised to keep the *Warspite* here before following Captain Reeves to his destination. However, you are to avoid engaging the Genex further. The *Warspite* is not expendable. Do you understand that captain?" Kim told him.
"Yes admiral. Avoid engagement." Knight responded.
"In that case captain I'll wish you good hunting. This is the *Ashford's Fury* out." Kim said before the channel went dead.
"You heard the admiral." Knight said, "Watch for any approaching Genex ships."
"Captain that stealth vessel is still out there somewhere." Thomas reminded him, "Anywhere we go it could give away our position."
"Not if we leave the system entirely. At the first sign of a Genex force heading our way we'll go." Knight replied.
"Abandon the captain?" Lucas said nervously.
"No, go after him. I don't care whether or not we've figured out where that courier is going we'll head after it. With any luck a ten light year jump should get us beyond the range of that stealth ship and still let us keep an eye on the courier." Knight reassured her.

"I don't suppose you've been able to calculate where we're going have you ambassador?" Reeves asked, looking over his shoulder at where the ambassador of Nexus stood.
"I am sorry captain, although the full version of myself aboard the *Nexus Dreadnought* will have been able to track our exit vector I lack that capacity. Starship navigation was not considered an essential part of my mission profile. That duty was left to the systems aboard my own courier." the ambassador answered.
"What about you Miss Hayes? I don't suppose you're familiar with the star patterns in the Eta Indi system are you?" Reeves added, turning to look at Hayes instead.
"Are you kidding? I've worked in intelligence my entire career, I'm not a navigator either. Oh and enough of this Miss Hayes crap. I'm Jennifer. Okay?" she said.
"If you insist." Reeves responded.
"So if you're calling me Jennifer, how about I call you-" Hayes began.
"Captain Reeves or simply captain will do." Reeves interrupted.
"Whatever you say, captain." Hayes replied and she briefly saluted.
Reeves then took out his tablet and began to replay the message from the old man again and Hayes peered at it as well. Pausing the video just a few seconds in he then looked at her instead.
"So what can you tell me about this man?" he asked her.
"He's a killer." Hayes answered, "I can't think of a single person who's reached his rank who isn't of course but he stands out. It's said that he even killed his own son to cement his position. After that his grandson disappeared while his granddaughter rarely strays far from him except when he sends her to kill someone else. He spent the first part of his career spying on you of course but later on he switched to internal security."
"Watching your own people I take it. It's not like any Commonwealth intelligence services would have had any spies among you." Reeves commented and Hayes nodded.
"All Genex leaders know that their subordinates are likely to double cross them if it would be to their advantage. The old man has specialised in rooting out plots like that to protect members of the government." she continued.
"So why can he be trusted to look after those in power? Why doesn't he betray his superiors?" Reeves said but Hayes just shrugged.
"That's always been the question. No-one knows why he's never made a grab for office himself. Maybe that's what this is." she said, "Who knows, all this could be him finally trying to take over."

INTERLUDE.

As soon as the *Enigma* arrived in the Luyten 212-19 system the light cruiser's crew began to scan the system to determine whether or not they were alone.

"What do we have?" Schaar asked.

"We're picking up the tachyon satellites in close orbit around the star and the refuge station twelve light minutes further out." the cruiser's flight operations manager responded.

Even though the system was uninhabited the Genex had followed the Commonwealth practice of setting up automated space stations in such systems close to their colonies that could be used as a place of safety by the crew of any starship that became disabled in them. These were stocked with tools and some spare parts to allow basic repairs to be carried out but if that was not possible there were emergency rations to sustain stranded crewmen until a rescue ship could arrive. To expedite the arrival of such a vessel a network of satellites orbited the system's star close enough to be able to receive tachyon transmissions aimed at the system that could act as relays for faster than light communication between the station and other systems. Rather than locating the space station around one of the planets, it was placed in an independent orbit that made it easy to locate.

"Anything from the depot on the second planet?" the old man said.

"Negative admiral. The depot is still dark." the operations officer told him.

"Captain there's a thermal signature between the orbits of the third and fourth planets." one of the *Enigma's* sensor operators.

"Show me." Schaar said, her response watched closely by the old man.

Aligning the *Enigma's* optical sensors on the other ship in the system showed it to be a simple box shaped transport vessel currently accelerating away from the star.

"I'm picking up a transponder captain. It's a civilian transport ship" the flight operations officer said before smiling and adding, "the *Topless Dancer* out of Sanctuary."

"Not a support ship for the depot then?" the *Enigma's* first officer commented.

"The depot is fully automated commander." the old man said.

"How tasteful." Schaar commented when she saw the magnified image of the artwork painted on the forward hull of the ship that showed a voluptuous woman with her arms folded across her chest.

"At least she's wearing something." her first officer said.

"Does the database say what that ship is currently used for?" Schaar asked, looking at the operations officer.

"Yes captain. It's logged as an asteroid mining and refinery vessel. There are about a dozen drones registered to the ship for the actual mining and the transport houses refining equipment to process the ore before taking it back to Sanctuary."

"Have they seen us yet?" Schaar said.

"Unlikely captain. There are no signs of any tachyon detection systems. They're limited to speed of light sensors and the heat and light from our arrival won't reach them for several hours yet. The EM data we're seeing from them is six hours old." the operations officer told him.

"You know we can't afford to have anyone observing us or our guests in the system Captain Schaar." the old man pointed out.

"Yes admiral, I understand." Schaar said, "Navigation we need a jump plotting to intercept that transport. Put us within ten thousand kilometres. Weapons be ready to fire as soon as the transport is in range. No warnings, just destroy it before it can send a signal to those satellites."

"Captain it looks like the ship is heading towards the asteroid belt between the fifth and sixth planets but if they changed course or their rate of acceleration in the last six hours I can't be sure of their location." the ship's navigator pointed out.

"Best guess lieutenant." Schaar replied.

"Plotting jump now captain." the navigator said as he determined how far the *Topless Dancer* would have travelled in the six hours the light seen from the *Enigma* had travelled for. As soon as the calculations were complete he passed the information to the light cruiser's helmsman who turned the ship towards the transport and engaged its FTL drive. The jump of just a few light hours took under a minute but when the *Enigma* dropped back to sub-light speeds the transport ship was just a few thousand kilometres away.

"Weapons free." the *Enigma's* first officer said and immediately the light cruiser's turrets all swung towards the defenceless vessel and fired.

The *Topless Dancer* was hit repeatedly by free electron beam lasers, each one burning deep furrows in the unprotected vessel. The transport was then rocked by explosions along almost its entire length before breaking up.

"Target destroyed captain. I'm not picking up any signs of escape craft." the cruiser's operations officer announced, checking the sensor readouts for any signs that any of the transport's crew had managed to

escape their ship before it was destroyed.

"Excellent." Schaar said, "Are there any other vessels in the system?"

"Negative captain, that was the only one we can see." the operations officer responded.

"Take us to the rendezvous point captain." the old man ordered, "But maintain a careful watch for other vessels in the system. Privacy is our biggest concern here."

"Of course admiral. Navigation I want a jump to the refuge station." Schaar ordered, "Helm as soon as we reach the station locate a docking port and take us in."

Despite having been constructed after the Genex developed the ability to generate artificial gravity fields the emergency refuge station used a rotating ring to generate gravity for its occupants. The reason for this was one of simple practicality, facilities such as this spent the vast majority of their time empty and so to generate gravity through the use of focused gravitons would consume both power and the gravitons themselves on an ongoing basis even when there was no-one aboard. On the other hand once the rotating section was set in motion it would continue to spin indefinitely. Basic life support systems such as heat, light and air processing could be maintained almost indefinitely as well by using an array of large solar panels aligned to always face the nearby star.

The one disadvantage with this method of generating gravity was that it difficult for a ship to dock with the rotating section directly. Even a relatively small change in mass could affect the rotation and so instead the rotating ring was mounted at the end of a long central docking arm that was fitted with numerous docking ports of different types to interface with as many different types of vessel as possible and ending in a small hangar that could accommodate a few smaller ships in a pressurised environment.

Approaching the station, the flight operations officer of the *Enigma* studied each of the docking ports in turn, searching for one that was capable of interfacing with the airlocks of the alien built light cruiser.

"I've found one." he announced, marking the relevant port for the ship's helmsman.

"Confirmed. Moving in now." the helmsman responded, firing the cruiser's thrusters to manoeuvre it in closer. The helmsman lined the cruiser up with the docking port and then fired the thrusters again, pushing the ship up against the docking port. In turn this automatically clamped onto the cruiser's hull, sealing the two together."

"Docking seal confirmed captain." the operations officer said.

"Order a marine platoon to the air lock." Schaar ordered. Then she turned to her first officer and added, "Commander Saxton, I want you to join them."

"That won't be necessary captain." the old man said and Schaar frowned.

"Admiral are you sure?" Schaar asked.

"Quite sure Captain Schaar. Remember I picked the marines aboard this ship myself. I have every confidence that they can protect me aboard an empty space station." the old man said as he got out of his seat.

"Just be careful admiral. I'd hate to lose you." Schaar said, smiling at the old man.

"And I you my dear. Although I doubt that there is anything in this system that will threaten either of us." he responded, smiling back at her before exiting through the doorway directly behind the positions occupied by the three senior officers.

The marine platoon ordered to deploy to the space station was waiting just inside the *Enigma's* air lock when the old man arrived to join them and they snapped to attention when he appeared.

"At ease. As you were." the old man told them.

"Admiral we've confirmed that the environment aboard the station is habitable." the platoon commander, the only member of the leader caste among the warriors said.

"Very good lieutenant. Let's go aboard and get the lie of the land then shall we?" the old man said and the lieutenant gestured for his men to move through the air lock.

The docking arm did not rotate with the main ring and this meant that it was an area of zero gravity.

Therefore, a soon as they crossed the threshold between the *Enigma* and the refuge station the Genex marines moved beyond the influence of the light cruiser's artificial gravity field and they began to float.

"Lieutenant send one of your squads to the hangar. I want cameras deployed so we know when our guests arrive." the old man ordered, then as the platoon commander was giving orders to his men the old man activated his radio, "Enigma we are aboard the station. Disengage and withdraw to five million kilometres. I don't want you being spotted when the courier gets here. If you detect any other ships in the system then destroy them. The need for secrecy is absolute."

"Understood admiral. If we don't hear from you otherwise we'll be back in twenty-four hours to pick you up. *Enigma* out." Schaar responded.

With their weapons held in just one hand, the Genex pulled themselves along the tunnel inside the docking arm towards the rotating ring. Here they found half a dozen elevator shafts equally spaced around the outside of the tunnel they were in.

"Which one admiral?" the platoon leader asked.

"This one I think." the old man answered, picking one of the elevators seemingly at random, "Make sure it's marked. I wouldn't want our guests not knowing where we have gone."

Despite the large size of the elevators there was only enough room inside each for half the Genex platoon and so they had to travel in two groups. The old man and the platoon commander both went down in the first group and as they descended they slowly began to feel gravity returning to normal the further from the core of the station they got.

It was not unknown for fugitives to take up residence aboard refuge stations such as this one, living off the stores of food and water for many months until they felt it was safe to re-emerge and so the Genex warriors positioned themselves towards the front of the elevator while their commander and the old man moved to the rear. Then as soon as the elevator reached the outer ring and the door opened the warriors rushed out to secure a perimeter.

"Clear." one called out when it was determined that the area around the elevator was safe and the two leaders emerged behind them.

"We're down and safe." the platoon commander said into his radio, letting the troops that had been left in the core know that they could now summon the elevator to follow the first group down.

"We need to find somewhere to wait." the old man said as he and the marines moved away from the elevator, "Also I want a fire team deployed to cover this elevator at all times. If when our guests arrive the wrong individual steps out of it I want them dealt with immediately."

"You don't talk about yourself much do you?" Hayes said, "More than a day and a half in this ship with just the two of us—"

"Three." Reeves interrupted and he looked up from the bible he was reading and turned toward the ambassador of Nexus who was still stood behind them.

"I'm surprised you count a machine. Didn't people like you try to destroy Nexus when it first came into being?" Hayes asked.

"I was attacked by a number of religious groups who saw my existence as blasphemous, yes." the ambassador said, "However, they were largely fringe organisations that were not accepted by the mainstream of their religions. The accidental nature of my creation instead made the majority of religions instead question whether it was due to an act of their deities. Some actively tried to convert me to their cause."

"So what are you reading about captain? Is God smiting the sinners?" Hayes said.

"Actually I'm re-reading the story of the Good Samaritan." Reeves replied.

"You'll have to explain. Genex don't get taught fairy stories." Hayes told him and he glared at her for a moment, "Okay I'm sorry. Seriously though, what is that about?"

"It's the story of a man who goes to aid someone who is his natural enemy. It's an example of loving thy neighbour." Reeves replied.

"So is that in the part where your name is mentioned?" Hayes said.

"No." Reeves said simply.

"Well I'm going for a shower." Hayes said, getting out of her seat.

"Just don't take too long. The water processing system on a ship this size isn't enough to recycle a long shower's worth rapidly." Reeves told her and Hayes smiled.

"Is that hint that you'd like to join me? Get two showers out of one lot of water?" she said.

"Captain I can monitor the ship's systems if you wish to—" the ambassador of Nexus began.

"That won't be necessary ambassador." Reeves interrupted, "Miss Hayes will be showering alone."

"It was an honest offer Captain Reeves." Hayes said, exiting the cockpit and turning towards the courier's compact bathroom while Reeves went back to reading.

Less than a minute later the courier shuddered as the shell of tachyons surrounding it was abruptly dispersed, forcing the ship back to sub-light speed.

"We just dropped out of FTL." Reeves said, looking around at the console for some indication of a problem with the ship. However, despite being unfamiliar with current Genex starship design nothing about any of the displays suggested to Reeves that there was anything wrong.

"Hey! What's going on?" Hayes called out as she appeared in the doorway at the back of the cockpit clutching a soaking wet towel around her, "That knock just soaked everything in the bathroom. I'd say that it was an attempt by you to see me naked if hadn't just turned me down flat."

"The FTL drive just disengaged." Reeves told her without turning around and Hayes rushed back to stand right beside Reeves, prompting him to suddenly look towards her when he realised she was wearing just a towel and she smiled when she noticed this.

"So where are we?" she asked.

"Err." Reeves said, looking back at the console.

"We appear to be in deep space captain." the ambassador of Nexus said.

"I don't see any signs of other ships on these instruments so this must be a course change to throw off tracking." Reeves said.

"Agreed captain." the ambassador responded, "There is definite motion of the star field that suggests a change in our heading,"

"If I'm reading this right then we're building up another tachyon field." Reeves said and he looked at Hayes again.

"Don't ask me." Hayes replied, "I never served aboard a starship."

All of a sudden the courier turned sharply and then accelerated again as the tachyon shell was completed and the ship's FTL drive engaged. This made the courier lurch again and Hayes lost her balance, falling forwards and landing in Reeves' lap.

"Are you okay?" he asked and she nodded, smiling at him as she continued to lie in his lap, "So are you going to finish your shower?" Reeves added.

"My what? Oh right, my shower. You know what I think I'll pass. Who knows when we'll drop out of FTL and you won't be there to catch me if I fall again." Hayes replied. Then she got back to her feet just long enough to return to her own seat and sat back down again.

INTERLUDE.

The old man's granddaughter was waved through the security checkpoint aboard the military space station orbiting the Genex colony world of Redoubt. The space station was home to the largest concentration of Genex warships apart from Sanctuary itself and as such security here was as tight as possible. However, for someone with the clearance that the old man's granddaughter had this was no obstacle and she was not even asked to surrender her pistol when she boarded the space station. Not that this would have mattered anyway, she had no need for a firearm in her mission when she was here to make use of a vastly more destructive weapon.

She checked the time after passing through security and she saw that she was ahead of schedule. Knowing that correct timing was essential to the assignment that her grandfather had trusted her with she turned away from her target and instead headed for somewhere where she could wait without raising any suspicion, setting an alarm on her tablet that would let her know when it was time to strike.

Hayes woke when Reeves shook her shoulder.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"We just dropped out of FTL again. This time we're in a star system." Reeves told her, "Wherever we're going I think we're there. You might want to get dressed." then he walked to the back of the cockpit where the ambassador of Nexus had opened the cases of munitions and the pair of them began to load rounds into magazines for the two personal defence weapons Reeves had drawn from the *Warspite's* armoury.

"This isn't how my towel was." Hayes commented, noticing how the towel she still wore was fastened around her.

"It fell while you were sleeping." the ambassador of Nexus commented, "Captain Reeves had to put it back in place."

Hayes smiled when she heard this.

"Ever the gentleman hey captain?" she said, walking past him to the exit from the cockpit.

After the magazines were loaded Reeves and the ambassador each inserted one into a weapon. The ambassador promptly slung his personal defence weapon across his torso while Reeves instead undid the belt his pistol was holstered on.

"I'll be right back." he told the ambassador, "I need to change." and then he too left the cockpit.

Making his way to the rear of the ship where the tiny crew's quarters were located he knocked on the door.

"Come in. I'm decent." Hayes called out and when Reeves opened the door he found her pulling on her boots.

"I just need to change." Reeves said.

"I feel I deserve to stay and watch." Hayes replied, "But I know you won't change while I'm here so I'll wait in the cockpit instead." and as she finished tying her boot laces she left the room and returned to the cockpit where the ambassador was inserting loaded magazines into load carrying harnesses that already had grenades clipped to them.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to give me one of those would you?" Hayes asked.

"No Miss Hayes. Captain Reeves' wishes are that he and I will be armed. You will not be." the ambassador replied.

"Fine, don't trust me. See if I care. While you two are trying to fight your way out of an ambush without me." Hayes said as she went to sit down again.

"Miss Hayes, may I ask you a question?" the ambassador said unexpectedly.

"A question? I suppose so. Go ahead." Hayes replied.

"Are you attempting to initiate a sexual encounter with Captain Reeves?" the ambassador asked.

"Let's just say that I wouldn't turn him down." Hayes answered.

"Yet you have known him only for a few days. It is my understanding that such relationships are better formed when those involved have known one another longer." the ambassador commented.

"I'm just looking for some fun right now okay? Right now I need someone I can rely on and bizarrely for someone who isn't a Genex, Captain Reeves is the best candidate to have come along in a long time. Good looking, smart and in a position of power. What's not to like?" Hayes responded.

"What's not to like about what?" Reeves said as he returned to the cockpit, now wearing his formal uniform and adjusting his tie.

"Let me get that, you're doing it all wrong." Hayes said, rushing over and taking hold of Reeves tie before altering it for him.

"You didn't answer my question. What's not to like?" he said while she did this.

"Going into what could be a trap without a weapon and completely defenceless." Hayes said before letting go of his tie, "There, perfect." she added.

"You won't be completely defenceless Jennifer." Reeves told her, stepping away so that he could reach another of the equipment cases that had been loaded aboard the courier, this one in the corridor just outside the cockpit. Opening the case he took out a set of body armour that he handed to Hayes, "This ought to fit you." he told her.

"Measure me while I was asleep did you?" she commented as she took the armour and then pulled it over her head before studying the various straps to figure out how to fix it in place. Meanwhile Reeves took out a second set of body armour, this shaped for man instead of a woman and he began to put it on despite the somewhat anachronistic appearance the combination of formal uniform and modern armour gave him. Hayes watched how he did this and copied the process for herself before Reeves reached out towards the ambassador of Nexus.

"Pass me that rig would you ambassador?" he said and the ambassador handed him the load carrying harness that was now connected to Reeves' pistol belt and loaded with ammunition and grenades. Reeves

put this on before picking up his personal defence weapon and slinging it across his chest.

Reeves then picked up a holdall and passed it to Hayes."

"What's in this?" she asked.

"Rations. First aid supplies. Respirators. Oh and that bottle of champagne you suggested we might be able to use as a bribe." Reeves told her and she smiled.

"Great. So now I get to be the pack horse." she commented.

"Well you're the only one not weighed down with a gun." Reeves replied.

Both Reeves and Hayes went to sit back down just as a structure came into view ahead of the courier, just about visible through its viewport.

"Is that an emergency shelter station?" Reeves asked when he saw the space station with its spinning ring and Hayes nodded.

"Yes, we kept the practice of leaving them in surveyed systems." she said.

"It still uses rotational gravity I see. I take it that it's normally unmanned." Reeves said.

"That's right. I read that the Commonwealth was replacing them with manned stations." Hayes replied.

"It's supposed to be, yes. The program has been going on for more than a decade though. Theft of supplies from unmanned stations remains a problem but having a permanent presence in every system makes them more secure and means that extra help is on hand if a civilian crew needs it."

"We appear to be manoeuvring to dock." the ambassador of Nexus said.

"Look, the hangar's opening." Hayes added.

The occupants of the courier watched from inside the cockpit as the compact vessel manoeuvred into the open hangar. The hangar had an octagonal cross section and inside each of its faces had a single docking berth for a small vessel such as the courier. The vessel slowed down on approach to the hangar, the autopilot used its thrusters to manoeuvre it into position. Once lined up on one of the berths the autopilot fired the courier's aft thrusters and the ship drifted forwards until it impacted against the buffers designed to hold it in place. These were spring loaded so that they gave way under the impact without damaging the ship and then returned to their original position after it came to a stop. By this time the courier had latched onto the berth and it remained securely in place as the hangar door closed behind it. The courier then began to power down and Reeves, Hayes and the ambassador all felt themselves becoming weightless when the artificial gravity system was deactivated.

"Okay let's go." Reeves said, releasing his safety harness and floating out of his chair.

"Let's go? Aren't you going to wait for someone to come and meet us?" Hayes asked.

"Why? If there's someone on the way I'm sure we'll run right into them. On the other hand if no-one is coming then we're wasting time in waiting for them."

"Okay I'm coming." Hayes replied, "But I should warn you that I haven't done any zero-gee training in almost twenty years. I may puke."

"Just make sure you're facing away from me if you do. But take my hand, it might help." Reeves told her as they drifted towards the airlock and he reached out to take Hayes' hand.

The ambassador of Nexus had no need to drift. His feet were able to clamp magnetically to the deck and he could walk as normal behind Reeves and Hayes.

"Captain it may be an idea for you to hold onto me." he suggested, "I can move faster and with greater control than you are able to."

"I've got you." Hayes replied, reaching out with her free arm to grab the ambassador by the shoulder as they entered the courier's airlock.

The outer door slid open moments later when the pressure in the hangar outside had been restored and the ambassador walked out onto the gangway outside while Reeves and Hayes floated behind him.

"Captain I see a hatch in the centre of the end wall. I expect that is the way up the station to the ring." the ambassador said as he looked around.

"Lead the way please ambassador." Reeves replied and the ambassador began to walk along the gangway.

"Have you noticed that there aren't any other ships in this hangar?" Hayes commented.

"Yes and I didn't see any docked outside either." Reeves responded.

"So either the old man hasn't turned up or he didn't want us to see how he got here." Hayes said.

"Admiral they're here." the Genex marine lieutenant told the old man and he handed him a tablet, "The camera placed in the hangar recorded this." and he tapped at the tablet's screen to play the recording made by the camera. This showed Reeves and Hayes floating behind the ambassador of Nexus as they all travelled towards the exit from the hangar leading up the docking arm towards the ring section, "They brought a robot with them."

"That's no ordinary robot lieutenant." the old man said, a smile appearing on his face, "The Commonwealth do not arm their robots and this machine is clearing carrying a weapon. No, that is an ambassador of Nexus itself. I knew that there was one aboard the *Warspite* and I expected it to company Captain Reeves and Jennifer Hayes here."

"What are your orders admiral?" the lieutenant asked.

"Deploy your men lieutenant. The time has finally come." the old man ordered.

When the timer running aboard the stealth drone in the Eta Indi system expired the machine's main systems came back on line and it immediately began to search the system for signs of other ships, specifically searching for the *Warspite*. The drone found the heavy cruiser less than a light minute away and it aligned its radio transmitter on the Commonwealth heavy cruiser and began to transmit.

"Captain we've found it." Goldman announced suddenly, "The Genex stealth ship is located about four million kilometres off our port bow."

"Show me." Knight ordered from the central console where he stood with Thomas and Mori as the three men tried to determine where the Genex courier had gone after it left the *Warspite's* radar range a day earlier.

"Transferring optical sensor feed now." Goldman replied.

"I don't see anything." Thomas commented.

"Can you magnify the image commander?" Knight said, looking at Goldman.

"Yes captain." she said.

"It must be tiny." Thomas said as the picture zoomed in closer, still without revealing the drone.

"It must be a drone." Mori added, "Programmed to follow the courier here."

"Still nothing on radar but we're picking up a transmission." Goldman said.

"Who are they talking to?" Knight said.

"Us I think captain. Look at this." Goldman told him before sending the text stream that the *Warspite* was receiving from the drone to the central console.

LUYTEN 212-19

"Captain the Luyten two-one-two nineteen system is right here." Thomas said, selecting a star chart of the Indus Sector from among those on the console display, "It's a white dwarf about ten light light years away. Right about the distance that that courier could have reached by now."

"Someone wants us to know where Captain Reeves is." Ash said from the helm station.

"And we can be there in less than thirty-six hours at top speed." Thomas added and Knight nodded.

"Plot a direct course. We're going in." he said.

"What about the drone?" Mori asked.

"Goldman is the drone still transmitting?" Knight asked.

"Yes captain." Goldman answered.

"Weapons lock onto the source of the transmission. Take it out with one of our turrets. I don't want to leave it behind to tell anyone else where we're going." Knight ordered.

Thomas immediately began to calculate the optimum course to take the *Warspite* to Luyten 212-19 and at the same time Goldman fed targeting data to the cruiser's gunners. One of the ship's dorsal free electron beam laser turrets promptly turned towards the position of the stealth drone and fired a sustained beam at the machine. Four million kilometres was beyond the usual engagement range for such a weapon but against a stationary target with minimal armour protection the beam was enough to totally destroy the drone when it struck it just over thirteen seconds later.

When Reeves, Hayes and the ambassador of Nexus arrived at the cluster of elevators leading out to the refuge station's rotating ring they saw that one of them had been marked with arrows either side of the door.

"A message telling us where to go perhaps?" Reeves said.

"Your guess is as good as mine. That could have been here years." Hayes replied.

"Perhaps so, but there are no other indications of a path to follow." the ambassador of Nexus pointed out.

"Then we go down there." Reeves said and the ambassador of Nexus reached out to open the elevator door.

The door did not open right away, instead the small display located above it indicated that the elevator car was ascending from the ring.

"There is someone down there." Hayes said when she saw this.

"Unless they made their way around the ring to one of the other elevators on their way out." Reeves commented.

When the elevator car finally arrived the doors slid open automatically to reveal its empty interior and the ambassador of Nexus guided Reeves and Hayes inside. Turning to face the control panel they all saw that another arrow had been marked on it, pointing to one of the buttons.

"I guess we go to that floor." Reeves said and he reached out and pressed the indicated button.

The elevator doors immediately closed and the car began to descend. Reeves and Hayes held onto the rail that ran around the inside of the elevator at about waist height, steadying themselves as the spin of the station slowly but steadily increased the feeling of gravity pulling them down.

"Oh that feels so much better." Hayes said and she sighed. Then she noticed Reeves smirking at her,

"What?" she asked.

"Jennifer I have never met a woman who was happy to be gaining weight before." he said and Hayes frowned.

The elevator eventually came to a halt and Reeves brought his personal defence weapon up to his shoulder but kept it pointed down as the doors slid open. Once again there was no-one in sight when the elevator doors opened and Reeves and the ambassador of Nexus looked out, examining the chamber they had arrived at. This was a large space that contained rows of storage units, each about a metre high. Exiting the elevator Reeves saw that each of the units was labelled, with those nearest to him being labelled as containing emergency medical supplies. The top of each unit was hinged and Reeves lifted one to examine the contents. Sure enough he found himself looking at medical equipment that ranged from simple field dressings to a defibrillator machine and cylinders of oxygen. Opening up the next unit revealed the contents to be identical, suggesting that each unit would contain a full set of emergency equipment.

The ceiling of the storage room was tall and around the outside of it ran a walkway that was accessible by a set of stairs set against each wall. The walkway was surrounded by a solid waist high safety barrier that hid what was on the walkway and Reeves continuously looked around at it as he advanced across the storeroom. However, he was facing the other way when a Genex warrior suddenly appeared from behind the barrier and fired his rifle, the sound of the shots echoing around the room.

"Down!" Reeves yelled as he threw himself between two rows of storage units.

Hayes and the ambassador of Nexus also took cover between the storage units, these proving solid enough to stop the Genex warrior's rifle fire when another burst of rounds struck one between Reeves and the ambassador. Reeves then briefly bobbed up from his hiding place and fired a rapid three round burst from his personal defence weapon and the pistol calibre rounds punched a trio of holes in the barrier close to the warrior, forcing him to move. However, there then came another burst of rifle fire from a different direction and Reeves was forced back into hiding.

"Give me your sidearm." Hayes said and Reeves looked around to see her holding out her hand towards him, still keeping herself hidden.

"Just stay down Jennifer." he told her before another rifle round rang out. However, this time the ambassador of Nexus saw where it came from and fired his own weapon in reply. The Genex warrior who had just fired had already ducked back out of sight but the ambassador was able to precisely plot where he was hiding behind the safety fence and there was a scream as one of the bullets that punched straight through the lightweight fence hit the warrior behind it.

Two more warriors opened fire from different directions at the same time and Reeves turned to face towards one of them, firing a longer burst from his weapon that emptied the magazine but forced the warrior to pull back again as the fence he was using as cover was riddled with holes. The burst also hit a retaining fastener that held one of the panels to the fence's supporting frame and this caused it to drop down, opening up a gap in the fence about two metres long. While Reeves was reloading the ambassador of Nexus fired again, using short bursts to target the locations where the Genex warriors were firing from.

"You know if we stay here it's only a matter of time before we both die don't you?" Hayes said, glaring at Reeves.

"Perhaps." he responded, "Ambassador I think a change of location would be advisable."

"Agreed captain. Might I suggest creating a smoke screen to cover our movement to the exit located to your right?" the ambassador replied and Reeves reached for one of the grenades he carried on his chest rig. This had a large red band around the middle, indicating the colour of the smoke it would produce and Reeves peered over the storage unit he was leaning against to judge the best place for him to throw it.

"That marine fire team is looking like a pretty good idea right now." he muttered. Throwing the grenade directly towards the exit that the group wanted to use would mean having to run through the choking smoke and Reeves knew that this meant he would have to use at least two, creating separate smoke screens either side of the exit that they could run between. However, in the confined interior of the space station a single smoke grenade could fill the entire compartment.

While Reeves was doing this the ambassador of Nexus fired another brief burst from his personal defence weapon before ejecting the spent magazine and rapidly inserting a fully loaded one. Just as he did this though there was another sharp 'crack' of a rifle shot and the ambassador was hit, the round penetrating near his right shoulder.

"Ambassador are you okay?" Reeves asked when he saw the machine rapidly duck behind the nearby storage containers.

"The motor control for my right arm is compromised captain." the ambassador replied as he transferred his personal defence weapon to his left hand, "However, I can still function." he then raised himself up again and stretched out his left arm, pointing the weapon towards where the round that had hit him had come from and fired another three round burst.

As he did this though another Genex warrior appeared and fired a longer burst down at the ambassador. These rounds hit the ambassador repeatedly on his chest, neck and head and he shuddered under the impacts before toppling sideways. Looking at the ruined machine Reeves watched with horror as sparks flew

before smoke began to stream out through the bullet holes. On the other hand Hayes looked at where the ambassador's personal defence weapon had skidded to after being dropped when he hit the floor.

"Cover me." she said.

"No Jennifer don't." Reeves replied but it was too late and Hayes leapt from her hiding place and raced towards the weapon, scooping it up. Seeing this Reeves emerged from cover and fired several sustained bursts from his own weapon, ducking back into cover when Hayes dived towards him and landed beside him. "Okay I've got it." she said, breathing heavily and holding up the gun as she studied it, "So what does everything do? I've never fired one of these before."

"That was stupid. You could have been shot." Reeves scolded her as he reloaded his weapon again.

"Or maybe not." Hayes replied, "Listen."

Reeves paused to listen and it was only then that he realised that the gunfire from the Genex had ended as soon as the ambassador had fallen. Slowly he raised himself up and looked around, using the sight unit on his weapon to search for the Genex but they were now all hidden. Looking around again he then saw that every one of the bullet holes caused by the Genex rifle fire was to one of the storage units that the ambassador had been using as cover, making it look as if this had been a targeted assassination rather than an ambush intended to wipe them all out.

All of a sudden the large doors at the end of the storage room slid open to reveal a row of Genex warrior kneeling behind portable armoured shields. Their rifles were visible between these but they were not pointed towards Reeves or Hayes.

"Captain Reeves I apologise for the necessity of what has just happened but perhaps now we can discuss things in a more civilised manner." the old man called out from behind the row of shields and both Reeves and Hayes pointed their weapons towards him.

"Why should we trust you?" Hayes responded.

"Oh come now Jennifer." the old man answered as he stepped between two of the warriors to stand in front of them, now clearly in the line of fire for both Reeves and Hayes.

"Admiral please-" the Genex lieutenant said.

"Now now lieutenant, none of us came here looking for a fight." the old man said, glancing back at the lieutenant before turning towards Reeves and Hayes again, "If I wanted you both dead then I could have simply had my ship destroy yours as soon as it entered the system, or just have it fly into a star or shut down in deep space and leave you to suffocate. I invited you here to talk."

"And brought a small army with you." Reeves pointed out.

"A precaution, one that has proven to be necessary it seems. Now perhaps you'd like to come this way and we can get down to business. You may even keep your weapons if you want Captain Reeves." the old man said before looking specifically at Hayes, "I'm afraid I must ask you to surrender yours though Jennifer. Please hand your weapon to the captain. He can return it to you later."

"Or how about you just tell us what you need to say and I'll think about not shooting you for everything you've put me through?" Hayes replied.

"That won't solve anything Jennifer. If you kill me then my men will kill you and the captain and none of us will get what we want." the old man said and at that point Reeves lowered his weapon and stepped in front of Hayes.

"Jennifer give me the gun." he said, smiling and she frowned and then sighed.

"Okay fine." she replied and she handed him her weapon.

"Good, now we've got that out of the way please follow me. I've had food laid out." the old man said, turning around as the warriors behind him opened up a larger gap in their line.

"Jennifer don't forget that bag." Reeves told Hayes as he started to follow the old man and Hayes quickly retrieved her holdall before hurrying after them both.

17.

The old man had had a basic lounge area converted into a place for him to sit down and talk with Reeves and Hayes and as he had said the table that was surrounded by the very basic cushioned furniture had food and drink laid out on it.

"Everything is edible Captain Reeves." the old man said as he sat down, "If you have any questions about what things are then I'm sure that Jennifer can fill you in."

"It has been pointed out to me that we may have something that you'll find interesting." Reeves replied and he opened the bag that Hayes carried to remove the box containing the bottle of champagne left by Bernard and he placed this in the centre of the table as he and Hayes both sat down as well.

"My word." the old man said, smiling as he picked up the bottle and examined it, "I take it that Jennifer has told you just how valuable this is in Genex space?"

"She has." Reeves said.

"Yes, there are plants similar to grapes on our worlds that we make a form of wine from but to have an original bottle is something different altogether." the old man said.

"How about you two quit the small talk and someone tells me why we're here?" Hayes snapped. Then she glared at the old man and added, "What the hell did your doctors do to me? I know you weren't turning me into a drone. His surgeon has already told me that I can still have children." and she nodded towards Reeves.

"Yes, yes you can Jennifer. You represent the future of the human species." the old man said, "But perhaps it would help if I started at the beginning. Captain Reeves, how much do you know about why the Genex attempted to overthrow the Commonwealth a hundred years ago?"

Just what everyone else knows. That you saw yourselves as superior and thought you should be in control." Reeves replied before reaching out and picking up one of the food items laid out and taking an experimental bite.

"That is not quite correct I'm afraid captain." the old man said, "The Genex of the day did see themselves as superior, yes. That has been a failing of ours ever since the first genetic engineers told people that they could give them perfect children. Children with superior intellect and conditioned to be well behaved, the first of the thinker caste. Of course the parents of those children raised them to believe in their own superiority and that laid the seeds of our downfall. The failings of the early Genex were clear for all to see, their own sense of superiority was often at odds with their inability to lead and they were soon treated as outcasts, when people saw that the modifications made to their genetic structure were hereditary and that interbreeding with ordinary humans produced the docile worker caste more and more of the general population began to turn against them. Knowing that they could not defend themselves they then created the warrior caste to do just that for them. Of course the warriors were not an army. Neither the thinker nor worker castes could act as commanders of the warriors and they were limited to reacting to specific instances of anti-Genex violence. It was only when the interbreeding of thinkers and warrior produced the first of the leader caste such as Jennifer and myself that the Genex had a viable society."

"I know how the Genex were created Admiral-" Reeves said before hesitating and then adding, "I'm afraid Jennifer never told me your name."

"Dalton. Admiral Robert Dalton." Hayes said, staring at the old man and he smiled.

"At your service." he said, "Now I am getting to my point Captain Reeves. You see the Genex before the war had little overall power. The nations where we were in the majority were all outside the Commonwealth and to be honest they were stagnant. On the other hand the Commonwealth itself was expanding although it was continuously plagued by minor conflicts that sapped resources that were better used elsewhere. Conflicts that were absent among the Genex at that time. It was then that a remarkable discovery was made in an asteroid field in the Tau-six Eridani system. Four alien spacecraft, non-functional but still relatively intact. This was momentous of course. This was the first evidence that any sentient life other than mankind had ever existed anywhere in the universe. The builders of these ships were long dead, that much was obvious but where there was one species there could be others that still lived. The problem was that three out of the four vessels recovered were clearly warships and with that came the possibility, or even likelihood of armed conflict between humanity and an alien species. A conflict that the thinker caste determine humanity would likely lose due to being disunited. What was needed was a new ordered society that united every human in existence under a single flag and the Genex saw themselves as the natural creators of such a society. That is why we rose up against the Commonwealth captain, that is why we planned to ensure that every child born would be one of us. A superior human able to fight against the alien hordes that could be waiting in the next star system to be explored."

"And thanks to your uprising the Commonwealth became more united than ever." Reeves pointed out and the old man smiled.

"Yes you did. A united military was formed, a decision that may have driven away some fringe members but the result was that you no longer need to wait for member nations to answer a call for forces and its size dwarfs that of the Genex regular armed forces even discounting the additional forces that you could call on from the Commonwealth member states' own forces. During the war of course the Commonwealth's united military command structure was considered a temporary measure to ensure the maximum level of co-operation between the forces of different member nations and it soon became apparent to us that we could never win the war. Negotiation was out of the question of course so we opted to flee, relocating far beyond what were then the limits of human space and rebuilding our society while you thought we had been destroyed on Langley. We had already sabotaged the SETI so the Commonwealth would continue to be unaware of the existence of advanced alien civilisations while we searched for and found them." he continued.

"All of that I could have told him." Hayes commented, "Why not get to your point? I want to know what you did to me and why you did it."

"Of course. Tell me Captain Reeves are you a man of God?" the old man asked.

"I believe in a higher power, yes." Reeves replied, "My father and brother are churchmen."

"He put a bible in the bag I was carrying." Hayes added.

"I thought you might come from such a background. Your name is an obvious clue. Of course Genex society does not accept the existence of a god or gods. Since before we even existed the idea of genetic manipulation for anything other than medical necessity as playing God and those who created us obviously had no such belief." the old man said.

"Does his belief in the supernatural really matter?" Hayes said.

"In a sense, yes. You see Jennifer it comes down to a lot of assumptions that we have always made about ordinary humans. My grandfather commanded a tracker unit on Fowler during the war, you know what they did?" the old man replied.

"They hunted civilians who had escaped the initial sweeps on the worlds we controlled." Hayes answered.

"That's right. My grandfather spent the war hunting people so that they could be taken to the interment camps, ready to be subjected to the same genetic engineering that our ancestors were that created us." the old man went on, "Not everyone was taken alive of course, some fought back and were killed and some times the tracker units wanted to send a message to any other people hiding from them. That was what my grandfather told me happened one day towards the end of the war, less than a week before the Commonwealth established its blockade over Fowler. His unit discovered a small group of civilians that had been hiding for the entire war in a remote church, a priest and several members of his congregation. The group had prepared for being discovered and they dug a tunnel that would allow them to escape. The problem was that they needed time to use this and that meant that someone had to distract our troops long enough for them to do this.

"In this group the role of decoy fell to the priest. He openly greeted my grandfather and the warriors under his command, telling them that he was alone when he was questioned. Of course my grandfather had his warriors search the church and they discovered the tunnel, but by that time the other members of the group were gone. My grandfather was convinced that the others were still close by and he ordered the priest to tell them that it was safe to return. Of course the priest refused and he dared my grandfather to do his worst, telling him that his faith would give him the strength to resist whatever was done to him. My grandfather's unit could have taken the priest off to an internment camp of course but instead my grandfather decided to kill him, hoping to use his screams as a lure to bring back some of the others and he decided to mock the priest in the process by crucifying the man. My grandfather's warriors tore down a large crucifix and dragged it to the front of the church before they drove their bayonets through his arms and legs. I believe that the term excruciating comes from the process of crucifixion, there are nerves located right where the ancient victims of that practice used to be nailed to their crosses and it was considered one of the worst ways of dying. However, even when my grandfather's troops were hammering those blades through him the priest remained silent. He grimaced and he gritted his teeth but he did not cry out even when that cross was raised up. My grandfather was furious and he yelled at the priest to scream. Despite the agony the man must have been in the priest still refused though and instead repeated his statement that his faith gave him the strength to endure the pain that his Messiah had done before him. In his anger my grandfather killed the priest and returned to hunting the others who had escaped but what had happened left him with an unanswered question, did the priest's simple faith allow him to endure agony that should have broken him?"

"Don't tell me he suddenly started to believe in mythical beings." Hayes said.

"Of course not, he remained an atheist until the day he died and he never mentioned that day again until one fateful day many years later." the old man said, "Captain Reeves I take it that you are away of the rivalry that exists between Genex leaders?"

"Everyone knows. There are dozens of engagements from the war where our intelligence believed that factional infighting contributed towards your defeat." Reeves replied.

"Well let me tell you captain that infighting can have tragic consequences." the old man said then he sighed

before continuing, "My wife was a chemist, one of the best among her peers and as such her expertise was highly sought after. Given a good team of thinkers to direct there were few problems that she could not solve and it was that ability that led to her death. You see the company she worked for had its competitors and they hoped to tempt her to join them. Her existing employer discovered these efforts and made sure that she would stay with his company but his rival wasn't done yet and he decided that if he couldn't gain access to my wife's expertise then he would make sure that her existing employer would not either."

"Are you saying that she was murdered to stop her working for someone else?" Reeves asked.

"I'm afraid so captain. It was made to look like an accident of course, we do have laws against such actions but the culprit reckoned without my own investigative skills and I was able to identify the laboratory equipment that had been sabotaged as well as the individual who was directly responsible for it. Then it was a simple matter of following the chain of intermediaries back to the man who gave the order for my wife's death." the old man answered, "But it was at my wife's memorial service when my grandfather finally told me about the priest he killed during the war. He described what he saw privately, making sure that no-one else heard the question he had struggled with for so many years since that day. A question that he found himself asking again when my precious wife was murdered out of petty spite. What if we are wrong?"

"Wrong about what?" Hayes asked.

"Wrong about everything Jennifer. What if belief without proof can make a man stronger? What if our bickering and infighting shows that we are not superior? What if the way the Commonwealth marshalled its forces to fight the war showed that humanity could protect itself against a hostile and united alien threat without us?" the old man said, "The question troubled me as much as it had troubled my grandfather and eventually I decided that the answer was 'yes'. The Genex are a mistake, a flawed creation that should never have existed in the first place. Of course the prevailing view among us has always been that we need to destroy the Commonwealth and take our place as the successors to mankind, on the other hand I began to work quietly behind the scenes to do the exact opposite. I wanted to work towards destroying our society so that the Commonwealth could survive."

"One man against an empire?" Reeves commented.

"Oh I'm not alone captain. Along the way I have collected allies, individuals who have suffered because of the way our society functions. You see as a senior officer of our intelligence service I was able to uncover a great deal of information about the rivalries that existed between different factions of Genex. Every so often I would discover an attempt to shift the blame for failure to a scapegoat and I would act first, exposing the true culprit and purging them along with their allies. In each case I approached the intended scapegoat, revealing to them what had been intended and suggesting that it would be in their best interests to co-operate with me. With each purge I gained another ally who owed me their life and I reinforced my own reputation for ruthlessly punishing failure in the finest tradition of the Genex."

"This is all nonsense." Hayes said to Reeves, "He's stringing us along. Remember what I told you? He killed his own son."

"The deaths of my son and daughter in law were a tragedy. One for which I let people think I was responsible to protect the person responsible." the old man responded.

"Oh what a pile of crap. There's no-one you care about other than yourself and-" Hayes began before suddenly trailing off, "and your granddaughter." she added eventually.

"Yes, my granddaughter Susanna." the old man said, nodding slowly, "You see I had hoped that given what happened to my wife, my son's mother, I could recruit my son and his family to my cause and I made the mistake of approaching them. They saw nothing wrong with our way of life though. The strong and capable progressed while the weak were left behind they said and they made it clear that they wanted nothing more to do with me on that night I went to see them. They were going to move away and inform my rivals of what I was trying to do. At a stroke my plan would fail and I would likely end up dead or a drone. However, our arguing woke Susanna and she came to see what was happening. She heard that her parents were planning to take her away with them and did not want to leave me behind. That's when she took the gun from my son's desk. If I'd had just one bodyguard with me then she could have been stopped but I thought I was perfectly safe in my own son's home and I had them all watching the perimeter. Susanna shot both her parents before any of us could do anything. You see they had made the same mistakes that our ancestors did, they raised their daughter to believe that she was superior to those around her and that she should let nothing and no-one stand in her way of getting what she wanted. What she wanted was to stay with me."

"And she's hardly left your side since." Hayes commented before she looked around at the other Genex present, "Where is she by the way?"

"A matter for later," the old man said, "but for now I was explaining why I wanted you both here. You see bringing down the Genex has two requirements, firstly the Genex government must collapse and secondly a way must be found to reintegrate the Genex with the rest of humanity and both of these involve you Jennifer."

"Me? How?" Hayes said, frowning.

"In my position as director of intelligence I saw many ideas to destabilise the Commonwealth. None of them

seemed to have any chance of actually changing the balance of power though, at least not until you brought me your suggestion of provoking a war." the old man said and Hayes winced, knowing that her role in the Genex intelligence service had just been exposed to Reeves.

"Interesting. You omitted that part when you were telling us who you were." he said, looking at her and the old man smiled.

"You really mean to say that she didn't tell you that it was her that engineered a Canadian military vessel being sent to the Phi Two Pavonis system? A system we knew was claimed by the Ticik." the old man asked. "No she didn't." Reeves replied.

"Well Jennifer's plan was to arrange for a Commonwealth warship to encounter the Ticik in a system we knew that they would defend. Nobody knows who they are or exactly where they come from but every encounter we knew of involving them has ended in conflict up to that point so it seemed likely that the same would happen when you encountered them." the old man explained.

"But how does a war between us and the Ticik bring down the Genex?" Reeves asked.

"It doesn't, not directly anyway. In fact whether or not the war occurred I saw the chance to get what I really needed, for the Commonwealth to discover that the Genex had survived. Questions would be asked about what a scout ship was doing that far out, especially if it led to a war and that would have led you to our operations on Verne. From there I just needed you to track us back here."

"So you expected us to bring down your government for you in retaliation." Reeves said.

"That was the original idea, yes captain." the old man responded, "You see I never expected the Commonwealth to actually fall and if we caused you to go to war with an alien species then how could that not be seen as an act of aggression in itself? I expected you to attack and once again emerge victorious. Especially when my followers and I would have been working to undermine our own war effort."

"That's treason." Hayes hissed, "They'd have turned you into a drone if they found out."

"Who would tell them Jennifer? Remember that I have a well deserved reputation for purging my opponents and my followers all owe their very lives to me. My position is still perfectly secure." the old man said.

"So let's just assume that the Commonwealth does bring down your government, what then? After the last war the Genex that were captured didn't exactly become part of society again." Reeves pointed out.

"No, all the warriors and leaders taken prisoner spent the rest of their lives in prison camps, apart from those few we were able to rescue and make it look like they had been killed of course. Then the workers and thinkers that were released were released only on the condition that they accepted being sterilised to prevent them from producing a new generation of Genex. I wanted something more civilised. I wanted the Genex as a people to become fully human again and at about the same time Jennifer brought me her idea to start a war I was also given a means to accomplish that. You see Jennifer you were never to become a drone, the surgeons who operated on you were genetic engineers. They found a way to reverse the genetic manipulation that created the Genex from ordinary parents and by introducing a targeted retrovirus into your reproductive organs they made it so that any children you have will be pure human, not Genex." the old man said.

"That's what you were doing to me? Using me as your science project?" Hayes exclaimed.

"Yes. Of course that would require the father to have undergone the same procedure or be an ordinary human as well, otherwise the child would be a worker just as any other offspring between a Genex and unmodified human would be. But you are the proof that humanity can be reunited and the failed experiment of the Genex ended once and for all." the old man said.

"Your plan has a flaw Admiral Dalton." Reeves said, "The Commonwealth isn't going to fight your war for you. You'd have to kill me to stop me from telling them what you've both done and that would mean bringing us here was a waste of your time. So what haven't you told us?"

"Ah you really are very intelligent Captain Reeves." the old man replied, smiling, "Of course I don't expect the Commonwealth to act because I ask them to but I think they will act if it is in their own best interests. In fact it may be the only way for humanity to survive."

"Survive the Ticik? The last I heard no war has been declared yet." Reeves said.

"No, not to survive the Ticik. To survive what you and your crew discovered captain. To avoid the same fate as the Sissusk and the aliens who built the ships we found."

"The AI computer virus?" Reeves said.

"Yes. You see we have a copy of that as well, recovered from Verne and I've had some of my best people studying it." the old man said.

"You shut down Doctor Horst's research on that." Hayes said and the old man nodded.

"Yes but she and Mister Stein wanted to uncover the secret of those mysterious gates whereas all I was interested in was the virus' ability to seize control of automated systems. You see captain the Genex military has been bolstered by a large force of robotic combat units, everything from ordinary infantry to capital ships that can run without any direct human control. Can you imagine what would happen if the alien virus was uploaded into them?" he said.

"They'd turn on you in an instant." Reeves said.

“Exactly captain. Jennifer you asked where my granddaughter Susanna is, well right now she is at Redoubt aboard one of the orbital fortresses. Specifically one that is home to a squadron of robotic warships and right about now she will be uploading the alien virus into them.” the old man said.

INTERLUDE.

Susanna Dalton, the old man's granddaughter, made her way towards the section of the orbital facility where the squadron of robotic warships were controlled from. At each security checkpoint she simply presented her intelligence identification and was waved through. Her details were still logged, however and as she was nearing a command and control suite from where she would be able to interface with the robot vessels she suddenly found herself confronted by a man in the uniform of a rear admiral and a pair of warriors behind him.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded as she continued to walk towards him confidently.

"I've come to inspect your operational readiness admiral." she replied, coming to a halt right in front of him.

"That's ridiculous. My command's operational readiness has been confirmed by Admiral Dressler's office." the admiral responded.

"Perhaps so admiral. However, it has not been assessed by the intelligence division for inclusion in our conflict outcome projections. Additionally in the wake of Admiral Dressler's fall from grace as it were, none of the official data released by his office is regarded as reliable. The intelligence division wants direct access to all commands so that an accurate report can be offered to Secretary LeClair." the old man's granddaughter told him.

"Then it's true? Admiral Dressler has been removed?" the dockyard admiral asked, making it clear that although rumours of Dressler's removal from his position had spread to Redoubt no formal announcement had yet been made by the government. This was most likely because various rival candidates to be his replacement were manoeuvring to limit their competition for the position.

"Yes. He violated the secretary's direct orders, resulting in the loss of more than twenty fleet vessels. He has been arrested for treason. Did you work closely with him?" the young woman explained. The question at the end of her statement was intended to unsettle the rear admiral she was speaking to. Anyone closely associated with Dressler was likely to come under suspicion when his replacement was announced and his previous allies would undoubtedly work hard to distance themselves from him as quickly as they could.

"Only as much as was required. I did have some direct contact with him of course but I didn't really know the man." the admiral answered. Whether this was true or not did not really matter to the old man's granddaughter, she just needed the admiral to give her access to the robotic fleet's command and control system.

"I need access to your system admiral." she told him, "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No of course not." the admiral replied, "Please come this way and I'll show you to my command centre."

The admiral then turned around and began to walk away from the old man's granddaughter while the warriors stepped aside to make room for the old man's granddaughter to follow him. Ordinarily she would be suspicious about letting potential opponents get behind her but on this occasion she was willing to accept the risk. By getting close enough behind the admiral she was confident that if he ordered his warriors to attack her then she would be able to take him hostage before they could get to her.

The admiral did as he said he would and led her to his command and control suite where the two warriors halted just inside the entrance. Most fleet command and control centres were heavily manned to be able to liaise with the living crews of starships. On the other hand this room needed far fewer manned positions to be able to monitor and direct a force of fully automated vessels. While the station's main command centre was buried deep within its structure to protect it from attack this room was instead located on the outer edge of the space station and the forward wall consisted of a row of viewports that overlooked rows of warships in external berths.

"I need to be able to access the status of each of your ships admiral." the old man's granddaughter said and the admiral nodded, "I'll need to be able to take copies of data as well."

"Of course. Any of these stations can provide you with any data you could need from any of my ships." the admiral told her and he indicated a nearby vacant control console.

"Excellent." the old man's granddaughter said as she sat down. Initially the admiral remained right behind her but before she began to work she looked up at him, "Is there something you wanted to say admiral?" she said.

"No."

"Then I would like to get on with my work in private. I'm sure you don't want it to be suggested to Admiral Dressler's successor that you attempted to influence this report." the old man's granddaughter said and the admiral backed away.

The old man's granddaughter began by calling up a status summary of the ships docked at the space station so that she could see the number and type of warships available to her. Redoubt had been selected as the initial deployment point for the alien virus because of the size of the automated force deployed there and the old man's granddaughter smiled when the station's computer confirmed that there were more than fifty

destroyers and frigates present plus a further fifty lighter warships and more than a dozen support vessels. A number of these vessels were designed for planetary assault or boarding actions that required the presence of infantry combat robots as well, all of which were tied into the AI systems that controlled the warships themselves. Given that she had already told the admiral that she intended to take data away with her the old man's granddaughter had no need to disguise her actions as she plugged a memory stick that had a copy of the alien computer virus on it into the console in front of her. This was accompanied by a self executing program that would open the file containing the virus on every infected ship at the same time, just a few minutes away. She was then able to upload these two files from the console to all of the robotic warships in one go, activating the self executing timer program at the same time. This also activated the timer program that was present on the console and to make sure that this remained hidden the old man's granddaughter concealed the window in which it was shown behind the data summary she had downloaded from the warships docked here. Releasing the virus into the station's computer would be less noticeable than in vessels already fully automated but as the alien AI spread it would trigger an increasing level of disruption to any response from the crew to what was happening to the robot warships. It would also give the virus the chance to spread further through the Genex computer network, first to other installations within the same star system and from there to the rest of the empire.

"Admiral there's something I need to verify on my ship." she said, standing up, "I'll be back in about ten minutes."

"Yes very well." the admiral responded and watched by the admiral the old man's granddaughter calmly walked out of the room.

"Intelligence has some nerve." the admiral said to the nearest of his staff, "Sending that girl here to accuse us of not being ready."

"The director of intelligence is an admiral isn't he?" the other officer commented, "Maybe he's looking to make a comeback to fleet operations if Dressler really has gone."

"That old man will be the death of us all." the admiral replied.

All of a sudden an alarm sounded and the admiral spun around.

"Admiral our ships are powering up." one of his staff called out.

"Did central command give a launch order?" the admiral asked her.

"No sir, the power up appears to be self initiated." the other officer responded as she checked her console for evidence of commands being issued to any of the robotic warships.

"Admiral I have six vessels engaging their engines. Docking clamps are being released." another officer called out and the admiral turned to look out through the viewport to where several of the robotic vessels docked to the space station had released the clamps that held them in place and as he watched they began to move slowly away from their berths.

Well what are you waiting for? Issue the shut down command." the admiral yelled at another of his staff.

"I'm trying admiral but the order isn't being acknowledged." the officer responded, frantically typing at his console as he tried to deactivate the robotic vessels.

"Admiral I've got Admiral Headland asking for an explanation about why our ships are launching. What should I tell him?" the communications officer said.

"Tell him we're working on it. Tell him we're-" the admiral began but before he could finish his order one of the robotic ships that had already left its berth, a heavy frigate, turned to face the command and control centre before firing its main gun. The forced plasma beam struck the viewports and instantly melted through them, filling the entire command centre with superheated matter that incinerated the occupants and destroyed all of their monitoring equipment.

The old man's granddaughter suppressed a smile as alarms sounded to indicate that the space station was under attack. Around her the crew of the space station began heading towards their duty stations. All of them knew that the system was heavily patrolled and littered with sensor platforms designed to detect incoming ships as soon as possible and a number expressed frustration at what they saw as an unscheduled exercise. Then there were muffled sounds of explosions and the seriousness of the situation set in and the true urgency of the situation became apparent.

As part of the station's defence procedure the warriors at the security checkpoints were reinforced and when the old man's granddaughter returned to the docking berths where her own vessel waited she was not surprised to see that a squad of heavy infantry had joined the regular guards. This did not worry her though, she had no reason to believe that anyone suspected her role in what was happening and deploying extra forces to a part of the station that was a likely entry point for a boarding party made perfect sense. Sure enough she was just waved through the checkpoint again, the guards more concerned about anyone trying to break in than someone getting away while they had the chance.

The ship that she had arrived aboard was located in a berth close to the checkpoint and when she arrived there she found a pair of crewmen standing guard.

"Get aboard." she told them as she walked between them and they followed without saying a word. Inside

she was met by the ship's commanding officer and the pair of them walked towards the bridge together, "What's our status?" she asked.

"Secure. Our connection to the station's network is via an isolated machine." the captain told her.

"And the station haven't queried it?" she said.

"No." the captain replied, shaking his head, "The machine was programmed to repeat the readings from our log of our stay at Sanctuary. A good job too. About five minutes before you arrived we started noticing signs of an intrusion."

"Not station security I take it." the old man's granddaughter commented.

"No definitely not. This looked unlike anything I've ever seen before. If our network was connected to theirs like it's meant to be then we'd be infected by this as well." the captain said just as they reached the vessel's compact bridge and he looked at his command crew, "Report." he said.

"Station command has issued a general launch order." one of the bridge officers responded.

"And are we ready to depart?" the captain asked.

"Yes sir, our drives are powered up. We can leave whenever the word is given." another officer answered.

"I don't see any point in delaying. Are the charges planted?" the old man's granddaughter said.

"Yes, I sent out an EVA team just after you left." the captain said before turning back to his command crew, "Detonate charges. Helm get us away from here." he ordered.

To avoid linking their computer network with any part of that of the space station the crew of the ship that had brought the old man's granddaughter to Redoubt had covertly planted explosive charges on the docking clamps that held their ship in place and when the captain gave the word these were triggered in unison, destroying the clamps and casting the ship loose. Of course the destruction of the clamps was detected by the station's computer network but with dozens of robotic warships having already broken free and now turning their weapons on the station as well a few small explosions went unnoticed by the crew.

"Firing thrusters captain." the helmsman reported while the old man's granddaughter was strapping herself into a seat beside the captain.

"Try not to draw too much attention to us." the captain commented. The ship was a corvette built for stealth over firepower, the perfect choice for this mission and the captain hoped to escape without being drawn into the battle that was now growing in its ferocity. The corvette's sensors showed that the Genex aboard the space station as well as those aboard the other ships docked there were attempting to fight back against their robotic attackers but their efforts were being hampered by the disruption caused to their computer networks that were also being corrupted by the alien computer virus. This had the effect of preventing weapon locks and disrupting communications between different vessels so that they could not co-ordinate their actions. For the time being at least the patrol ships away from the station remained unaffected by the virus though and those nearest were already speeding back towards the station. The problem here though was that there were too few of these to make a real stand against the robotic vessels, most of which were now free of their moorings and engaging the station and the other vessels docked there. Unable to manoeuvre the manned warships made easy targets and the command crew of the stealth corvette watched as a robot frigate sped along a row of cruisers firing its turrets into them from point blank range.

"We've got ships heading for Redoubt itself." the corvette's captain commented when he saw a trio of assault frigates, warships optimised for planetary attack missions, moving away from the station and into a lower orbit around the planet below.

"What about planetary defences?" the old man's granddaughter asked.

"It looks like they're coming on line. Obviously they haven't been affected yet." the captain responded.

"Captain it looks like we've got drop pods deploying." one of the corvette's officers said as a cluster of tiny craft suddenly broke away from the assault frigates, dropping into the atmosphere.

"They're deploying ground units." the old man's granddaughter said as a smile spread across her face,

"Excellent. Redoubt will be infected by the virus within hours. How soon before we can get to FTL?"

"Helm?" the captain said.

"I have the jump details captain. We'll be clear in about three minutes." the helmsman responded.

"Three minutes and we're safe. My grandfather will be pleased this all went so smoothly." the old man's granddaughter said just as there was a brilliant flash of light from the space station caused by a warship docked there exploding.

"You're going to release that virus into our own computers?" Hayes exclaimed, leaping to her feet, "You're insane."

"No, just aware that this will not only bring down the Genex empire but also force the Commonwealth to intervene." the old man replied as a pair his warrior escort grabbed hold of her and pulled her away from him before forcibly sitting her on a nearby couch, "Consider this we have seen evidence of civilisations completely destroyed by this virus, their populations relocated to who knows where. The Sissusk may have survived in a limited form only because of the task force that you led into their space Captain Reeves just as the Genex will survive if they are able to flee into the Commonwealth. Our territory is far too concentrated to permit hiding places to be constructed within it. Of course the Commonwealth would not normally admit Genex into their territory as they are but if there was a way that the Genex could become ordinary humans again then-

"And what makes you think that the Commonwealth would intervene?" Reeves interrupted.

"Why self preservation of course captain. You see we know where the Commonwealth is located. The Sissusk had only limited knowledge of the extent of human space while at Verne the alien AI was defeated before it could spread beyond the system. If Genex society falls, as it surely will given the track record of every other civilisation that has encountered this alien AI then the Commonwealth may be the next target." the old man replied and Hayes snorted.

"Or they could just use the time taken for our people to be wiped out to strengthen their defences." she said. "Of course that is what any of us would do my dear Jennifer, sacrificing an enemy to buy time but that is not how the Commonwealth works. They will examine the situation and see that their longer term interests are served better by intervening right away. They may be able to buy themselves more time to strengthen their defences by abandoning us but the consequence of that is that they will face a more powerful enemy. On the other hand by combining forces with us they will be able to face the AI controlled ships before they gain control of our entire military and industrial capacity." the old man explained then after a brief pause he added, "Now I think I've told you all you really need to know so I'll be taking my leave of you now. Lieutenant could you please contact Captain Schaar and have the *Enigma* return to collect us? Captain Reeves I'm afraid that you and Jennifer will have to remain here while we depart, you see if my granddaughter is on schedule then the alien computer virus will be spreading throughout Genex space by now and may have reached this system."

"Where are we exactly?" Hayes asked while the Genex lieutenant was using a long ranged radio to signal the *Enigma*.

"Luyten two-twelve nineteen." the old man answered and Hayes winced.

"What's wrong?" Reeves said when he saw this.

"This system may not be settled but there is a depot here. A military depot filled with robotic combat units, everything from ground combat troops to warships. When the alien AI spreads to here they'll all come on line."

"That's is why you destroyed the ambassador of Nexus, isn't it?" Reeves said, turning to the old man again.

"Quite so. I hate to think of the consequences if the alien AI spread to Nexus." he responded.

"So how are we supposed to get away?" Hayes said.

"Captain Reeves' ship of course. You see the courier that took you to the Eta Indi system was accompanied by a stealth drone. That craft informed me of your departure and at about the same time you arrived here it will have informed the *Warspite* of where you are. I'm sure that the captain's crew will already be rushing here to collect you. Assuming that your ship remained in the system after your departure of course but I doubt you ordered them to leave before you returned." the old man said.

"And when they get here they'll run right into an ambush by your robots." Reeves said, staring at the old man.

"Captain the risk is minimal. We are light hours away from the depot and the machines there have no reason to expect the arrival of your vessel. A small number may come here to secure the facility but you only need evade them for a short time. All that is required is for the *Warspite* to arrive, collect you and leave before the robotic forces at the depot can respond." the old man replied.

"Message from the *Enigma* admiral. Captain Schaar will be at the docking port in fifteen minutes." the Genex lieutenant said when he received a response to his message.

"Very good. Let's be there waiting for her shall we?" the old man replied and he and the rest of his party began to head back towards the elevator shaft leading to the station core.

"So what happens to me now?" Hayes asked when she and Reeves were alone again.

"What do you mean?" Reeves replied.

"I mean now that you know what I did. How trying to trigger a war between you and the Ticik was my idea."

Hayes said.

Rather than answer right away Reeves got to his feet and walked over to where Hayes sat and promptly sat down right beside her.

"You told us that you worked for the Genex intelligence service. Correct?" he said and Hayes nodded.

"Yes but not-" she began.

"So it was obvious that during your career you must have carried out operations against the Commonwealth." Reeves interrupted.

"I tried to start a war. How can you forgive me for that?" Hayes said, looking into Reeves eyes and he smiled back at her.

"Because to the best of my knowledge, so far you've failed." he told her, "Jennifer because of your actions humanity now knows about alien civilisations we never knew existed before. We've encountered aliens as advanced as ourselves for the first time."

"And people have died because of it." Hayes said, slumping back on the couch.

"What if you hadn't done it?" Reeves asked and Hayes frowned.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Well if the Commonwealth hadn't encountered the Sissusk at Phi Two Pavonis then we couldn't have followed them back to their base and discovered their plan to invade Liberty. Right now the entire population of that world would be dead or enslaved and to the Commonwealth it would just be another mystery of the Fringe Worlds. The Verne would still have dug up the ruins of the civilisation that once inhabited their world and become infected by the alien computer virus only without the Warspite there at the time to try identifying you the entire planet would have fallen again and the computer virus would probably have spread beyond the system into the Commonwealth itself. Reeves explained.

"So I won't be spending the rest of my life in a prison cell?" Hayes said.

"Not if the Commonwealth listens to me. Now come on, I'm assuming that like a Commonwealth outpost this space station will have a communications room aboard it. We need to find it before the *Warspite* gets here so that we can signal them. Also if the alien virus does spread here before the *Warspite* arrives then I want to know when those robots are coming for us." Reeves said and he handed one of the personal defence weapons he was carrying to Hayes before taking her free hand in his and standing up.

"Thank you." Hayes said as she rose from the couch as well and she leant forwards and kissed Reeves on the cheek, "For agreeing to keep me out of prison I mean."

"You're welcome. Besides it would be a wasted opportunity. Too many of us need you free." Reeves said as they walked towards the exit from the lounge.

"Really? Who?" Hayes asked.

"Well Admiral Dalton seemed keen for you to have children." Reeves answered.

"Okay that's one. Who else?"

"Me."

"You need me out of prison? Why?"

"This may be kind of awkward to bring up but I'm going to need a plus one when Lynn Shaw gets married and I can hardly ask any of the female officers under me now can I?" Reeves said.

"You'd really take a Genex as your date?"

"Trust me Jennifer, compared to my ex-wife a Genex is an improvement. A massive improvement. At least you can blame any of your failings on your ancestors' opinions on genetic engineering."

"Was your meeting a success admiral?" Schaar asked when the old man returned to the bridge of the *Enigma* and took his seat again.

"I think so." he replied, "Both Captain Reeves and Jennifer Hayes were willing to hear me out. Unfortunately it was necessary to destroy an emissary of Nexus to prevent it becoming corrupted but hopefully that can be smoothed over. Has there been any word from outside the system?"

"Not yet, no." Schaar said.

"Oh well, I suppose Redoubt is more than thirty light years away. Perhaps we should be making our departure though. I'd hate to be caught out here alone if the forces at the depot do activate." the old man said and Schaar nodded.

"Helm disengage from the station and take us to the rendezvous point at New Langley. Best speed." she ordered.

Reeves and Hayes found the refuge station's communication suite on the far side of the ring from where they had started, guided there by a series of signs that they quickly discovered when they had the chance to look around freely. Unlike the command centre of a permanently manned station that would have had numerous duty stations for officers of various rank the communication suite aboard the refuge station was a small compartment that held only three seats in a row. One of these was intended to provide information about the station itself while the others were an external communication and sensor station respectively.

"All this looks pretty straight forward." Reeves said, sitting down at the monitoring console. Because the station was intended as a facility open for use by anyone who needed it the consoles were kept as simple as possible and Reeves was able to understand the one he was looking at even though it was not Commonwealth technology, "Everything looks like it's working."

"And we're not broadcasting anything other than a transponder." Hayes added as she sat next him, "All our sensors look passive. Thermal, optical and a radar detector."

"We need to make sure that the *Warspite* knows we're here as soon as it arrives." Reeves said, "Can we modify the transponder somehow?"

"To say what?" Hayes asked.

"I was thinking of my service number." Reeves suggested and Hayes looked at the console then shrugged.

"I don't know." she said, "That doesn't sound like a regular function of a station like this. The transponder might be hard coded."

"Then we'll need to find another way of signalling them. Otherwise when they get here they may have to search the entire system before finding us." Reeves said.

"What about the courier?" Hayes suggested, "It's probably shut down right now but if we turn the transponder back on then your crew will pick it up and come looking for us."

"That's risky. If the robots at your depot do get infected by the alien AI then they'll know there's a ship here and on past experience they'll come hunting for it." Reeves said.

"What other choice do we have?" Hayes replied and Reeves thought for a moment.

"Okay we'll bring it back on line." he said, "This will be where we hole up though, not the courier. As soon as the transponder is on line we'll see if we can recover the hard drive from the ambassador so it can be returned to Nexus and then come back here. When we detect the *Warspite* we'll signal them directly but if the station is boarded by robots then I'd rather we were as far from the docking ports as we can get."

The *Warspite's* aft hangar was almost devoid of crew when Willis entered it, clad in full body armour. Shaw was the only other crew member present along with a number of the *Warspite's* complement of robots, all of which had labels attached to them with the names of people written on them. Among the names Willis noticed several of those belonging to the *Warspite's* senior staff, 'Denise Goldman', 'Douglas Knight', 'Marcus Ash' and one standing out in front of the others labelled 'Captain Reeves'.

"May I approach the blushing bride?" Willis called out from across the hangar.

"If you must." Shaw replied, lowering the tablet she held and turning towards him, "Make this quick though, I'm trying to pace out the ceremony."

"So I heard. You ordered the ground crew out." Willis said as he approached Shaw.

"All the fighters are flight worthy and they were getting in my way. Robots are better for representing people while I plan where everyone will be. They don't complain about having to stand around or cry like babies when given constructive criticism about how to act like a bridesmaid that may or may not yet be promoted to maid of honour." she replied.

"Spaceman Carter is hardly a baby. In fact I believe he was once fined two thousand dollars for his role in a bare knuckle fighting operation. That's why I'm wearing all this. I wasn't sure if you'd throw something at me." Willis said and Shaw shrugged.

"He still blubbed like a baby when I pointed out that I didn't believe he was representing Jessica Lucas properly. She should count herself lucky she's still allowed to be at the wedding as well. Getting herself captured and then escaping has meant I've needed to rearrange things twice because of her."

"I'll tell her to stay captured the next time it happens." Willis commented.

"What do you want Ben? This had better be good news about either squadron operations or my wedding or I'm going to be very angry." Shaw said.

"Well Commander Bernard would like his robots back." Willis said and Shaw glared at him, "Before you get mad though I should point out that you need to get changed. Commander O'Neil and her navigator have stood down so you'll be taking her fighter out when we get to Luyten Two-twelve Nineteen. Commander Knight is holding a planning meeting now on the bridge."

Shaw smiled.

"Major Willis that's excellent news." she responded, "Now if only I could find an answer to the more pressing problem."

"There's a problem with the fighters?" Willis asked, looking at the rows of fighters and interceptors currently in the hangar.

"Oh no much worse than that. On Centaur there are approximately sixteen thousand species of flowering plants and I can't find a single one that matches my eyes perfectly." Shaw told him.

"Err, try northern orchids." Willis suggested and Shaw frowned.

"Northern orchids." she repeated, typing into her tablet to call up an image of a pale blue flower and she smiled again, "Ben that's perfect." she said, "I would offer to make sure the bouquet heads towards your wife in return but I've already promised Commander Knight that it's heading towards Christine, so instead as a

special thank you at the reception between the fifth and sixth dances when I am somewhat tipsy you have my permission to grope me. Chest only though.”

“Thanks commander but with my wife there I don't want your wedding becoming my funeral.” Willis said and Shaw sighed.

“Oh very well.” she said and she suddenly grabbed one of his hands and pressed the palm her chest, “Now squeeze gently three times Ben. Come on, one, two, three.” she told him before letting go when he had followed the instruction, “There, now we're even.” she said and then she started to walk towards the exit while Willis just stood and stared at her. Then after a few seconds he reached for his radio and activated it. “Neo Tokyo has been saved from Bridezilla. I say again Neo Tokyo has been saved from Bridezilla.” he said into it before hurrying after Shaw.

When the pair reached the bridge they found Thomas, Lucas and Mori standing beside the central console with Knight.

“Archangel, happy you could join us.” Knight said.

“My pleasure captain. By the way, Christine may be interested to know that my bouquet will be northern orchids.” Shaw replied, “Now what can we expect when we reach our destination?”

“As I was just explaining there's not much that we know about Luyten Two-twelve Nineteen.” Thomas said, “It's a white dwarf system and radio telescope observations have suggested that it has a system of planets but none of them seem to be in the Goldilocks zone.”

“So just balls of rock, gas and ice?” Mori commented and Thomas nodded.

“Yes. Being more than seventy light years from Earth and with no indication of anything interesting there no drones or manned exploration missions have even been attempted as far as I can find in our records.”

“If the Genex have a presence in the system they'd probably have shot down any Commonwealth ship that entered it.” Lucas added.

“Then we need to be ready to fight as soon as we arrive.” Shaw said.

“The jump I plotted will bring us out of FTL close to the centre of the system. We'll just be a couple of light minutes from the star but above the orbital plane. From there we should be able to get a good view of pretty much the entire system right away.” Thomas said, “Of course I'll have to be ready to plot us another jump to get to wherever the captain and that Genex woman are located.”

“How far is the system from where she told us the Genex have their new home world?” Willis asked.

“Alpha Indi is about thirty light years away.” Thomas answered.

“Assuming that Jennifer Hayes wasn't lying to us then the Genex occupy only five planets fully and they're all pretty close to Alpha Indi. I doubt that there'll be a major Genex presence in Luyten Two-twelve Nineteen.” Lucas said.

“Another outpost like the one we encountered at Eta Indi then?” Willis suggested.

“The Genex could have scattered outposts like that across a hundred systems to slow us down.” Lucas added.

“A pity Nexus only gave us conventional missiles. A few more nukes would have helped clear out a nest of Genex.” Shaw commented.

“Not if the captain is in that nest.” Knight pointed out and then he looked at Willis, “Major your marines will need to be ready to carry out another boarding action.” he said and Willis nodded.

“This time I'm staying behind.” Lucas muttered.

“Let's suit up.” Reeves said when he and Hayes returned to the courier.

“Suit up?” Hayes replied, holding onto a railing as she floated in the weightless conditions now that the courier's artificial gravity was shut down.

“In case you haven't noticed we're inside a sealed hangar. The transponder broadcast may not have have the power to penetrate the hull so we'll need to open the doors. Unless you can tell me a way of doing that automatically then that means finding a manual override. We only need to open it a bit but the bay will decompress when we do.” Reeves explained as he opened a case that contained a pair of spacesuits brought from the *Warspite*.

“Err, I haven't done EVA training in as long as zero-gee training. Plus I don't know the procedure for putting one of your suits on.” Hayes pointed out.

“Don't worry, I'll guide you through it.” Reeves told her and she smiled at him.

“Why Captain Reeves are you asking me to undress for you?” she said and Reeves just tossed a spacesuit at her.

Once Reeves and Hayes were in their spacesuits they exited the courier and looked towards the massive outer door while standing on the walkway just outside the courier using their magnetic boots to remain in place.

“I don't suppose you know where a manual override would be do you?” Reeves asked.

“I worked behind a desk.” Hayes responded.

“Then we'll just start right there and work our way around.” Reeves said, pointing to the closest point around

the edge of the outer door. Then he unhooked one end of a short line from his spacesuit and hooked it onto Hayes', "Release your boots." he told her as he took her hand in his. Then when both of them had deactivated their magnetic boots Reeves leapt up from the walkway towards the outer door at the end of the hangar, pulling Hayes along behind him.

"Hey a little more warning would have been nice." she said as they drifted towards the door.

They hit the wall beside the door at low speed and picked themselves up, reactivating their boots so that they could walk on the wall as if it were a horizontal surface. There was nothing set into the wall at the point where they landed so they began to walk around it until coming to a small protrusion that had a hatch set into it that was labelled 'FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY'.

"A handy hatch." Reeves commented, "Now I wonder what is beneath it?" and he crouched down to open the hatch.

Unlocked, the hatch opened easily to reveal a long handle held in a bracket and a nearby socket into which it could fit that was labelled with a double headed arrow.

"Looks like you plug the handle in and move it back and forth." Hayes said and Reeves unhooked the handle.

Sure enough once plugged into the socket the handle could be moved back and forth relatively easily while Reeves stood beside it and there was the sound of a ratchet as tension was applied to the mechanism. All of a sudden this reached a limit and Reeves looked at Hayes.

"I think I could use a hand here." he said and she took hold of the handle as well, "Now pull towards you."

Reeves told her and together they applied pressure to the handle. Now that the mechanism was tight, applying enough force to overcome the inertia of the massive outer doors required Reeves and Hayes to apply considerable pressure but slowly the handle moved back and forth. At first there was no effect as the doors were pulled apart, the gaskets between them were compressed to establish a seal and so initially the only consequence of pulling the doors apart was to release some of this compression. However, as the doors continued to move apart a gap opened up between the doors and there was a sudden rush of escaping air accompanied by a warning klaxon.

"Hold on!" Reeves exclaimed, grabbing hold of Hayes with one hand while keeping hold of the handle with the other.

The sudden drop in pressure caused the station's life support system to cut off the supply of air to the hangar, limiting the amount that could be lost into space and the strength of the wind caused by this blowing out through the opening dropped in line with the amount remaining in the hangar until it was in a vacuum.

"Now what?" Hayes asked when the wind stopped, "Moving it this far was hard work, how much more do we need to open the door?"

"It should be fine as it is." Reeves replied, "Radio waves will find their way through even a narrow gap. Now let's make sure the transponder is broadcasting and get back to the communication room."

With adequate supplies of food and water already aboard the refuge station Reeves and Hayes needed no further supplies from the courier and as soon as it was confirmed that the transponder had been reactivated they returned to the station's communications suite to await the arrival of the *Warspite*. The bag Hayes had originally brought from the courier still sat in the corner of the room and before sitting down Reeves took out the bible it contained.

"So are you going to read to me?" Hayes asked and Reeves frowned.

"I thought you said it was fairy stories." Reeves commented and Hayes smiled.

"You believe it." she said, "I'm interested."

"Very well, if you insist." Reeves replied and he turned back to the start of the book, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth." he began.

The alien computer virus loaded into the computer network of the space station orbiting the Genex colony of Redoubt did not remain contained there for long. As soon as it found its way to the communication system it began to spread out across the systems where the Genex had installed tachyon communication relay stations. This included Luyten 212-19 and a tachyon transmission containing the malicious code was sent to the depot on the second planet where it found the perfect environment for it to activate.

The depot was already fully automated and so the alien computer virus was able to seize control of all of its functions in a very short period of time. Its first act was to start activating the stored robot forces at the depot. The facility itself was regarded by the Genex as disposable and so it had only limited ground forces assigned for its own protection, the bulk of the robotic troops there were instead based aboard the spacecraft it housed. Being a frontier post most of these were light warships, a squadron of four corvettes and a pair of monitors but there were also two capital ships that would act as the core of the force. One of these was a heavy frigate while the other was a heavy picket that in turn carried more than a hundred drones.

As soon as these ships could be activated the alien computer virus now in control of the depot opened the hangar doors and launched the entire fleet into space, also launching the two dozen drones intended for the depot's defence. While these were being deployed the alien AI searched the system, looking for any ships

that might be present. It immediately detected the transponder from the refuge station but discounted this. The depot's records indicated that this was an unmanned station that held little of any value to the AI. However, it also detected a second transponder coming from the same location as the refuge station that indicated there was a ship docked there. The transponder identified the docked ship as a mere courier, nothing that could threaten the depot or its forces but the presence of the ship suggested the presence of organic beings that the AI's program instructed it to capture and so a signal was sent to the orbiting frigate. This ordered the frigate to launch a skip loaded with a platoon of robot infantry towards the station and secure it as well as anyone found aboard.

Shaw climbed aboard the fighter normally flown by the officer from the carrier *Jericho*, transferred to the *Warspite*. Sitting down she frowned and wriggled in the front seat.

"Something wrong?" Mori asked as he sat behind her.

"Yes, this seat is all wrong Kaz." Shaw replied.

"I thought it had been adjusted." Mori said.

"It has but it's still not right. I don't know what O'Neil did to it but she's messed it up somehow." Shaw said as she began to strap herself in. A member of the ground crew then lowered the fighter's canopy and Shaw gave a thumbs up before the craft was guided forwards to the lift that took it down into the launching tube and once in place she reached for the communication system, "Bridge this is Archangel, we're all set down here." she said.

"Understood Archangel. We'll be dropping to sub-light in under two minutes." Goldman responded.

Meanwhile on the *Warspite's* bridge the control stations were fully manned, only Knight's normal position reserved for the ship's first officer was empty while Knight sat in the captain's chair instead.

"Sub-light in twenty seconds." Ash announced.

"All weapons stand by." Knight ordered, "Sensors I want a full passive sweep as soon as we arrive in the system."

"Dropping to sub-light now." Ash added as the *Warspite* slowed below the speed of light, arriving close to the white dwarf star at the heart of the Luyten 212-19 system.

"Captain it looks like we're picking up multiple transponders." Goldman said.

"Thermal and optical scans indicate eight vessels orbiting the second planet. Two small capital ships and six light vessels." one of the sensor operators added.

"None of these match any of the profiles recorded in the Eta Indi system captain." Lucas added as she compared the information available to data gathered during the last engagement with the Genex fleet.

"Captain I just picked up a tachyon pulse, we've just been scanned." Cortez said suddenly.

"They know we're here." Ash commented.

"What about the captain?" Knight asked.

"I've think I've got their transponder but I can't see their ship." Goldman replied, "It looks like there's a second transponder being broadcast from the same location. It looks like a space station."

Knight looked at his console where he saw an image of the Genex refuge space station .

"A rotating ring?" he commented.

"It could a refuge station captain." Lucas commented, "I don't see any signs of weapon systems or extensive sensors. I don't think they'll have detected our arrival."

"There's another vessel heading for the station from the second planet captain." Goldman said, "It looks like it's just a shuttle but it could be carrying troops."

"Then we need to beat it there." Knight said.

"I've got the coordinates, jump plotted." Thomas announced.

"Very good. Helm take us to that station. Goldman inform Major Willis that his marines will be deploying shortly." Knight ordered.

The arrival of the *Warspite* in the Luyten 212-19 system was detected almost instantly by the alien AI using the sensors aboard the warships and the depot it now controlled. Too far away for conventional electromagnetic sensors to have picked up yet, the AI engaged the active tadar aboard the frigate to identify and track the *Warspite* and as soon as it was revealed to be a Commonwealth warship it was flagged as hostile. The ships orbiting the depot began to manoeuvre to defend the planet, the AI expecting the *Warspite* to move in and attack. However, the heavy cruiser instead turned towards the refuge station that the AI had despatched a skip towards and a build up of tachyons indicated that the *Warspite* intended to travel there instead. Sure enough the *Warspite* suddenly accelerated to faster than light speed again, heading towards the refuge station.

Had the vessels orbiting the second planet been operated by organic crews then the *Warspite* would easily have been able to make it to the space station ahead of them but the alien AI had already plotted the course that the heavy cruiser would take and implemented a counter plan of its own. At the moment the *Warspite* engaged its faster than light drive the heavy frigate controlled by the AI fired its main armament into the cruiser's path. Instead of a conventional directed energy weapon the frigate was armed with a charged tachyon projector in its main mounting. This fired blasts of tachyons with an opposite charge to those used for enabling starships to travel faster than light and when such blasts struck a vessel travelling at these speeds it would strip away the tachyons surrounding it.

The *Warspite* lurched heavily and alarms sounded as the heavy cruiser suddenly dropped to sub-light speed far short of the refuge station and the command crew began frantically checking their instruments.

"What happened?" Knight demanded.

"We're out of FTL. We made it about a third of the way to the station." Ash replied.

"Jump data was good. We should have made it." Thomas added.

"Obviously we didn't." Knight said.

"Captain we were struck by a massive tachyon blast." Cortez said, "It must have knocked us out of FTL."

"One of those ships has a charged tachyon projector." Lucas commented.

"Bridge to engineering, what's our status?" Knight said, activating the intercom.

"I'm picking up stress points all over the ship. Being dragged out of FTL like didn't do us any good but I think we'll hold together for another jump as long as the same thing doesn't happen again."

"And if it does?" Knight asked.

"Then we run the risk of hull breaches or worse." Bernard answered.

"Define 'worse' commander." Knight said.

"The ship will break apart. Even our artificial gravity field can only do so much to keep the ship together when we're subjected to those kind of unbalanced forces." Bernard told him.

"Captain if we try going to FTL again then the Genex will just use that weapon again." Goldman pointed out.

"Assuming it is the Genex." Thomas added.

"Captain that shuttle is still heading towards the space station and it's got a good head start on us. What are your orders?" Goldman said and Knight considered this briefly.

"Scramble all fighters and drones. Tell the hangar to launch Major Willis and his men as well. The fighters are to escort our marines, the drones to stay with us while we hold off those ships. I doubt they'll be staying in orbit around the second planet for long." he said.

"Scramble. Scramble. Scramble." Shaw heard Goldman say over the intercom and she grinned.

"About damn time too. I don't know what the hell it was that hit us but I almost lost my lunch." she said before the magnetic launch system activated and her fighter shot rapidly down the launch tube and out into space, emerging alongside another fighter from the second launch tube while behind them the next pair of attack craft were being loaded into the tubes, "Okay Kaz what have we got?" she asked.

"Nothing in range, the sky is clear." Mori replied as he checked the fighter's sensors.

"*Warspite* this is Archangel we don't have any targets on our scopes. What exactly are we doing out here?" Shaw signalled.

"Archangel you are to escort the marine skip to the space station located nine light minutes ahead. We will follow as far as possible but it may not be possible for us to stick with you." Goldman told her.

"Babysitting grunts. Just great." Shaw said.

"At least there are no rocks to crash into this time." Mori commented.

"All craft deployed captain." Goldman announced.

"Status of enemy ships?" Knight asked.

"I'm picking up increasing tachyon levels captain. Looks like they're preparing to jump." Cortez said before her console registered a rapid succession of tachyon pulses as the AI controlled ships performed a synchronised FTL jump that took them from orbiting the second planet to arrayed in a line behind the *Warspite* with the capital ships and monitors in the centre and the corvettes arrayed either side of them.

"Captain we have multiple contacts astern at one light second." Goldman warned.

"Helm one eighty turn." Knight ordered and Ash fired the *Warspite's* main drives to spin the ship around to face the newly arrived warships without altering the ship's direction of travel or speed.

"Picking up multiple launches captain." Goldman added.

"Missiles?" Knight asked.

"Drones captain. Their profile is the same as those used by the Genex at Eta Indi." Lucas said, "I think we can flag one of those capital ships as a heavy picket. The other is probably a heavy frigate mounting the charged tachyon projector."

"Incoming missiles." Goldman called out suddenly as the corvettes released a wave of missiles and in unison accelerated ahead of the other ships, closing their ranks to form a line in front of the monitors and capital ships. Half of the drones launched by the heavy picket also accelerated, forming a screen to cover the advance of the corvettes while the other half remained behind to protect the other ships.

"Light turrets target those missiles. X-ray lasers the ships that fired them. Main guns try for a shot against that frigate if it comes into the line of fire. We're going to need to get out of here sooner or later." Knight ordered.

The skip carrying the force of infantry combat robots docked at one of the external ports along the refuge station's core. The robots carried aboard the skip were some of the lightest built by the Genex, humanoid in structure they were designed to use the same weapons and equipment as ordinary troops instead of having weapons integrated into their structure. Equipped to form a boarding party that would fight in the confines of a starship, the robots were armed with assault rifles in place of the bulkier machine guns that were standard for such machines in ground combat but to further boost their firepower each of them also had an underslung grenade launcher and as they marched out of their skip they brought these weapons up to their shoulders, ready to fire.

The lack of gravity in the core of the station meant nothing to the robots and they simply engaged magnetic clamps in the soles of their feet that enabled them to simply walk up the inside of the core towards the cluster of elevators. When they reached these they divided into equal groups, sending a part of their force in each down to the outer ring section.

There were three levels to the outer ring, all connected by the elevators and the AI now controlling the robots determined that the most efficient way of searching them all was to continue dividing its force evenly. Two robots would exit each elevator on each level to cut off access to the elevator and trap the occupants of the station on whatever floor they were on while the remaining four out of each group would search the sections of the ring between the elevators one level at a time. Ordinarily splitting up a force of infantry like this was dangerous, inviting an enemy to pick them off a few at a time. However, each of the robots was totally expendable and the AI could afford to sacrifice a few of them if it meant locating its quarry so that the remaining machines could then gather together to overwhelm them.

"We've got trouble." Reeves said to Hayes when the station's sensors showed the skip manoeuvring to dock and he picked up his weapon, "What are we likely facing?"

"Probably a large platoon sized force of light infantry robots. About fifty or sixty depending on the shuttle, they can be packed in pretty tight without complaining." Hayes replied, picking up her own weapon as well, "Of course they're not actual light infantry. Their armour protection is closer to heavy infantry power armour.

These guns might not have enough penetrating power to stop them."

"Well they're all we have. Hopefully we'll be able to keep ahead of them until the *Warspite* gets here." Reeves said, "Bring that bag. We may need to hide where there aren't any supplies."

Hayes slung her bag over her shoulder before she and Reeves left the communications room and headed towards the nearest elevator.

The *Warspite's* light turrets picked off the missiles fired towards the cruiser while the medium X-ray lasers turned to track the corvettes. These ships did not stay in front of the other robotic vessels though, instead they accelerated towards the *Warspite* and changed their formation into a line astern instead of abreast. This made the first corvette a relatively easy target while those following behind were shielded by it. The *Warspite's* X-ray lasers both hit the lead corvette, the first blasting the forward section of the ship including its fixed main gun away from the ship before the second destroyed one of its drive units. This was followed up by a second volley that struck the corvette more centrally and the two beams burned right through the light warship and it exploded. The three remaining corvettes were close enough to be able to effectively return fire by this point and they orientated themselves to be able to fire their main guns at the *Warspite* as they moved

past. Although they mounted only light weapons these were numerous and the *Warspite* was struck by a barrage of free-electron beam lasers that burned gouges in its armour around the neutral particle beam cannon mounted on that side of the hull.

"Damage report." Knight said.

"Nothing serious captain." Goldman responded, "The hull isn't breached."

"Main guns are still functional." one of the gunners added.

"Captain we may have a problem." Lucas said and Knight turned towards her.

"Explain please lieutenant." he said.

"Those corvettes have too many guns sir. Four turrets each plus a fixed gun and a missile system." she replied, "Nothing we know so far about the Genex suggests that they've been able to miniaturise their weapon systems more than us so there shouldn't be enough room inside for them all. The same with that picket. I've not seen that many drones launched by a ship of that size before."

"Captain, remember what Nexus told us about the weapons aboard his ship?" Goldman said, looking at Knight, "Because he didn't have to maintain an environment for a living crew he had more room for weapons."

"Are you saying that those ships are robotic?" Knight asked.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Ash commented.

"They're dividing again captain." Goldman said, "Two of the corvettes are slowing and turning. The third is going for our fighters and the skip. It's taking a squadron of drones with it as well."

"Warn Shaw she has company coming. Do we have a lock on that frigate yet?" Knight said.

"They're holding back captain." one of the *Warspite's* gunners responded, "They're at the limit of our range."

"I've got a missile lock but I'm not sure we'll get through their defensive fire captain." a second gunner added.

"Let's at least see how they respond. I want a four missile volley." Knight ordered.

"Launching missiles now captain." the gunner replied as a pair of missiles shot from beneath each wing and began to speed towards the robotic capital ships. Given the extreme range between the *Warspite* and its opponents the robotic vessels did not open fire immediately, instead the screen of drones in front of their larger vessels began to redeploy themselves. This meant that when the missiles came closer they were better placed to fire at them, adding their weapons to those of the frigate and heavy picket in intercepting them and all four missiles exploded far short of their target.

"Multiple bogeys closing from the rear." Mori announced.

"Okay Kaz I got it." Shaw replied, "Marine Alpha are you set?" she then signalled to the skip.

"Copy that Archangel. We're eight minutes out from the target. Can you hold them until then?" the marine pilot responded.

"Don't worry marine alpha. We'll keep them off your back. All ships break and engage." Shaw broadcast to the other Commonwealth attack craft and they all suddenly broke away from the skip, spinning or circling around to instead engage the robotic craft closing from behind them.

The robotic corvette and drones were all accelerating at the same rate to maintain a formation that placed the drones in a box pattern ahead of the corvette to screen it.

"We'll need to watch that corvette." Mori said, "It's almost a frigate in firepower."

"Interceptors see if you can draw off some of those drones. I want that corvette." Shaw broadcast.

"Understood Archangel." one of the interceptor pilots responded and the six interceptors raced ahead of the dozen superiority fighters and moments later they each unleashed a missile towards the drones.

In response three of the drones peeled away from the formation and half the missiles turned to follow them.

On the other hand the remaining drones targeted the incoming missiles with their cannons. They successfully shot down two of the missiles but their focus was taken away from the interceptors as they came closer and fired their own nose mounted gauss cannons. The remaining missiles each hit the drones they were targeting, destroying all four in rapid succession while another two were hit by cannon fire. One of these exploded instantly while the second span out of control before breaking up. The drones were already returning fire as half their number were destroyed and the interceptors all broke off to evade the cannon fire and the drones turned to follow them.

This left the way to the corvette itself open for Shaw and her squadron of superiority fighters to close in. The warship's assigned target was not the squadron of fighters though, instead it was the skip still heading for the space station and it continued heading straight towards it.

"I've got a lock." Mori said and Shaw nodded.

"Firing now." she replied, launching a missile towards the corvette.

Several of the other fighters also launched missiles at the corvette and this prompted the robotic warship to target them with its turrets. The free-electron beam lasers picked off the missiles one by one but in opting to protect itself from these the corvette left itself open as the fighters zoomed past. Almost in unison these turned sideways and fired their gauss cannons at short range, strafing the corvette along its entire length. This was not enough to destroy the warship altogether but it did produce several internal explosions,

destroying two of its turrets and damaging its engines. The AI controlling the corvette rapidly calculated that it could no longer catch the skip and instead it launched a single missile before stopping its acceleration entirely to focus on the fighters instead.

"The skip's got a missile heading its way." Mori said.

"What about our interceptors Kaz?" Shaw asked.

"I'm still picking up three and it looks like they've dealt with the drones. They're heading for us now." Mori told her.

"Interceptors we've got this. Shoot down that missile and make sure marine alpha gets to the station." Shaw broadcast as she completed turning her fighter around and sped back towards the damaged corvette.

Reeves and Hayes heard the sound of marching feet and quickly ducked out of sight, peering over a storage unit as four robots marched into view at the far end of a chamber that was long enough for the curvature of the deck to be visible.

"Four of them. They look like they're armed with the same rifles the troops with your admiral had." Reeves said and Hayes nodded.

"The light units are designed to use standard weapons. It's cheaper." she explained.

"Well four is too many to risk taking on directly. We'd never take them all out before they could summon the others." Reeves replied.

"So what do we do? They're heading this way." Hayes said.

"We retreat. Then we take a look at what's in the storage units in the last compartment we came through."

Reeves told her and keeping low they hurried out of the chamber.

Once they were in the next compartment Reeves began opening the storage units that filled it, checking the contents.

"You know if you let me in on what you were looking for I could help." Hayes commented.

"Anything volatile. I want to make a really big bang." Reeves told her.

"A bomb?" Hayes exclaimed, "But we're on the outer edge of the ring. We could blow a massive hole in the hull."

"That's the idea. If the armour of those robots is anything like heavy infantry powered armour then we'd need serious high explosives to destroy them but we might have a chance at putting a hole in an unarmoured hull." Reeves said.

"You mean space them?" Hayes said, smiling.

"Exactly." Reeves replied and Hayes suddenly opened a nearby storage unit to check what was inside.

"Here." Hayes said after checking several of the units and she held one open so that Reeves could see the gas cylinders inside, "Coolant. Highly flammable." she said and Reeves then opened up the adjacent storage unit to check it as well.

"More here. Let's hope it's enough." Reeves said as he took a grenade from his load carrying vest, "There's a reel of lightweight line in that bag. I'll need it." he added and Hayes quickly rummaged through the bag she carried to find the line and handed it to him. Reeves tied this to the grenade's ring pull before dropping it into the storage bin. Just to make sure he then dropped the rest of his grenades into the storage bin before closing the lid so that the line led out from beneath it, "Let's hope this lid is heavy enough." he said as he began unravelling the line and backing away. He and Hayes retreated to the far end of the compartment and took cover, waiting for the advancing robots to appear.

"Seal your suit." Reeves said softly before he lowered his spacesuit visor and Hayes copied him just as the robots came into view at the far end of the chamber.

"Here they come." Hayes said, peering around the storage unit they were hidden behind.

"Tell me when they get to the bomb." Reeves replied and Hayes watched the robots advancing towards them, checking between each row of storage units to make sure that there was no-one hidden behind them. "Now!" Hayes hissed when she saw the first of the robots drawing level with the storage bin that Reeves had thrown the grenade into. Reeves then pulled on the line but nothing happened, the line going taught without the pin being pulled from the grenade and so Reeves tugged on the line again.

"Any time you're ready." Hayes commented.

"Setting booby traps is more of a marine thing." Reeves said, pulling the line once more but this time it did not simply pull tight, instead the line managed to pull the pin from the grenade, "Hold on!" he snapped as he grabbed hold of Hayes before the grenade went off inside the storage unit, triggering the other grenades in the process.

The combined blast tore apart the storage unit as well as those surrounding it and the gas canisters they contained all burst open and released their combustible contents. This gas promptly ignited, creating a massive ball of flame and a secondary shock wave that hurled the nearby robots backwards. The explosion also fractured the hull beneath the storage units, creating a large hole out into space and the flames created by the burning gas were extinguished as rapidly as they had been created when the air inside the space station was blown out through the hole.

The station's automated systems detected the hull breach and a klaxon sounded as the doors at either end of the compartment slammed shut, trapping Reeves and Hayes inside with the combat robots. The robots did not remain in the compartment for long though as the rush of escaping air blew all four of the machines out through the gaping hole into space before the rush of air calmed as the compartment was left in a vacuum. "Okay captain, so now what?" Hayes asked.

The two corvettes and their accompanying drones turned back towards the *Warspite* and at the same time they began their second run the drones screening the robotic capital ships and monitors accelerated forwards as well. This was followed by the vessels behind them also moving in, trapping the *Warspite* between the two groups of ships. The two monitors cut their engines abruptly, drifting towards the *Warspite* while the heavy frigate and picket continued to accelerate.

"Captain I'm detecting a large energy build up in the two smaller vessels." one of the *Warspite's* sensor operators said.

"Captain I think they're monitors." Lucas added as she studied the sensor readings herself, "I think they're using a combined drive and weapon system like the ones used on the old Munich-class ships."

"So their engines are plasma cannons as well." Thomas commented.

"Helm hard to port." Knight ordered and Ash nodded.

"Hard to port aye." he said, turning the *Warspite* just at the moment that the two monitors fired their main guns.

To save on internal space and allow them to carry a weapon that was powerful even by the standards of a monitor the two light warships combined their primary weapon with their drive system, using the energy of the plasma from their fusion reactors as both a means of thrust and to attack enemy vessels. There was a drawback to this system though was that the ship could not fire while changing course or speed and so when the *Warspite* turned the smaller ships were forced to fire their weapons before they reached full power to prevent the heavy cruiser from leaving their field of fire entirely. This was not enough to ensure a hit though and one of the plasma beams missed the *Warspite* entirely while the other just hit the end of one of the cruiser's wings and blew it off.

"Damage report." Knight said.

"We've lost the antenna arrays on the starboard side." Goldman responded.

"Captain the enemy corvettes are closing in again." a sensor operator added.

"Target them with medium turrets only, we need the others to screen us from those drones. Ash, try and line us up on those monitors." Knight ordered.

"Already on it captain." Ash replied as he turned the *Warspite* back towards the robot vessels and as soon as the ship was lined up on the nearest monitor the ship's gunners fired its main guns. The twin neutral particle beam cannons struck the monitor head on, the energy beam travelling down the gaping maw of the combined drive system and forced plasma beam and there was a brilliant flash of light as the monitor's fusion reactor exploded and vaporised the warship.

At the same time as the monitor was destroyed the two corvettes began their run on the *Warspite*, each of them launching another volley of missiles before following these up with their turrets and main guns. Once more these could do little against the thick armour of the *Warspite* but one of them did strike one of the cruiser's ventral gauss cannons and the turret exploded. In response the *Warspite* fired its X-ray laser turrets again and both of these struck one of the corvettes head on, burning along almost its entire length and splitting it into two large pieces of flaming debris. One of the missiles fired by the corvettes was then able to slip through the *Warspite's* defences and it hit one of the two mission adaptive modules attached to the cruiser's hull. This blew a hole in the module and destroyed a number of the courier drones it contained but other than that it inflicted no damage to the *Warspite* itself.

"Captain the second corvette isn't slowing down. I think it's going to try ramming us." Goldman said suddenly when she saw the course being taken by the other corvette.

"Full power to engines. Take us through those drones, smash right through if you have to." Knight ordered.

"Any particular heading captain?" Ash asked as he increased the power to the engines.

"Towards that other monitor. Main guns fire when ready." Knight replied.

"Stay in tight." Shaw told the other pilots of her squadron as they flew after the damaged corvette, "All that corvette's weapons on the starboard side are out. Get in close and launch from point blank range. Don't give it chance to turn and defend itself."

The fighters rushed towards the corvette, staying in the shadow of its own hull to protect themselves from its remaining two turrets. The corvette spun as the fighters closed in and the Commonwealth pilots matched this by angling their craft down to stay out of the line of fire.

"Range six thousand metres" Mori said, "We've got a lock. We launch now or not at all."

"Firing. Fox one, fox two." Shaw replied as she fired a pair of missiles in rapid succession.

The other fighters also unleashed their missiles and the fighters broke off their run as these streaked towards the corvette. One after another slammed into the robotic warship. Individually the missiles meant for engaging other agile attack craft had little destructive power but when more than twenty of them hit the corvette in rapid succession it was enough to inflict severe damage and the vessel's engines and weapons shut down, leaving it nothing more than a burning wreck drifting through space.

"I'm not reading any activity from the corvette." Mori said, sorting through the sensor data available for any sign of patterns that pointed towards the ship still being operational.

"Okay target is dead." Shaw broadcast, "Good work boys now let's go and make sure those grunts get to the space station and back safely."

"Major there's something here I think you should see." the pilot of the skip said over the intercom and Willis made his way forwards into the cockpit.

"Show me." he said.

"Here." the co-pilot replied, bringing up a recording from the skip's optical sensors on the display in front of him, "We just picked this up."

The recording showed the refuge station, focusing on the rotating section and just as Willis was about to ask what he was supposed to be looking for when there was an explosion from the outside of the ring and debris was hurled out into space. The co-pilot then froze the playback and zoomed in on the damaged section so that the shape of one object being thrown out of the station by the blast could be seen.

"I don't like the look of that." Willis said as he looked at the still moving humanoid form, "It looks like the robots are aboard the station."

"Your orders major?" the pilot asked.

"Head for the source of the explosion." Willis ordered, "I'm guessing that the captain had something to do with it and he's just given us an alternative way inside."

"Yes major." the pilot responded and as he adjusted the skip's course to take it towards the rotating ring Willis returned to the rear compartment.

"Okay we're nearly there." he told the platoon, "We won't be going in through an air lock though, we'll be performing an EVA to go through a damaged section of hull so seal up your suits and plug into the O-two supply here. If I'm right we may be in and out in just a few minutes."

The lack of atmosphere inside the compartment limited sound to travelling just through the structure of the station to reach Reeves and Hayes but they could still hear the dull pounding as the robots on the other side of the door attempted to smash their way through.

"I don't think that door's going to hold." Hayes said as they both levelled their personal defence weapons at the door, "It's only meant to hold back the air on the other side. Sooner or later it's going to-" and then the door suddenly buckled and a section was torn out of the frame. This allowed the robots on the opposite side to grab hold of the edge and begin to pull the door free, ignoring the rush of air past them as the atmosphere of the adjoining chamber escaped into space as well.

Seeing the head of one of the robots Reeves fired his weapon on automatic, emptying the magazine into it in just a few seconds. The ten millimetre pistol calibre bullets fired by the personal defence weapon could not penetrate the armoured structure of the robot's head but the optical sensors built into the machine's head were more vulnerable and some of the bullets struck these, smashing their way through to the circuitry inside. The main processing system and power supply for the robot were located within its torso where they could be protected by the thicker armour around it but with most of its sensory input suddenly cut off the robot staggered backwards, its arms flailing as it tried to determine what was happening around it.

Meanwhile another robot stepped forwards and returned fire through the gap, firing short controlled bursts from its rifle that forced Reeves and Hayes to retreat while the other robots behind the door continued the process of breaking it down.

"They'll be in here soon." Hayes said, "Got any other ideas?"

"Outside." Reeves replied.

"Outside? You mean-"

"Out onto the hull. Even if they do figure out where we went we'll have more options for where to run to."

Reeves interrupted before he started to run towards the hole in the hull at the far end of the compartment.

"Wait for me." Hayes called out after him even though the radio in her suit meant raising her voice made no difference and she ran after him.

Reaching the edge of the hole the pair looked down and out into space where, thanks to the rotation of the station's ring, it appeared to them as if the stars were in motion.

"Turn your magnetic boots on but hold onto me as we go through." Reeves said, "The spin will try to throw us off and if our boots can't hold us down then I don't want us getting separated."

"Okay." Hayes said, activating her magnetic boots before hand in hand they both climbed down through the hole and out onto the outside of the refuge station's hull, "I feel sick." Hayes added.

"Look down at the hull, not at the stars." Reeves told her as they began to walk across the hull and Hayes nodded.

"Right. Look at the hull. Mustn't throw up now." she said.

"Major we're picking up a transmission on one of our frequencies." the skip pilot told Willis.

"Let me hear." Willis said.

"Look at the hull, not at the stars." he then heard Reeves say.

"That's the captain." Willis exclaimed, "That sounds like he and the Genex woman are outside. Try to trace that signal and run optical and IR scans. If they're doing an EVA then they must be in trouble."

The surviving robotic monitor turned towards the oncoming *Warspite* but doing so ensured that it could not fire its primary weapon and Ash used this fact to their advantage, setting a course that would take the heavy cruiser past the monitor instead of straight towards it before turning the entire ship to keep the enemy vessel in front of it.

"Target acquired. Main guns firing." one of the gunners announced and both the *Warspite's* neutral particle beam cannons fired together. Although Ash was doing his best to keep the monitor in the same position relative to the *Warspite* there was still some lateral drift and rather than simply burning straight through the monitor the beams sliced along it before penetrating the fusion reactor that made up a large percentage of its internal volume and there was another massive explosion as this monitor suffered the same fate as the first. At the same time as the *Warspite* was engaging the monitor with its main guns its light turrets were picking off the swarms of drones that made repeated runs at the cruiser while its X-ray lasers turned to track the rapidly approaching corvette. This ship was closing from the *Warspite's* starboard side. With the antenna arrays on the starboard wing tip destroyed it made targeting it difficult and before the *Warspite's* turrets could get a fix on it the corvette unleashed a rapid volley of six more missiles from close range. Overcoming the *Warspite's* electronic defences and with the cruiser's gun crews distracted by the attacking drones all six missiles slammed into the side of the heavy cruiser.

Two of the missiles hit one of the *Warspite's* forward drive units, instantly putting it out of action while two more struck the hull above it and blew large holes in the ship's outer sections. One of the last two missiles struck the nearest mission adaptive module and did nothing more than destroy a few more of the drones carried inside while the final weapon impacted beside one of the two dorsal X-ray laser turrets and blew the weapon from the hull.

The corvette was not on a suicide run as it had initially appeared to be though and it instead sped over the cruiser. This gave the cruiser's gunners the opportunity to get a clear shot with its remaining X-ray laser and the turret fired upwards into the underside of the robotic vessel. Struck at point blank range by the full force of the twin X-ray lasers the corvette was blasted into two pieces and the forward half of the vessel tumbled away while the rear section continued to accelerate out of control, its main drives locked on now that its control systems had been destroyed.

The destruction of this final light warship left the *Warspite* facing just the two robotic capital ships and the picket's remaining drones and the heavy cruiser now turned towards them.

Reeves and Hayes walked across the hull of the refuge station's ring section, their spacesuits now connected together but also holding onto one another to try and keep their movement in step to maximise the magnetic force holding them to the hull while the rotation attempted to throw them off into space.

"How far do you think we'll need to go?" Hayes asked, glancing behind her. They had already gone far enough that the curvature of the rotating ring hid the hole blasted in the hull by the explosion but as Hayes looked behind her she saw a figure come walking into view over the artificial horizon, "They're coming after us!" she exclaimed.

Reeves turned around and squatted down against the hull, making sure that both his feet were flat against it as he brought up his personal defence weapon.

"Get down. Don't kneel." he told Hayes, taking aim at the advancing robot before firing a short burst from his weapon. The vacuum surrounding him muffled the noise of the firing but the sound of the shots still reverberated through the weapon and Reeves heard each one .

Ahead of him the robot jerked but continued to advance as the bullets hit its armoured torso and failed to penetrate. Copying Reeves, Hayes also squatted down before firing her weapon in one long sustained burst before the magazine was emptied, only a few rounds having hit the robot at all.

"I'm out." she said and Reeves took a spare magazine from his load carrying vest and handed it to her.

"Make them count." he told her then he fired another rapid burst, this time aimed at the robot's head.

The robot brought up its own rifle and returned fire but the spin of the ring meant that Reeves and Hayes were carried out of the line of fire before being hit, the bullets passing over their heads. This was not a mistake that the robot would repeat, its own programming compensating for the error and lowering its weapon as it prepared to fire again just as two more robots appeared on the hull behind it. However, before any of the machines could fire a hail of heavy projectiles struck the ring section right where they were clustered and all three were smashed to pieces before the familiar shape of a Commonwealth fighter flew past Reeves and Hayes.

"I have visual contact with them." Shaw's voice said over the radio.

"Lieutenant Commander Shaw it's good to see you. Is there any chance of arranging a ride back to the *Warspite*?" Reeves transmitted.

"Already in hand captain. You just need to jump." Shaw told him.

"What does she mean jump?" Hayes asked.

"Jump." Reeves said simply and he reached out to deactivate Hayes' magnetic boots at the same time as he shut off his own and the pair were suddenly flung into space.

Hayes screamed as they tumbled through open space and she let go of her weapon, instead wrapping both arms tightly around Reeves. Lacking any propulsion packs to get them back to the station they continued to fly uncontrolled through space before the skip from the *Warspite* flew up to them, adjusting its speed and heading to match theirs as its hatch slid open.

"Hold on captain." Willis signalled before jumping from the skip and then he triggered his propulsion pack to take him towards Reeves and Hayes, "Take my hand." he said and he and Reeves linked hands before Willis fired his propulsion pack again.

"Major jink." the skip's pilot said when the craft's sensors picked up more robots walking across the hull and they fired their rifles into space.

Willis fired his propulsion pack again, adjusting the speed of the trio holding onto one another while the skip's pilot manoeuvred his craft to place it between them and the robots to act as a shield for them. This had the desired effect and the bullets from the robots' bullets bounced harmlessly off the skip's armoured hull before another volley of fire from a fighter's gauss cannons ripped through the alien controlled machines. As soon as Willis' propulsion pack brought him within reach of the skip another pair of space suited marines pulled him, Reeves and Hayes inside while another closed the hatch behind them.

"We're secure." the marine who had closed the hatch said into his radio.

"Copy that, we're heading home now." the pilot responded.

Ordinarily a heavy frigate would be a threat to a vessel of almost any size but the specialised nature of its main gun put it a severe disadvantage against the *Warspite*. All the frigate had to defend itself with were its light turrets and as the *Warspite* turned towards it the frigate fired its engines to close the gap between them enough that these would have a chance of inflicting damage on the larger warship.

"Do we have a firing solution?" Knight asked.

"Yes sir, missiles are locked but we'll need a lot to get through that frigate's defences." a gunner responded.

"I'm not worried about that spaceman, just be ready to fire a four missile salvo when I give the word. Helm take us in. All guns fire when ready." Knight ordered.

The robotic frigate turned as the *Warspite* began to close in, attempting to keep out of the fire arc of the cruiser's main guns. The *Warspite*'s remaining X-ray laser turret was still able to track the frigate though and it fired while the frigate's light turrets were still out of range. Although not as powerful as the cruiser's heavy neutral particle beam cannons the twin X-ray laser was still powerful enough to slice a deep furrow in the side of the frigate and there were several explosions from within it.

The frigate remained active though and the AI controlling it diverted more power to its drives, adjusting course slightly in an attempt to get the vessel beneath the lower limit of the *Warspite*'s X-ray lasers' field of fire while getting close enough that its free-electron beam laser turrets would have a better chance of inflicting damage to the heavily armoured cruiser.

Knight watched the motion of the frigate on the display in front of him closely, paying special attention to the distance between the two vessels.

"Captain that thing's getting very close." Lucas commented.

"I know that lieutenant. Mister Ash bring our nose down slightly. I want to get within two thousand metres."

Knight responded, "Missiles stand by."

"Taking us in captain." Ash said as he put the *Warspite* into a shallow dive. The robotic frigate countered this by also moving downwards to keep beneath the cruiser and out of the line of fire of its most powerful guns. The AI controlling the frigate did not attempt to maintain a minimum distance from the *Warspite* though and the two vessels continued to close in on one another until Knight saw the range to target reading hit just two thousand metres.

"Missiles fire! Helm pull away, full power." he ordered and in an instant four missiles dropped from beneath one of the *Warspite*'s wings and immediately engaged their engines.

The frigate's early warning system detected the launch and the AI immediately knew that the correct course of action was to shift its turrets away from attacking the *Warspite* to laying down defensive fire instead. However, being at point blank range meant that despite being able to determine what needed to be done within a matter of microseconds, there was not enough time for the frigates turrets to reorientate themselves to target all of the missiles before they struck the frigate.

Just one heavy missile had enough explosive power to cripple the frigate so when three out of the four hit it the robotic warship was doomed. The three large explosions ripped open its hull and tore apart its internal systems before a massive secondary explosion from the fuel store for the main fusion reactors vaporised what was left of the warship. Already pulling away from it the moment the missiles were launched, the *Warspite* was already out of the danger area when this happened and the cruiser escaped further damage. A number of the drones that had been attacking the *Warspite* were closer to the frigate when it exploded though and lacking the thick armour plating of the Commonwealth vessel they were destroyed along with the capital ship.

"What's the status of our marines?" Knight asked.

"On their way back with our fighters now captain. They have Captain Reeves and the Genex woman with them." Goldman answered.

"What about the ambassador?" Knight said, noticing the omission but Goldman shook her head.

"He wasn't mentioned sir." she said.

"Helm lay in an intercept course. Weapons I want one missile fired at that picket every twenty seconds. Force it to pull its drones back to defend itself. Commander Thomas plot us a jump back to the Eta Indi system." Knight said.

"Captain the picket is changing course, it looks like it's pulling back." Goldman told him, "It looks like the drones are disengaging as well."

"The picket is heading towards the second planet captain." Lucas added.

"The robots have decided they're losing too many resources and are trying to save what they've got." Ash suggested.

"Most likely, yes." Knight agreed, "If they're pulling back I'm inclined to let them. Let's pick up the captain and get out of here."

Knight, Bernard and Doctor Thundercloud entered the *Warspite*'s forward hangar just as Reeves and Hayes disembarked from the skip and Hayes promptly dropped to all fours on the deck.

"Are you okay?" Reeves asked, reaching down to help her back to her feet as Thundercloud also rushed forwards.

"Fine." she replied, "I'm just glad to be back aboard a proper starship again. I don't mind admitting that leaping out into space left me considering praying to that God you read to me about."

"Captain I'm glad you're both safe." Thundercloud said and Reeves smiled.

"Thank you doctor. Although for a short time it was touch and go." he said.

"What happened to the ambassador?" Knight said.

"The Genex admiral was determined not to have any form of robot around and his security detail ambushed us. We retrieved the ambassador's hard drive though so it can be returned to Nexus." Reeves answered.

"Captain the forces we encountered all appeared robotic." Knight said, "I suppose it's too much to hope for that that's not related to the alien computer virus we've been encountering?"

"I'm afraid so commander." Reeves replied and he glanced at Hayes, "Hayes' former superior has decided that he wants to bring down the Genex and is using the virus to do it. Apparently they have an entire army of robots just waiting for the virus to take over. Obviously it's already reached here so who knows how many are already affected?" then he looked at Bernard and added, "What's the status of the *Warspite*?"

"Damaged captain. I just had her put back together the way I like her again and then we came charging into this nest of homicidal machines after you." Bernard responded.

"We'll be heading back to Eta Indi shortly." Knight added.

"We got hit by a charged tachyon projector and forced out of FTL. We'll need to dry dock when we get back to Centaur so I can make sure all the stress damage is fixed." Bernard continued.

"Very well. I'm sure fleet command will want to hear about everything that happened on the station." Reeves replied.

"What did happen? Did that old guy just invite you all the way out here to present you with a super villain monologue?" Knight said.

"He wanted our help." Reeves said.

"Our help? And he thinks we'll give it?" Knight replied.

"To prevent the alien AI overrunning the Commonwealth after it's destroyed the Genex? Yes, I think the Commonwealth will agree. Especially considering what else he's offering us." Reeves said and he turned to Hayes.

"Apparently I'm the future of the Genex." she said, "Any children I have will be ordinary humans."

"He found a way to undo the genetic manipulation? Incredible." Thundercloud said.

"He didn't provide any proof of that but that is what he told us. Our help could be conditional on any Genex we save undergoing the same procedure." Reeves said.

"The exact opposite of what the Genex planned to do to us if they'd won the war." Bernard commented.

"Quite, now if you don't mind I would like to go and get changed." Reeves said and he took a step towards the exit from the hangar before suddenly stopping and looking at Bernard again, "Oh and Adam?"

"Yes captain?" the engineer replied.

"Thank you for the champagne. It came in most useful." Reeves said before he held out his hand towards Hayes, "Coming Jennifer?" he asked and she smiled as she took it and then she waved at the Warspite's other senior officers as she and Reeves walked away from them, leaving them staring in confusion.

"Do you think-" Bernard began before trailing off.

EPILOGUE

The champagne cork exited the bottle with a 'pop' and then the old man poured out equal measures for himself, his grand daughter and Captain Schaar. The trio were standing in a compartment aboard the Enigma that had been outfitted as a meeting room for senior officers. This meant that it had been given comfortable furnishings and there were also numerous large display screens on the walls. These were currently set to show both military status reports and also civilian broadcasts and the information being shown on both was the same. All across Genex space the robotic forces that had been stockpiled for use against the Commonwealth were coming on line of their own accord and going rogue. All attempts to shut them down had failed and military and police units were desperately trying to contain them. This was not helped by an increasing level of disruption to other computer networks as the alien computer virus spread from world to world and system to system.

"Here is to a job well done." he said as they all lifted their glasses, "I knew you could do it." he added, looking at his granddaughter.

"It was easy." she replied, "Professor Tanner did the hard work in separating out the parts of the code we needed."

"Yes, I do hope he and his family are alright. It would be such a shame to lose a man of his talents, even if we could never tell him what he was really doing for us."

"Isn't it a bit early to celebrate admiral?" Schaar asked and she pointed to the wall mounted displays, "Take a look at these reports, the government is in chaos as are our forces. We're getting word from every system of heavy losses in manpower and equipment. It will take at least three weeks for forces to arrive from the Commonwealth. If they come at all. There might not be anything left of us by then." but the old man simply smiled and sipped at his drink before replying.

"My dear Anna as the good Captain Reeves who kindly gave us this very valuable bottle of champagne might say, have a little faith." he said before lifting his glass to his lips again.