

WARSPITE: AN ONCOMING STORM

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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When a mysterious starship fires on an exploration ship many light years from Earth the Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite* is sent to investigate. What it's crew finds far beyond the frontier of known space threatens to change the way humanity sees itself in the universe...

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The red maple leaf emblem on the *Saint Lawrence's* hull made it clear that it was a very long way from its home base in Nova Scotia. At one hundred and fifty metres long the craft, a cutter, was not ideally suited to being sent as far as it had been on its own. Normally it performed more short ranged missions making use of the remotely directed drones it carried in the bulging structure along its otherwise sleek upper hull to deter and engage outlaw traffic. But now it waited in a high orbit above a world in the Phi-2 Pavonis system, just over eighty-one light years away from Earth and well beyond the outer edge of the Fringe Worlds that were generally considered the outer limits of human expansion. For this mission the *Saint Lawrence's* normal compliment of attack and sensor drones had been exchanged for specialised planetary survey drones and eight of them now orbited the planet below in an evenly spaced ring around its equator while a pair of messenger drones remained aboard the ship in case of emergency. This far from the nearest settled system the tachyon transmitter aboard the *Saint Lawrence* was useless, so sending a pre-recorded message aboard a drone was the only way that the crew had of calling for aide if they got into difficulty out here.

The data feeds from the drones were being relayed from one to the next until they could be sent to the *Saint Lawrence* itself where just one bored crewman was monitoring it while he listened to music to pass the time. "Anything interesting?" a voice from behind the crewman asked as someone pulled one of the earpieces from his ears.

"Lieutenant." he exclaimed, sitting up straight as he looked at Lieutenant Baker, the *Saint Lawrence's* first officer standing behind him, "I wasn't expecting you." and she smiled back at him.

"Obviously." she replied, "So Davis, what's down there?"

Davis sighed.

"Green pastures, blue skies and oceans and an atmosphere free of detectable toxins." he said, "If it weren't so far from Sol it would make an ideal colony world."

"Well someone back home finds it interesting." Baker commented as she wandered over to her own station and sat down before calling up a copy of the feed Davis was seeing on her console, "Enough to send us all the way out here."

"Yeah about that." Davis responded, "Why did the Defence Ministry agree to this? We're border patrol, not deep space exploration. Hell, even the Commonwealth itself doesn't send ships out this far."

Baker shrugged.

"When we get home you can write to your MP and ask." she said, "But in the mean time-" and then she was interrupted by a bleeping from another nearby console.

"What's going on?" Davis said when he heard the alarm and Baker hurried to investigate.

"Proximity alarm." she said, "Someone just dropped out of FTL on the far side of the planet. Can you re-task one of the drones to get us a better look?"

"I'll give it a go. But these things are meant for planetary survey, not ship to ship action." Davis said.

"Well we don't have the time to go back to Earth and get anything better so it'll have to do." Baker said before she activated the intercom beside her, "Contact. Contact. Captain to the bridge."

Relaying commands through the network of drones Davis instructed one of the ones located on the far side of the planet to turn around and direct the limited sensors it possessed towards the source of the tachyon wave that had heralded the arrival of the unidentified vessel.

"What's going on?" the ship's captain said as he entered the bridge and moved to stand behind Baker.

"Unidentified contact on the other side of the planet." she replied, "No identifiable transponder."

"So it's not one of ours then." the captain responded, "I'm not taking any chances. Sound action stations."

"All hands action stations. Action stations." Baker said into the intercom, "Unidentified contact."

The three crew members already on the bridge strapped themselves into their seats as they were joined by the rest of the bridge crew who hurried into the room one by one.

"Davis can you get us a picture yet?" the captain asked.

"Results coming through now captain." Davis replied, "I'm not picking up any significant EM emissions."

"She's running silent?" Baker asked but Davis shook his head.

"I don't think so. I just don't think that the ship is conducting any active scans. There's still some thermal output concentrated somewhere inside though."

"What about a picture?" the captain said.

"Coming through." Davis said, "On screens now." and on large monitors around the bridge images recorded by the drones appeared of the newly arrived craft. With only the most basic of sensors available to them these were not of very high quality but it were enough to reveal the unidentified vessel to be roughly cylindrical in shape and by comparing the views available from different angles the *Saint Lawrence's* computer was able to assemble a crude three dimensional model that provided some details of the size of the craft.

"That's a big son of a bitch." one of the other bridge crew commented.

"Computer estimates a length of about seventeen hundred metres long." Davis said.

"A battleship." Baker added.

"Genex?" another crewman said and there were groans.

"He said it." Baker said.

"And the first round of drinks is on Mister Cooper when we get back." the captain said, "That's a real ship, not a hundred year old ghost."

"Heat bloom." Davis announced, "Looks like a drive signature. Whoever they are they're on the move, heading towards the planet."

"And our drones." the captain muttered, "Try an active radar pulse. See if you can get us a better image."

"Aye captain." Davis said as he sent the command to engage the active radar fitted to one of the drones. Intended for terrain mapping from orbit it was one of the few sensors carried by the drones that could provide the crew with detailed information about the ship. But before Davis could report on the findings of the scan a sudden flash appeared on the optical images of the ship and the feed from one of the drones was suddenly cut off.

"What the hell was that?" the captain exclaimed.

"Sir I think the unidentified vessel just fired on the drone that I ordered to emit the radar pulse." Davis responded, "There was a spike in the X-ray region of the EM spectrum."

"An X-ray laser?" Baker suggested, "Bring the weapons on line."

"No." the captain said, "An X-ray laser is serious firepower. All we've got is a couple of light turrets."

Then the images of the unidentified ship flashed again.

"I've lost the feed from drone five." Davis called out then a moment later he added, "And the ship is now emitting active lidar pulses. They just bounced off three and six." then there were more flashes, "Drones three and six are down." Davis announced, confirming what the rest of the bridge crew had already suspected the moment they saw the flashes of weapon fire from the unidentified ship.

"Okay that's it. We're done here." the captain announced, "Baker, I want a quick course plotting out of here. Send us a light year or so straight up and then take us back towards the Outer Colonies. As soon as we're in communication range we'll send a signal ahead. Mister Davis I want you to lock all of the remaining drones into a passive observation mode. If the Commonwealth sends anyone else to investigate they might be able to make use of whatever data they can collect. Assuming they don't get shot down as well of course."

"Enemy vessel is manoeuvring around the planet." Davis warned, "She'll be on us in thirty seconds."

"Lieutenant Baker, where's my escape course?" the captain said.

"Ten seconds." she replied.

"This is going to be close." the captain said, "Engage countermeasures."

"Aye sir, countermeasures online." Davis replied and then there was a loud 'Ping' from a speaker, "Enemy vessel just scanned us." Davis said, "Can't tell if it was just a detection pulse or a weapons lock."

"Course set!" Baker snapped.

"Helm get us out of here." the captain ordered, "Spin up the particle inductor and take us to FTL."

The *Saint Lawrence* then accelerated rapidly forwards as the much larger ship lumbered around the planet towards it. Though the cutter was accelerating at many gees, the crew felt almost nothing as the ship's own artificial gravity field compensated for it. As the cutter fled the particle inductor at the heart of its faster than light drive produced a shell of spinning tachyons around it, held in place by a magnetic field until there were enough that when their direction of travel was adjusted to match that of the cutter it was suddenly propelled to faster than light speed and vanished from the system in a flash.

The massive unidentified vessel then began to slow and arced back towards the planet, apparently unaware of the drones still drifting in orbit around it as well and watching and recording everything they could.

INTERLUDE.

Jennifer Hayes had just arrived back at her apartment after a day in her office when the communicator in her pocket started to sound, producing the classical tones that she had set as its alert. Without bothering to look at the display to see whether the caller was identified or not she lifted it to her head and accepted the call.

"Hello?" she said simply as she removed her shoes.

"Miss Hayes, it's me." a man's voice said and she immediately recognised as her assistant Enrico Vale.

"Enrico? I've only just walked in through the door. What's wrong now?" Hayes said, now heading towards the kitchen.

"Nothing hopefully." he replied, "But I thought you'd like to know that we just received a message from Martins."

Hayes froze, resting one hand on the kitchen counter.

"A direct signal or a drone?" she asked.

"A drone. He's too far out for a direct link. He's monitored some official Commonwealth chatter going back and forth in the Pavo Sector."

"The Canadians?" Hayes asked.

"It looks like they reached Phi Two Pavonis in plenty of time to witness the arrival of our friends and it played out exactly as we predicted." Vale said and Hayes smiled.

"Oh Enrico don't sell yourself short." she said, "Like you predicted. Predictions are your speciality after all. That's why I asked you to join me on this. Now tell me exactly what happened anyway."

"The ship arrived and detected the presence of the Canadians. It fired on their drones and they retreated before it could destroy their ship. They dropped out of FTL as soon as they got within communication range of a colony that could relay their signal. Martins hasn't attempted to locate them since but it seems likely that they're still heading back for the Sol Sector."

"As well they should after such a scare." Hayes said, "Now what about the Commonwealth? How are they reacting?"

"Orders have been sent from Earth to the fleet at Gamma Pavonis. They're ordering ships to Phi Two Pavonis to investigate."

"Ships? Can you tell me any more than that?" Hayes asked.

"No. The signal that Martins intercepted only contained orders for Admiral Mitchell to despatch a mission to investigate the system. She was warned not to leave Gamma Pavonis vulnerable but apart from that there was nothing. It's hardly surprising. The Commonwealth is still concerned about an attack on Gamma Pavonis by-

"Yes, yes, I know all that. If it wasn't for those lunatics I doubt that the Commonwealth would have stationed the ships we need that far out in Pavo. But look on the bright side Enrico, everything's starting to fall into place."

2.

The short range liner was little more than a glorified shuttle. After being transferred from the interstellar capable vessel that had brought him back from Earth to the Gamma Pavonis system just over thirty light years away Reeves had sat in a row of seats that was otherwise unoccupied and was waiting for the ship to reach the colony world of Centaur that was the centre of human civilisation in the system.

"Mommy! Look at the battleships!" the young boy sat in the row of seats in front of Reeves exclaimed. The child was sat next to the viewport while his parents sat on the other side of him and as Reeves peered over the seat he saw that the boy had his fingertip pressed against the transparent material.

Reeves looked out of the viewport at the end of the row of seats he occupied and saw what the boy had seen. The external view of the main orbital space station above Centaur never failed to impress Reeves whenever he saw it. From a distance it appeared to be a hollow frame that was capable of berthing starships as big as the two kilometre long super freighters used to transport bulk materials between systems. But what had captured the child's attention was the military section of the space station and in particular the berths of the Commonwealth task force that was based here.

"Those aren't battleships young man." Reeves said as he stood up and leant over the seat in front of him.

"But I can see the guns." the boy replied and Reeves glanced through the viewport again. The child was correct in this point. One of the vessels docked at the space station was aligned pointing towards the liner and the large forward mounted cannon was visible.

"That ship is a frigate." Reeves said.

"What's a frigate?" the boy asked.

"A frigate mounts direct fire weapons like that gun you can see as well as smaller ones in turrets. They're intended to protect fleets from attack craft or missiles. On the other hand those ships in that row heading away from us are destroyers. They're about the same size as a frigate but their weapons are focused on missiles for attacking other warships at longer range. A battleship is much, much bigger."

Reeves did not bother to explain that the frigates in orbit around Centaur were also armed with turrets that fired bursts of charged tachyons that could force a ship travelling at faster than light speeds to drop to a speed slower than light so that they could be engaged by the destroyers. As well as being more technical than he thought the boy may be able to handle the strategies that the Commonwealth task force stationed here was trained to follow was not something to be discussed openly aboard a civilian vessel. In centuries past the phrase had been 'loose lips sink ships' and it applied to vessels that travelled between the stars just as much as to those that still plied the oceans of many worlds.

"Like them?" the boy said as another row of warships came into view.

"Even bigger." Reeves replied, "The two ships furthest away are light cruisers. They may not be much bigger than the frigates and destroyers but they're capable of acting more independently than either. Then that one with the box shaped hull is an escort carrier. It carries four squadrons of fighters as well as two of remotely operated drones. It's the flagship for this sector."

"What about that one?" the boy said, "The one nearest us. It looks the biggest."

Reeves looked at the warship that the boy was looking at. Though it was not quite as long as the carrier next to it, it had large wing assemblies that did make it look larger overall.

"That's an Essex-class heavy cruiser." he said.

"But a battleship is even bigger?" the boy said and Reeves nodded.

"Twice that size. But bigger isn't always better. You can see the two forward heavy guns from here and if we get closer you may get to see the doors on the upper hull for its missile system, ninety-six in total and if it needs to it can carry more heavy missiles under each wing. Each one can put a hole in a battleship or dreadnought. Then to engage smaller targets like frigates and destroyers at closer range there are two X-ray lasers in the large turrets on the upper hull, eight free-electron beam lasers for close in defence and a pair of gauss cannons for close defence or ground support fire."

"And why are they taking it apart?" the boy said, referring to the two rectangular sections of the ship currently being removed from the underside.

"Those are mission specific modules." Reeves explained, "By swapping them around the ship can be customised to fulfil whatever role you want."

"You really know your space ships don't you buddy?" the boy's father said, smiling at Reeves and he smiled back.

Reaching down onto the empty seat beside his own Reeves picked up the tunic of the Commonwealth fleet uniform he wore. Without it the shirt and tie he wore looked like any formal business suit but the tunic clearly marked him out as an officer.

"That's because I'm the captain of that cruiser." he said and then he looked through the viewport again at the heavy cruiser, "It's called the *Warspite* and frankly right now I'm wondering what the bunch of clowns I left in

charge for a month while I was on Earth are doing to my space ship.”

After disembarking from the liner onto the station Captain Reeves took a travel car as far as the military section. This was separated from the civilian portion of the station by security checkpoints guarded by Commonwealth marines who after checking Reeves' identity card waved him through. Though these guards wore standard duty uniforms and carried only batons and sidearms Reeves knew that there were more marines out of sight who wore heavier armour and carried more firepower should anyone attempt to attack the checkpoint.

The *Warspite's* berth was only a short distance away from the checkpoint and Reeves headed there on foot. Two marines from the *Warspite's* own compliment stood guard outside the ship and they snapped to attention when they saw him approaching.

“Welcome back captain.” one said and Reeves smiled at him.

“Thank you private. It's good to be back.” he replied as the other marine opened the hatch for him.

Proceeding through this Reeves walked along the short boarding tube that led to the *Warspite* itself where someone opened the air lock door from the inside to allow him through.

“Captain on deck!” the marine officer standing at the far end of the honour guard ordered and the row of marines between the captain and the other two officers stood up straight. Next to the large marine officer was a dark skinned fleet officer in a duty uniform and this officer addressed Reeves as he looked along the row of marines.

“Welcome back Captain Reeves.” he said.

“Permission to come aboard Commander Knight?” Reeves replied.

“Permission granted captain.” Knight said and Reeves walked up to him before setting down the two bags he carried while Knight checked his watch, “I make it sixteen fourteen ship time captain and I transfer command back to you.”

“I accept command.” Reeves said.

Then the marine officer spoke up.

“Can I have someone carry your bags captain?” he asked.

“No thank you Major Willis. I can manage myself.” Reeves said. Then he looked at Knight, “With me commander.” he added, “You can let me know what's been going on while I've been away.” and then he picked up his luggage again before the two officers began to walk towards the captain's quarters. Meanwhile Willis turned his attention back to the honour guard.

“Dismissed.” he told them simply.

“So how was the wedding?” Knight asked as he and Reeves walked towards the captain's quarters. As the two senior officers made their way through the ship's corridors they encountered other crew members that stepped aside in deference to their rank and position.

“Fine. The sun even shined.” Reeves replied, “I've got plenty of pictures if you fancy being bored to death by them.”

“Christine will kill me if I don't take a set home to show her.” Knight said, “But what about your ex? Did she make an appearance?”

“Oh she knew better than to try. She knows she's not welcome around any of us.”

“And your new son in law?” Knight asked and Reeves smiled.

“Oh he knows that should he fail to properly respect my daughter then it will take only a few days for a nuclear armed warship to be orbiting above him and that I can hunt him across all know space if needed.”

“Sounds like a speech to remember.” Knight replied as the pair reached the door to the captain's quarters and Reeves set down his bags to open it before sliding them through.

Inside the room was laid out to function as not only Reeves' private quarters but also his office, with a desk on the opposite side from his bunk. Even on a starship that was eight hundred metres long there was limited internal space and so such savings were essential. Reeves then lifted the larger of his two bags onto his bunk and began to unpack.

“So what's with all the work I saw from the liner?” he asked, “Somehow I doubt that you're going to the trouble of swapping out the modules for fun.”

“Orders.” Knight replied, “We're being deployed.”

“The fleet?” Reeves said and Knight shook his head.

“No just us.” he said, “Well we're the only capital ship. It's all on the tablet.” and he looked at the tablet computer resting on Reeves' desk.

“This must be good if you're not just going to come out and tell me.” Reeves said as he picked up the tablet and powered it up. Then he quickly located the file containing the *Warspite's* orders and read them, “This is a joke right? Phi-Two Pavonis? How far out is that?”

“Lieutenant Commander Thomas informs me that it is fifty-one point seven light years from here which at our top speed will take just over six and a half days to get to.”

"So call it a week." Reeves said, "To hunt for an 'unidentified capital warship. Is this someone screaming 'Genex' and then turning tail and running away from a drone? I thought that ended decades ago."

"Canadian military." Knight said, "They were conducting a survey mission and got enough data to convince them that the ship didn't come from anywhere in the Commonwealth. I think that intelligence is concerned that our friends out at Luyten may have come up with something new."

Reeves sighed.

"The Caliphate couldn't make anything that big." he said, "Their ideology doesn't exactly lend itself to innovation."

"Some people have also made another suggestion." Knight said, then pausing briefly before he added, "They're saying it could be alien."

Reeves stared at him.

"You're kidding." he said.

"No. Leave aside the fact that no-one's found any evidence of any species other than humanity that has developed interstellar travel on their own."

"Or even radio communication." Reeves added, "SETI's been searching for centuries and come up blank. Though I suppose that doesn't mean it can't happen. Now what about the modules? What are we getting?"

"A pair of hangars. The admiral doesn't think that we can deal with what could be a dreadnought on our on so we'll have an extra four squadrons of interceptors in addition to our own fighter squadron. Plus we'll be transporting a scout ship, the *Pegasus*."

"Ah, Captain Sanchez."

"The same. We'll challenge whatever that ship is directly while the *Pegasus* watches from a safer distance."

"And pulls out if anyone starts shooting?" Reeves commented and Knight smiled.

"Pretty much." he said, "Though the marines weren't exactly happy when the old cargo modules were removed."

Reeves stared at Knight for a moment.

"You let them build a fort didn't you?" he said and Knight held up his hands.

"Not my fault captain. I was down in engineering with Adam. Petty Officer Cortez was watching the bridge at the time." he replied and then there was a knock at the door.

"Enter." Reeves called out and when the door opened a woman peered around it.

"Sorry to disturb you so soon captain." she said, "But I heard-"

"Ah Petty Officer Cortez." Reeves interrupted, "Do come in. Commander Knight and I were just talking about you." and then as Cortez stepped through the doorway and closed it behind her he added, "I hear there was some construction work in one of the holds."

"Oh." she said, "You heard about that. In my defence captain the marines told me that they wanted to stage a siege warfare simulation."

"And did they promise to let you inside?" Reeves asked and Cortez smiled nervously.

"Kind of."

"But I'll bet they didn't, did they?" Reeves added.

"No sir."

"Which is why we never let them build a fort anywhere." Reeves said and then he reached into his pocket, "Now I expect you're wanting to know about this." and he produced a memory stick and tossed it to her, "I managed to stop by in Manila and your family gave me this. It's the usual letters, pictures and videos. I told them you're performing very well."

"Thank you captain." Cortez responded, "May I be dismissed?"

"Of course. Off you go."

"Thank you captain." Cortez said again before hurrying out of the room.

Reeves then turned back towards Knight.

"I don't suppose anyone's given any thought to the fact that a mission like this really needs an intelligence officer and since Admiral Mitchell poached ours we don't have one?" he asked.

"As of six hours ago we do." Knight told him, "Check the personnel transfers." and Reeves closed the mission file on the tablet and instead located a list of personnel transfers both to and from the *Warspite*. On a vessel crewed by almost nine hundred people, including marines and fighter crew, there were frequent transfers as tours of duty came to an end. According to the list Reeves was now looking at four members of the crew had left the *Warspite* in the last month and been replaced and in addition a new officer had been assigned to the ship.

"Lieutenant Jessica Lucas." Reeves said, reading the name out loud and he highlighted it on the tablet display to see her full profile, "Let's see. Transferred from the Texas Air National Guard and this is her first assignment with the Commonwealth. Is she even qualified as a bridge officer?"

"No but the personnel shortage means that we're having to make do. Don't worry, she's qualified to use the system we have and there are plenty of officers above her in the chain of command if anything happens to us. I'm sure we'll be able to get her qualified in a month or so."

"In that case," Reeves said as he returned to his luggage and started to root through it, "I think I ought to go and meet this Lieutenant Lucas and see if she can shed any more light on this mystery vessel. Then after that I need to pay a visit to Commander Bernard. I have a gift for him." and he removed a bottle of wine in a transparent protective case.

Lieutenant Lucas was sat at the desk in her quarters when Reeves and Knight arrived and knocked at her door.

"Hold on." she called out before stepping over the bags that were still spread out over the floor as she made her way to the door and opened it. She had met Commander Knight when she first came aboard but it was only the four bands around the sleeves of Reeves' tunic that enabled her to realise who he was, "Captain." she said, "I wasn't expecting you."

"Obviously." Reeves replied, peering past her at her belongings, "Still unpacking I see."

"What? Oh yes. Come in, please. I'm sorry about the mess but I wanted to review the mission files I found waiting for me before you came to me."

"And I see you made sure to get yourself plenty of hats." Reeves commented, looking at a pair of peaked caps that were still in their clear wrapping, each one was embroidered with a side image of the *Warspite* while above it was written 'CSV WARSPITE' and 'CH-307' beneath.

"One is for my kid brother sir. I promised I'd send him one. I signed to pay for the extra one if that's what—"

"I think that the Commonwealth's budget can stretch to an extra hat lieutenant." Reeves interrupted and for a moment the way he pronounced lieutenant as 'left-tenant' confused her, being unused to the English style pronunciation as opposed to the more common American style one, "I'll make sure that you're not billed. Now can you tell me anything about this unidentified ship that we're being sent to hunt for?"

"Not really sir." Lucas replied, "If you'd like to take a look at this." and she led the two senior officers to her desk where she was using the computer terminal built into it to review the data provided by the *Saint Lawrence's* drones, "As you can see the images aren't very clear. The distance was too great and the drones being operated by the Canadian vessel weren't designed for ship to ship operations. But their sensors were able to determine that the weapon used by the unidentified vessel was an X-ray laser."

"So more than just ordinary renegades then." Reeves commented.

"Yes sir." Lucas agreed, "So I'm ruling out a merchant cruiser of some kind. Without exact specifications on the power of the weapon I can't say whether we'd classify it as a medium or heavy weapon but I think it's fair to say that we're looking at a battlecruiser at least."

"So we can expect to be out gunned." Knight commented.

"Have you run this through the fleet intelligence database yet to see if it matches anything encountered elsewhere lieutenant?" Reeves asked.

"I was just about to sir." she replied.

"Well hold off on that for the time being." Reeves said, "I want you to report to the bridge and use the intelligence station there."

"But I thought my terminal here replicated everything that can be done on the bridge." Lucas said.

"It does. But you need to get used to the way things work on a starship." Reeves told her.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman is on watch." Knight added, "She'll be able to help you get settled in. Run all the information you have through the database and see what you come up with."

"Then get back here and finish unpacking properly." Reeves commented as he looked around, "I want this cleaned up before we leave. Understood lieutenant?"

"Yes sir." Lucas answered.

"Good." Reeves said and then he looked at Knight, "Now where can I find our chief engineer?" he asked.

When the *Warspite* was in flight and its bridge fully manned there would be more than thirty officers and enlisted men at work on the bridge. But with the cruiser in space dock most of its duty stations had no practical function and so when Lucas entered the bridge she found only six other members of the crew including a pair of marine guards present. In addition to the human crew however, were two of the *Warspite's* compliment of utility robots. These were of humanoid construction and designed so that rather than having specialised tools built into their bodies as many basic single function robots did they could instead make use of tools and equipment meant for use by humans. With different models in use not all of the *Warspite's* robots appeared identical but these two were. Right now these two machines were using an ordinary ladder to access a lighting panel in the ceiling that needed repair while the crew continued with their work. All of the fleet personnel wore standard duty uniforms and given that all of them were either facing away from her or had their rank insignia hidden by their control consoles Lucas could not identify Goldman.

"Can I help you lieutenant?" Goldman asked, turning around and straightening up, revealing her rank insignia and name patch in the process.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman I'm Lieutenant Lucas."

"Ah, our new intelligence officer. A pleasure to meet you lieutenant."

"Thanks. The captain asked me to come and familiarise myself with my station on the bridge." Lucas replied. "Well it's that one right beside you." Goldman said and as Lucas looked around she started to walk towards it as well, "Cortez with me." she added, "Let's make sure our new intelligence officer gets settled in properly." Lucas sat down at the intelligence station she had been pointed to and immediately found that the previous occupant had been significantly taller than she was.

"Oh, err." she said as she felt for the adjustment lever.

"On the right." Cortez told her. Being a similar height to Lucas she too often had to adjust her seat.

Lucas increased the height of her chair and then studied the console in front of her.

"It's a standard interface." Goldman said, standing on the other side of the console and looking down at Lucas, "And it runs the software common to pretty much all Commonwealth member nations."

"Though we can also give you a live feed from our sensors." Cortez added.

"Actually we had that in the National Guard." Lucas replied, "Aircraft could relay what their onboard sensors were seeing back to us. Not that we ever got to use it though, all we ever did was study footage taken over Cuban cities that no-one's lived in for centuries."

"Ah so you transferred out here for excitement?" Goldman asked and Lucas smiled.

"And to see the stars." she replied.

"They look the same here as they do on Earth." Goldman said, "Just in different patterns."

Lucas activated the console and accessed the mission files. Then she looked at the database options.

"There are more choices than I'm used to." she said as she selected the full Commonwealth database over the *Warspite's* own more limited records, "We had to send requests for access to Commonwealth data to a liaison officer." then as the system started to search for any matches in the database she sat up and looked directly at the other two women, "So what's serving on the *Warspite* like anyway? In practice I mean."

"Not bad actually." Goldman answered, "On a ship this size you can still get space to yourself once you get used to knowing where to look."

"But everyone's pretty friendly anyway." Cortez added, "Even though there are some quiet spots where you can have time to yourself there are still almost nine hundred people crammed into this ship. Fleet, marines and fighter pilots."

"Ah yes, the fighter pilots." Goldman said, "Watch out for them. They can be pleasant enough but they're still fighter pilots who think they're better than anyone else"

"So they don't mix with the rest of the crew then?" Lucas asked.

"Oh they have to." Cortez said, "But they tend to stick together so you need to be prepared for the bragging if you go near them."

"They tolerate Lieutenant Commander Ash more than most." Goldman added, "He's our chief helmsman by the way. He was a fighter pilot until he broke his back and got pulled from fighter duty. Now he flies the *Warspite* instead."

"What about the captain?" Lucas asked, "What's he like as a CO? I only spoke to him for a few minutes and he seemed nice enough."

Goldman and Cortez exchanged glances.

"Look, this is important." Goldman said, "The captain keeps to himself as much as is possible. Don't think you can change that or you'll find yourself walking home."

"Yeah, he only really talks to the XO and Commander Bernard." Cortez commented.

"Does anyone know why?" Lucas asked.

"Only that it's got something to do with that he used to be married and it didn't end well." Goldman responded.

"And I thought he looked like he was about to celebrate something." Lucas commented, "He had a bottle of wine with him."

"Oh that's for the toast." Cortez replied and then before Lucas could ask, Goldman explained.

"It's a tradition the captain and Commander Bernard have." she said, "Do you know about the Battle of Gliese Two-Oh-Five?"

"No. The National Guard didn't teach that sort of thing."

"Well it was a key battle in the Genex War." Goldman said, "The first one involving capital ships that had their own artificial gravity systems. A small Commonwealth force made up of elements of English and French warships came across a much larger force of Genex in the Gliese Two-Oh-Five system. The Commonwealth commanding officer split his force and scattered them across the system. In response the Genex split up to engage them all, not realising that the Commonwealth had artificial gravity aboard its ships. So the Commonwealth ships were able to perform high-gee accelerations to link up again and then strike at each of the isolated Genex ships in turn. It proved how important the technology was for space combat. All of a sudden ships could manoeuvre in ways that would otherwise crush the crew."

"But how does that explain the wine?" Lucas asked.

"Well one thing we do know about the captain is that he had a relative in that battle." Goldman replied.

"And so did Commander Bernard." Cortez added, "So each year on the anniversary they drink a glass of

French wine and a glass of English beer to mark it.”

“The anniversary is next month and the captain just got back from Earth.” Goldman said, “Hence the wine. It’s for Commander Bernard.”

Before Lucas could say anything else the console in front of her chimed as the database search was completed and she frowned.

“Found something lieutenant?” Cortez asked.

“Nothing.” Lucas replied, “Whatever that ship is, it matches nothing that has ever been encountered by the Commonwealth before. It shouldn’t exist.”

An officer looked up at the canister being moved above him across the cargo hold. Roughly cylindrical in shape it was emitting a deep blue glow from inside.

“As chief engineer I would have expected you to know that we can produce our own tachyons.” Reeves said as he walked up behind Bernard.

“Captain. I didn’t realise you were back yet.” the engineer replied as he turned to face his superior.

“Got back less than an hour ago.” Reeves said, “Now what’s with the tachyon storage jar?”

“Jars. This is the fourth one I’ve loaded. If we’re being sent more than fifty light years from civilisation then I want us to be able to get back even if our particle inductor fails. Or at least be able to send a message drone back with a distress signal. Each one holds enough imaginary mass to get us home if the worst comes to the worst. I’ve brought some singularity jars aboard as well so we can keep the gravity going.”

Reeves smiled.

“Nice to know you’re optimistic about our chances.” he said, “Though if we do get stranded at least there’ll be something to drink.” and as he held out the wine it was Bernard’s turn to smile.

“Ah, you found it.” he exclaimed.

“Right where you said it would be.” Reeves said, “I’m looking forward to the toast to try some. But back to the matter at hand. How long until the *Warspite* is ready to depart?”

“Eager to leave captain?”

“Eager to get this nonsense over with.”

“The Canadians didn’t think it was nonsense when they were being shot at.” Bernard pointed out.

“Oh I don’t doubt the seriousness of this.” Reeves said, “But what I can’t stand is all the theories that must be floating around. I just want it settled one way or another.”

“You know that’ll never happen captain. Even if we capture that ship intact and manage to get it back here for the press to see there will still be conspiracy theorists claiming that it’s a fake and we’re covering up the existence of space faring aliens or something. We get at least one attempt to hack our system from someone looking to prove that every week.”

“Just tell me how much longer I have to wait.” Reeves said.

“This is the last of the cargo to be loaded and the modules ought to be linked up in four hours. We can leave anytime after that.”

“Very well commander.” Reeves said, looking at his watch, “I’m setting launch time as nineteen hundred hours. That gives you just under five hours to be ready.”

“Oh that’s plenty of time captain.” Bernard said before there was a loud ‘Crash!’ from across the hold and he frowned, “Assuming these idiots don’t trash the ship first.” he added.

B.

With the *Warspite* about to launch the bridge was now crowded as Knight looked around from his seat near the back of the room. From here he could see the navigators directly in front of him and the helm stations on the far side of the large central console in front of them and Goldman at her console to his right with the communications, sensor and system monitoring staff in front of her. Even though combat was not expected immediately upon launching, the weapon control stations to the left of the bridge were fully manned as well. Only two seats currently remained empty as the bridge crew went through their final checks, both located to Knight's left. The first was the captain's chair and Knight hoped that by the time he appeared everything would be ready for the *Warspite* to depart. The final seat that remained empty was Lucas' seat at the intelligence station. But the newly assigned officer came scurrying into the bridge just as Knight was considering using the intercom to find out what had happened to her.

"Sorry I'm late sir." she said as she hurried to sit down.

"Just don't make a habit of it lieutenant." he replied, "The captain's not here yet though so you'll be fine." then he looked around, "Is everything set?" he asked out loud, "We're travelling through the Fringe so we need to be ready to come to action stations at a moment's notice."

"Ah." Goldman said, "There may be an issue with that sir."

"Define 'an issue.'" Knight said.

"It's the lighting panels." Thomas said from his seat at navigation.

"What about them?" Knight asked.

"The red elements aren't working." Goldman said, "So we can't go to action stations properly."

"Oh great." Knight said, "The captain will have our hides for this."

"All we need is the elements and we can fit them without needing a robot." Thomas pointed out.

"Okay then." Knight said and he looked at Lucas, "Run down to maintenance and get some replacement elements." he told her and she looked back at him with a confused expression.

"But I-" she began.

"But nothing lieutenant. Everyone else has important work to do. Now go and try to get back before the captain turns up."

"Yes sir." Lucas said, getting up and hurrying back towards the nearby doorway. However, just as she was leaving the bridge she encountered Reeves on his way in.

"Aren't you going the wrong way lieutenant?" he asked.

"Oh yes sir. Sorry sir." Lucas replied, "But I need to go to maintenance."

"Why precisely?" Reeves asked and Lucas glanced at Knight, "Come on lieutenant. I don't have all day." Reeves said.

"Well sir, it's just that there's a problem with the red lighting elements. I need to go and get some replacements." Lucas explained.

Reeves looked up at the lighting panels.

"Of course." he said, "Well run along lieutenant. We launch soon."

"Yes sir." Lucas said and she darted past him, running off down the corridor. Meanwhile Reeves calmly walked to his seat and sat down without speaking, watched by the bridge crew.

"If you break her," he said without looking at anyone in particular, "then you owe me a new intelligence officer."

The engineering section of the *Warspite* was located several decks below the bridge and was significantly busier with both human and robot crew making sure that everything was working properly. It consisted of numerous different compartments and signs stuck to the walls indicated in which way each of them lay. Lucas followed the signs that read 'GENERAL MAINTENANCE' and opened the hatch into a room where two enlisted crewmen were sat in chairs set against a wall while they waited while the wall beside them was filled with humanoid alcoves that had utility robots of differing models standing in them. The rest of the room was filled with rows of shelves and each shelf was populated by sealed drawers of spare parts. All labelled with serial numbers rather than descriptions of the parts they contained.

"Can I help you lieutenant?" one of the crewmen asked.

"I need new red lighting elements." Lucas answered, "Enough for the bridge."

"New are you lieutenant?" the crewman said as he got up.

"Yes. Why?" Lucas said.

"Oh no reason." the crewman replied, walking over to an intercom and picking up the handset. Then he connected to the bridge and spoke into it, "Bridge this is maintenance. We have an officer here requesting red lighting elements for you." and then he held out the handset so that Lucas could hear the laughter at the other end and her face fell.

"This was a joke wasn't it?" she said and both of the maintenance crewmen smiled and nodded. "I think you ought to be getting back to the bridge lieutenant." the crewman said. Then as Lucas departed he returned to his seat, "Officers." he commented.

Upon her return to the bridge Lucas took her seat without saying anything.

"I think what everyone intended to say was 'Welcome to the *Warspite* lieutenant.'" Reeves said and then looking around the bridge he added, "Now I assume everyone's got that out of their system? Good. Now Commander Goldman, what's our status."

"All systems reporting ready and functional." Goldman answered, "And dock control has cleared us for launch."

"Very well." Reeves said, "Launch."

"Yes captain." Goldman said before activating her intercom, "Engineering this is bridge. We are ready to launch."

"Understood bridge." Bernard's voice responded, "Fusion reactors one through four are operating at full power and the fission reserve is ready if needed."

"Helm take us out." Knight ordered.

"Confirmed." Ash answered. The chief helmsman already had his hands on the flight controls and as soon as the order was given he powered up the ship's engines and there was a slight vibration as the monitors scattered all around the bridge showed the ship sliding gently away from the space station orbiting Centaur. Reeves smiled and leant towards Lucas.

"What sort of ship brought you to Gamma Pavonis lieutenant?" he asked.

"A Commonwealth courier sir." she replied, "There was one available so I took it."

"And did it have it's own particle inductor or did it use singularity and tachyon storage jars for FTL travel and gravity?"

"Jars I think sir."

"And that is your only interstellar flight so far?" Reeves added and Lucas nodded.

"Yes sir." she replied.

"Then this may be a bit different." Reeves said and he straightened up and looked at Thomas, "Mister Thomas, do we have a course?"

"Already calculated and laid in captain." Thomas replied.

"Confirmed captain." Ash added, "I have our heading."

"In that case proceed to faster than light commander." Reeves ordered.

Remembering how the courier had shuddered as it accelerated through the light speed barrier, Lucas gripped the arms of her seat and leant back. But as the bridge displays indicated that the *Warspite's* velocity was increasing drastically she did not feel the same sensation of being pushed back into her seat like she had done aboard the courier and there was no tremor as the ship moved to faster than light speed.

"We're at FTL now captain." Ash announced, "Full speed in two minutes."

"Very good commander." Reeves replied and he looked at Lucas again, "We generate all our own tachyons and gravitons." he explained to her, "That means we don't need to ration their use like a ship that relies on stored particles does."

"Makes for a much smoother ride." Knight added.

Reeves then waited for Ash to announce that the *Warspite* had reached its maximum velocity before he spoke again.

"Commander Thomas how does our heading look?" he asked.

"Spot on captain. It won't take us anywhere near any hostile territory or shipping lanes so we should have a clear run right the way out to our destination." Thomas responded.

"Very good." Reeves said, "I want us to pause before we leave communication range with Gamma Pavonis to send them an update but apart from that everyone as they are." then he looked at Lucas, "Lieutenant," he added, "since you're not qualified as a bridge command officer yet I want you to shadow those of us who are as much as you can. Your top priority remains studying that ship but after that I want you here on the bridge observing and learning. Understood?"

"Yes captain."

"Good. Now I'd like a full intelligence briefing twenty-four hours before we reach Phi-Two Pavonis. Can you handle that?"

"Yes sir. I've run the ship through-" Lucas began but Reeves held his hand up for her to stop.

"That's alright lieutenant, I trust that you know your job. I just want to know what you can tell us about the ship after you've finished collating all of the evidence."

A ship travelling faster than light was largely isolated from the outside universe. Conventional electromagnetic based communications could not catch up with it and unless someone was able to predict exactly where it would be at a particular time and send a tachyon based signal to that point at that exact time

it could not be reached by those means either. On the other hand the vessel's own view of the universe was limited to what its own tachyon based sensor systems, the active tadar or passive tachyon detectors could pick up and these were generally just enough to identify the presence of objects rather than identify them. On an ordinary patrol through the Fringe Worlds the *Warspite* would drop to sub light speeds so that it could investigate these. But with a mission to be carried out in which time could be critical, it had already been several days since the sighting of the unidentified vessel by the time the *Warspite* launched, any unexpected contacts had to be logged for later investigation but otherwise ignored.

When the *Warspite* was just twenty-four hours away from reaching Phi-Two Pavonis Captain Reeves called together the mission command personnel for a final briefing. The briefing room of the *Warspite* was designed to seat several dozen people in rows but on this occasion most of the seats remained empty as Lucas looked out from behind Reeves as he stood at the podium at the front of the room. To avoid disruption to the crew's duties Reeves had gathered together only the handful of personnel that he believed needed to hear what the young intelligence officer had to tell them. This consisted of himself and Commander Knight from the *Warspite*'s command staff and also Major Willis of the ship's marine company and Lieutenant Commander Shaw who commanded the ship's own fighter squadron. Joining her to round out the crew of the *Warspite* present was her co-pilot and navigator Lieutenant Mori. But given that the *Warspite* was not alone in this mission Reeves had also insisted that the leaders of the four interceptor squadrons being carried in one of the cruiser's two mission adaptive modules attend as well as Captain Jose Sanchez of the scout ship *Pegasus*. Lucas noticed that Captain Sanchez had a radically different appearance to Captain Reeves, looking far more intimidating despite their uniforms being identical. On the other hand the four interceptor pilots looked almost identical in terms of their expressions.

"Okay we all know why we're here." Reeves announced, "So I'm going to turn this briefing straight over to Lieutenant Lucas who is our intelligence officer. After she's filled you in on our target I'll brief you all on our deployment and tactics." then he looked around at Lucas, "The floor is yours lieutenant." he told her before he walked to the front row of seats and sat down in the vacant space between Knight and Sanchez. Lucas stepped up to the podium nervously. This was her first time giving a briefing on her own and she wanted to make a good impression.

"This is the clearest image we have of the unidentified vessel." she announced as she activated the large display on the wall behind her. There was a smaller version set into the podium so she could see what was being shown without needing to turn away from her audience and also enabled her to indicated specific points on the image by touching it, "This was taken by the *Saint Lawrence*, a Comet-class cutter operated by the Royal Canadian Space Force in orbit around the fourth planet of the Phi-Two Pavonis system. According to the crew of the *Saint Lawrence* this vessel dropped out of FTL and proceeded to fire on the drones it had been using to survey the planet when one of them tried to scan it with an active radar pulse. It was at this point that the *Saint Lawrence* withdrew for its own safety." Lucas then tapped the display in front of her to change the image to a composite one that showed several different views of the unidentified ship from various angles. None of these were as clear as the original, however, "These were taken by the drones using passive sensors." she explained, "By cross referencing them it's possible to come up with this." and she moved on to the net image in the set. This was a computer generated line drawing of the unidentified vessel that included calculated dimensions, "As you can see it is approximately one thousand seven hundred metres long and has a cylindrical configuration that is approximately three hundred and fifty metres in diameter. Thermal imaging when the vessel turned indicates that it has propulsion units at each end of this cylinder which I'm referring to as fore and aft though there's no confirmation of that."

"Not surprised they ran." one of the interceptor pilots commented, "Looks like a battleship."

"The vessel only used a single weapon during the exchange, some sort of X-ray laser that was sufficient to destroy the drones it struck cleanly. The crew of the *Saint Lawrence* also reported that it aimed an active sensor pulse at them that could have been a lock for a missile weapon but since no such weapon was fired I can't confirm the existence of one, let alone its performance. However, there were several identical structures located on opposite sides of the cylinder that could be turrets. If this is correct then the vessel mounts at least primary six weapons." Lucas said, explaining what she knew about the unidentified ship's weapons. Then she turned to the one last subject she had any information on, "The vessel was seen to manoeuvre." she said, "It turned to move around the planet towards the *Saint Lawrence* and accelerated towards her. The thrust has been calculated at four gees so since that is well within the ability of a human to withstand for short durations we can't determine whether the ship has its own internal artificial gravity field or not." Lucas then glanced over her shoulder at the main display despite having the same image right in front of her and added, "That's all the information I have."

"What about where the ship came from?" Reeves asked.

"The ship doesn't match anything in the Commonwealth database." Lucas replied, "There have been several classes of ship that match the overall size and cylindrical configuration but those all existed purely in the early days of human long distance space travel. Given the relatively primitive technology available at the time they were all incapable of accelerating at four gees. All but one were limited to less than one gee."

Reeves looked at Sanchez.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Captain Reeves," Sanchez replied, still looking at the computer generated image on the screen in front of them, "I've spent more than forty years travelling throughout the Fringe Worlds. Now I know that there are a lot of stories floating around about weird things going on out here but let me tell you, they're all nonsense. I've never seen anything like that monster."

"Could the Caliphate build anything that big?" Knight asked.

"No sir." Lucas answered, "Latest intelligence on the Caliphate's ship building capabilities limits them to nothing bigger than about four hundred metres."

"I'd agree with that." Sanchez added, "The *Pegasus* has done a few flybys on their systems and the ones around them to see if they're trying to spread out. But there's nothing to contradict what the lieutenant has just said."

"Some people are saying it's a survivor from the Genex War. Something they built." one of the interceptor pilots said and at the front of the audience Reeves, Knight and Sanchez all smiled.

"Did he just commit to buying a round of more than nine hundred drinks?" Sanchez said.

"I think he did captain." Knight responded.

"I don't understand." Lucas commented.

"A tradition aboard military ships lieutenant." Reeves told her, "Anyone publicly suggesting that the Genex are responsible for something has to buy a drink for everyone aboard." then he looked around at the pilot and added, "And there are a lot of people aboard this ship right now." and then he looked back at Lucas, "But do answer the question. He has enough to worry about in terms of his next mess bill without wondering what you have to say on the subject."

"Well the ship can't be Genex." Lucas said, "As I'm sure everyone here knows they stole not only their entire fleet but also all of their industrial facilities from us so anything they had produced would be easily identifiable. Added to which all of the stolen ships were accounted for and none of their shipyards could produce ship capable of true faster than light travel. So even if they had somehow managed to build a ship of this size it would have ceased functioning decades ago."

"I've got a question." Shaw said, raising her hand as soon as Lucas finished and waving it about.

"This ought to be good." Willis muttered.

"What exactly is it that you do for a living lieutenant?" Shaw asked and she grinned, "Because all you've basically said is that you don't have a clue what that thing is. Doesn't sound very intelligent to me."

"The information at hand is extremely limited." Lucas admitted.

"Yes, which is why we're being sent out there to begin with commander." Reeves added.

"What about the planet?" Willis asked, "I mean if my marines are to be involved then they could be being asked to clear out a surface installation."

"Ah, now here I have more useful information." Lucas told him, "The *Saint Lawrence* detected no signs of habitation. The drones they were carrying were designed specifically for planetary survey work and they picked up no indications of construction, excavation or energy emissions that weren't of natural origin."

When no one else spoke up Reeves got to his feet and returned to the podium while Lucas stepped aside to make room for him.

"Thank you Lieutenant Lucas." he said, "Hopefully by the time our mission is complete we'll have much more information about that ship for you to digest." then he turned his attention to the audience before starting to explain his plan, "I intend for the *Warspite* to drop to sub light speed half a million kilometres out from the planet." he began, "I've spoken with Lieutenant Commander Thomas and he feels that we ought to be able to time this so that we arrive close to being in eclipse of one of the planet's two moons. Once we can position ourselves there it is my intention to have the *Pegasus* cold launched."

"You want us to run silent?" Sanchez asked and Reeves nodded.

"I do." he replied, "At the same we'll launch our fighters, all of them and as we emerge from behind the moon we'll initiate active scans of the area, focusing them away from the *Pegasus*. Hopefully this will allow the *Pegasus* to pick up everything we do while remaining unnoticed herself. In the meantime the *Warspite* and our fighters will make for the unidentified ship if she's still in orbit or the planet itself if she's not. Hopefully all of the EM activity we'll be putting out will attract her attention and she'll show herself."

"And what if she's gone captain?" Shaw asked.

"Then we'll search for the *Saint Lawrence*'s drones." Reeves replied, "The Canadian Ministry of Defence has provided us with all of the access codes we need to command them to download the data they've recorded. Alternately if all of the drones have been destroyed we'll try to recover whatever wreckage is still in orbit for analysis." then he looked at Sanchez, "Captain Sanchez, your orders are to ensure the survival of the *Pegasus* at all costs. If you are engaged then you are to withdraw while we cover you. Don't worry about us or the fighters. We can look after ourselves but someone needs to get back to Commonwealth territory with whatever we learn there."

"Yeah so someone else can give a briefing without any hard data." Shaw said softly and Mori and the other

fighter leaders smiled.

“Do you have a question lieutenant commander?” Reeves asked, staring at her.

“No captain. Raring to go.” she answered.

“Good. Because we're less than twenty-four hours out now and anything not ready by the time we drop out of FTL is something we're going to have to do without. Now everyone get back to your stations and make sure everything is prepared. We'll be sounding action stations half an hour before we arrive at Phi-Two Pavonis.”

4.

A klaxon and notices displayed on monitors were the only warnings on the bridge that the *Warspite* was coming to action stations when Reeves gave the order, the lighting remained exactly as it had prior to this. Given that the entire ship's crew had already known about the impending change in duty status they had all made their way to their appropriate duty station in plenty of time and as soon as the call to action stations was sounded they began to report ready.

"All stations reporting ready captain." Goldman announced, "EVA teams on standby."

"I should hope so as well." Reeves responded.

"I take it we won't be using that as our benchmark time for future drills?" Knight commented and Reeves smiled.

"Depends how bad a mood I'm in." he replied, "We ought to be getting readings from Phi-Two Pavonis by now. Is there anything?"

"Negative on tachyon detector captain." Cortez replied, "Should I try an active tadar scan?"

"No. No sense in giving anyone advance warning that we're coming. All stations be ready for us to come out of FTL though. Navigation I want a precise fix on our location relative to the target planet and its moons as soon as we do. Understood?"

"Yes captain." Thomas replied.

"Is the *Pegasus* reporting ready?" Reeves asked.

"Yes sir." one of the communication officers responded, "The *Pegasus* reports all systems on line and ready to launch."

"Good. Now all we have to do is wait. Sensors I want to know the moment you pick anything up." Reeves said.

There was no unusual sensor activity between then and the moment the *Warspite* dropped to sub light speeds and the moment it did Thomas and his two subordinates hurried to determine exactly where they were.

"Target planet is dead ahead captain." Thomas reported, "Distance four hundred and ninety six thousand kilometres. Steer six degrees to starboard and climb by fourteen degrees to take us into eclipse behind the primary moon."

"Six to starboard and climbing fourteen." Ash called out without needing to be told by either the captain or first officer and the various bridge monitors showed the change in heading that would take the *Warspite* into the protective shadow of the moon.

"Get me the *Pegasus*." Reeves announced.

"Captain Sanchez on line for you now sir."

"Sanchez, we're making for the moon now." Reeves said, "We'll deploy you as soon as we're behind it."

"Copy that Captain Reeves." Sanchez responded, "Good hunting. *Pegasus* out."

"Move scout ship into launch position." Knight ordered and below the *Warspite* the *Pegasus* was lowered from where it had been clamped in place during the journey from Centaur, now held in place purely by a set of magnetic clamps that matched with clamps of opposite poles on the hull of the smaller ship.

"Captain we're in eclipse now." one of the sensor operators called out, "No readings of the planet."

"Launch *Pegasus*." Reeves ordered and the clamps holding the scout in place were suddenly switched to the opposite polarity. With the clamps on both the *Pegasus* and the docking module used to transport it now the same the smaller ship was suddenly hurled forwards like a projectile from a gauss cannon without the need for its own crew to fire their engines.

"Comms, keep a beam on them." Knight said, instructing the communication staff to aim a communication laser directly at the *Pegasus*. As long as this remained aligned on the receiver array on the scout's hull the two ships could remain in contact without needing to reveal the position of the smaller ship.

"Scramble fighters." Reeves ordered and Goldman reached for the intercom to connect her to the *Warspite*'s internal fighter hangar as well as the second module and the interceptors it carried.

"Scramble. Scramble. Scramble." she said.

"Okay Kaz." Shaw said as she heard the order, "This is it." and the pair of them felt the sudden acceleration as they too were propelled forwards by magnetic force until they emerged from the launch tube in open space.

"Engines hot." Mori said, "Squadron is launching."

"What about those interceptors?" Shaw asked.

"Launches look good." Mori replied, "Sixteen already out. Sequence should be done in a minute."

Shaw activated the squadron wide communications network, simultaneously connecting her with not only the other two man superiority fighters carried by the *Warspite* itself but also the lighter single seat interceptors

assigned for this mission.

"Okay this is it." she broadcast, "Form up in squadrons ahead of the *Warspite*. If anyone wants to get to the cruiser then they're going to have to come through us first. I want a thousand kilometre square formation. Interceptors on the corners and us in the middle. Go."

Using Shaw's fighter as their reference point the other fifty-nine attack craft started to manoeuvre into position. Her own squadron positioned itself around her while the leaders of the four interceptor squadrons spread out to create the thousand kilometre wide square she had described while the craft in their own squadrons formed up around them and the eight attack drones controlled by the *Warspite* formed a line behind it. As the cruiser emerged from behind the shadow of the moon she did so with a wall of attack craft in front of her.

"Any sign of our target?" Knight asked.

"No contacts on any sensors." Goldman replied.

"Comms send the drone activation command." Knight ordered, "Let's see if there are any left."

However, before the command could be acknowledged Cortez looked up from her console.

"Contact." she called out, "Single vessel just coming over the planetary horizon now."

"Is it our target?" Reeves asked.

"No sir." Lucas replied, "It's far too small."

"Second contact." Cortez announced, "No make that five. Accelerating towards us."

"They all look identical captain." Lucas said as she compared the readings she was getting from the sensor stations, "Some sort of attack craft or drone."

"Looks like we're not the only ones setting up a screen." Knight commented.

"Okay take us towards those ships." Reeves ordered, "Nice and steady. And for God's sake keep an eye out for that capital ship."

The crew of the *Warspite* did not have to wait long as the massive cylindrical vessel appeared from over the planetary horizon just a few seconds later behind the five smaller vessels that formed a screen similar to the one formed by the *Warspite*'s fighters only much smaller, about a hundred kilometres across.

"Recording all this lieutenant?" Reeves asked and Lucas nodded.

"Yes sir." she replied.

"Good. Goldman, try to establish contact."

"Yes captain." Goldman replied before taking control of the *Warspite*'s ship to ship communications directly and selecting the radio transmitter, "Attention unidentified vessel this is the Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite*. You have been identified as having fired on a Commonwealth member vessel and are hereby ordered to stand down and prepare to be boarded."

"Captain they're scanning us." a sensor operator called out, "Active radar just lit us up."

"*Warspite* this is Archangel." Shaw transmitted, using her call sign rather than name, "We've just been lit up by radar. Do we have permission to engage?"

"No. Nobody fires until I say or or they shoot first." Reeves answered.

"Understood *Warspite*." Shaw responded.

"Captain there are more contacts moving in from around the planet." Cortez warned and the tactical displays showed two more groups of smaller ships appearing to approach the *Warspite* from all sides.

"Goldman warn them off." Reeves said.

"Unidentified vessels you are to alter course away from us immediately." she transmitted, "Failure to do so will be considered a hostile act."

Reeves intended to wait a few seconds to give the unknown ships a chance to react before acting further but he was pre-empted by one of the smaller vessels.

"Incoming!" a sensor operator snapped, "Single heat bloom. Looks like a missile launch."

"Aimed at us?" Knight asked.

"Can't tell. Could be us or the fighters."

"Send to all craft." Reeves announced, "Weapons free, fire at will. Leave the smaller ships to the fighters. I want a firing solution on that capital ship. Let's see if she's really as tough as she's acting."

"Firing solution plotted captain." one of the gunners called out.

"She's too far for a shot with the main guns." Knight pointed out.

"Well a couple of missiles ought to do just as well." Reeves replied and then he looked towards the gunners, "Missiles. Two rounds. Fire."

"Firing."

On the upper hull of the *Warspite*, a pair of square hatches burst open to reveal the nose cones of the missiles stored beneath them and moments later the weapons were propelled out of their silos like simple projectiles. But as soon as they were clear of the cruiser's hull their own engines ignited like torches and the missiles began to arc towards the large cylindrical vessel. Back on the bridge the *Warspite*'s command crew watched as the icons representing the missiles raced towards their target, passing by the enemy missile as

they went. However, before either of them could strike their target the massive ship responded with a barrage of projectiles from turrets mounted on both sides of its hull. One of the missiles broke in half as a projectile punched right through and the two parts tumbled through space without hitting the target. The second was also hit but this only punctured the propellant tank, causing its engine to splutter and die. Wrongly assuming that the missile had been destroyed the enemy ship ceased fire and the missile slammed into it. The shaped charge detonated on impact, sending a blast of molten metal into its hull but there was no further noticeable effect and the ship continued to advance towards the *Warspite*.

Shaw flinched as the enemy missile exploded in front of one of the interceptor squadrons and sent a cloud of fragments hurtling through several of them at high speed. One of the small craft was shredded completely while three others veered off with flames trailing behind them.

"That's it!" Shaw exclaimed, "All squadrons break and engage. Target those smaller ships. Kaz can you get me a missile lock?"

"On it." Mori replied from behind her, "Targets closing fast."

As the fighter squadrons adjusted their headings to target the smaller ships the *Warspite* herself continued to move directly towards the larger ship.

"Captain there's increased thermal output from the enemy vessel." a sensor operator called out.

"It appears focused in several distinct sections of the ship." Lucas added, "The turrets."

"Standby to receive incoming fire." Reeves ordered before there was the flash of weapons fire from the enemy capital ship and alarms sounded.

"X-ray lasers." Lucas said, "Too far to do much to us but if we get closer they'll burn right through us. I'd say they're much more powerful than our own."

"If they can hit us we can hit them back." Knight said, "It might make them think twice." and Reeves nodded.

"Bring the main guns on line." he ordered, "Target enemy vessel centrally."

"Captain that might not be the best idea." Lucas said and Reeves turned to her.

"And what would you suggest lieutenant?" he asked.

"There's a tower towards the rear of the ship sir." she replied, "It looks well defended by the close in weapons they used on our missiles."

Reeves nodded.

"A command centre." he said.

"In such an exposed position?" Thomas commented. The *Warspite's* bridge was located buried deep within its hull to protect its command crew and this was a common arrangement on modern Commonwealth capital ships.

"Whatever it is the enemy obviously considers it worth protecting." Reeves responded and he looked towards the gunners, "Target that structure and fire."

The two neutral particle beam cannons that were the *Warspite's* main direct fire armament were capable of slicing through the thickest known starship armour. But at the distance the two capital ships were firing on one another from the energy loss in their beam weapons was significant and though the hull of the enemy ship at the base of the tower did start to glow it remained intact.

"Enemy ship is turning captain." Cortez said.

"Running or planning something?" Knight commented. However, before Reeves could offer an answer the large turrets mounted on the enemy vessel all swung towards the *Warspite*.

"Giving us a broadside it looks like." Ash said.

"Missiles." Reeves ordered, "Four round spread. Maybe we can throw their aim off."

The four missiles were fired just as the enemy ship fired again and they flew towards it between the beams that were slicing into the *Warspite's* armoured hull. One missile angled itself towards one of the turrets and passed through the beam it was in the process of firing. Naturally this blasted the missile apart but the cloud of fragments still heading towards the ship created a screen that lessened the effect on the *Warspite*. As the remaining three missiles drew closer the enemy vessel activated its close in defences again and at the same time shut down its heavy turrets. But this did not mean that the *Warspite* was suddenly given a reprieve as the enemy vessel instead responded in kind with a volley of three missiles of its own.

"Countermeasures." Knight ordered, "Light turrets fire."

The *Warspite's* turret mounted free-electron beam lasers turned to try and track the incoming missiles. Some extra time was bought by the jamming produced by the *Warspite's* electronic countermeasures but the missiles eventually saw through this and started to turn back towards the cruiser after having briefly turned away from it. The turrets fired as the missiles came within range and the near light speed stream of particles sliced one apart and triggered the warhead early on a second but the third evaded the defensive fire and continued towards the *Warspite*.

"Can we get a drone in the way?" Knight asked, looking at Goldman and hoping that it would be possible to sacrifice one of the remotely operated drones to protect the cruiser.

"Not in time." she answered.

"Brace for impact." Reeves said calmly.

With the *Warspite* duelling with the enemy capital ship, its fighters were engaging the smaller craft. As they closed in the pilots saw that these had a vaguely crablike appearance with a shallow arcing hull on one side and clusters of weapons and engine exhausts on the other, giving them the appearance of some kind of giant mechanical crab flying through space.

"I don't see a cockpit." Shaw said as she fired her fighter's forward firing twin gauss cannons. Mori had provided her with a missile lock that had allowed her to damage one of the enemy craft but it had survived the explosion and now she had closed in to finish it off at point blank range, "I think they're drones." All of a sudden the craft veered away sharply, pivoting around so that one of its weapons could swing around to face Shaw's fighter and she swore as she was forced to lose her more favourable position to avoid the burst of projectiles it fired at her.

"That's some pretty fancy flying for a drone or AI." Mori said as he studied his instrument panel, "And I'm not seeing much in the way of a command link to their mother ship."

"Well I'm not being out flown by some computer program." Shaw responded and she accelerated away from the enemy craft as it charged towards them, "Say when."

While Shaw concentrated on flying the fighter Mori watched the sensor display and the moment that the enemy craft matched their heading as it attempted to line up for a clear shot he called out.

"Now!"

Shaw immediately spun the fighter around while keeping its heading the same, leaving it now flying backwards but facing directly at their opponent. Squeezing the triggers built into her control column Shaw unleashed a burst of projectiles that caught the enemy vessel by surprise and slammed into it just beneath the arched surface. The effect of this was dramatic and the craft exploded, the blast focused away from the curved hull leaving it spinning through space like the empty shell of some strange sea creature.

"Scratch one." Shaw said, "Now tell me where my next kill's at."

The incoming missile continued to evade the *Warspite*'s defensive fire before it impacted on the underside of the cruiser's starboard wing just a few metres away from the fusion drive on that side. Like the missiles fired by the Commonwealth vessel this carried a shaped charge warhead that detonated on impact and the blast was sent upwards into the wing.

The explosion caused a noticeable shudder throughout the ship as several storage cells of fuel for the *Warspite*'s fusion reactors were breached, causing a cloud of gas to leak out into space and at the same time the displays used by the bridge personnel monitoring the ship's sensors flickered.

"Bridge this is engineering." Bernard's voice called out over the intercom, "We're losing fuel."

"How much?" Knight responded and having seen the sensor disruption on the console in front of him he added, "And what's up with the sensors?"

"We've lost about ten percent so far and we could lose more if any of the other tanks are damaged." Bernard told him, his voice raised over the background noise in the engineering section as the crew hurried to try and contain the damage, "And I think that the link to the starboard side sensor array could be damaged."

In order to keep the *Warspite*'s sensors as far away from any interference from the ship's own engines its sensor arrays were located at the tips of its wings as well as at the very front of the ship's hull. But this meant that any damage to the wings threatened to stop the flow of data that was vital in battle.

"Prioritise the fuel tanks." Reeves ordered, "Without fuel we don't fly. Goldman I want our drones pulling back to cover that side until we can be sure that our sensors are giving us full coverage."

"Captain." Lucas said, looking up from her console, "Studying the power of the enemy weapons I'd say that we're facing a dreadnought."

The weapons of a dreadnought were of two extremes only. Firstly they mounted powerful offensive weapons designed to destroy targets as massive as themselves and to support these they had much lighter weapons designed to create a defensive perimeter against fast moving missiles and attack craft. No intermediate weapons such as the *Warspite*'s two dorsal mounted X-ray laser turrets were carried. Such warships had been more popular prior to the development of self contained artificial gravity fields since they did not need to manoeuvre much to bring heavy firepower to bear. But since artificial gravity had meant that smaller vessels mounting fixed heavy guns rather than the bulkier turrets of dreadnoughts could do the same with much lower fuel costs their dominance had decreased.

"They can out gun us." Reeves said, "But maybe they can't out turn us." and he looked to the sensor operators, "Cortez, what's the most rapid manoeuvre that ship had carried out so far?"

"Nothing above three gee turn captain." Cortez answered.

"Thinking they may not have artificial gravity?" Knight asked.

"Hoping." Reeves replied, "Helm, full ahead. Try to keep us out of the firing arc of as many of the enemy guns as you can. Take us right past and then head for the planet's secondary moon. Goldman, I want the drones to peel off before we head into eclipse. We'll try for a blind launch and take them by surprise when we come round the other side. All guns fire at will."

The *Warspite's* engines flared as Ash diverted as much power to them as he could and the ship raced forwards. At the same time Ash angled their approach to the dreadnought so that only one half of its turrets could attempt to track them while keeping the enemy ship in the field of fire of as many of the *Warspite's* own weapons as he could.

The two capital ships hurled fire at one another across space to little effect. The *Warspite's* turrets lacked the power to inflict serious damage on their enemy while the dreadnought could not predict accurately where the smaller cruiser would be as Ash varied its acceleration. Only as the *Warspite* drew closer did one of its X-ray laser turrets penetrate something volatile aboard the dreadnought and there was a brief plume of flame from inside as an explosion was triggered.

"He's right on me! I can't shake him!" the panicked voice of a fighter pilot called out as he tried to shake off the pursuing enemy ship.

"I see you." Shaw responded, "Pull up now and you'll bring him right into my sights."

Doing just as Shaw had instructed the pilot pulled up and both she and Mori watched as the pursuing craft followed him.

"Lock!" Mori snapped and Shaw immediately released a missile. But as they watched it fly towards its target the enemy ship opened as well and the fighter they had been rushing to save flew apart, "I've got beacons." Mori said, looking at his instrument panel and confirming that the two crew had survived long enough to be able to eject from their doomed craft. But now they were floating helplessly in space while battle continued to rage around them.

"Where's the nearest S and R bird Kaz?" Shaw asked. Launched at the same time as the fighters were a pair of armed shuttles known as skips and it was their task to conduct search and rescue operations, recovering the crews of destroyed fighters and return them to the *Warspite*. This was a dangerous task, however and despite the limited defensive armament they carried the skips could only survive by remaining as inconspicuous as possible.

"Looks like one of the interceptor squadrons has been shredded." Mori replied, "One is reeling in the survivors. The other's heading this way though. ETA three minutes."

"Okay those guys can hang around that long. Let's see if we can draw the enemy away from them for the skip."

"Drones pulling away now captain." Goldman said as the *Warspite* neared the smaller of the two moons orbiting the planet and the remotely operated craft veered off, climbing sharply.

"Weapons, link targeting to the drones. Helm, full thrust." Reeves ordered and the *Warspite* continued to accelerate. Entering the gravitational pull of the moon the cruiser started to turn but Ash did little to correct this, merely making sure that their rate of turn did not cause them to crash right into the moon rather than pass behind it, taking them out of the dreadnought's line of fire. However, with its drones positioned around the moon between the two capital ships the *Warspite* remained fully aware of where the dreadnought was positioned from the sensor data relayed from each of the drones.

"Firing solution plotted captain." one of the gunners announced.

"Missiles. Two rounds." Reeves said, "Open fire."

"Missiles away." the gunner replied as two further missiles were launched. Rather than turn forwards of the cruiser as the earlier missiles had done these continued to travel straight up, the gravity of the moon pulling them around until they came up over the horizon and into view of the dreadnought. The massive ship turned towards the missiles, presenting the smallest possible target for a ship that was well over one and a half kilometres long and its close in weapons opened fire, doing their best to shoot down the missiles before they could find their target.

But while the dreadnought's attention was focused on the incoming the missiles the *Warspite* emerged from behind the moon, still accelerating and it headed towards the larger ship from a different direction to its missiles. The dreadnought's heavy turrets began to turn towards the *Warspite* but their rate of turn was too slow to keep up with the fast moving cruiser and it flew right past, firing its weapons at close range. The multiple energy beams sliced into the dreadnought's hull and small explosions appeared along the ship's length. But the damage remained insufficient to cripple the bigger ship and as the *Warspite* raced away it let loose with another volley of missiles.

"Incoming." Cortez warned, "Tracking six missiles." then she looked up, "Enemy vessel is also turning towards us. Sixteen gees."

"They've got artificial gravity if they can make a turn like that without incapacitating half their crew." Knight commented as he looked at an image on his console of the dreadnought turning to be able to bring all of its weapons to bear on them.

"What about those missiles?" Reeves asked as he looked at the tactical display that told him three of them were still closing on the *Warspite*, the others having already succumbed to the cruiser's defensive fire and electronic jamming.

"Impact in thirty seconds." Goldman replied.

"Bring the drones in." Reeves ordered, "Instruct them to engage the missiles. Have them ram them if necessary but we need to do something about them."

Reeves saw the icon representing another of the enemy missiles on his console blink out as one of the *Warspite's* turrets was able to shoot it down at a safe distance. Then a second disappeared as the cruiser's drones rushed to defend their mother ship and one used a missile of its own to destroy another. But that still left one enemy missile running the gauntlet of free-electron beam lasers and jamming from the *Warspite* as well as fire from the drones as it closed in. The missile was closing in from directly behind the *Warspite* and that offered the vessel a potential way out.

"Helm." Reeves called out, "Full thrust on-" but before he could finish the order that would have created a massive thermal blast that could have been enough to disable the final missile there was the sound of an explosion as the *Warspite* was hit.

"Captain I've got a red light on port engine two." Ash called out.

"Fire in engineering captain." Goldman added.

The missile had hit the *Warspite* directly in one of its main aft fusion drives and although the loss of one engine would not disable the cruiser entirely it would reduce its manoeuvrability in addition to whatever secondary damage was inflicted by the fire that had been caused.

"Can we evacuate the section and decompress?" Knight asked.

"Commander Bernard is already working on it sir." Goldman replied.

"Then leave him to it." Reeves said, "Now what's the status of our fighters?"

"Looks like we've lost two of our own and at least eight of the interceptors." Goldman replied.

"And losses to the enemy?" Knight added.

"Four I think." Goldman said, "It's hard to tell if any are just out of our line of sight."

"We're losing this aren't we?" Knight said and Reeves nodded reluctantly.

"We're out gunned and they can match our manoeuvres." he said in agreement, "Okay I'm calling it. Send to all craft, disengage and return to base. We'll retreat before the damage becomes too severe."

5.

From his seat on the bridge of the *Pegasus*, Sanchez had watched the battle without speaking. The scout ship continued to drift through space monitoring everything that was going on using its passive sensors only. The amount of information that could be collected this way was often limited but on this occasion there were enough reflected signals from the other ships involved in the fight that a complete picture was available to the crew.

"Captain the *Warspite* is recalling its fighters." one of his crew announced and everyone looked towards Sanchez to see how he would react. Sanchez was well aware of the damage that the *Warspite* had suffered, his own ship's sensors had picked up the internal fire even before the burning section was vented into space. "Navigation stand by to retreat as well." he ordered, "This fight is over and our orders are to get away with what we've learned."

"All craft return to base. I say again, all craft return to base." one of the *Warspite's* communications officers broadcast and Mori checked their position.

"I don't believe it. We're running?" Shaw exclaimed.

"The captain mustn't like the odds." Mori replied.

"Just give me a heading Kaz." Shaw ordered.

"Steer port fourteen degrees and dive thirty two." Mori told her, "We can be in the hangar in four minutes."

"What about the skips? They'll need cover." Shaw said.

"They're already turning and their drives have just lit up full." Mori replied, "We're in position to catch one and it looks like another already has a pair of interceptors riding alongside."

"Good. That'll do. Now just watch for enemy ships. I don't want anyone to say I got shot down running away from a fight."

"All fighters acknowledging recall order captain." Goldman announced.

"Captain I'm picking up a tachyon surge." Cortez announced.

"Incoming?" Knight asked.

"No sir." Cortez replied, "It looks like the *Pegasus* preparing to jump to FTL."

"Something we need to be ready to do as well." Reeves said, "Thomas I want a half light year jump to get us clear and then a course back to Gamma Pavonis."

"The enemy may figure out what we're doing and follow." Knight said.

"Only if they know which way we've gone." Reeves replied and he activated the intercom, "Engineering this is the bridge. Commander Bernard I have a job for you once you're done dealing with the fire."

"Yes captain?" Bernard replied.

"Those tachyon storage jars you had the foresight to bring aboard. Am I correct in saying that we can eject them into space using our fighter launch system?"

"Yes captain. I can have the first one loaded in about five minutes."

"Very good. I also want the jar rigged with an explosive charge that can be triggered using the same frequency as our missile command signals." Reeves added.

"Yes captain. I'll get right on it." Bernard replied and the channel was shut off.

Reeves then reached under his shirt.

"Oh no." Knight said, "Are you really planning to do what I think you are?" and then Reeves produced a key that was held around his neck on a chain.

"Your key commander." he said as he inserted it into a slot in his console.

"The admiral will be furious." Knight said as he took out a key of his own and inserted it into his console.

"Let her be. Just as long as I get to stand in front of her desk when she threatens to court martial me. On three." Reeves said, "One. Two Three." and both men turned their keys together.

Instantly a klaxon sounded and one of the gunners looked up.

"Nuclear missile launch system armed captain." he announced.

Of the ninety-six missiles normally carried by the *Warspite* eighty were fitted with conventional shaped charge warheads. But the remaining sixteen were fitted with fusion warheads instead as part of the Commonwealth's strategic deterrent. Twelve carried eight warheads each with a yield of five hundred kilo-tonnes while the remaining four each had a single fifty mega-tonne warhead.

"Lock single fifty mega-tonnes warhead on to the enemy vessel but hold fire. Set missile for command detonation. Helm I want you to put as much distance between us and the enemy ship as you can. Navigation make sure that our initial retreat runs perpendicular to the direction of the enemy." Reeves ordered. Then he looked at Knight, "Now we wait and hope." he added.

"Fifty mega-tonnes is a lot of hope." Knight commented.

The *Warspite* flew directly away from the dreadnought and the massive ship followed, engaging the cruiser with its foremost X-ray laser turrets. But even with the damage that the *Warspite* had suffered, Ash was able to maintain a healthy lead that reduced the effectiveness of the beams on the cruiser's heavily armoured hull. For now at least the enemy vessel fired no more missiles, perhaps wary of the drones now providing a defensive screen between the two warships or perhaps reluctant to use up more ammunition that was necessary given the dreadnought's clear advantage in terms of direct firepower.

Meanwhile all of the surviving fighters, interceptors and the two skips launched by the *Warspite* now rushed back towards the vessel. The cruiser was equipped with both forward and aft hangars as well as a further recovery bay built into the module that had housed the four interceptor squadrons and now the small craft headed for whichever would allow them to land safely the quickest, hangar assignments could be sorted out once the *Warspite* was clear of the system. Following behind these came the smaller enemy craft and with no other suitable targets to fire at the *Warspite*'s light and medium turrets turned to engage them. The free-electron beam laser proved adept at picking off individual craft while the two gauss cannons proved less accurate but more destructive and the bursts of projectiles caused more than one enemy craft to veer off before it was hit. The two X-ray laser turrets were not intended for engaging targets as small and agile as the enemy craft now closing but they were still accurate enough to be of use and their more powerful beams vaporised anything they hit. Such was the ferocity of the *Warspite*'s fire that rather than continue their pursuit of the retreating Commonwealth fighter the smaller enemy craft gave up and pulled away in groups that prevented the cruiser from focusing its fire on any one without leaving some other direction undefended. When the last of the fighters and skips was aboard Goldman looked up from her console.

"All craft aboard captain." she announced.

"And what's the status of the tachyon jar?" Reeves asked.

"Still being loaded into the launch tube." Goldman answered.

"Let me know the moment it's ready for launch." Reeves told her then he looked towards the sensor operators, "Position of enemy craft?"

"Thirty thousand kilometres to stern captain." Cortez told him.

"Helm try and put some more distance between us." Reeves ordered, knowing that now the *Warspite* did not need to limit its manoeuvres to allow its fighters to land, "Be ready to come about as soon as I give the word. Navigation do we have an exit course set?"

"Yes captain." Thomas replied, "It'll take us away from the enemy without being directly towards Gamma Pavonis. I've already laid it into the computer."

"Excellent." Reeves said, "I only hope this works."

"Bridge this is launch bay." Bernard's voice suddenly called out over the intercom, "Tachyon jar is loaded and rigged for detonation."

"Confirmed. Launch system armed." Goldman added.

"Helm all about full." Reeves said sharply, "Set course towards enemy vessel.."

The sudden spin of the *Warspite* was enough to tax its artificial gravity field and everyone aboard felt the pull sideways until the ship settled into its new facing. Initially the cruiser's heading remained the same, travelling backwards under its previous momentum until it began to accelerate back towards the dreadnought.

"Helm hold speed. Ionize hull and prepare for FTL on my command. Missile one, launch, launch, launch."

Reeves ordered and there was another klaxon as the nuclear armed weapon burst from its silo and headed towards its target. But Reeves was not done yet, "Eject tachyon jar." he added and the tachyon jar now loaded into one of the *Warspite*'s fighter launching tube was shot out into space like a projectile from an oversized gauss cannon, "Goldman order all remaining drones to head for the enemy ship. Fire all weapons and lay in collision courses. If there are any of the *Saint Lawrence*'s drones still active then have them target the enemy for ramming as well. I want to give them as much to worry about as possible."

"Aye captain. Collision courses set. Drones locked on target." she responded.

Now the nuclear tipped missile, tachyon jar and drones all flew towards the enemy dreadnought as it in turn came directly towards the *Warspite*. As the drones started to fire the dreadnought responded, ignoring the other threats for now and it was only when the missile came close enough for the type of warhead to be detected that the dreadnought re-evaluated its targeting priorities. But by that point it was too late and the missile was close enough to achieve what Reeves wanted of it.

"Detonate." he said and the gunner responsible for launching the missile reached out to trigger the warhead's remote detonation system.

The output from *Warspite*'s optical sensors turned brilliant white as the fifty mega-tonne nuclear warhead detonated and at the same time the explosive charge fitted to the tachyon storage jar went off, collapsing the magnetic field that held the contents inside. The missile produced a massive burst of energy that overwhelmed all electromagnetic sensors directed towards it while the sudden release of so much tachyonic mass had the same effect on tachyon based sensors, rendering both the *Warspite* and the dreadnought blind to one another.

"Helm now!" Reeves snapped and without acknowledging the order Ash engaged the *Warspite*'s faster than

light propulsion, sending the ship hurtling out of the system under the cover of the interference created to shield their withdrawal.

For a little over an hour the *Warspite* headed away from the Phi-Two Pavonis system until dropping back to sub light speed. The crew remained at action stations all this time, ready just in case the mysterious dreadnought had been able to see through the energy pulse and release of tachyons used to hide their departure and had opted to come after them. But when there was no sign of pursuit Reeves finally allowed himself to relax.

"Navigation plot a course back to Gamma Pavonis." he said, "Secure from action stations, all crew can stand down."

The atmosphere aboard the *Warspite* as it travelled back towards its home base was much more subdued than it had been on the way out. Then there had been the uncertainty of what they would face, combined with the inevitable rumours and speculation. But now that the crew had experienced defeat at the hands of their still unknown enemy and casualties had been suffered the mood was vastly different.

There was still plenty of work to keep the crew occupied however, with the damage to the ship to be repaired. To get the ship fully functional again would inevitably require the *Warspite* to stop and with the priority being to get back to Commonwealth space as quickly as possible this was not possible. Therefore, only partial repairs could be carried out.

For Lucas however, there was another task at hand. Though the battle had ended in defeat and withdrawal vastly more information had been gathered by the *Warspite's* sensors and all of it needed to be studied just in case any of it could shed any light on the origins of the dreadnought. Nor was the *Warspite* herself the only source of new data. Every ship involved in the battle had recorded everything their sensors detected and this meant that there was more potentially priceless data to be had in the hangar.

"Lieutenant commander." she called out when she saw Shaw sat in the cockpit of her fighter while a technician and one of the *Warspite's* robots inspected the underside.

"Yes lieutenant?" Shaw responded, "What do you want? I'm kind of busy."

"I was hoping that you might be able to release your gun camera and sensor records to me." Lucas replied, "Also I was wondering whether you could give me a statement regarding the attack craft you engaged."

"A statement? How about they were lethal. I've never seen drones move like that before." Shaw told her.

"Drones?" Lucas repeated and Shaw started to climb out of her cockpit.

"Yeah, drones. I got real close to one or two and I didn't see any signs of a cockpit or hatch big enough for a pilot. Trust me Lieutenant Lucas, there was no-one flying those things." Shaw explained. Then she looked at the robot, "Grab the memory core." she told it, "The lieutenant here needs it."

"Thanks." Lucas replied.

"You want to thank me? Take that data and find out where those things come from because everyone aboard this ship has a score to settle now." Shaw told her as the robot detached a compact computer drive from the fighter and held it out towards Lucas, "I'll make sure that you get all the rest as well." Shaw added.

Returning to her quarters Lucas transferred the data from the fighter's records to her computer terminal, adding it to everything the *Warspite's* own sensors had picked up and then she looked at the list of files she had to look through. There were files for every sensor aboard the cruiser, each one with every entry time stamped so that they could be matched to one another precisely. The idea was that if one particular sensor reading always preceded another then it would be possible to spot the pattern and if not discover more about how the mysterious ship functioned then at least its actions could be predicted more accurately in any future encounters. But the downside of this was that even with a computer to help sort through the data there was still a staggering amount for Lucas to go through.

Deciding to start with the basics, Lucas opened up all of the visual records now available to her. If she could find even one component on the dreadnought that matched something she could trace to its source then the origin of the dreadnought itself could perhaps be determined. But at the very least Lucas knew that the next time she gave a briefing about the dreadnought she would at least have a much clearer image to show the audience.

Lucas was not watching the time as it passed so she did not know how long she had spent studying the information available to her when there was a knock at her door and an artificial voice spoke.

"Delivery from Lieutenant Commander Shaw." it said and Lucas looked up from her terminal.

"Come in." she called out and the door was opened to reveal a robot carrying an equipment container.

"This contains hard drives from-" the robot began before Lucas interrupted it.

"Yes I know what they are." she said, "Set them down over here and I'll look at them later."

"Affirmative." the robot said and it carried the case over to where Lucas was sat before placing it on the floor beside the desk and then standing up straight.

"Is there something else?" Lucas asked as the robot stood motionless.

"All instructions have been completed." the robot replied and Lucas realised that it must not have been told

what to do when it had handed over the drives.

"Then return to the hangar." she said.

"Affirmative." the robot responded, turning around and exiting her quarters.

"Robots." Lucas muttered to herself, "So much for artificial intelligence. You still need to explain everything to them."

Then a thought hit her. Shaw had indicated that she believed the attack craft accompanying the unidentified dreadnought to be drones and drones required a direct wireless link to a mother ship to receive instructions and it seemed likely that somewhere amongst all of the sensor and communication logs that she had available to her at least one would contain a recording of some of these instructions. Abandoning the visual data that had allowed her to build a nearly complete three dimensional model of the dreadnought Lucas instead turned her attention to the communication logs.

There were secure means of communicating between spacecraft but these required carefully aligned transmission and receiving units, something that could not be guaranteed during a battle so drones were controlled by broadcast signals instead. These would be encrypted to prevent an enemy from not only determining what orders were being given to a drone but also to prevent them from issuing their own contradictory orders to them but even an encrypted signal was made up of ones and zeroes encoded using one of the varied methods of digital communication protocols.

The problem was that there just were not enough messages being passed between the dreadnought and its attack craft. With every change in priority there ought to have been a signal sent from the dreadnought and even if the drones made use of an unusually efficient onboard AI controller they should have been sending a near constant stream of data back to the dreadnought so that it would know exactly what they were doing and what their status was. Lucas did still manage to find numerous transmissions however, both to and from the dreadnought. But more interesting than either of these were communications that appeared to take place between the attack craft themselves as if they were able to work together in concert without the need for continuous control by the dreadnought.

"What the hell are you?" Lucas said to herself as her terminal confirmed that the enemy attack craft appeared just as likely to react to a broadcast made by another of their number as they were to one from the dreadnought itself. This was a pattern that reminded Lucas of the behaviour of a manned fighter rather than a machine. But the existence of a pilot remained problematic. The attack craft were not much larger than one of the *Warspite's* own two man superiority fighters but they appeared to carry a far heavier armament and combined with the visible size of several other components this did not leave a lot of room. All attack craft had cramped interiors but there were limits beyond which a human being could not function efficiently and so this brought Lucas back to the idea that the smaller craft were some kind of drone and it occurred to her that the signals being sent between them could be the key to how they worked.

At several points in human history various governments had attempted to create fully automated weapons with varying degrees of success. The main issue always remained the complex decision making processes required. These in turn required large and powerful computers that were often difficult to install in relatively small spaces such as the inside of a drone. But the communication between the craft offered an answer to this. If the computers controlling each drone were networked together then it was possible that between them they could achieve the necessary level of processing power needed to match a living pilot.

Wanting to study the signals sent between the attack craft Lucas opened up one of the communication intercept files. As expected this contained a stream of digital data that could be labelled as either high or low and collecting groups of these together would determine what data was being conveyed. This would undoubtedly be encrypted but simply knowing the protocol used to convey it could be enough for Lucas' immediate task of determining the origin of the dreadnought and its attack craft.

Taking the first few bits of data from one of the transmissions Lucas began to run a pattern matching function against every known method of transmitting either a one or zero digitally. Leaving this to run automatically she got up from her seat and went to make herself a drink using the coffee maker she had squeezed into the limited kitchen facility in her quarters. Sipping at her drink as she returned to her seat Lucas expected the algorithm to have completed its run but was surprised to find that it was still under way. Over the centuries there had been many different ways of transmitting data developed by mankind but there were a handful that were far more widely used than others that had either become obsolete or never gained widespread acceptance. The pattern matching algorithm had already been through all of these, however and was now proceeding through the more obscure types.

"Who programmed this?" she said to herself moments before the search came to an end.

NO MATCHES FOUND.

That made no sense to Lucas. Even if someone had managed to create a secret shipyard totally unknown to the Commonwealth and produced both the dreadnought and its attack craft without using any common stock parts, to develop an entirely new communication protocol as well as a means of networking drones together would take a staggering amount of time, effort and resources. Though there were numerous individual colony worlds or small alliances in existence in the Fringe Worlds hostile to the Commonwealth that could see the

development of such technology as a means of avoiding embargoes none of them possessed the knowledge or resources to accomplish such a task. Since every search Lucas had run demonstrated that the hostile ships had not originated within the Commonwealth and no human nation outside it had the ability to create them that drew her to one unavoidable conclusion.

“Oh my God.” she said, setting down her drink on the desk, worried that she was about to spill it.

The ships were of alien origin.

The Commonwealth's only current contact with sentient non-human life was the Brekken, a species similar to marsupials of earth that when first encountered less than a century earlier had been a medieval level of technological and societal development but now thanks to fifty years of human help were entering an industrial age. But the Brekken could not possibly have built the dreadnought either. Their most advanced vehicles were lighter than air flying machines and in any case their home world was in the Auriga Sector on the far side of human space. These ships had obviously been built by an entirely unknown alien civilisation.

6.

Doctor Thundercloud was the *Warspite's* chief medical officer and after he was satisfied that none of the casualties brought to the ship's medical section were in danger of dying he headed for Captain Reeves' quarters to deliver his report in person.

"All in all I'd say we got off lightly." he said as he sat opposite Reeves.

"How lightly?" Reeves asked in response.

"Out of our own people just four dead and thirty-one wounded. But nine of the interceptor pilots didn't make it back." Thundercloud said and Reeves sighed as he looked at the tablet he was handed, "Wondering how you'll explain the deaths to their families?"

"You know I've lost people before doctor." Reeves said, "But I've always known why, even if I wasn't able to tell their next of kin. But this time I don't even know who killed them, let alone why."

Then there was a sudden knock at the door to Reeves' quarters and before he could respond it was opened and Lucas rushed in.

"Captain I—" she began before noticing Doctor Thundercloud, "Oh I'm sorry doctor. I didn't know you were here."

"Perhaps if you'd waited to be invited in I could have told you lieutenant." Reeves said.

"I'm sorry captain but I just had to bring you this." Lucas replied and she held out another tablet for him.

Setting down the one brought by the doctor, Reeves took this instead and looked at it.

"I don't get it." he said, "All this says is that you still don't have any matches with anything."

"That's the point sir. The database is limited to Commonwealth and other human sources." Lucas said.

"Human sources?" Reeves repeated, looking up at Lucas and she nodded.

"Captain I think that that dreadnought was the product of an advanced alien civilisation." she said and both Reeves and Thundercloud stared at her.

"Seriously?" Thundercloud said, "Aliens?"

"Yes sir. It's the only possible answer."

Reeves just stared at Lucas.

"An alien civilisation with the capability to travel between star systems less than a hundred light years from earth and no-one's known anything about it until now?" he said eventually, "Lieutenant, you do realise that the nations of the Commonwealth have spent a great deal of money constructing equipment designed specifically to detect this sort of thing don't you?" he asked.

"Yes sir, I do and I can't explain why none of the SETI platforms picked anything up." Lucas answered.

"Hold that thought lieutenant." Reeves said, sliding his chair to where he could reach out for the intercom,

"Bridge this is the captain. Is Lieutenant Commander Thomas there?" he asked as soon as the call was taken and before the person at the other end could speak.

"Right here sir. I'll put him on." a voice responded. Then moments later Thomas answered.

"Captain." he said simply.

"Commander we need to make a detour." Reeves said, "I believe that there's a SETI platform not far off our course home. I want you to plot us a course to it."

"It'll mean dropping to sub light while I make the calculations captain." Thomas pointed out.

"Just make it as quick as you can commander. Reeves out." and Reeves shut off the intercom and turned towards Lucas again, "Go and find Commander Bernard." he told her as he handed Lucas' tablet back to her,

"You and he need to work together to rig up something that can reproduce that signal you think is alien by the time we get to the SETI platform."

"Yes captain." Lucas replied and she nodded before exiting his quarters.

"What are you planning captain?" Thundercloud asked and Reeves smiled.

"Very simple doctor. I'm going to do what people have been doing ever since the idea of non-human intelligent life was conceived of. I'm going to fake an alien encounter and see what happens."

The Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence program had begun before mankind had mastered manned interplanetary travel and despite centuries of failure it still persisted. The most recent attempts to detect signs of alien life consisted of a series of massive automated observatories scattered around the Fringe Worlds and directed into deep space where they would be free from interference from Human signals. Ideally the scientists and engineers who designed these platforms would have liked to use them to hunt for tachyon emissions given that they could travel at speeds faster than light and would demonstrate a level of technology that allowed interstellar travel. However, given that tachyons transmissions were by necessity tight beam signals that had to be carefully aimed towards their intended destination the chances of stumbling across one were remote. Therefore, although the platforms were equipped with tachyon communications of their own they searched only for more mundane electromagnetic signals, primarily in the radio and

microwave portions of the spectrum. The drawback to this was that it could take centuries for a detectable signal to reach one of the platforms, meaning that whatever society sent it may not even still exist by the time humanity became aware of them. However, given the amount of time it had taken humanity to develop interstellar travel after the discovery of radio it was only logical that any other society would also require a similar amount of time to achieve this and given that the Phi-Two Pavonis system was around ninety light years away from Sol, radio signals from an advanced species in that region of space ought to have reached human space long ago.

The moment the *Warspite* came out of FTL in proximity to the SETI platform the cruiser's presence was detected and an automated communication system engaged.

"Greetings." the voice message that had been recorded long ago began, "This is a scientific platform established for the benefit of all mankind. It bears no weapons and is not-

"Cut that off." Reeves commanded, "I know what it says." and the message stopped.

"The platform appears fully functional captain." Goldman said.

"So no signs that anyone's been aboard?" Knight asked.

"I can't tell from here." Goldman replied.

"Inform the hangar that we are in position." Reeves said, "They may launch when ready."

Two shuttles emerged from the *Warspite's* aft hangar in rapid succession. One headed away from both the cruiser and the platform, its engines burning brightly as its pilot put as much distance between them as possible. The second shuttle headed straight for the platform however, lining up on a docking port and fixing itself to it. Aboard this shuttle was Bernard and a small technical crew as well as a squad of marines present just in case there was anyone aboard that remained undetected. Though automated the SETI platforms were quite capable of supporting human life long enough for a ship from the Commonwealth to arrive. The idea behind this was that like the outposts scattered throughout Commonwealth space the crews of damaged spacecraft could find refuge here while they waited for rescue. However, it also meant that anyone wanting to could hide from the Commonwealth for a significant length of time.

Two marines in body armour were ready with raised rifles when the hatch opened and behind them Bernard looked into the darkness of the SETI platform's interior, illuminated only by the beams of the lights mounted beneath the barrels of the marines' weapons.

"Move in." the marine sergeant ordered and the soldiers began to advance cautiously. Aware of their presence since the shuttle made contact with the docking port, the automated systems aboard the platform had already begun to bring its life support online and the ceiling mounted lighting panels activated.

"Doesn't look like anyone's home." Bernard commented, glancing to his technical crew before he looked at a map on the wall opposite the air lock's inner hatch that gave an idea of the platform's internal layout, "Okay the main control centre is this way." he told his men. Then he looked at the marines' squad leader, "Sergeant I want you to check all of the entry points to this facility. See if there are any signs that anyone has been aboard other than us. Also double check the emergency stores. They ought to still be full."

Yes sir." the marine replied before looking at his own men, "Okay men you heard the officer, we've got a job to do." and the squad began to hurry off down the corridor.

While the marines were making sure that the platform was secure Bernard led his men towards the command centre. Though they lacked the body armour and heavier firepower of the marines the engineers were still armed and some, including Bernard, drew their sidearms just in case anyone lay in wait. Reaching the command centre unmolested, the technical crew spread out and started to check the status of the platform's systems. Bernard himself headed for the communications console and signalled the *Warspite*.

"*Warspite* this is Commander Bernard." he transmitted, "Do you read me?"

"Coming through loud and clear commander." Goldman's voice responded, "What is your status?"

"The marines are checking the station for any signs of intrusion but we've made it to the command centre without any trouble. So far there's no indication that anyone's been here since this place was built."

"Commander," Reeves' voice said, "does the deep space monitoring system appear functional?"

Bernard looked across the command centre to where two of his men were inspecting the console relating to the antenna arrays monitoring radio frequencies for signals that could be of alien origin. Looking over his shoulder at Bernard, one of the engineers nodded and gave a thumbs up.

"The system appears function captain." Bernard replied, "You can send the signal any time you want."

"Understood. Stand by commander." Reeves said and he signalled to Goldman. In turn she communicated with the shuttle that had flown away from both the *Warspite* and the SETI platform, coming to a halt just over half a million kilometres away.

"Shuttle Two you may begin transmission." she told the crew.

Transported aboard the shuttle was a powerful radio transmitter. This had been modified to send an exact copy of one of the signals recorded during the battle with the alien dreadnought on a repeating loop and when ordered to do so the crew of the shuttle activated this. It took just under two seconds for the order to reach the shuttle, a brief amount of time to activate the transmitter and another two seconds again for the played back recording to make the return journey to the *Warspite* and so just over five seconds later the

signal was detected by the *Warspite's* sensor.

"Signal coming through now captain." Goldman announced.

"It is the alien signal captain." Lucas added, "The modified transmitter is functioning as intended."

"And is the platform receiving it?" Reeves asked over the communication channel that remained open.

"It's coming through now captain." Bernard replied, "The platform is receiving the signal and processing it."

"Any signs of the tachyon transmitter coming on line?" Knight said, looking at the *Warspite's* sensor operators.

"Not yet sir." Cortez answered, "So far the platform appears inactive."

"Captain we have activity." Bernard reported from the platform, "The computer has identified the signal as potentially being alien in origin and is moving it to the tachyon transmitter." then there was a brief pause, "Wait, that's not right."

"What's happening over there commander?" Reeves asked.

"Sir the computer is conducting a selective wipe of its hard drives. It's purging all evidence of the signal and erasing it from the communication buffer."

"Well this is interesting." Knight said, looking at Reeves, "I wonder how many times this has happened without us around to notice?"

Reeves just frowned.

"Commander Bernard how long will it take to copy the system programming and event logs from the station?" he asked.

"About four hours captain. Six at the most."

"Then do it." Reeves ordered, nodding, "I get the feeling that SETI will be most interested to know that their platforms may not be working as they're supposed."

"I'll get my men right on it sir." Bernard said, "But if it's alright with you I'd like to spend the time overseeing repairs to the *Warspite*."

"Agreed." Reeves said, "But don't take any systems off line that we need to get back to Centaur. I want to be back there as soon as possible."

When the *Warspite* returned to the space around Centaur the crew found it significantly different to when they had left two weeks earlier. Then the Commonwealth task force in orbit had been docked at the primary orbital facility but now all of the ships were deployed and as soon as the *Warspite* came within range it was scanned by active sensors. In addition to the Commonwealth military ships positioned to defend the colony world there were also vessels from the four Centaur nations that operated their own space forces. But dwarfing all of these ships was the near two kilometre long Delaware-class dreadnought *Maasai*. This was an older vessel, pre-dating the Genex War and it still created internal gravity using a large rotating armature towards the rear of the massive warship behind the half dozen twin gauss cannon turrets that it mounted. At the end of the war the sixteen surviving examples of this class had been sold off by the American government as part of its program to modernise its fleet with ships that could generate their own internal gravity artificially. While some had either been scrapped or converted to civilian purposes by their new owners some had been eagerly acquired by nations who were happy to operate older vessels and now the *Maasai's* hull was emblazoned with the Kenyan flag.

"Looks like the admiral's called in reinforcements." Thomas commented when he saw the dreadnought on his monitor.

"I wonder what they were doing this far out." Knight added. But before Reeves could respond Goldman spoke up.

"Captain the station is calling." she told him, "It's Admiral Mitchell."

"Put her through." Reeves said solemnly.

"Reeves." the admiral's voice said, "Nice to see you made it back at last."

"Glad to be back admiral." he replied, "I see you've got the fleet deployed."

"Well we couldn't be sure that you wouldn't be bringing back any unwanted visitors." Mitchell said, "I want a full report captain. Made in person in my office aboard the *Jericho*. Bring your chief engineer and intelligence officer as well. I want to hear what they have to say about the enemy vessel and the damage to the *Warspite*."

"We can be aboard your ship in under half an hour admiral." Reeves said.

"Make it an hour." she responded, "Take the time to make sure you've got everything you need. Mitchell out." The channel closed and Reeves looked towards his first officer.

"I think she doesn't know about the nuclear missile yet." he said.

The Nebula-class light carrier *Jericho* was a hive of activity when the shuttle from the *Warspite* landed in its ample hangar bay. Not large enough to carry anti-capital ship bombers in any significant number it instead housed five squadrons of interceptors and superiority fighters identical to those that the *Warspite* currently carried. As Reeves, Bernard and Lucas disembarked from their shuttle they were met by a young

midshipman who stood at attention as they approached him.

"The admiral sends her regards." he announced, "If you'd like to accompany me I'll take you right to her."

"Of course. Lead the way midshipman." Reeves replied.

The midshipman then proceeded to lead the trio of officers from the *Warspite* through the passageways of the *Jericho*. Though about a hundred metres longer than their own ship the interior was more cramped owing to the amount of room that needed to be dedicated to its hangars and they had to walk single file whenever anyone came towards them in the opposite direction. When the group reached the door to Admiral Mitchell's office it was guarded by a pair of armed marines and stood waiting outside was Captain Sanchez. The midshipman walked up to the door and was about to knock when Sanchez suddenly reached out and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I wouldn't do that if you ever want your commission to be confirmed." he warned.

"The admiral is occupied." one of the marines added.

"We'll be fine here." Reeves told the midshipman, "We'll wait until the admiral's done."

"Yes captain." the midship said and he walked away leaving the officers to wait. Meanwhile Sanchez looked at Reeves and smiled.

"I hear we missed the fireworks." he said and Reeves face fell, "Firing off a nuke? Man you must have some serious balls."

"Oh he does." a voice called out from along the corridor and the officers turned to see a man in a commander's uniform approaching.

"Richard." Bernard responded, "How are you doing?"

"Fine thanks Adam." the man answered. Then he looked at Lucas, "Though I don't believe we've been introduced."

"No you haven't." Reeves said, "Commander Park meet Lieutenant Jessica Lucas, your replacement aboard the *Warspite*. Lieutenant Lucas, Commander Park here was your predecessor before he accepted a promotion and transferred to the admiral's staff."

"Pleased to meet you." Lucas added.

"So how's she working out?" Park asked.

"Oh you know." Reeves replied, "She's younger and better looking. The crew have been asking why I didn't have you kicked off my ship years ago." then after a moment's pause he added, "So I'm guessing that the admiral knows all about the nuclear missile." and Park nodded.

"Oh yes. When the *Warspite* sent its automatic status transmission to the space dock the fact that you were missing a fifty mega-tonne warhead got flagged and forwarded directly to her. She found out about thirty seconds after summoning you here."

"Oh great." Reeves said, "I was hoping to be able to break it to her myself in private."

"Well that ship has sailed." Park said and then he stepped up to the door.

"She's with someone." Bernard warned him.

"I know." Park said before knocking on the door.

"What?" a woman's voice called out from the other side.

"Admiral it's me." Park answered, "Captains Reeves and Sanchez are here."

"Bring them in." Admiral Mitchell ordered.

"The admiral will see you now." Park said and he opened the door.

As it happened Admiral Tihana Mitchell was not the only flag officer present in her office. Sitting opposite her was the Kenyan admiral who obviously commanded the *Maasai*.

"Captain Reeves, Captain Sanchez." Mitchell said as they entered, "I don't believe either of you have met Admiral Ethuro."

"A pleasure." Reeves said as the Kenyan stood up to shake hands.

"Thank you captain." he responded.

"Likewise." Sanchez added as he too shook the admiral's hand.

"Thank you." Ethuro repeated.

"I'm surprised you were able to get here so quickly." Reeves commented.

"The *Maasai* had been sent to Beta Hydri to take an ambassador on a trade mission." Ethuro explained, "When word arrived that you'd encountered a hostile dreadnought we came as fast as we could. Fight fire with fire so to say. We arrived about an hour before you got back."

"Now why don't you explain why you found it necessary to use a nuclear weapon Captain Reeves." Mitchell added.

"I felt it was either use the weapon or lose my ship." Reeves replied, "It was used to cover our retreat and the vessel we were engaging was undoubtedly a military target."

"So you nuked it." Mitchell said.

"Not quite no." Reeves said, "The weapon was detonated in empty space to blind the enemy's sensors while we retreated."

"A tachyon storage jar was used to blind any FTL detection they may have had as well." Bernard added.

"Oh I don't give a damn about a tachyon storage jar." Mitchell snapped, "Reeves, you fired a nuclear missile. Do you know what deterrent means? It means it's not supposed to be used. It's just supposed to make your enemy worry that you will use it so they don't attack you in the first place."

"With respect admiral the enemy had already attacked us." Reeves said, "And it has since come to light that they probably did not know what sort of weaponry we have."

"And how do you figure that captain?" Ethuro asked.

"Show them lieutenant." Reeves said, looking at Lucas.

"Yes captain." she replied and she stepped forwards and handed her tablet to Admiral Mitchell. Taking the device the admiral looked at it and her eyes widened.

"Is this a joke?" she asked, passing the tablet to Park.

"Not a very good one." he added, "Aliens?"

"The communication protocol used by the enemy vessels did not match anything used by humanity." Lucas explained.

"Did you notice any of this?" Mitchell asked, looking at Sanchez.

"No." he answered, shaking his head, "But we only recorded their signals, we didn't study them. All we looked at on the way back was the physical data we'd gathered about the enemy ships."

"Same here." Park added, "We've not started looking at the communication intercepts yet."

"When we tested it at the SETI platform the computer there flagged it as alien in origin as well." Lucas said.

"You went to a SETI platform?" Mitchell asked, looking at Reeves again.

"Yes admiral." Reeves replied, "I wanted to know why no evidence of an advanced alien civilisation had been discovered before one of the their warships started firing on our ships."

"And did you get an answer captain?" Ethuro asked.

"Commander." Reeves said, looking at Bernard.

"The computer on the platform has been sabotaged admiral." he said, "It flagged up the copy of an enemy signal we sent directly to it as potentially being of alien origin but rather than alert the SETI Institute it just erased all evidence of having received it."

"But who would want to sabotage a SETI platform?" Mitchell said.

"The Caliphate perhaps." Park suggested, "Perhaps they thought that the platform was being used to spy on them as well."

"It's a possibility I suppose." Bernard responded, "Though I'd have thought that they'd have just blown the thing up. It's a sitting duck for a long range projectile."

"I had Commander Bernard take a copy of the platform's computer records." Reeves said, "And we can provide you with complete copies of what we recorded during the battle."

"Good. I want those records sending to me immediately captain." Mitchell said, "For something like this I think I ought to see if we can run it through Nexus."

"Well if a sentient super computer can't decide whether the signals are alien then I doubt anyone can." Park commented.

"Oh I doubt we'll have time to wait for a reply commander." Mitchell told him and then she looked at Bernard,

"How long do you estimate it will take to complete repairs on the *Warspite* commander?" she asked him.

"A full repair job will take at least three weeks." he answered, "But I can do enough to restore our full hull integrity and get us rearmed and refuelled in thirty six hours."

"Good." Admiral Mitchell said and then she looked at Reeves, "Captain, for now I'm satisfied that your use of a nuclear weapon was justified to protect your crew. But there is the issue of an unidentified warship that has fired on our ships twice now and I'm not about to let that drop. Therefore, I have requested and subsequently received permission from fleet command to take the entire task force to Phi-Two Pavonis where we will locate and destroy this dreadnought. Then we'll find out if it really is an alien ship by examining the pieces afterwards."

"The entire task force?" Lucas commented, "Won't that leave Centaur vulnerable to Caliphate attack? Or attack by the dreadnought if it's already on its way here and we miss it?"

"Centaur will still have its own defence forces." Park pointed out, "They can handle the Caliphate's ships easily enough."

"Plus there will be the *Maasai* lieutenant." Ethuro added, "My ship may not be state of the art any more but she packs a punch and she'll make any intruder regret attacking her whether they be human or alien."

"Return to your ships." Mitchell told Reeves and Sanchez, "I'm setting our launch time for forty-eight hours time."

The officers from the *Warspite* and *Pegasus* turned to leave when admiral Mitchell suddenly spoke up again.

"Oh and Captain Reeves." she said.

"Yes admiral?" he replied.

"Under no circumstances are you to deploy any further nuclear weapons without my authorisation. Is that clear?"

"Yes admiral. Perfectly clear."

INTERLUDE.

When Hayes stepped from the lift a young man sat behind the reception desk for the floor looked up.

"Miss Hayes," he said, "Mister Vale is here to see you. He's waiting in your office."

"Thanks." Hayes responded, smiling despite her irritation. Though she was fairly certain that Vale was loyal to her she knew that he was exceptionally clever and that made him dangerous. It would likely take only a few minutes for him to be able to either access her computer or plant some form of monitoring device in her office. Calmly she walked to her office where the doors detected her approach and slid open for her automatically. Inside she saw Vale sat with his back to her reading from a tablet, "Hello Enrico." she said, "You're up early."

"I was called in at about midnight." Vale replied.

"A signal from Lieutenant Commander Martins?" Hayes asked as she took her seat.

"Not just him. We're getting reports of activity from all over the Commonwealth."

"I take it that the cruiser sent to investigate Phi-Two Pavonis made it back then."

"Yes but it didn't return directly. They stopped at a SETI platform and went aboard it."

Hayes tilted her head back and groaned.

"Let me guess." she said, looking forwards again, "You're about say that they found about the modifications our people have made."

"They have. Now the SETI institute is sending people to all of its facilities. They're going to find the changes we made to them all. They're involving Nexus."

"Don't panic Enrico." Hayes said, "The Commonwealth was bound to figure out that the SETI platforms weren't doing their job anyway and of course they'd involve Nexus. That thing can process information faster than any human. This just puts them forwards by a few months."

"A time scale that was not part of my calculations." Vale pointed out.

"Then redo your calculations. That's what I'm paying you for after all. Otherwise I could just use a messaging service for all the good you'd be." Hayes said, "Now what about the Commonwealth's military? How are they responding?"

"In that case precisely as I predicted they would. Admiral Mitchell placed her task force on alert as soon as the signal from the *Pegasus* reached Centaur. She also called in reinforcements, the *Warspite* identifying the dreadnought as alien didn't change anything. Now she's ordered her entire task force to Phi-Two Pavonis."

"And what do you predict will happen when they get there?" Hayes asked.

"One dreadnought and its associated gunships versus one heavy and two light cruisers, a light carrier, four frigates and sixteen destroyers plus a dozen smaller ship and almost two hundred fighters and interceptors? There's no doubt what will happen. That dreadnought will be destroyed in minutes and sooner or later its owners will come looking for it."

"And when they do we'll make sure that there is enough of a trail for them follow back to the Commonwealth." Hayes added, smiling before they were interrupted by a chiming sound from the doors to Hayes' office, "Open." she called out and the doors reacted accordingly.

Standing in the corridor outside was a man who like Hayes was taller than many of his gender but in contrast to her long dark hair and eyes his fair hair was worn short and his eyes were pale. Staring at Hayes he grinned at her and then started to clap slowly.

"Commander Kane." Vale said.

"What do you want Alex?" Hayes asked.

"Only to congratulate you my dear Jennifer." he responded, "I've heard all about how your little scheme has already exposed our tampering with the SETI program. How many man hours went into that exactly?" Hayes frowned.

"Oh do shut up Alex. What exactly have you achieved in the fifteen years we've worked here?" she said.

"Well I managed to do everything my job demanded and still be able to get married and have a family. I guess you've managed to screw that part of your life up as well haven't you." Kane said and Hayes scowled at his mention of her private life, "Perhaps if you give up this stupid idea of yours now you may still be able to resign honourably and find a man to settle down with in the few childbearing years you've got left to you."

"Or maybe I'll stay right here and demonstrate how your wife made a big mistake choosing you." Hayes responded, "My plan has Parliamentary backing. I'm attracting all the right attention to advance my career. In comparison with that your relationship advice means nothing to me."

"Then take some career advice instead Jennifer." Kane said, "Give this stupid idea up. If the old man doesn't already know about the SETI fiasco then he soon will and I guarantee he won't be happy about it. He may even be mad enough to reassign you to somewhere that you can't screw up things any further." and Kane then glanced over his shoulder at the man behind him mopping the floor of the corridor outside Hayes' office before he looked back towards Hayes, "Get my meaning?"

"I'm not scared of the old man." Hayes said, "His reputation is all talk. Same goes for that granddaughter of his. You can tiptoe around being careful and never taking any risks if you want but I'm telling you now that it'll be you mopping my floors Alex, not the other way around."

"Just don't say that I didn't try and warn you Jennifer." Kane replied. Then looking at Vale he added, "You too Mister Vale. I don't know what she promised you to get you to help her with this plan of hers but I'm sure I can find you a much better position that doesn't come with the chance of being found dead one morning. The phrase 'I was only following orders' was discredited a long time ago." then Kane stepped away from the doors to Hayes' office and walked away. Hayes watched him walk away from view without speaking until he was completely out of sight.

"Close." she said and the doors slid shut again.

7.

Synchronising the arrival of more than thirty starships capable of travelling at slightly varying faster than light speeds could prove difficult but the crews of the Commonwealth vessels that made up Admiral Mitchell's task force were well practised at it and the entire force dropped to sub light speeds within the space of a few seconds. The moment that the last of them appeared every single vessel that carried any form of attack craft scrambled them, producing a massive swarm that organised itself into a wall in front of the fleet while the larger vessels started to reorganise their somewhat haphazard formation. The carrier *Jericho* and the three cruisers positioned themselves in the centre of the formation, surrounded by the fleet's destroyers. Then as drones filled the gaps between the capital warships the frigates and smaller ships of the fleet positioned themselves on the outside of the formation to provide a screen against missiles and attack craft and it was in this formation that the Commonwealth ships approached the planet where the alien dreadnought had last been encountered.

"Any sign of it?" Reeves asked as he stared at a display that showed nothing but empty space around the planet.

"Nothing captain." Cortez answered, "Wait, there's something coming over the horizon now."

"It's not the dreadnought." Lucas added, "Not large enough. In fact I don't think it's even a ship. At least not any more."

"What do you mean lieutenant?" Knight asked.

"She's right." Goldman added, "There's some infrared but none of the other emissions you'd expect from a ship."

"Focus our optical sensors on it. Try to get me a picture." Reeves ordered and a few minutes later the picture on the bridge monitors changed to show what appeared as a glittering cloud reflecting sunlight, "A debris field." Reeves commented.

"As far as I can tell the largest piece is approximately fifteen metres long captain." Goldman said.

"From the dreadnought?" Knight suggested, "Maybe we did more damage that we thought and this was left behind."

"Any ideas Lieutenant Lucas?" Reeves said but she shook her head.

"Without careful analysis I couldn't say sir." she answered.

"Second contact." Cortez announced, "Out near the smaller moon."

"I see it." Goldman added and she split the display to show both contacts. Like the first this consisted of a cloud of debris that looked to have come from a ship but was not large enough to have been the dreadnought.

"What's that on the surface of the moon?" Thomas said when he spotted a blackened patch.

"I don't recall seeing it when we flew around it." Ash added.

Zooming in on the darkened area the *Warspite's* optical sensors revealed what looked to be a newly formed impact crater and at the bottom of it was more twisted wreckage. This was more intact than either of the two debris clouds detected in orbit around the planet and suggested that a rectangular ship about the size of a scout or corvette had crashed there.

"Two weeks since we left." Reeves said, "What happened here while we were gone?"

"Captain I think that there's more debris coming into view." Cortez announced and then a moment later she added, "Contact! Unidentified vessel."

"The dreadnought?" Knight said.

"No." Lucas added, "Too small. Smaller than us. Six hundred, no seven hundred metres I think."

"Show me." Reeves ordered and the display in front of him changed to show the newly appeared vessel.

Unlike the cylindrical shape of the dreadnought the *Warspite* had encountered on its last visit to the Phi-Two Pavonis system the hull of the ship now in front of the cruiser had a wedge shape to it while a slowly tapering cone extended out from the middle of the wider end. The wedge made up the bulk of the ship's length, about five hundred metres while the rest was made up by the cone. Positioned either side of the hull at the point where this cone began were two stubby cylinders that were obviously drive units of some kind though they were clearly inactive at that moment. There was one final obvious section to the drifting vessel, a narrower wedge that stuck out from close to the wider end of the larger one. What looked to be assorted antennas then stuck out from the narrower ends of each of the wedge shaped sections.

"Okay let's refer to that narrow section as the tail." Reeves announced, "That makes the narrow end of the wedge the front. What can anyone tell me about this ship?"

"It's not the dreadnought." Thomas commented.

"No EM emissions other than some random infrared." Goldman added, "I'd say that it was adrift."

"It's got gravity." Lucas announced, "Artificial. I can see where some of the field is leaking out."

"Can we zoom in on that?" Reeves said and without speaking Lucas adjusted the image of the drifting vessel

to show a close up of part of the wedge shaped hull. Either the ship had been struck by a missile at this point or alternatively something inside had exploded to produce a large hole in the hull and through this hole the internal gravity field was able to escape. Also able to pass through the hole was light from the ship's internal illumination system and this revealed the existence of decks that ran along the length of the wedge.

"The decks look a similar height to our own." Lucas said, "Slightly taller."

"Admiral Mitchell is calling captain." one of the communication crew announced.

"Put her through." Reeves replied.

"Reeves are you seeing this?" Mitchell's voice asked before Reeves could speak to her, "Park is telling me that it looks like a cruiser."

Reeves looked at Lucas and she nodded. Then he responded.

"Yes admiral," he said, "Lieutenant Lucas is saying the same. That wasn't the ship we encountered last time though. In fact none of the debris looks like it came from the dreadnought."

"So where did it come from?" Mitchell asked, "Because so far I'm getting reports of seven clouds of debris and three wrecks. The cruiser looks the most intact."

"Someone else came here and found that dreadnought waiting for them?" Knight said to Reeves.

"Getting crowded around here." Reeves commented.

"What was that captain?" Mitchell asked, "I didn't quite catch it."

"Just thinking how interesting it is that this system in the middle of nowhere seems to be a popular destination recently." Reeves told her, "I think that cruiser warrants a closer look. But I'm not certain that the dreadnought isn't still around somewhere."

"I agree captain. I want the fleet to move in closer and secure the orbit of the planet out as far as its moons. Then we can decide what to do about that cruiser. *Jericho* out."

The fleet advanced steadily towards the planet and small groups of drones broke off, accelerating ahead of the main fleet to ensure that nothing was hiding over the planetary horizon or behind either of its moons. But all that was found was more fields of debris that indicated a battle had taken place here after the *Warspite* had departed and that many of the combatants had fared even less well than the *Warspite* had. But significantly there was no trace of the dreadnought at all, nor any wrecks or debris that could be conclusively shown to have come from the massive warship. Neither were there any signs of the crab shaped attack craft that the dreadnought had carried. Wherever the alien ship had gone, it had had the time to clean up all traces of its presence.

"One ship did all this?" Lucas commented as she scanned yet another cloud of debris for useful information.

"I hope so lieutenant." Reeves replied, "Otherwise that would mean that there was something else that had come to this system at a very convenient time."

"You don't think it's a coincidence then?" Knight said.

"No I don't." Reeves replied, "Happening to stumble across an alien warship in a system so far outside Commonwealth territory that it's of no use to us seems too unlikely to me. Then having these ships turn up as well pushes things from the unlikely to the plain ridiculous."

The *Warspite's* course took it close to the drifting cruiser and the entire bridge crew studied it closely.

"Is that thing close enough for us to put an adel beam on it?" Knight said.

"Good idea." Reeves agreed.

Audio detection by laser, or adel as it was commonly known, provided a method of getting around the inability of sound waves to travel through the vacuum of space. By aiming a low energy laser at a distant object a vessel could detect sound by monitoring any distortions of the reflection as it returned to the emitter.

"We're in range." Goldman replied.

"Do it." Reeves said, "Let's see whether anything's going on over there and put the return on speaker, I want to hear it myself."

"Yes captain." Goldman said as she lined up the *Warspite's* adel laser herself and moments later the return signal as processed by the ship's computer was played back for the bridge crew. The sound was a mix of regular clicks and a repeated pounding, both of which seemed to run in repeated cycles.

"Doesn't sound like speech." Knight said, "Even an alien language ought to have some variation to it."

"So something's still running over there. I've never heard an artificial gravity system make that sort of noise though. They don't have any moving parts."

"Life support maybe." Thomas suggested, "We could be hearing air recycling pumps."

"Or a coolant system for the engines." Ash added.

"Forward our findings to the *Jericho*." Reeves ordered, "Whatever those sounds are can wait until the admiral decides whether or not to put a team aboard."

The Commonwealth fleet advanced towards the planet's orbital space cautiously. In addition to the risk of attack from an enemy hiding behind one of the moons or beyond the planet's on horizon there was the danger of colliding with some of the debris that now surrounded the planet. Most of this was concentrated in easily monitored clusters but there were also rogue pieces moving at many thousands of kilometres per hour

that although unlikely to cause significant damage to a heavily armoured warship could still tear off an exposed antenna or jam a turret mechanism. To properly secure the space around the planet and its moons the Commonwealth fleet spread out so that between them they had a clear view in every direction and it was possible to relay signals between ships so that any of them could talk to any of the others and it was using such relays that Admiral Mitchell chose to address the fleet.

"It appears that the mystery of what has happened in this system is deepening." she announced, "The dreadnought that the *Warspite* and *Pegasus* encountered no longer appears to be in the system, at least not anywhere that we can see. On the off chance that it is either still present somewhere or returns later I want the fleet to remain on alert while we investigate the wreckage we have found. The focus of this will be the wrecked cruiser and since the *Warspite* has the largest marine force aboard that ship will undertake a boarding action. All other ships are to investigate debris fields that come close to them. Use drones and work pods to gather samples if it is practical but do not risk your vessels for the sake of any scrap. Above all keep watch for any other vessels that approach and flag them up immediately. Mitchell out."

Reeves exhaled heavily when he heard this. Then he looked at Knight.

"I'm guessing that you'll-" he began.

"Volunteer to go over there?" Knight interrupted, smiling, "You're right. That's an alien ship and I get to go aboard."

"Err, technically I haven't confirmed that the ship is of alien origin yet sir." Lucas pointed out.

"Really lieutenant?" Reeves said, "Would you like me to tell the admiral we can all go home then? Christmas isn't far away and I'm sure everyone in the fleet would like to be back on Centaur for the holidays."

"No captain." Lucas replied, "I just thought I ought to warn the commander."

"Consider me warned." Knight replied as he stood up. Then looking at Reeves he added, "I'll go and let Major Willis know that we've got a job for his marines."

"Take Commander Bernard and an engineering team as well." Reeves added, "I'm sure they'll jump at the chance to go aboard an alien spacecraft as well."

"I bet they will." Knight replied, "How many hundreds of years have we been waiting for this?"

"Too many." Reeves said, "We'll monitor you from here." then as Knight left the ridge he looked at Goldman and added, "Tell Doctor Thundercloud he's needed on the bridge. If any of the crew are still aboard that thing then the boarding party may need his advice."

In addition to the two skips used for search and rescue operations the *Warspite* also carried four unarmed shuttles and four marine dropships, all of which were lined up in the cruiser's large rear hangar as almost the entire ship's company of marines prepared to embark along with a team of engineers and several robots, more than a hundred and twenty men in all. Scans of the unidentified cruiser suggested that it still contained an atmosphere at a pressure that would not require the boarding party to wear full space suits but as yet its exact composition remained unknown. For that reason each member of the boarding party wore a heavy oxygen cylinder on their back that would give them enough breathable air for more than an hour. The full face covering masks that would be worn with these cylinders could also take much smaller filters if this was all that was required but the boarding party had to be prepared for every eventuality. To gain entry to the drifting vessel would require the boarding party to cut through the outer hull and with this in mind each shuttle had been fitted with a detachable airlock module that could not only be left clamped in place when the shuttle left to prevent any further de-pressurisation and could also protect the shuttle crew from any harmful agents in the atmosphere aboard the drifting vessel.

When Bernard entered the hangar the first thing he noticed was that the marines were carrying standard issue rifles and he walked up to Willis to ask about this.

"Rifles?" he said, "That ship is priceless major and your men are preparing to fill it with even more holes than are already in it."

"Don't worry commander." Willis replied, "The rifles are just in case we run into serious trouble. Each man is carrying a sidearm as well and there's one shotgun per fire team. I've ordered rifles to be slung unless one out of myself, you or Commander Knight give permission for them to be used." then he looked around at the boarding party and quietly added, "Oh and I think we may need to make arrangements for everyone to be checked when they get back to the ship. I've warned my men not to go grabbing anything as a souvenir until we can be certain what absolutely everything is and whether it's dangerous but I can bet someone will ignore me."

Knight nodded.

"I'll let the captain know." he said, "I'm sure he can have a squad of marines waiting for us."

"So which is our ship?" Bernard asked.

"That one." Willis answered and he pointed to a nearby drop ship, "We'll be in the second wave. Right behind the skips that will let us know what the environmental conditions are inside."

"Hopefully whoever built that thing breaths the same air we do." Knight added, flexing his shoulders as he adjusted the oxygen cylinder he wore.

"In that case I'd just like to do a quick camera check before we depart." Bernard said and Willis nodded. "They've been distributed." he said as Knight handed him a tablet and he activated the device. In addition to his usual equipment, each marine had been issued with a compact video camera that included a compact wireless transmitter. Such devices were of limited use in most military operations, being too much of a security risk should they fall into enemy hands but in this instance they would allow the boarding party to record as much as possible about the cruiser and send it back to the *Warspite* for instant analysis. Willis held the tablet so that Bernard could see the display and swiped his hand across the screen to switch from one camera feed to another, all of which showed images of the marines taking their places aboard the shuttles at this stage.

"Excellent. Everything looks in order." Bernard said, "Now how about we actually get aboard our shuttle and get to that cruiser?"

Monitoring the boarding action from the *Warspite's* bridge, Reeves, Goldman and Lucas had been joined by Thundercloud and were all gathered around the central console rather than sat at their individual stations while an open communications link was kept with the drop ship carrying Knight, Bernard and Willis. The *Warspite* itself remained more than a thousand kilometres away from the drifting cruiser as a precaution against anything that the boarding party may happen do that could trigger an explosion, drive firing, weapons' discharge or anything else that could risk the *Warspite*. The boarding itself would take place in three waves. Firstly the two skips would dock and confirm conditions aboard the cruiser, the combination of weaponry, armour protection and powerful engines meant that these ships could withdraw quickly if anything went wrong. Next would come the dropships and finally the standard shuttles. However, before any of these could be allowed to approach the drifting cruiser several of the *Warspite's* drones made close passes by the ship, directing every sensor they carried towards it and from this data an accurate virtual model was constructed and displayed on the bridge of the *Warspite*. This was far more detailed than the long distance images and made clear what looked like weapon emplacements with half a dozen small turrets mounted on the main wedge section and two larger ones on the same faces as the drive units, positioned about half way between them and what had been labelled as the front of the ship.

"Looks like she's lost hull plating in several sections." Thundercloud commented when he saw rectangular holes in the outer hull.

"Too neat to be battle damage." Reeves replied, using hand gestures on the console screen to zoom in on one of these sections.

"Are those hatches?" Goldman added as she looked at what lay within the drifting ship.

"Could be escape pods bays." Lucas suggested.

"The crew abandoned ship." Reeves said, nodding.

"The question of course is 'Why'?" Thundercloud said, "The ship obviously hasn't broken up so why would someone want to get off a ship that was still structurally sound? Our people could be walking into danger."

"Didn't anyone tell you that's what marines are for doctor?" Willis' voice responded, "Don't worry doctor, this isn't my first party."

"Any change in emissions from the target vessel?" Reeves asked, looking towards the row of sensor operators.

"None sir." Cortez replied, "Zero on EM, zero on tachyons. Just the same limited gravity leakage."

"Okay I'm satisfied." Reeves announced, "Pull the drones back and send in the marines."

Firing their main engines, the two skips started to pull away from the other shuttles and headed towards their target under the watchful eyes of a pair of escorting fighters. One skip began to slow as it approached the near side of the cruiser while the other arced around to the far side. Both ships rotated to match the orientation of the decks that had been determined by examination of the large hole blown in the cruiser's hull though neither approached this damaged section, instead seeking out places to attach themselves to the hull that still looked structurally sound.

Each of the skips carried a robot among its passengers and even as the tiny vessels were manoeuvring to dock the other occupants were preparing the machines to enter the cruiser ahead of them. Taking advantage of the robots' humanoid form the marines put body armour and helmets identical to those that they wore themselves onto the robots to protect them in the event that there were any defensive measures in place to deter boarders when they entered the unknown ship, while the engineers also aboard the skips prepared the gas monitoring sensors that would tell the boarding party whether or not they would be required to carry their own oxygen supplies.

"Skip one docked and locked." one of the pilots reported as his ship made contact with the cruiser's hull and the airlock's systems confirmed that it was securely sealed in place.

"Skip two docked and locked." the second pilot added a few seconds later.

"Proceed with boarding." Willis ordered and aboard both skips the airlocks were opened to expose the cruiser's hull beyond them. Pairs of marines dashed forwards and using small hand held dispensers they

sprayed squares of explosive gel onto the exposed hull before pressing remotely triggered detonators into them. Withdrawing from the airlocks the marines made room for the robot that stepped into them clutching the gas sensors and came to a halt as the inner doors were then sealed behind them.

The explosives were triggered almost in unison, creating an intensely localised thermal reaction that melted through the hull, cutting loose a section that fell inwards, producing loud 'Clang' sounds that were audible even inside the skips.

"Hull breach successful, entering target vessel." both robots said in rapid succession as they stepped through the breaches and turned to look around the interior of the cruiser, "Temperature is approximately twenty-six degrees Celsius and gravity appears lower than earth standard by approximately thirty percent." one of them added.

Whatever lighting system was used aboard the badly damaged vessel was not functioning at either location where the hull breaches had been made and only the flash lights mounted to the helmets worn by the robots provided any significant illumination. Whereas the marines still waiting in their shuttles had cameras mounted externally to their armour the two robots were instead equipped to broadcast footage from their own internal visual sensors and so as they looked around images of the interior of the cruiser were sent to the rest of the shuttles as well as relayed back to the *Warspite*. This footage showed corridors much wider than those aboard the *Warspite* though many of the doorways visible appeared to be a similar width to those that humans were used to.

"There!" Lucas exclaimed as she studied the footage being returned and she pointed to the feed from one of the robots.

"What did you see?" Reeves asked.

"I think it was a sign of some sort." Lucas replied, "H-sixteen saw it." and she opened a small window on the console display that she used to replay the last few seconds of footage from the robot until she saw the flash light beam illuminate what she had seen. The sign consisted of a yellow rectangle on the otherwise dull green wall that had numerous markings in black printed on it while at the bottom was a thick line with a point at one end that looked like an arrow of some kind, "Hang on, I'll enhance it." Lucas said, zooming in on the sign so that the symbols became visible. However, although the symbols could be clearly seen none of the *Warspite's* crew could read them.

"That's no language I know of." Thundercloud said.

"No human one at least." Reeves added.

"It's not Brekken either." Lucas said, "There's nothing like it in our computer."

"So I'm guessing that this is confirmation that we're dealing with another alien ship." Goldman said and around the bridge people looked up from their consoles.

"I think that's a safe bet." Reeves replied, turning to Lucas, "Lieutenant?"

"Yes sir." she said, nodding.

"Okay what are conditions like aboard that ship?" Reeves asked.

"H-sixteen and F-seven, check environmental readings." Goldman ordered and the footage being returned from both robots showed them looking at the gas sensors they carried. The readings of these were also broadcast back to the shuttles and the *Warspite* where a complete breakdown of the atmosphere was provided.

"Oxygen, nitrogen, argon." Thundercloud said as he read off the results of the scan, "All looks good. CO-two levels are bit higher than I'd like but well within safe limits."

"A consequence of the damage?" Goldman suggested and the doctor nodded.

"Could be. A fire may have taxed their processing system." he said.

"Or maybe the aliens like more CO-two." Ash pointed out from the helm station.

"That is a possibility." Thundercloud admitted.

"But in your opinion doctor, is the atmosphere safe to breath for extended periods?" Reeves asked.

"Oh yes, quite safe." Thundercloud answered, "Though I recommend that oxygen supplies be kept close at hand just in case there are any sections that contain more hazardous gases."

"Did you catch that commander?" Reeves said, knowing that his words were being transmitted to the shuttle carrying his first officer.

"Yes captain. The second wave is on its way in now." Knight replied.

As the drop ships accelerated towards the alien cruiser they were not the only vessels to make changes to their speed or heading. In a cloud of debris that had been identified as likely having been made by the destruction of a vessel the size of a frigate or destroyer a much smaller ship not much larger than one of the *Warspite's* shuttles with a roughly dagger shaped structure and jet black in colour fired low energy steering thrusters to push itself away from one of the larger pieces of wreckage and turned towards the cruiser as well. Then with a brief blast from its main engine it too accelerated towards it before shutting down its engine again to run silent.

B.

The first thing that Bernard did after stepping through the breach into the alien ship was check his tablet. This showed the locations of all six teams to have so far boarded the alien cruiser and he briefly checked a random camera feed from each. So far the six teams were still positioned around the hull breaches and none of them appeared to have entered the ship in anything that looked to be an important area of the ship.

"Major." the voice of a nearby marine called out and Bernard looked up from his tablet as both Knight and Willis also looked around.

"What is it marine?" Willis asked.

"I'm not sure, but you may want to take a look at this." the marine responded and the three officers hurried to see what had been found.

The marines had come across a control console of some kind though without being able to read any of the labels printed next to the controls themselves there was no way of knowing what its function was. But what had caught the attention of the marines more than the console was what looked to be the seat where the operator would sit. This was unlike any human chair, consisting of a padded oval shaped surface that sloped upwards towards the console and was mounted on a single cylinder in the middle that looked adjustable for height.

"*Warspite* are you seeing this?" Knight signalled, "What do you make of it?"

"I'd say that the crew probably weren't humanoid in form." Thundercloud replied.

"Does it tilt?" Goldman asked and the other officers around the console looked at her, "Perhaps it's not really a chair, more of a back rest for someone stood up and leaning against it." she added.

"That could work." Knight responded from aboard the alien ship as he reached out and rocked the surface of the 'chair' back and forth.

"With respect I'm less interested in internal decoration and more interested in finding out how this ship works." Bernard interrupted, "We should try to locate key areas. Engineering, the bridge, the main computer." "It would be nice if we could find a light switch as well." Willis added, "I don't like relying on just flash lights like this."

"I'll see about getting one of the other ships in the fleet to send over a shuttle to ferry you some proper lighting equipment." Reeves said and Goldman looked around and nodded at one of the communication officers, "Until then just do the best you can."

"I'd say that engineering is likely located between the drive units." Lucas said, "But I can't be certain about the bridge."

"What about all those antennas on the outside?" Goldman said, pointing to the area of the console currently showing the virtual model of the alien ship. Cluster of antennas were located at the very front of the ship, at the tip of the protruding wedge and also towards the end of the tail. This gave the impression that like the *Warspite's* wings, this configuration was intended to keep them as far away from the main engines as possible.

"A control centre could be placed near any of them. Though I doubt it would be in the tail, that would leave it very exposed." Lucas said, "Or if it was positioned where we would put it near engineering then it would be about equidistant between all three of the main clusters."

"I think that it's best to send squads to all four possible locations." Reeves said, "Wouldn't you agree Commander Bernard?"

"Yes captain." Bernard replied, "One squad can head for each probable location of the bridge, one for engineering and the fifth can start to conduct a more detailed search of the main section while we set up a command post and monitor them all from here."

"We should also bring in the third wave." Knight added, "Things will go much quicker when we've got all our men."

While the remaining four shuttles filled with marines and engineers approached the alien cruiser the troops already on board started to spread out from their entry points. The marines from the *Warspite* treated the alien ship as hostile territory, each squad breaking into two equal halves so that one could cover the other as it advanced. The doors aboard the ship proved to be a hindrance to this advance, the designers of the ship appeared to have intended for them to be opened using a simple button press control beside each doorway that would cause the door to slide open. However, the control system for these appeared to have succumbed to the same issue that had affected the lighting and none of them would open as they ought to have done. Fortunately the designers had also foreseen the possibility of a system fault causing this and each door was fitted with an easily located emergency release lever. This disengaged the door from the motor mechanism and allowed the boarding parties to manually pull the doors open.

Watching the video feeds from each squad, both the officers at the command post now set up aboard the

alien cruiser as well as those still on the bridge of the *Warspite* would periodically order a team to halt and investigate some detail that had caught their attention. But although these details looked likely to prove interesting later on, the marines remained unable to locate the bridge. That was until a door was forced open that led to a section that had been gutted by fire. The marines and engineers accompanying them recoiled as smoke billowed out of the section.

"Close it up!" one of the marines yelled, concerned that the flow of air into the section could allow the fire to come back to life and spread.

"No wait." and engineer responded, "There's no extra heat. The fire's long dead, just give it some time for the smoke to clear."

It appeared that the section had been sealed off to prevent the fire from spreading and when all of the available oxygen had been used up it had been extinguished. Of course this meant that the air within that section was not breathable but that would change now that air from outside could circulate. But the team did not need to wait that long for one of the engineers to notice something.

"Hey look." he said, pointing into the damaged section, "There's an open panel on the wall." and he directed his helmet mounted light towards it. Just about visible through the smoke was a section of wall that had been removed, the detached panel now lay on the deck below it and behind this a large bundle of cables was visible as it hung partially out of the hole.

"Think it's significant?" the marine squad leader asked and the engineer nodded.

"Problem is getting to it before the air has more chance to clear." he said.

"Major," the squad leader said, switching his communication headset to transmit, "we're going to need a robot down here. Our engineers have found something."

"Hold on sergeant." Willis' voice responded, "Shuttle three is about to dock near to your position. It's got two robots aboard and it's team will rendezvous at your location."

"They'll bring oxygen as well." Bernard added, "Just in case you need to take a look yourself."

"Understood. Standing by." the marine sergeant said as his men took up positions to cover all of the approaches to their location.

The arrival of the shuttle was heralded by a distant booming as its occupants breached the alien ship's hull in the same way that the first two waves had done. Then guided by the command post, the marine squad from the shuttle as well as more engineers and a pair of robots made their way to the squad waiting to enter the damaged section.

"Friendly!" the leader of this newly arrived squad called out as he rounded the final corner before coming face to face with the waiting troops. Each of the robots carried three oxygen cylinders, one on their backs and one in each hand but these were just set down for the time being as one of the engineers from the first team pointed out the open panel to the machines.

"I want you to just head down there and inspect that open panel." he said, "You may need light."

"Confirmed." both robots replied in unison and they turned and started to march down the corridor.

Meanwhile the engineers waiting behind them clustered around a tablet to watch the feed from the robots' visual sensors. This footage revealed that what had once been numerous individual cables had been fused into one large mass by the heat of the fire. But amongst the multicoloured mass of melted insulation there were points where the interior of the cables were visible.

"That's optical fibre." one of the engineers commented and he activated his communicator, "Commander Bernard are you watching the feed from our robots?"

"I am." Bernard replied, "Those are data lines, lots of them. See if you can figure out where they lead to. That could be the bridge."

The sheer quantity of data lines in the bundle indicated that whatever central control centre they were leading to was close by and the two boarding parties started to search in an expanding pattern until they came across a compartment unlike any they had encountered already. Fortunately for the boarding parties this was not in the fire damaged section and so they had a clear view of everything when they forced open the door.

The room was filled with the bizarre tilted ovals that had been labelled as seats, arranged in two semi circles centred on a raised platform at one end of the room that had four more of these seats on it, apparently so that whoever was sat up their could look down on those below while their attention could be focused on those above them. The wall opposite the platform was dominated by a large display screen that as the marines entered the room and spread out to secure it just flickered back and forth between solid black and white seemingly at random. But what really stood out in the room were the seats themselves. Unlike those that had already been encountered these had control consoles built into them, extending out from the central support columns in the direction of the raised end. In addition to these consoles some of the seats had what looked like foot pedals built into their bases.

"Commander," one of the engineers said into his communicator, "I think we've found the bridge."

"So their entire command crew focuses on their captain then?" Thundercloud said as he studied the seating

pattern of the alien bridge.

"I like that idea." Reeves commented, grinning. Then he turned his attention back to the feed from the boarding party, "I don't suppose that any of those consoles are still active are they?" he asked.

"Negative captain." one of the engineers replied, "Everything here's dead."

"That's going to make things difficult." Lucas commented.

"How so?" Thundercloud said.

"Well that ship is seven hundred metres long. How are we going to get it back to Commonwealth territory if we can't get its own propulsion system working again?" she replied.

"We'll worry about that later." Reeves said, "For now I'm more interested in what happened in this system. Who made that ship and what is it doing here?"

"Captain." a voice suddenly called out from across the bridge and Reeves looked towards the row of sensor operators.

"Is something wrong crewman?" he asked.

"Possibly." the crewman replied, "I just got a brief contact on my scope. A gravitational fluctuation that doesn't tally with any of the radar or lidar returns."

"Where?" Goldman said as she brought up a copy of the crewman's own display in front of her.

"About six hundred kilometres from the target." he replied, "Bearing sixty-two by minus seventeen."

"That places it between the target vessel and this debris field here." Goldman said, pointing out the closest debris field to the alien cruiser.

"Perhaps something that's spun away from the field?" Reeves said, "A material that doesn't have a strong radar or lidar cross section?"

"Ceramic maybe." Lucas said, "We use plenty of ceramic components aboard our ships so there's no reason why another civilisation wouldn't do the same."

"All the same I think we ought to take precautions." Reeves said and he looked towards the communication stations, "Get me Lieutenant Commander Shaw." he ordered.

"*Warspite* this is Archangel." Shaw's voice said moments later, "Go ahead."

"Commander I want your squadron to isolate and start circling the target at a thousand kilometres and run active radar and lidar sweeps." Reeves ordered.

"Understood captain. Looking for anything in particular?" Shaw replied.

"Just being cautious commander." Reeves told her.

"Copy that *Warspite*. Changing course."

While the *Warspite's* fighter squadron was on its way to surround the alien cruiser Knight, Bernard and Willis were on their way to its bridge. When they arrived they found the marines positioned near each entrance, giving as much room to the engineers as they could while they inspected every aspect of the room.

"The captain obviously wasn't afraid of heights." Knight commented as he looked up at the four seats on the raised platform. Then he noticed something missing, "How do you get up there?" he asked.

"If you move further back you can see another entrance at the back behind those seats sir." one of the engineers told him and Knight backed up, peering up onto the platform where he saw the door the engineer had described.

"Looks like the senior officers kept themselves separate from the rest of the crew then." Willis said.

"I still don't get these seats." Bernard said as he studied one of the control stations, "Were the crew backwards or something?" and he lay against the padded oval and reached out behind him for the lifeless consoles.

"It's like a motorbike." Willis said suddenly, smiling as he walked up the control station beside the one Bernard was studying, "Look." and then he leant forwards over the alien seat, spreading his legs either side of it.

"Doesn't look comfortable." Knight said,

"Oh it isn't." Willis replied as he climbed back off the seat, "But I'm guessing that whoever is meant to sit here isn't built the same way as we are."

"Any ideas what the captain's after?" Mori asked. In front of him his displays were showing the returns from the alien cruiser. From this range highly detailed scans were possible and they did not appear to be showing anything other than the drones had already picked up earlier.

"None Kaz." Shaw replied, "That's the problem with cap ship officers. They're too focused on one thing to see the big picture. Us fighter pilots on the other hand have to be able to do everything."

"Well right now it seems like we're not doing anything that hasn't already been-" Mori began before he suddenly stopped speaking.

"Kaz, what's wrong?" Shaw asked.

"What the hell is that?" Mori responded.

"What's what?"

"There's a hole in that ship." Mori said, "No radar or lidar returns."

"Where?" Shaw asked, instinctively looking towards the alien vessel even though it was too far away to be seen in detail with the naked eye.

"Transferring it to your console now." Mori said and Shaw looked down to see what her co-pilot was talking about. From the fighter's point of view the tail of the cruiser now appeared to have a hole in it where there were no returns from the primary active sensors. The outline of this hole was far too regular to be the result of previously undetected damage, appearing much like a dagger. Albeit a dagger that was more than forty metres long.

"*Warspite* this is Archangel. We may have something here." Shaw transmitted, "We're sending you our feed. It looks like there's something attached to the target. Something that wasn't there earlier."

"What do we already know about that section of the ship?" Reeves asked, looking around him.

"Nothing about the interior captain." Goldman replied.

"Though the location does correspond with what we took to be an external hatch of some kind." Lucas added and she zoomed in on the virtual model of the alien ship to illustrate her point. This clearly showed a circular indentation that looked very much like a recessed hatchway.

"So what do you think is stuck to it now captain?" Thundercloud said.

"A stealth ship." Reeves said, "My guess is that it was hiding in one of the debris fields when we arrived and that was what was detected as it drifted from there to the cruiser. I want a drone sending in for a close pass with optical and IR sensors. Let's see if it's invisible to those as well."

"That would indicate a considerable technological advantage over us." Lucas said.

"They obviously decided that going in through a hatch was easier than just burning through the hull."

Goldman commented as she looked at the position of the alien stealth ship.

"Which means they knew how to do it without inflicting too much damage." Reeves added, "I think the ship's original owners are back."

"Is that a problem?" Thundercloud said, "Empty it's salvage. But if there are still crew aboard then we just forced an entry to their ship."

"None of our scans suggested that the ship was inhabited before our boarding party went in doctor." Lucas pointed out to him.

"So legally we're sound." Reeves replied before he looked at Goldman, "Warn Commander Knight that his people may have company over there. They may want to check out that hatch." then he looked towards the communications stations, "And get me the admiral. If there's one stealth ship lurking around there could others and she needs to know."

Knight and Willis ordered two squads of marines to converge on the hatch where the stealth ship was docked. The first was one of the units sent to try and locate the cruiser's bridge by heading for the antenna cluster at the end of the tail while the other was one of the newly arrived third wave of marines and engineers.

"What are our rules of engagement?" the leader of this second squad asked as he led his men towards the hatch.

"Still the same sergeant." Willis responded, "Do not fire unless you have reasonable belief that you are about to be fired upon. Remember that those cameras are recording everything. Oh and they were checked before we left the *Warspite*, so any mysterious technical failures won't look good at a court martial. Understood?"

"Fully major." the sergeant answered.

"Over there!" one of the engineers attached to the squad suddenly called out and he pointed his flash light down a side corridor, "I saw something move."

The team came to a halt and all aimed their rifles in the direction indicated by the engineer but they saw only the dull green of an empty corridor.

"There's nothing there sarge." one of the marines said.

"But I saw something, I swear it." the engineer responded.

"Well we don't have time to check it out now." the sergeant said, "We need to get to that hatch. Now let's move." and the team started off again, hurrying towards their target, none of them realising that they were being watched from within the darkness. After they vanished around a corner something let out a hiss before it too led more of its kind away.

Though they had no way of knowing their precise position in relation to external features of the alien cruiser, the marines and engineers came to a halt once more when they reached the dividing line between the wedge that made up the main bulk of the vessel and the tapered tail when they found their way blocked by a closed door.

"Okay let's get this open." the squad leader ordered, "Henderson release the mechanism. Cooper and Trainer open the door."

While two of the marines holstered their sidearms, one of the engineers accompanying them hurried to the

access panel that covered the release switch for the door and crouched down.

"That's weird." he said.

"What is?" the marine sergeant asked.

"Well this has already been released." Henderson told him, "Look." and he leant back, shining his flash light at the lever that was already in the release position.

"So the team who headed for the rear of the ship already released it. So what?" the sergeant said.

"So why did they close the door?" another marine commented and the sergeant turned his head towards the door and glared at it.

"Get this thing open." he said sternly, "Everyone stand to. That means you spanner jockeys as well."

The two marines at the door pulled the two halves apart slowly while the rest of their squad and the engineers watched with drawn sidearms at the ready. When the gap between the door halves was wide enough to allow an armoured human to pass through easily one of the two marines at the door then drew his weapon and started to step through it. But just as he looked to one side there was a roar from the far side of the door and he was suddenly dragged through into the darkness where he screamed.

It was an engineer who was the first to discharge his weapon, panicking and squeezing the trigger of his pistol to send a burst of bullets into the darkness randomly. The marine squad leader was about to order him to hold fire just in case he accidentally hit the marine who had just been dragged through but before he could something came leaping back through the gap.

The creature dived straight at the engineer and caught in the beams of numerous flash lights the rest of the boarding party was able to get a rough idea of its appearance. Like something from Earth's distant past it was scaled, bipedal with a torso that was almost horizontal and possessed a long muscular tail that it swept sideways to lash out at a nearby marine before he could come to the aide of the engineer as the alien opened its mouth wide enough to expose two rows of razor sharp teeth that it then plunged into the engineer's throat. Unlike an animal however, this creature was clothed in a similar way to the marines from the *Warspite* so that its torso and limbs were covered in a dull green fabric. Standing shorter than a typical adult human, the alien's more horizontal posture nevertheless made it appear to have a similar mass.

The booming of a shotgun discharging rapidly filled the corridor as one of the marines armed with the more powerful weapon opened fire repeatedly. The blasts struck the alien but like the human marines it wore an armoured vest that prevented any of the low velocity pellets from penetrating. However, the full force of the impacts was still enough to force the alien away from the unfortunate engineer and the rest of the squad opened fire as well.

"Contact! Contact! Contact!"

The moment the signal from the marine sergeant reached the leaders of the boarding party they looked to their tablets, searching through the various video feeds until they found one that showed the crew of the *Warspite* engaging a target unlike anything that any of them had seen before.

"Oh my God." Knight exclaimed and he switched his communicator to transmit back to the *Warspite*, "*Warspite* are you getting this?" he asked, "We are under attack."

"Yes, we're seeing it all commander." Reeves replied, "Take whatever actions you deem necessary to defend yourselves."

"We're on it." Willis responded before broadcasting to the entire marine force aboard the alien cruiser, "All units on alert. Hostile contact to stern. Defensive fire is permitted against any target that does not identify itself. Platoons one and two head for the stern, I want that stealth ship investigating. We need to know what we're facing here." then after shutting off his communicator he looked around at the marines in the alien bridge with him, "Okay we need to secure this area." he announced, "Any access point that can't be sealed needs guarding but we still need a way in and out. Now move!"

The aliens were not only armoured but armed as well and in response to one of their own coming under fire from the human troops two more of them opened fire, the muzzle flashes easily visible in the darkness as a hail of bullets came through the gap between the doors and one of the shotgun armed marines fell as he was hit by a round that punched right through his body armour. The rest of the team threw themselves out of the line of fire and one marine positioned himself at the door and fired a short burst around it, his shots producing an inhuman shriek from the far side before another burst of gunfire forced him to take cover.

"Major we are under fire." the sergeant reported, "Enemy has armour piercing weapons. Requesting permission to deploy rifles."

On the bridge Willis looked at Knight.

"My men are out gunned using pistols only." he said.

"I know." Knight replied and he looked at Bernard.

"Damn." the engineer said softly, "This ship is priceless." then he turned to Willis, "Give the order." he said, "Just have your men be careful about shooting near the hull."

Willis nodded.

"They're professionals commander." he said before he activated his communicator and once again addressed the entire force aboard the alien ship, "The word is given." he said, "You have permission to use

your rifles.”

The marines fighting in the corridor wasted no time in swapping their pistols for rifles instead, bullpup weapons designed to eject cases forwards so that they could be used either left or right handed their length was not so great that it would become a hindrance while fighting in the relatively confined space of the alien ship. One of the marines promptly held out his weapon and pushed the muzzle through the gap in the door before unleashing a sustained burst rather than then limited one possible with a standard issue Commonwealth sidearm that sprayed bullets down the corridor beyond until the magazine was empty. This apparently had the desired effect and there was no immediate return fire from the alien troops, allowing another marine to lean around the door and aim his rifle properly through the gap. The optical sight mounted on the weapon amplified the ambient light enough that he clearly saw the last two aliens as they vanished around a corner leaving behind the body of the marine they had dragged through the door as well as three of their own. The marine fired two rapid shots towards the retreating aliens, missing with both before he ducked back from the doorway to avoid a rapid burst of return fire. Two more marines advanced on the doorway with their rifles at their shoulders, firing short bursts to keep the enemy back until they reached the doorway and saw that the aliens were now gone. Moving through the doorway the squad quickly inspected all of the bodies, both human and alien to ensure that all really were dead.

“My God that is amazing.” Thundercloud said as he studied the feed from one of the marines' cameras, pausing the image when it gave the best view of one of the alien bodies. Then as one of the marines reached towards an alien body he called out a warning, “No! Don't touch them with your bare hands. Sergeant did any of your men get blood from the aliens on them?”

“Negative doctor.”

“Good. Now sergeant listen to me carefully. I want you to wrap as many of those bodies in plastic as you can. Seal them up air tight if possible then get them back over here to the *Warspite* as quickly as possible. I need to examine them quickly.” then he looked at Reeves, “Captain I need a path cleared from the hangar where that shuttle lands to the sickbay. Lock it down and have robots scrub it down afterwards. Maximum quarantine until I can evaluate what pathogens might be inside those bodies.”

Reeves nodded and looked at Goldman.

“See to it.” he told her before she and Doctor Thundercloud hurried from the bridge.

“Captain we should also be looking to recover as much of the enemy equipment as we can.” Lucas added.

“Sergeant this is Captain Reeves,” Reeves transmitted, “make sure that the aliens' equipment is also returned to the *Warspite* for study. Do you understand?”

“Yes captain. We'll bag it up as well and have it on the shuttle in five minutes.”

The marine squad that had been sent to the very end of the alien cruiser's tail made their way forwards cautiously. Even though they had been granted permission to make use of their rifles they knew that their position was not a strong one. Their enemy was not only likely to know the layout of the ship far better than they did but also they were positioned between the squad and the rest of the Commonwealth forces. If the squad had to retreat then it was effectively trapped in the tail section of the cruiser.

Approaching the location of the hatch where the stealth ship was docked the sergeant had his men pause around a corner.

“Kill your lights.” he hissed. Then he looked at the engineers accompanying them, “One of you got a tablet?” he asked quietly and one of the engineers nodded before producing one of the devices from his pack, “Good. Now set it to pick up my camera feed.” the sergeant added, detaching his camera from his helmet.

“On line now.” the engineer said and he held up the tablet so that the sergeant could see the screen, knowing what he planned. The sergeant adjusted the camera to its low light mode and when he was satisfied with the quality of the image on the screen he slowly held it around the corner, pointing it down the corridor towards the hatch.

The picture on the tablet screen showed a single alien standing guard, partially concealed by the hatchway itself and armed with what looked like a rifle of some kind. He held up his hand with just his index finger raised to indicate to his men that there was only one alien in sight then he pointed at one of his men in particular. This marine consistently scored highest for marksmanship in the squad and so the sergeant expected him to have the best chance of dealing with the partially concealed alien with the minimum of fuss. Without saying a word the marine moved to the corner and brought his rifle up to his shoulder. Then he spun around to look towards the alien guard and fired a short burst from his rifle. Two of the three rounds struck the alien, one hitting the side of its armoured vest and the other its exposed shoulder while the third round ricocheted off the wall beside it and flew off down the corridor. Both rounds that hit the alien penetrated deep into its chest, the one having hit its body armour finding a weak spot between the primary rigid plates designed to stop such attacks and the alien fell sideways without making a sound. However, a second alien then appeared and fired back, bullets bouncing off the walls of the corridor as it unleashed a sustained burst of fire.

"Covering fire." the sergeant ordered and the marines fire rapid bursts towards the hatch, forcing the alien back as it reloaded its weapon. At the same time the human marines advanced, continuing to fire short bursts that prevented the alien from taking advantage of its superior position while they were in the open. The alien risked a rapid burst of fire by holding its rifle around the hatchway and fired. One of the bullets clipped a marine's armoured vest and he fell, injured but alive thanks to his armour. Immediately two other marines lowered their rifles and started to drag their injured comrade away while the rest of the squad continued to advance.

Reaching the very edge of the hatchway, the lead marine leapt around to face the alien and he caught it in the process of reloading its weapon. Letting out a screeching cry, the alien swung its empty rifle like a club and struck the marine. Dazed, he was too slow to react as a clawed hand swiped at him, slicing into the cover of his body armour and then cutting open his face as it moved upwards. The marine dropped his rifle and staggered backwards into the open where he was in full view of the rest of his squad. Then the alien slammed a fresh magazine into its rifle and stepped forwards to finish off the marine. But in doing so the creature inadvertently exposed itself to the other marines and there was a rapid volley of rifle fire as they shot it before it could fire its own weapon.

"Quick, get that wound seen to." the sergeant said, looking at the injured marine, "Make sure it doesn't get infected. Who knows what sort of nasty little bugs are living under that thing's fingernails?" then he looked at the hatchway leading to the alien stealth ship. He was about to order his squad through when he realised the potential of what lay on the other side, "Major Willis this is Sergeant Vernon." he transmitted to the company commander, "My squad is at the hatch now. I'm ordering rifles slung again before we proceed. I intend to try and take the alien shuttle intact."

"Excellent thinking sergeant." Bernard's voice replied before Willis could, "Be advised that reinforcements are en route but there are still an unknown number of aliens at large."

The marines armed with shotguns advanced through the hatchway first. The inside of the stealth ship was more cramped than the cruiser but its lighting system was active, giving the marines a better look around than they had had aboard the larger ship. The marines had come aboard the stealth ship in what looked like some sort of passenger compartment. Two rows of the strange alien seats ran down the centre of the compartment for much of its length, arranged so that with the aliens posed as Willis had demonstrated on the bridge they would be facing one another.

"Damn it's hot in here." one commented.

"Quiet." Vernon hissed from behind them, "Just stay sharp. I don't want to-" but before he could finish there was a gunshot. The bullet came from the end of the compartment where a hatchway led into another. It struck one of the lead marines but failed to penetrate his armour. Instead he just staggered back as the rest of his squad turned to see an alien armed with a pistol taking aim at them. The alien fired twice more in rapid succession, hitting the same marine both times but still failing to inflict any serious injury on him. But then the second shotgun armed marine brought his weapon to bear and fired a short burst.

The alien fell to the floor, letting out what sounded like a piercing cry of pain as blood pumped from its long neck. Meanwhile the marines split into two groups, moving down each side of the compartment towards the alien. But the alien was not totally out of the fight yet and it recovered its senses long enough to be able to let off another shot that struck a marine in his leg and he fell backwards. This was the alien's last chance at resistance however, as the other marines opened fire with a barrage of pistol and shotgun bursts that silenced it for good.

"Careful." Vernon said quietly, "There could still be more." and he edged towards the hatchway with his pistol raised. As he neared it he heard what sounded like a mix of hisses, clicks and squawks from the other side and he leapt over the alien body into what was obviously the stealth ship's cockpit where another alien was sat at a console apparently speaking into a microphone, "Get away from that console!" the sergeant yelled, hoping that the tone of his voice combined with the pistol he was aiming at the alien would overcome any language barrier. But instead of meekly doing as the marine wanted the alien lashed out with its tail, knocking him back through the hatchway into the passenger compartment before leaping from its seat and drawing the pistol it carried in a holster mounted at the base of its tail behind its legs. The alien fired through the hatchway without searching for a target, intending only to keep the marines away from the cockpit and at the same time it reached down for the body of its comrade to pull it clear of the hatch. The alien's plan was to close the hatch, sealing itself in the cockpit while it waited for help to arrive but even as it reached out for the hatch control the barrel of a shotgun was pushed through, blocking the hatch from closing. The alien screeched as it pressed its hand down on the control to close the hatch before grabbing hold of the shotgun barrel and trying to push it back through the gap. But in doing so it left itself exposed as the marine sergeant took the chance to extend his arm through the narrowing gap of the hatchway and pressed the muzzle of his pistol up underneath the alien's elongated jaw before pulling the trigger and putting a bullet through its brain. "Give me a hand with this door." Vernon then called out as he pulled back his arm. The only thing holding the hatch open now was the shotgun barrel and the motor that powered the door could be heard straining to try and finish the closing sequence. Obviously there was no safety mechanism to prevent the hatch from closing

onto anyone caught in its path.

Quickly, the other marines hunted for the access panel they guessed existed that would allow them to disconnect the motor from the door.

"Found it!" a marine shouted as he ripped a small panel away from the wall beside the hatchway and reached inside for the level it concealed. As soon as he pulled on this the sound of the motor ceased and the marines at the door were able to pull it open once again.

Vernon then stepped into the cockpit, kicking each of the alien corpses once to make certain that they were both dead before he took a look around. There were two seats positioned in front of the console and the sergeant guessed that the two dead aliens were the flight crew who would have occupied them. Then he looked back into the passenger compartment.

"Someone go check out the back of the ship." he ordered, "Make sure that there aren't any more hiding back there." then he activated his communicator, "Major Willis," he signalled, "this is Sergeant Vernon. My men have secured the second enemy vessel and it appears intact."

"Good work sergeant." Willis replied, "Can you hold it?"

"I think so sir. Oh and there's one more thing."

"Go ahead sergeant."

"The ship looks like it's designed for personnel transport. There is seating for about twenty passengers plus two flight crew. We've dealt with four here so that leaves anything up to eighteen that are elsewhere."

"We've got three confirmed kills already." Willis told him, "So that leaves us with no more than fifteen left. I'm sending another squad to reinforce you. Under no circumstances must the remaining aliens be allowed to retake that ship."

On the cruiser's bridge Willis then looked at Bernard and Knight.

"Fifteen isn't a bad number." Knight said, "We outnumber them about ten to one."

"That depends on their intentions." Bernard said, "If all they want to do is deny us this ship then fifteen could cause us a lot of trouble while we try and corner them."

"Especially since they know the lie of the land better than us." Willis added in agreement, "What we need to do is try and figure out where they'll head for."

9.

The cruiser's engineering section was arranged in a circular pattern with a cylindrical power core at its centre while three levels of work stations surrounded it, the bottom one extending right up to the core while the upper two were set back so that it was possible to see over the edge of them and down to the lower level. A slightly elevated level of radiation in the engineering section suggested that the power core was based on nuclear fission rather than the fusion power used as the primary power source of the *Warspite* and other Commonwealth vessels but this was not high enough to be considered dangerous. However, on the lowest level the engineers from the *Warspite* stayed away from the core, instead using robots to undertake any task that involved venturing right up to it. Except where the bright white light of flash lights provided illumination the entire section was filled with a pale blue light that came from dozens of chemical glow sticks that the marines had activated and scattered around so that the engineering teams could have a better view of the section while the marines themselves stayed out of the way of the engineers and robots who had accompanied them there. The marines had deliberately positioned themselves at the exits from the engineering section, enabling them to be ready to use their rifles without worrying about the effects that the hard nosed, armour piercing ammunition they fired would have on any of the equipment and in particular the power core should it be accidentally struck by a bullet.

The aliens however, were not so worried about the potential for damage from firing their weapons as they attacked the marine sentries from several directions at once. Co-ordinating their strike via radio the aliens opened fire at three different sentry points simultaneously marines were killed before they even realised what was happening. But the marines reacted quickly, returning fire and hurrying to reinforce the areas under attack.

"Engineering is under attack." the marine lieutenant commanding the platoon defending it transmitted as he looked around and tried to take in exactly what was happening. He had heard the gunfire from multiple directions and needed to know where to focus his attention. All of a sudden he realised that the firing had stopped from one of the entrances under attack and he turned to face it just as an alien leapt over the bodies of the marines guarding that entrance and opened fire on the troops hurrying to replace them, "Top floor breeched!" he yelled, raising his own rifle and firing across the gap in the middle of the upper engineering level. The burst caught one of the aliens and as it fell it struck the one behind it. But at the same time it alerted them to the presence of the marine officer and another alien raised its rifle towards them. This was fitted with a stubby grenade launcher beneath its barrel and there was a sudden 'Pop!' as it was fired. The low velocity round had to be fired in an arc that caused it to bounce off the ceiling and disrupted its trajectory. But it still landed close enough to the platoon command section that the marines in it hurled themselves aside.

"Grenade!" one of the lieutenant's men shouted as he rolled behind a console with less than a second to spare before the grenade exploded

"Van Holt. Van Holt what's going on?" Major Willis' voice sounded over the marine communication net. But as one of the marines in his section looked around they saw the lieutenant lay on his back and staring up at the ceiling with lifeless eyes, shrapnel from the grenade embedded in his face and throat.

"Major, this is Corporal Green. The lieutenant is down." he signalled, "The enemy is inside engineering."

"How many Green?" Willis asked and the marine looked at each spot that was under attack in turn, "I don't know sir. I can see four that came from one direction plus the lieutenant got one before he was killed. Could be anywhere from a dozen to twenty of them."

"Hold on Green. Tell everyone that help is on the way." Willis said.

On the bridge Willis looked at Bernard and Knight.

"Sounds like they're concentrating on engineering." Knight said.

"If they take it they could blow the power core." Bernard added, nodding.

"I get it." Willis responded and he activated his communicator, "All units not protecting either the bridge or stealth ship are to converge on engineering." he broadcast, "Enemy is attacking in force." then he looked at the other two officers again and added, "I should go as well." he added.

"Go." Knight replied, "We'll be just fine here."

"Can we tell exactly what's happening?" Reeves asked as he watched the feed from multiple cameras that showed the marines battling to keep the aliens out of engineering. One of the sentry posts had been overrun almost instantly and that had allowed some of the alien force to gain entry to the engineering section, thus forcing the marines to not only defend themselves against an external threat but against one that could come from behind them as well.

"Only that this looks like it could be all of the remaining aliens from their stealth ship." Lucas commented, "If not then a sizeable portion."

Then before Reeves could reply one of the communication officers spoke up.

"Captain, I have Admiral Mitchell for you. She's asking for an update."

"Oh great." Reeves said, "Put her through." then after a pause he added, "Admiral. I take it you've been watching the feed from the alien ship?"

"As much as possible. Reeves, what's going on over there?" Mitchell asked.

"It seems that the stealth ship that attached itself to the cruiser was used to deploy a force of troops that have engaged my men." Reeves told her.

"And what's their situation captain?"

"We outnumber the enemy admiral, but they have better knowledge of the ship and are currently attempting to overrun engineering."

"They may intend to deny us the ship by causing a meltdown in the power core admiral." Lucas added, "It appears to be fission based so that should be possible."

"And your people's reaction?" Mitchell responded.

"The bridge and access to the stealth ship are both secure." Reeves answered, "All available personnel are converging on engineering."

When Willis and the fire team of marines accompanying him towards engineering rounded a corner he narrowly avoided tripping over a metal plate that had been left leaning against a wall. He was about to curse whoever had left it there when something occurred to him and he ground to a halt, raising his hand for his men to do the same.

"That wasn't there the last time we came this way." he said, remembering having been down this section of corridor before. Looking straight at the panel so that the flash light mounted on his helmet illuminated it clearly Willis saw that it was in fact a grill of some kind and it had obviously been removed carefully using the appropriate tool rather than just ripped or prised out of place. When he looked up at where on the wall it had been removed from he saw just an empty hole, "Give me a hand up." he told his men and they helped lift him up to the hole where he peered inside and saw that it was a duct that led off in both directions parallel with the corridor that he was in, "Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." he said as he jumped back down and he activated his communicator, "All units be alert. The enemy could be using the ship's ventilation system to move about. Check all vents in your sections and don't leave them unguarded."

"Oh this sounds bad." Bernard said, drawing his sidearm and looking around.

"You think they'll attack here?" Knight asked.

"Possibly. I mean they could be trying to open another avenue of attack against engineering but we can't be sure." then raising his voice he added, "I want every vent located and covered. The least we can do is make sure that these aliens can't watch us through them."

There was movement at the end of the corridor Willis and his men were rushing down as they neared engineering and he raised his rifle to make use of its optical sight just in time to see a long tail vanishing around a corner and instinctively he fired two rounds in rapid succession. One of these clipped the alien's tail and it screeched before turning around and leaning back around the corner to fire at the marines. Willis dropped to one knee and fired again, this time using a short burst to finish off the alien. But as it fell he saw a small object pass through the beam of one of his men's flash lights as it was hurled around the corner.

"Grenade!" he yelled, throwing himself to the deck as his men did the same.

The grenade landed far short of the marines and when it detonated what shrapnel reached them flew over their heads or bounced off their armour. But the explosion was enough to punch through the deck immediately beneath the grenade and the area all around the hole was clearly badly damaged.

"Quick." Willis said as he and his men got back to their feet, "We need to find another way around. I doubt that will hold our weight."

Hurrying back the way they had come, Willis and his men quickly found a closed door that they started to pull open only to have the same aliens they had just encountered fire one of them from the far side and with the door open only a few centimetres the marines moved away from the gap.

"Can anyone near engineering here any gunfire not coming from in there?" Willis broadcast, hoping that there would be reinforcements close by.

"This is Sergeant O'Donnell. We've got gunfire in front and to our right." a voice responded.

"Head for the fire that isn't engineering." Willis ordered him, "We're pinned down and could do with an assist."

"On it major. Should be with you in a couple of minutes."

Approaching from the other side of the door, O'Donnell's marines rounded a corner to find themselves facing three aliens firing at Willis and his men. Focused on the gap in the doorway ahead of them, the aliens had forgotten to watch behind and without even needing to issue an order O'Donnell's men all opened fire, cutting down the aliens mercilessly.

"O'Donnell is that you?" Willis called out when the firing stopped.

"Right here major." he replied.

"Good. Then help us get this door open and let's get to engineering."

While leaving one of their number at each of their other points of attack the aliens had been redeploying to concentrate on the direction where they had been able to gain entry into the cruiser's engineering section and so as Willis and the marines accompanying him approached it themselves they found the way unguarded and the bodies of two marine guards and one of the aliens just inside the door. There was gunfire coming from all around the engineering section as the alien troops split up to cause as much chaos and confusion as they could. In addition to the marines the engineers from the *Warspite* were fighting back as well. But their pistols lacked the firepower of the rifles carried by either the marines or the alien troops and they had little effect on the enemy other than to hinder their movement somewhat.

Though small groups of the aliens had broken off to disrupt the *Warspite's* crew's actions, around half had formed a larger group that was making its way slowly around the upper level of the engineering section and clearing it out. The aliens positioned closest to the edge overlooking the core and lower levels were also firing over the side as targets presented themselves on the lower levels. Unlike the aliens in the corridor, this group was also alert for anyone manoeuvring around behind them and it was only a few seconds after they came through the doorway that Willis and his men were spotted and the main group of aliens began targeting them.

"Suppressive fire." Willis ordered as he ducked and fired a short burst towards the aliens, "But check you line of fire. Remember that this place is full of friendlies as well."

The fire from Willis' men brought the advance of the main group of aliens to a sudden halt and one that attempted to fire its grenade launcher over the safety barrier around the opening near the core was hit by a bullet that caused it to topple over, screeching as it plummeted down to the deck on the lowest level.

Meanwhile the smaller groups of aliens, six of them operating in pairs found that with the main group no longer distracting the bulk of the human troops they had been left exposed as more marines arrived to reinforce those already present and one by one they fell victim to either well placed rifle rounds or alternatively a barrage of automatic fire so great that avoiding it was impossible.

This left just the main group of alien troops in engineering, now numbering five and although the suppressive fire from the marines prevented them from making any serious attempt at moving to a new position there were also enough of them that the marines could not approach without being seen and fired on. But there was still one direction that was not blocked by marines that the aliens could make use of to try and break out. Down the core.

Using short bursts of fire to cover their move towards the safety railing, the aliens dropped lines over the side before leaping over and sliding down these to the deck below, landing among the startled engineers. The aliens opened fire again as soon as they landed, spraying bullets into the engineers as they took whatever cover they could. But the engineers were not alone on the bottom level, most of the robots deployed to engineering were also down there with them. For centuries there had been debate about the extent to which weapon systems should be automated and although there had been many fully autonomous combat robots produced by human nations, mankind in general still had an aversion to creating an entire army of them. But there were circumstances under which the utility robots used by the Commonwealth military could engage in combat. While the shooting had been taking place on the upper two levels the robots had taken no action, their artificial intelligence calculating that they did not stand a reasonable chance of successfully intervening to preserve the lives of the armed marines and engineers. The aliens had observed that the robots had moved to avoid combat and ignored them after a small number had been damaged but they had miscalculated how they would react when given a more realistic chance of being able to save the lives of their human masters.

As one the robots charged towards the alien troops, taking them by surprise and it was only when the first of the robots grabbed hold of an alien rifle and attempt to wrest it away from its owner that they realised the threat and turned their weapons on the humanoid machines. Unlike the first two robots sent into the cruiser, these wore no armour and relied only their own innate toughness for protection but that was insufficient against the close range rifle fire that the aliens unleashed at them. But whereas a human shot in the arm or leg would still be taken out of action until treated the robots could only be slowed down by such damage, with only hits to the processing cores or power supplies within their torsos being enough to bring them down fully. Taking advantage of the distraction provided by the robots the remaining human troops in the engineering section, both marines and engineers aimed their weapons towards the melee and opened fire. Though many humans had the tendency to see robots, particularly humanoid models like those brought from the *Warspite*, as more than just machines this did not prevent them from risking hitting them in their efforts to deal with their alien opponents. The result of this was that several robots were downed by friendly fire but, unable to take cover without surrendering their weapons to the robots that refused to release their grip or seek cover themselves the aliens bore the brunt of this fire and in just a few seconds all of them lay dead among the bodies of numerous damaged robots.

"Check them." Willis ordered as he leant over the safety railing on the upper level, unwilling to risk any of his

men being shot by an alien that was not as dead as it looked and a pair of marines on the lower level advanced towards the core and kicked each of the alien bodies in turn. Meanwhile Willis turned his attention to the remaining sources of gunfire. Though the bulk of the alien troops taking part in the assault on engineering had entered through the hatchway where the marine sentries had been killed in the opening exchange of fire, there was at least one still firing on the other two entrances that had been attacked, "Report!" he called out, "What are we facing?"

"Looks like one left at each of these two doors sir." a platoon leader replied, pointing to the two hatches coming under fire and Willis looked around to see what he had available to him.

Against just two aliens he had far more men than he needed but he knew that the aliens still had the advantage of home ground and so was careful not to be over confident.

"Take your platoon and work around behind them." he told the lieutenant, "Split your men into squads so the enemy's got nowhere to run to. Then we'll come at them from all sides and see if we can get them to surrender."

"Yes sir." the lieutenant replied before dashing away, his platoon following him.

"Someone get on each door again." Willis ordered, again not wanting to risk being suddenly attacked from a direction previously thought safe, "Everyone else to those two doors but stay back. We don't want to scare off the enemy just yet."

The marines then converged on the two doors still coming under fire from outside and waited as the platoon despatched by Willis to cut off the aliens' retreat moved into position with just the sentries exchanging fire with the aliens.

"Ready major." the platoon commander signalled, "All units in position. We have eyes on the enemy but have not engaged."

"Okay this is it." Willis announced as he raised his rifle, "Suppressive fire."

Now instead of just two marines firing single shots, multiple marines started to fire short bursts through the hatchways, forcing the aliens to take cover and hold their fire long enough for the marines to exit the engineering section and start to advance down the corridors towards them. The marines held their fire as they advanced, shooting only when the aliens ahead of them attempted to lean around the corners they were using for cover but doing their best to avoid actually hitting the opponents they wanted to try and capture.

"Commonwealth marines!" Willis yelled, hoping that the tone of his voice would be enough to get the attention of the alien ahead of him, "Surrender now."

"Commonwealth marines!" another voice called out from somewhere out of sight as the groups blocking the aliens' retreat now made their presence felt and both aliens now knew that they were surrounded and cut off from one another. However, while Willis had hoped that this would be intimidating enough to cow the aliens into surrendering it appeared to have the opposite effect and both aliens reacted violently.

The alien ahead of Willis and his men leapt out into the open with its rifle raised and opened fire on fully automatic. The hail of bullets caught one of the marines full in the chest and he fell backwards with blood pouring from wounds where his armour had failed to block the bullets. But in return every remaining marine opened fire directly at the alien and its body jerked under the weight of fire as it was torn apart by one powerful bullet hit after another.

The second alien turned on one of the marine squads that had circled around to cut off its retreat and hurled something down the corridor towards them.

"Grenade!" one of the marines yelled when he realised what it was and the squad dived for cover before the grenade went off.

The moment that the grenade detonated the alien that had thrown it broke into a run towards the direction of the explosion, firing short bursts from its rifle at any marine that was still moving as it sought to escape. But the marines approaching from the opposite direction sprang into action and charged forwards. They ran after the alien, following the sounds of gunfire until it came into view and the marines opened fire and shot it in the back. The alien let out a sharp cry as it dropped its rifle and continued to stagger forwards, managing several long, unsteady paces before it finally collapsed and died.

"Enemy neutralised major." the squad leader transmitted to Willis.

"Neutralised?" Willis responded, "So much for a prisoner then. Okay everyone, let's do a body count. I want to know how many we bagged here and what it cost us."

"Adding on those already accounted for and we get a total of twenty-one." Willis said, his signal being sent directly to the alien cruiser's bridge and also being relayed back to the Warspite's bridge where Reeves and Lucas were listening.

"That potentially leaves one more." Reeves responded and Lucas nodded.

"It makes sense." she said, "If this group was left behind by the aliens to make sure that none of their wrecked ships were of use to a potential enemy then it's logical that they'd have filled their ship to capacity."

"And presumably waiting for another ship to come back and pick them up." Reeves added. Then he turned his attention back to what was happening aboard the alien cruiser, "Major, do you have any idea where this

last alien could be?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure that it went into the ventilation system so it could be almost anywhere. Assuming that the ducts are large enough all over the ship anyway." Willis replied.

"We're keeping an eye out here." Knight said, "We figured that if engineering couldn't be taken then the next logical target for putting the ship beyond use would be the bridge."

"And what state is the ship in?" Reeves asked.

"I can't say for certain captain." Bernard answered, "But I'd say that it took a pounding from that dreadnought. The controls are either dead or locked out so until we can do something about that this ship is going no-" and then he was cut off by the sound of a high pitched scream.

The alien emerged from the ventilation system on the upper bridge level where the boarding party from the *Warspite* had deduced that the alien ship's most senior officers would normally be located. With most of the Commonwealth personnel present being on the lower level there was much less light up there and the access to the ventilation system located at floor level had been missed, allowing the alien to wait until it could exit the duct safely and take the three humans present by surprise.

Grabbing hold of the closest of them, a female engineer, the alien tossed her over the edge of the raised platform before pointing its pistol at the sole marine guard and firing at him. The two bullets it fired struck the marine in the chest where his armour prevented them from passing through his heart but still left him gasping for breath as the force of the impact knocked the wind out of him and he collapsed, dropping his rifle to the floor. The remaining engineer dived for the dropped rifle rather than draw his own sidearm. But just as his hand touched the weapon the alien pounced, dragging him away and sinking its teeth into his throat.

On the lower bridge level the assembled marines and engineers pointed their weapons upwards but the alien remained too far back for them to be able to target it.

"One grenade and we're all finished." Knight said, remembering the reports of aliens being willing to use grenades in the confines of the ship, "Everyone out. Quickly." However, as the rest of the *Warspite's* personnel present headed for the exits Knight himself ran to where a lightweight ladder had been erected leading up to the upper level and he started to climb it as quickly as he could. When he was about half way up he suddenly saw the alien peer over the edge of the upper level and looked directly at him, baring its teeth and hissing. Then it placed a foot on the top rung of the ladder and Knight felt it move as the alien prepared to push it away from the platform with him still on it.

All of a sudden there was the sound of a gunshot and the alien jerked as a bullet hit its armoured torso. Both Knight and the alien turned towards the source of the shot and they saw Bernard standing in a hatchway aiming his pistol at the alien. Then he fired again, this time letting off a three round burst that struck the side of the alien's skull and tore it off. Without making a sound the alien collapsed, tumbling over the edge of the upper bridge platform and plummeting past Knight before landing on the floor below with a dull 'Thunk.'

"Thanks." Knight said, looking straight at Bernard.

"You're welcome." he replied as he returned his pistol to its holster, "But maybe next time you'll follow your own order and get out."

"Commander Knight what's happening over there?" Reeves asked from the *Warspite*.

"Just a little problem with one of the ship's original owners not wanting us on the bridge." Knight replied as he descended the ladder, "I think we can consider the ship secure now though captain." he said before looking down at the body of the final alien soldier, "You can tell Doctor Thundercloud that we have more bodies for him if he's interested."

The bodies of the first aliens killed by the boarding party arrived back on the *Warspite* wrapped in plastic and sealed with tape. The packages were taken directly from the hangar to the ship's medical facility where an isolated operating theatre had been prepared for studying them. When Reeves arrived from the bridge to see what Thundercloud had discovered he found the autopsy still in progress. All of the medical personnel involved were wearing sealed suits designed to protect the wearers from the most infectious biological agents known to man while several robots were on hand to carry out any decontamination that may be required. The theatre was separated from the main area of the medical centre by a large window that had an intercom panel located beneath it.

"So what can you tell me about our guests doctor?" Reeves asked, the intercom broadcasting his voice over speakers on the other side of the wall.

"Well for starters they aren't bulletproof." Thundercloud replied as he used a pair of tweezers to removed a bullet from the body he was studying before dropping it into a metal bowl held by one of the nurses assisting him, "I've found a mix of seven millimetre rifle rounds and ten millimetre pistol rounds in these bodies. I take it that your presence here means that the alien ship has been secured?"

"That's right. Commander Bernard is looking at the stealth ship right now. I've despatched our work pods to bring it back here for study once he's figured out how to separate it from the cruiser. Now what have you learned doctor?"

"Well this species possesses the same iron based blood as pretty much every vertebrate species we've encountered so far and although the organs are different shapes and in different places they seem to possess the same sort of insides as we do. I think they're cold blooded though. Even wrapped in plastic their bodies were cold by the time they got here and when we removed their clothing we found what looked like a heating element in their jackets. Then when I cut the first one open I found what I believe is their heart located right under where the element was."

"So it heats up their blood before it gets pumped around their bodies?" Reeves asked and Thundercloud nodded.

"It makes sense." he said, "Oh and I'm sure that everyone will be glad to know that although the body fluid tests revealed the presence of numerous single celled life forms, none of them have reacted well to being placed in our environment. We're in no danger of infection from them."

"Yes, I noticed that you'd released the quarantine seals." Reeves commented. Then the door to the medical section opened to allow Major Willis to enter at the head of a stream of wheeled stretchers. Some of these held injured crewmen from the *Warspite* who were already being tended by marine corpsmen but others had more alien bodies lay upon them. As the injured crew were transferred to beds Willis walked over to the window and stood beside Reeves.

"Patients for you doc." he said into the intercom, "Plus some more bodies for you to cut up."

"Carry on without me." Thundercloud told one of his staff. Then as he exited the operating theatre he looked at the alien bodies and then at Willis, "I take it this means you killed them all?"

"Every last one." Willis replied, "Is that a problem?"

"Possibly major." Thundercloud said, "Considering that in the last two weeks or so we seem to have encountered two intelligent civilisations capable of travelling between the stars. Your men filled these with bullets while Captain Reeves fired a nuclear missile at the other. Frankly I'm a bit worried about us as a species if that's how we're going to start handling first contact."

Reeves and Willis looked at one another.

"Shall I remind him that our first official contact with the Brekken involved a full marine brigade performing an orbital combat drop and killing more than a thousand of them?" Willis asked.

"And after twenty years of covert surveillance." Reeves added, "Best not major." Thundercloud frowned.

"Well if you don't mind I've got work to do." he said, looking back towards the injured crewmen.

"In that case we'll let you get on." Reeves said before he looked at Willis and added, "I believe that Goldman and Lucas are currently studying the equipment these aliens had on them. I want to find out what they've discovered and I'm sure they'd appreciate your input."

The compartment near engineering where the aliens' captured equipment had a strong scent of disinfectant to it. The recovered items had been brought here prior to Doctor Thundercloud confirming that there was no risk of infection and so every one had been sterilised before anyone was allowed to hold it. Even then both Goldman and Lucas as well as the two engineering staff present to assist them wore latex gloves while handling the equipment.

When Reeves and Willis entered one of the engineers was holding an alien rifle to his shoulder and rocking back and forth as he tried to look down the sights. Unlike the compact bullpup rifles used by Commonwealth forces the aliens used a rifle with a more conventional layout that placed an ordinary looking box magazine in front of the trigger grip. Meanwhile the short optical sight was located further forwards, very close to the muzzle and it was this positioning that was causing the engineer trouble as he struggled to focus.

"Just doesn't feel right does it?" Willis asked, smiling at the engineer.

"I'm guessing it's a consequence of the alien physiology." Lucas replied, "Their bodies are more horizontal so the sights would be properly positioned for them to use."

"Plus they don't have the same need to make their weapons shorter with their heads sticking so far out."

Willis added, "Mind you I'm not so sure that they find turning around in a tight space as easy as we do."

"And what about you commander?" Reeves asked, looking at Goldman and the other engineer as they studied some form of electronic device with a display, "Found anything interesting?"

"Frankly captain I'm still not sure what this even is." Goldman replied.

"And yet still you're poking wires into it." Willis commented, looking at the trail of multi-coloured wires emerging from the back of the device where it had been opened and leading to a nearby computer.

"We're hoping that this will let us understand how the alien technology conveys data." Goldman said, "We think we've isolated the data bus leading from the processor to the display and we're comparing what happens when I press particular controls. I suspect Commander Bernard will be doing something similar aboard the alien ship."

Just then the intercom sounded and Lucas reached out to pick up the handset.

"Lucas." she said simply. Then she looked at Reeves, "Yes sir, he's here." she added before holding out the handset, "It's Lieutenant Commander Thomas for you captain." she told him.

"Thanks lieutenant." Reeves replied as he walked over to her and took the handset, "Reeves." he added.

"Captain, Admiral Mitchell is calling again." Thomas said, "She wants an estimate on how long it's going to take to complete the examination of the aliens and their ship."

Reeves sighed and lowered the handset.

"Admirals want everything right away." he said before lifting the handset to his head again, "Tell her that she'll have a preliminary medical report today but the technical examination may take longer. Wait no. First contact Commander Knight aboard the alien ship. Ask him to draw up a list of what extra resources they need to get that thing running again. There are dozens of ships in this fleet, we don't have to be the only ones contributing personnel and equipment. Then offer that list to Admiral Mitchell. I'm sure she can arrange for it all to be delivered."

Admiral Mitchell looked at the tablet handed to her by an aide while she stood on the bridge of the *Jericho* and monitored the deployment of the Commonwealth force. On the display was the list of personnel and equipment that Knight and Bernard had requested for examining the alien cruiser.

"This looks doable." she said, looking up at the young man, "Distribute it to the rest of the fleet. I'm sure that there'll be plenty of volunteers to go aboard that ship."

"Admiral I'd kind of like to head over to the *Warspite*." Park said from close by, "They're examining some of the alien technology there and I'd-"

"I'm sorry commander but you're going to have to wait for the report to come in like everyone else." Mitchell interrupted, "I've got the fleet spread out surveying all of those wrecks and I need you to collate what they're sending us. Plus if any more alien warships turn up then I'm going to need my intelligence officer here. I'm sure that Reeves' new intelligence officer is more able to manage without you than I am."

"Well it's nice to feel wanted admiral." Park replied.

The *Warspite* carried two work pods, compact space vehicles just large enough to hold a single occupant and equipped with only the most basic propulsion system as well as large robotic arms for use in conducting external repair work. But the robotic arms also allowed them to grab hold of the alien stealth ship when it was detached from the cruiser and keep hold of it as they guided it back towards the *Warspite's* forward hangar. Here another robot arm, this one much larger than those mounted on the work pods reached out to take hold of the stealth ship and after the work pods released it, brought it into the hangar and carefully set it down on the deck as the outer doors were closed behind it.

At the same time as this operation was being carried out the shuttle bringing Bernard back from the cruiser was arriving in the *Warspite's* rear hangar and from there he hurried the full length of the ship to begin his study of the stealth ship. But as he approached the forward hangar he found his way blocked by a large crowd. This was made up of a mix of both officers and enlisted men from various departments and included both fleet personnel and marines.

"What's going on here?" he asked, looking around at the crowd.

"What do you think?" Shaw responded as she pushed through the crowd to speak to him. Then she pointed to the still sealed entrance to the hangar, "That's an alien ship in there. Everyone wants to take a look."

It was then that the light above the door to the hangar changed from red to green and there was a buzzing sound to indicate that the hangar had been pressurised and the door unlocked. Immediately the nearest crewman, one of the hangar's ground service crew reached out and opened the door. But before the crowd could rush inside Bernard gave a shout.

"Stop!" he yelled, "No one goes in there before me and no one goes within ten metres of that ship without my permission. Do you all understand that?" and he rested his hand on the sidearm that he had not yet had the chance to return to the storage locker in his quarters. In response there was just silence and the crowd parted to allow him through. Then after he had entered the hangar and was staring at the alien stealth ship the crowd followed him through the doorway and started to spread out. A number of them lifted personal communication devices fitted with built in cameras to record still images and video of the alien ship.

"Wow." Shaw said from right behind Bernard, "That looks impressive close up." then she looked over her shoulder, "Right Kaz?"

"Incredible." Mori replied.

"Well since you two apparently have nothing better to do you can assist me in figuring out how it works."

Bernard said and the three officers started to walk towards the alien ship. As they approached it one of the robots that had remained in the hangar when it was decompressed to allow the stealth ship to be brought aboard walked up to them.

"Caution." it announced, "Radiation levels are slightly elevated."

"Dangerously?" Bernard asked.

"Negative." the robot replied, "But my programming requires me to warn you of the increase level."

"It was like that aboard the cruiser." Bernard said to Shaw and Mori, "The power core was a fission reactor and I don't think that these aliens are as worried about shielding as we are."

"I take it that you know how to get inside this thing?" Mori asked and Bernard nodded.

"Of course I do." Bernard replied, "The squad that captured it was able to figure that out." and he walked right up to the hull where the outline of a hatch was just about visible before opening a small panel beside it to expose a control panel consisting of six large buttons. Bernard pressed one of these and the hatch hissed open, "Come on." he told the two fighter crew, "I'll give you the tour."

"Never mind a tour." Shaw replied, "The cockpit's all I need to see."

While the smaller alien craft, along with its occupants and their equipment were all being studied aboard the *Warspite*, Commander Knight was overseeing the work being carried out aboard the alien cruiser. The boarding party's command post had been relocated to the bridge where, along with engineering, most of the work was being concentrated. Engineers and other technical staff from an assortment of ships in the Commonwealth task force were at work. In a larger and more complicated version of the procedure being used by Goldman to study the handheld alien device, access panels had been removed and probes inserted into consoles. Power lines had been identified and portable power supplies used to make them operational, after which the engineers began to push buttons and monitor the responses of the consoles both in terms of how the displays changed as well as the data bits sent back and forth through the ship's computer network. Of the two types of response it was the second that was considered more important, enabling the engineers to build up a picture of how data was communicated by the alien technology. One console was left out of this process however, fitted with larger control levers than any of the others this was taken to be the helm station and to avoid having the ship sudden start to move it was left alone.

Another console was soon determined to be a communication station and this was soon made a priority for study. As part of its function the console could produce the alien speech as well as converting an audio input into data, both of which were key to understanding their systems so a large number of personnel were assigned to studying this particular console and as Knight sipped at a cup of soup he had been handed by a crewman he did not recognise from one of the task force's other vessels he listened to the various hisses and growling sounds being produced by the console and wondered what they meant. For all he knew they could be being played in an order that made them as meaningless to the aliens as they were to him or on the other hand they could be precise instructions on how to operate the alien equipment if only any of the humans could understand them.

"Morning."

Knight looked up from his soup when he heard this and stared towards the engineers gathered around the communication console.

"You've got it to record and playback?" he asked, impressed that they could achieve this after only a few hours of work.

"No sir." one of the engineers replied, "It was already stored somewhere in the system."

"You're kidding." Knight said, walking over towards the console.

"No sir." the engineer said again and he tapped the display where several alien icons were shown.

"Light."

"Speak."

"Fall."

"What the hell is this?" Knight exclaimed as the console produced yet more words in perfect spoken English, "Could they have recorded communications between our ships at some point? Maybe the receiver was still active when the task force arrived in the system."

"I don't think so sir." the engineer replied, "As far as I can tell this is part of a library stored in the main computer. But that would have to mean-"

"I know what it means petty officer. It would have to mean that they've encountered humans before." Knight interrupted and then he activated his communicator, "*Warspite* come in. This is Commander Knight."

"*Warspite* here commander." Thomas' voice replied, "Go ahead."

"Is the captain there? I need to speak to him urgently."

Once again Reeves, Goldman and Lucas stood around the central bridge console and studied the data being sent back from the alien cruiser as one English word after another was spoken by its computer. Only now they were joined by Thomas and Willis as well.

Goldman shook her head.

"That's just impossible." she said, "How could they possibly have detailed files on our language?"

"Maybe their space extends into the Fringe Worlds." Thomas suggested, "What with the Caliphate in the way there are a lot of systems in the Pavo Sector that remain uncharted there."

"There is also the issue of the unofficial missions that have come this way since humanity started exploring space." Lucas added, "When I was studying possible explanations for where that dreadnought came from I found records of forty-eight long range drones and seven manned vessels that left Commonwealth space to come out this way that were never heard of again."

"So you think that one of those missions could have run into these aliens and made contact with them?"

Reeves asked and Lucas nodded.

"It's the best explanation I can come up with at the moment sir." she replied.

"Then this could be our Rosetta Stone." Reeves said and Willis frowned.

"It was a carved stone that allowed archaeologists to translate ancient hieroglyphics." Thomas said when he saw the marine's expression.

"Thanks." Willis replied.

"Didn't study history then?" Goldman asked.

"Too busy getting in some practical work at biology." Willis answered with a smile.

"Well the fact is that this ought to speed up the process of translating the alien language and interpreting their technology." Reeves said, "Without that we'd be limited to basing everything on what signs look to be giving directions towards."

"I'm more interested in their numbering and co-ordinate system." Thomas added, "Once we figure that out and can read it from their computer I can try to put together a map of where that ship's been."

"Commander Knight did you get that?" Reeves asked.

"Yes captain." Knight replied from the alien bridge, "We've managed to identify what looks like the aliens' navigation station and pulled up a few star charts but so far we've had no luck in identifying how they actually go about laying in a course."

"Well keep on it." Reeves told him, "Oh and if you've not already done it see if you can spare someone to try searching through crew quarters. Some of the crew could have had personal effects that could shed some

light on things.”

“Contact!” Cortez suddenly called out from her station and the officers gathered around the central console all looked up at her, “Single vessel just dropped out of FTL about six million kilometres away.”

“Action stations.” Reeves ordered as he and the others with him hurried back to their stations, Willis moving to the back of the bridge and joining the two guards by one of the exits.

“No visual image yet captain.” Lucas commented as she called up the feeds from the *Warspite's* sensors. There was nothing unusual about this however, at six million kilometres distance it would take twenty seconds for any passive sensors based on EM waves to pick up any information about the newly arrived vessel and twice that for active sensors.

“Any information at all would be nice petty officer.” Reeves said.

“The tachyon burst wasn't that big captain.” Cortez replied.

“Agreed.” Lucas added, “Possibly a small capital ship, but more likely something smaller.”

“The fleet is coming about captain.” Goldman announced, “Shall I order the fighters launched?”

“What's their fuel status?” Reeves asked.

“About half are fully fuelled. The rest are still being seen to by the ground crews.” Goldman answered.

“Then no.” Reeves told her, shaking his head, “The fleet has more than enough attack craft to handle a target like this.”

“Visual image coming in now captain.” another sensor operator announced and both Reeves and Lucas immediately brought this up on their own consoles.

The design of the newly arrived vessel was similar to that of the wrecked light cruiser and also the stealth ship used to put the alien troops aboard it. The forward section of the ship was an almost triangular wedge with a tail making up the rear third of its length. Either side of this tail were the main drive units that extended into the forward section so that exhausts to slow the ship down were set into this rather than mounted to the sides as they were on the other two alien ships. The prow of the vessel mounted assorted protrusions that could have including a fixed forward gun but could also be antennas for communications or sensors. On the other hand the turret mounted on the forward section was obviously a weapon of some kind.

“Target is approximately one hundred and fifty metres long captain.” Lucas told him.

“So a corvette or scout.” Reeves said, “Any indication of why they're here?”

“Tachyon surge detected from alien vessel captain.” Cortez said and at the same time the alien ship appeared to turn away from the planet now orbited by the Commonwealth fleet.

“They're running.” Ash said and he smiled, “Hardly surprising. One small ship against a fleet? No contest.”

“Keep alert.” Reeves ordered, “They could still drop a missile or two before they leave.”

“Tachyon levels increasing.” Cortez said, “They should reach critical mass any time now.” and then moments later the icon representing the alien craft on the *Warspite's* sensors vanished, followed a few seconds after by a flash on the visual display as the light of the ship's departure reached the Commonwealth cruiser.

“So they just came to take a look around and then left?” Willis commented from the back of the bridge.

“Ideas lieutenant?” Reeves asked, looking at Lucas.

“The tail section of the ship looks like it could be a docking station.” Lucas said as she examined the virtual model that the *Warspite's* computer had generated based on the visual scans of the ship and she ran her finger across the display where the tail section was flat on one side.

“So they came to pick up that stealth ship?” Reeves said and Lucas nodded.

“That would be my guess captain.” she replied.

“And now they're hurrying back home to tell them all about us.” Ash pointed out.

“Get me Admiral Mitchell.” Reeves said, glancing at the communication station and a few moments later the admiral's voice was heard.

“Mitchell here. Go ahead *Warspite.*”

“Admiral, I take it you saw our latest visitor?” Reeves said.

“Yes. Not that they seemed interested in staying long.” Mitchell replied.

“My intelligence officer believes that they were just here to collect the smaller alien vessel we have in our hangar.” Reeves told her.

“This complicates matters captain. When that ship gets back to its base it will tell them we're here and we could be facing a fleet that's much closer to home than we are.”

“There's another matter I should make you aware of admiral.” Reeves said then after a pause as he tried to decide how to explain it to her he added, “It appears that the aliens already have knowledge of humanity. Their cruiser contains information on the English language.”

“That must be a mistake Reeves. If the Commonwealth had contacted an advanced alien species out here then I'd damn well know about it. That's a major security issue.”

“Admiral it may not have been the Commonwealth that contacted them. In her investigation Lieutenant Lucas has come across the records of numerous vessels that came out this way but never returned. Right now it's our opinion that the aliens contacted one of them.”

Reeves heard the admiral sigh.

"Find out." she said, "Have the research teams do whatever is necessary to uncover what the aliens know about us. Right now we're stumbling about in the dark over pretty much everything and I don't like it. Now is there anything else? Because if we're going to have company I want to make sure that we're ready to greet them."

"Nothing more admiral." Reeves answered.

"Good. Carry on captain. *Jericho* out."

"Contact Commander Knight." Reeves said, looking at Goldman and getting to his feet, "Tell him to have his teams focus on the alien communication and navigation systems. Anything that could tell us who these aliens are and where they are from. Everything else is secondary. Oh and make sure copies of everything we have are on the main server, I'll review in my quarters. The bridge is yours Lieutenant Commander Goldman."

Reeves was asleep when the call came, the buzzing of the intercom waking him up. Fortunately the handset was mounted within reach of his bed and he was able to just reach out and grab hold of it.

"Reeves."

"Captain you may want to come to the bridge immediately." Goldman said, "Commander Knight has just returned from the alien ship and he says that they've managed to access and download part of the alien navigation system."

"I'm on my way." Reeves responded before putting down the handset and leaping out of bed.

By the time Reeves dressed and got to the bridge he found that Knight was already there and along with Cortez was plugging a portable computer drive into the central console while Goldman and Thomas looked on.

"How much do you have?" Reeves asked.

"Not much." Knight replied, "But it looks like it's the course that was last laid into the computer when the ship went to FTL."

Thomas then lowered the tablet he had been studying while Knight and Cortez worked.

"It looks like there's enough here to convert their numbering system to our own as well." he added.

"The engineers already took care of that." Knight replied, "Or so they claim. They wrote an application to adjust the numbering base and bearing system."

"What about distances?" Reeves asked.

"Ah, now that's where things get a bit more tricky captain." Knight answered, "The translation that we've been able to carry out so far suggests that the aliens have a similar term to our light year but without any knowledge of the planet that it's based on we're still in the dark about exactly how long their unit is."

"We can guess that it's somewhere between half and twice as long as our own though." Thomas said, "Then we'll take a look at what star systems lie on the course stored in this thing."

"Plugged in now sir." Cortez said, getting up from where she had been crouched.

"Okay let's see what we've got." Thomas replied, setting down the tablet and turning his attention to the central console instead. Already displayed on this was a Commonwealth star chart showing space in the Pavo sector as well as the neighbouring Indus and Telescopium sectors. Then a red line appeared on the display to show the heading followed by the alien cruiser when it had entered the Phi Two Pavonis system.

"So that's the way they came?" Reeves said and Knight nodded.

"According to our best guess, yes. And given the size range that we could apply to their distance measurement they'd come between nine and thirty-six light years to get here." Knight replied.

"I'd say less than twenty." Thomas said as he moved his hand over the display to turn the map and allow it to be viewed from a different angle, thus confirming to him that the course followed by the alien ship came very close to a particular star system.

"What star is that?" Knight asked.

"CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one." Thomas replied as he called up the information available on the star system, "It's an orange dwarf star. K-five spectral class and according to long range observations may have at least five planets orbiting it. Oh and it's fifteen point seven two light years away from here."

"Just over two days for the *Warspite*." Knight commented and Reeves nodded.

"So this could be the aliens' home system or just an outpost. Either way there's likely to be a whole lot more information on them there." he said.

"Question is how will they react to a heavy cruiser turning up unannounced?" Knight asked, "They didn't seem too keen to find us aboard their ship after all."

Reeves smiled.

"Hopefully Commander Bernard will be able to help us out there." he replied and he walked to the closest intercom handset and picked it up, pressing the code for the forward hangar, "This is Captain Reeves." he said to the crewman that answered, "Is Commander Bernard still there?"

"I'm sorry captain, he left about an hour ago."

"Okay, I'll get him in his quarters." Reeves said, hanging up and then calling Bernard's quarters.

"Bernard."

"Commander I need you on the bridge as soon as possible." Reeves told him.

"I'll be right there captain." Bernard responded.

The *Warspite's* chief engineer arrived a few minutes later, carrying with him a tablet and he joined the officers gathered around the central console.

"You've figured out the navigation system?" he said, looking at the star chart and the course indicated on it.

"And traced the aliens back to this system right here." Thomas replied, pointing to the star system crossed by the calculated heading.

"The issue is that we don't know how the aliens are likely to react to our presence there." Reeves explained, "From everything we've seen it's likely that they'll attack as soon as they discover us. How much about that stealth ship have you learned?"

"I take it that you're asking if I know how to fly it?" Bernard asked in response, "Well Shaw and Mori seemed confident in operating the controls but they're going to need system displays they can understand."

"How long will it take to rig something like that?" Reeves asked.

"A day. Maybe two. It depends on just how much translation of the alien language has been achieved."

"More than you'd think." Knight commented.

"The aliens appear to have encountered humans before." Goldman added, "They have files in English aboard their ship."

"You're kidding." Bernard said in surprise.

"No." Reeves replied, "It is my intention to ask Admiral Mitchell to give us permission to investigate CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one and to do so I would like to make use of the alien stealth ship. Hopefully it will be able to penetrate their defences unobserved or alternatively be accepted as one of their own ships without question."

"And you really think the admiral will sign off on this little trip into alien territory?" Bernard asked.

"She told me to do whatever it takes to find out about these aliens." Reeves answered.

"And what about our investigation of that derelict out there?" Bernard said, "We can't be anywhere near done with it. Figuring out how to fly something like what we've got in the hangar is one thing but a cruiser is another thing all together."

"Admiral Mitchell will have to find someone else to finish that off." Reeves replied.

"Most of the work crews are from other ships anyway." Knight added.

"Commander Bernard is just worried that he won't be involved." Thomas said.

"Then he will just have to settle for whatever we find at CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one." Reeves said.

INTERLUDE.

"Enrico come on in. Have you met Mister Stein? I was just explaining to him how the Commonwealth is reacting exactly as you predicted." Hayes asked when Vale stepped through the doorway of her office to find that she already had company in the form of a smartly dressed middle aged man while in the far corner of the room stood a more muscular figure who was making no effort to hide the compact submachine gun slung beneath his shoulder.

"Not yet no." Vale replied and he bowed his head towards Stein. Though the pair had not previously met one another Vale was well aware of Hayes contact in the government. Without his influence to back her up she would have been limited to whatever intelligence normally crossed her desk rather than being able to specifically order reconnaissance flights to suit her plan. Vale had not been informed of exactly what Stein hoped to gain from his involvement with Hayes' scheme but he obviously had advisers of his own telling him that there were advantages to him being involved. For a brief moment it also occurred to Vale that his involvement could be to do with Hayes herself. She was undoubtedly an attractive woman and it could be that Stein saw himself as having the opportunity to pursue a more personal relationship if he acted as her benefactor but then he noticed the wedding ring on Stein's finger and discounted the idea.

"Mister Vale has planned every detail of this operation." Hayes told Stein, "He can take the most trivial intelligence and gain more meaning from that than some could manage by being in the same room as a target. I expect he's here to update us on the situation."

"Perhaps we should discuss this more privately." Vale suggested, looking at Hayes.

"Oh come now Enrico, we've nothing to hide from Mister Stein." she said.

"I was just thinking that it would be better to provide him with a more formal report that takes into account all the relevant information, not just the incomplete data available to us right now." Vale replied, anxious not to have to risk incurring the ire of Stein and his heavily armed bodyguard who Vale suspected would not need the weapon he displayed to kill both he and Hayes if his master commanded it.

"I think I am capable of understanding an intelligence report Mister Vale." Stein said sternly and then he glanced back towards Hayes, "This is why I never trust his sort." he said to her, "Always trying to hide details on the grounds that they think we won't understand them."

"Spit it out Enrico." Hayes said, "But close that door first. Mister Stein and I need to know but Commander Kane and his staff don't."

"Very well." Vale replied, moving away from the door so that it slid shut behind him. Then he walked over to Hayes' desk and used her computer to access the building's communication system, opening his own messaging system, "Martins was watching Phi Two Pavonis." he said, "And he picked up this." and then he placed an image on the room's primary display screen that showed the alien cruiser prior to it being damaged.

"Is that what I think it is?" Stein asked, glaring at Hayes.

"It's a light cruiser." Vale replied before Hayes could speak, "It and a squadron of other vessels entered the system about two days before we expected the Commonwealth fleet to arrive. Martins said that they engaged the dreadnought and suffered losses before withdrawing. This cruiser and several smaller ships were either destroyed or crippled and abandoned, the cruiser relatively intact. Martins withdrew shortly after to inform us of what had happened. But he was there long enough to witness the dreadnought pulling out as well."

"Did the dreadnought attempt to clean any of its mess up?" Hayes asked.

"No." Vale replied, "What's left of the other ships was left behind."

"So your telling us that when the Commonwealth arrives to deal with the dreadnought it will have already departed and instead they'll find this ship just drifting there?" Stein asked, pointing to the display.

"That's correct." Vale replied, "Though in all likelihood they've already arrived in the system and-"

"And most likely they'll have sent a boarding party aboard." Stein added, "A boarding party that could find out far more than the plan presented to me called for." and then he stared angrily at Hayes, "Do you have any idea how this could make me look Miss Hayes? You assured me that the Commonwealth would encounter only the one ship and that they would not gain any significant intelligence from it. Now they'll have encountered that as well. Damn it Commander Hayes, it's not even from the right species. I thought your plan was based on the behaviour we know to expect from the aliens who built the dreadnought, not them."

"It's alright." Hayes replied, clearly flustered but doing her best to try and convince her benefactor that she was in complete control of the situation, "It was inevitable that the Commonwealth would encounter them as well sooner or later. The important thing is-"

"The important thing is that you seem to think that this, like the fact that the Commonwealth is now aware of our tampering with the SETI program, is all a part of your plan. Yet none of it was mentioned to me when you asked me to support it." Stein said angrily as he got to his feet, "Just figure out what's going on and how

you're going to fix it commander. Otherwise you may find yourself trying to get by without my support. Let's see how well you fare then." and he nodded at his bodyguard before both of them headed for the door. Stein avoided looking at Vale as he walked past the man but his bodyguard glared at him and smirked before he left.

When the door closed behind them Hayes sighed.

"You couldn't have called ahead?" she asked, looking at Vale.

"I tried to warn you." he pointed out.

"Well from now you call me first before coming here." Hayes said, "And make it sound unimportant. We can't afford any more screw ups like that."

"Of course commander. Do you want me to have Martins head back to Phi Two Pavonis?"

"No. No, a drone will do. But make sure it's rigged to self destruct if anyone goes near it. The last thing we need now is the Commonwealth fleet getting close to one of our ships as well."

"Yes commander." Vale replied and he turned to leave. But as he neared the door Hayes called out to him.

"One more thing Enrico." she said.

"Yes commander?"

"I want you to look into our good friend Mister Stein." Hayes told him, "If he's going to try and throw me under a bus to cover up his involvement in this then I want to know that I can bring him down with me." then she smiled, "No. I want to make sure that he's the one that goes under instead. Do you think you can manage that?"

Vale smiled.

"I predicted the likelihood that Mister Stein would try and disassociate himself from us after you first told me about him." he replied, "I've already been making all the necessary preparations."

The star Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 was just a tiny orange dot in the distance when the *Warspite* dropped to sub light speed on the outer edge of its planetary system. Long range gravitational scans had determined the presence of a gas giant that the warship used as cover to shield it from the inner rocky planets that were the most likely to be inhabited before drifting out of its shadow and using passive sensors only to survey the system properly. The possibility of encountering hostile ships as soon as the *Warspite* arrived had prompted Reeves to bring the cruiser to action stations while still moving at faster than light speeds and every station on the bridge was fully manned while in the hangars most of the fighters and interceptors aboard the ship were crewed and ready to launch.

"We've got three rocky planets visible." Thomas reported, "Plus another gas giant behind us and what could be a frozen world beyond that."

"Captain one of the rocky planets is within what we'd consider the habitable zone of the system." Goldman added, "About point five of an AU from the star and there's an atmosphere."

"Tachyon activity near the star." Cortez announced and Reeves looked at Lucas.

"Lieutenant? Care to enlighten us?" he asked as she looked at her console.

"They're not ships captain." she replied, "It looks like a system of six satellites orbiting the star at close range equipped with tachyon based equipment."

"A communication network." Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Nice to know they haven't figured out a system better than what we have." he said. Given the highly directional nature of tachyon communications it was not enough to know that the destination of a message was in a particular system. Instead faster than light signals in the Commonwealth would be aimed directly towards a star orbited by a network of communication satellites. These would then relay the signal to its intended destination in the system. Without such a network of satellites the only way to deliver a message via tachyon transmission was to know exactly where the destination would be located to within a few tens of thousands of kilometres.

"There does appear to be activity around the primary planet." Goldman said, "Multiple EM sources all across the spectrum."

"So we've got an inhabited world and evidence of advanced technology." Reeves said, "Are there any indications that we've been spotted?"

"No sudden tachyon bursts." Cortez responded.

"That planet's several light hours from here captain." Goldman pointed out, "Even if they did detect the tachyon burst from our arrival it'll take that long for any useful data to reach any EM based sensors they point this way."

"Any traffic closer to us?" Knight asked, knowing that where one planet was inhabited by a technologically advanced civilisation it made outposts on other bodies in the system more likely along with craft moving between them, any one of which could have detected the *Warspite*.

"Could be some engine flares out near the other gas giant." Goldman told him.

"I'm not seeing anything that looks like a major warship captain." Lucas said, "Though there are some large vessels that could be carriers rather than the cargo transports they look like at the moment. Though there are several smaller vessels that look like patrol ships of some sort and three larger ships docked at an orbital facility that look like frigates or destroyers."

"Nothing we can't hold off." Knight commented, looking at Reeves.

"What about fixed orbital defences?" Ash asked from the helm station.

"The planet's orbited by more than thirty major satellites and space stations that are visible from this angle."

Lucas replied, "Any of them could be military and if these aliens are anything like us then it's likely that the one where the capital ships are docked will be armed."

"Okay I've heard enough." Reeves said, "We're moving to the next stage. Ash, Thomas, I need a course to the primary planet that keeps us hidden. Goldman, tell the others that it's time for them to go on ahead of us."

"Forward hangar this is the bridge." Goldman said into the intercom, "*Intruder* is ready cleared for launch."

"Copy that bridge. De-pressurising hangar now. *Intruder* will be go in sixty seconds."

The alien stealth ship, now unofficially named *Intruder* by the crew of the *Warspite* was positioned ready to launch from the cruiser's forward hangar, its systems already powered up. Inside Shaw and Mori were in the cockpit where the alien seats had been removed and replaced by more conventional human ones while a pair of large display screens had been fixed above the flight console to provide information in a form that the two fighter crew would be able to understand more easily. Shaw's ability to pilot the stealth ship was still a matter of theory rather than something put into practice but the distance to the planet would allow her plenty of time to put this to the test. Meanwhile the passenger compartment behind the cockpit had also seen some

remodelling to suit human physiology rather than the alien one and a full platoon of marines led by Major Willis himself was crammed in with full kit.

"We've got clearance." Mori said when the hangar door was fully open and the hangar controller gave his permission for launch.

"Okay everyone hang on." Shaw called out. In concentrating on learning how the alien craft's flight controls worked there had not been enough time to work out more minor details such as the intercom so she just called out through the open cockpit door, "Here we go." and she gently pulled back on the flight controls. Normally as a fighter pilot Shaw was used to making rapid course corrects and manoeuvres but at the helm of an unfamiliar craft inside the *Warspite's* hangar she was more cautious and the stealth ship slowly lifted off the deck before moving forwards out into space. Shaw cut power to the engines at this point, letting the ship drift under its own momentum until it was more than a kilometre from the *Warspite* and it was then that she fired the ship's main engines.

Unsurprisingly for a small ship that relied on a limited stored supply of gravitons for its artificial gravity, the internal gravity field was insufficient to totally counteract the force placed on the occupants of the stealth ship as it accelerated towards the system's primary inhabited planet and all of them felt themselves being pushed back into their seats until Shaw was satisfied with their velocity and cut power to the engines again. Then just in case the drive flare was detected she fired the stealth ship's low energy thrusters to adjust its course so that it would approach the planet by a more indirect but more discrete route.

"Now we wait." she said, looking at Mori.

A few seconds later Willis appeared at the hatchway to the passenger compartment, his height forcing him to duck down to fit through the alien doorway that was lower than the human equivalent.

"So what's our ETA?" he asked.

"Sixteen hours." Mori replied, "Give or take an hour or so for manoeuvring."

"I reckon we could make it there in seven if I went full burn on the engines." Shaw added, "But that would compromise our stealth and we'd be relying on the fact that we're piloting one of their own ships to get us through."

"Frankly no matter what Commander Bernard said about the translation database his people put together, I'm not willing to risk our lives on it when they only had two days." Mori added, "One signal asking for a codeword or using just a single word we've not translated yet and they'll know something's wrong."

"So we're relying on them not being able to penetrate their own stealth tech then?" Willis said and Shaw nodded.

"Pretty much major." she said.

"Look at it this way," Mori added, "if they didn't think it was any good then why did they keep all their emissions to a minimum when they were sneaking aboard that cruiser?"

"Kaz has got a point." Shaw said, "They had confidence in their own ship. So why shouldn't we?"

"Given that we're stuck in here for sixteen hours?" Willis responded, "I just wish we could be as confident about that portable field latrine in the back. I don't know about you, but my men had the chilli last night."

Led by a man called Horst who was clearly the oldest of the group, the three men and one woman who had just finished filling in the hole patted down the ground on top of it, doing their best to level it off. Alongside where they had just dug this latest grave was a row of others, each one marked by a simple pile of stones and a single flat stone on which the name of the individual buried beneath it had been crudely scratched. There was no other information such as a date of birth or date or cause of death. It was all they could do to record that the physical remains of their former friends were even buried at this place. All four wore clothing that was almost identical, simple and hard wearing it allowed for the freedom of movement needed for physical labour and was marked with lettering that did not come from any human language.

"We should be getting back." Horst said, "We've used up our time." and the woman among them snorted.

"You'd think they'd be more worried about leaving rotting bodies around the camp." she said.

"We'll have outlived our usefulness by the time any of us got sick." one of the other men replied.

"They'd just throw the bodies in the incinerator given half a chance." Horst added, "Anything to make themselves look better before our masters." and he snarled as he said the word 'masters'. Then there was a sound like thunder from overhead despite the sky being clear above the barren ground and all four of them looked up to search for the source of this unexpected sound. High above them they saw the unmistakable trail of a spacecraft entering the planet's atmosphere and they watched as it continued to descend.

"That's not right." one said, "There aren't any spaceport facilities in that direction."

"It's turning anyway." the woman added as the spacecraft began to change course now that it had entered the atmosphere properly.

"Yes but not enough." Horst pointed out, "That's going to come down in the middle of nowhere."

"Perhaps it's damaged." the final one of the group suggested right before the spacecraft's engines shut down and given the distance from the four observers it vanished from their sight.

"Then why not dock at one of the orbitals?" Horst asked, "Why risk entering the atmosphere?"

"So what do you think is going on?" one of the others responded.

"I think that someone just arrived that doesn't want to make their presence on this planet widely know and that makes me think that we should try and make contact with them." the eldest told him.

"You think it could be smugglers?" one of the others asked and he nodded.

"It's not even luxuries I'm hoping they'd have." he replied, "We need the medicines the overseers are hoarding for themselves."

"We'd need an excuse to be away from the camp for a couple of days at least." the woman pointed out.

"I know. But perhaps if we spoke to-" Horst began.

"What the hell are you lot still doing out here?" a voice called out before he could finish and the four members of the burial team turned to see another man approaching them. He wore similar clothing to theirs but his were in better condition and had the added benefit of a thicker jacket more suitable for protection from the wind. Visible around his neck was a collar of metal and plastic that extended up one side of his head and into his ear while in one hand he held a long baton, "Your time was up ages ago. All of you should be back at work by now." and he waved his baton towards the group.

"Tell me Indigo," Horst said as they started to walk back towards their camp, "when it comes time to bury you in a hole in the ground do you think our masters will take as much care over you as we did over our friend?"

"Keep it up old man." the man named Indigo replied, snarling at him, "You'll be in a hole long before me. In fact maybe I should give you a head start right now. Your friends can come back tomorrow and bury whatever the local scavengers haven't eaten during the night."

"You know Indigo that big man act may work back at camp but out here there are four of us with shovels to you and your baton and no other overseers or guards with machine guns to back you up. Perhaps we should be the ones burying you. Ask nicely and maybe we'll kill you before we put you in the hole." another of the group said, glaring at Indigo.

"Keep it up Kruger." Indigo replied, pointing his baton towards the man, "You'll have a hard time explaining what happened to me and why your face is all smashed in. By the time they're done with you you'll be begging for them to finish you off." he added, not needing to explain to the group who the 'they' he was referring to were.

"You think they'd waste a perfectly good slave over a traitor like you?" the woman asked.

"Yes they would." Horst told her, "They'd have to or all of their little collaborators would become targets and they can't have that."

"Of course they can't." Kruger commented, "Then they'd have to keep watch over us themselves."

"Just get moving." Indigo ordered and he shoved the nearest of the group in the direction of the camp.

As the group continued on its way, Horst looked back over his shoulder briefly. Indigo scowled at him as he did, thinking that the older man was looking at him and not realising that he was looking off into the distance to make sure that there was no plume of smoke from a crashed spacecraft coming from over the horizon.

"Any landing you can walk away from is a good one." Shaw said as she walked down the ramp that had extended from the stealth ship's outer air lock door with Mori following close behind her. Around them Willis and his marines were at work concealing the ship. Neither tearing up what little vegetation was available or spreading dirt dug from the ground would be of use for this purpose. Even if enough could be found to cover the ship the vegetation would dry out and change colour over time while on the other hand the colour of the dirt would take time to adjust its colour to match the ground around it, as well as leaving the tell tale signs of digging from wherever it was collected. Fortunately the landing party had come prepared for this and the marines deployed large sheets of fabric made from a material capable of adjusting its colouration and pattern by running an electrical current through it. Thermally insulated, it would also shield the vessel from being detected by infra red sensors.

"Landing?" Willis responded as he and his men glared at the pilot, "I've flown before lieutenant commander and in my experience most pilots wait until their ship is on the ground before shutting off their engines. That was less of a landing and more of a sudden fall if you ask me. Drop pods offer a smoother ride."

"Well if you think you can do better flying an alien spaceship for the first time you're welcome to try on our way back." Shaw told him, "Now Kaz reckons we got pinged on our way down so we need to make sure that we're invisible from the air."

"So they saw through the stealth tech then?" Willis asked.

"Not really." Mori replied, "It was right as we were entering the atmosphere. Our radar signature was negligible but there was nothing we could do about the thermal trail we left. That's when someone tried bouncing a lidar pulse off our hull."

"That's why I made that sudden course correction." Shaw added, "With any luck any search craft will follow our original course but I wouldn't want to bet my life on that. We need to know whether anyone approaches." Willis nodded.

"I'll send a section out to scout around for a good location." he said, "What about the comms gear?"

Given the radical difference in communication technology between the Commonwealth and the alien species

who had made the stealth ship the landing party had brought along their own long range communications equipment. This consisted of a dual laser and radio system that was limited to communicating at the speed of light rather than a tachyon based system that would be faster but also more easily detected. The plan was for the landing party to transmit their position along with any information they wanted to convey by radio and for the *Warspite* to respond with a carefully aimed laser signal.

"We may as well leave it inside." Shaw said, "The *Warspite's* approaching from the outer solar system so it'll only be in our line of sight at night. We can just set it up at sundown and dismantle it again in the morning."

"Sounds good to me." Willis replied, "All we need to do then is find something worth telling the ship about."

"Not quite all major." Mori said and he glanced at Shaw.

"That's right." she added, "Have some of your men do something about that latrine. I'd like to be able to inhale without wanting to vomit on the way back."

A single squad of marines was left to protect the alien ship that had brought the landing party to the planet with Shaw and Mori being nominally in command of them. The squad was split between the ship itself and two concealed observation posts that had been set up in positions that between them gave a good view of all directions of approach. As an extra precaution a belt fed machine gun was set up in each observation post though the marines were under orders not to reveal their positions by using them without permission.

Meanwhile the bulk of the landing party, three more squads of marines along with a command section led by Willis made their way on foot towards the nearest signs of habitation that had been detected from the air as the stealth ship made its descent. To help conceal their presence each marine wore a hooded cloak over their other equipment that was made of the same fabric as the large sheets used to conceal the stealth ship. This material meant that the *Warspite* needed only to carry uniforms made in the standard multi-purpose camouflage colours rather than colours and patterns that allowed for every conceivable range of terrain colour. On human controlled worlds it also meant that from a distance even if they were seen then it would be harder to recognise them as armed soldiers since they carried their weapons beneath their cloaks. However, given that there was no chance that anyone could look at a human being's vertical body structure and mistake it for the more horizontal one possessed by the aliens this would be of no benefit for this mission so the cloaks were regarded only as a means of avoided detection rather than making identification more difficult.

In possession of a map generated from scans made from the air, Willis had a good idea of the terrain ahead and he guided his men towards an area of higher ground that featured a large number of rocks as well as some of the coarse vegetation that was to be found in this region of the planet.

"Spread out." he ordered, "I want two squads in front either side of me and one behind."

Obediently the platoon began to disperse among the rocks. Willis positioned his command section at the highest vantage point he could find while the three marine squads positioned themselves around this, guaranteeing that it was not possible for anyone to sneak up on his section without having to pass through one of the other squads first. To begin with Willis brought his rifle up and looked through the optical sight, using it to survey what lay below them. The magnification and light amplification offered by the sight was sufficient to give him a reasonable view of the settlement in the valley below despite the failing light, a small collection of cuboid utilitarian structures that looked as if they had all been constructed to the same pattern. There were roads running between these structures but no vehicles drove up or down any of them and at first Willis thought that the settlement may have been abandoned.

"Movement to the left." one of his men said softly and Willis turned his rifle in that direction in time to see a column of four vehicles driving along one of the otherwise deserted roads. The first two of these as well as the vehicle at the rear were a similar size to a small human truck while the third was larger. All three were fully enclosed and Willis was unable to pick out their occupants from this distance. However, that changed when the vehicles came to a halt beside one of the buildings. The doors of the two leading vehicles opened almost immediately and the marines watched as several members of the alien species encountered in the Phi Two Pavonis system emerged. About half of them carried rifles but none of them wore the same level of body armour as those previously encountered, suggesting to Willis that this was not a front line combat unit. Depending on how the species viewed giving its members access to firearms they could even be civilians in spite of the identical nature of their clothing. But then something far more interesting appeared, something unusual enough that Willis set down his rifle and quickly took out his binoculars for a better look. Climbing out of the second vehicle was an alien of a totally different species.

"What the hell is that?" he said to no-one in particular as he focused his binoculars on the alien and activated the recording feature built into the optics.

This new alien was taller than the other species, looking to be around two metres in height and it stood straight up rather than having the forward pointing torso. Increasing the magnification of his binoculars Willis examined the alien more closely and saw that although it was vaguely humanoid there were several significant differences between the two species. The most significant of this was the alien's skin that was a mottled grey and green as well as being scaled and completely hairless as far as Willis could make out. The

alien held a bag of some form in one hand and this allowed Willis to see that its hands had fewer digits than a human's, with two wide fingers and a pair of narrower opposable thumbs either side of them on each hand. The clothing worn by this alien was a different colour to that of the others and appeared more basic. But just about visible around its neck was a metallic collar that connected to a bulky earpiece on one side of the alien's head.

Willis saw one of the other aliens approach this one and its mouth moved as if speaking. At the same time the more humanoid figured bowed its head in a stance that looked to Willis to be a submissive one. If he was reading the situation correctly then the other aliens were in charge here. Then the humanoid alien turned around and started to walk towards the larger vehicle just as a pair of the other alien species climbed out of the cabin. Then the doors of the final vehicles opened as well for an alien driver to get out. But along with this creature there were three more passengers and Willis could not contain a gasp when he saw them.

They were human.

All three humans wore clothing similar to that worn by the more humanoid alien, including the strange collars while each one also carried a long baton. The humanoid alien gestured towards these humans and they darted forwards to the rear of the larger vehicle where they began to release the large doors of the cargo section. As these swung open the three humans started yelling something and waving their batons towards the interior of the vehicle. Then all of a sudden another human appeared as he jumped down from the vehicle. This man was not as neatly dressed as the others and he lacked both a baton and the collar sported by them. He was not alone either and as Willis watched he counted more than thirty people all with a similar dishevelled appearance emerged. The more tidy appearing humans swung their batons, using them to organise these people into rows that the humanoid alien walked up and down, pausing every so often to inspect one of the humans while the other aliens looked on.

"I don't like the look of this." Willis said softly.

"What do you plan on doing major?" one of his men asked.

"Nothing right now." Willis answered, "We need more information. We'll just watch them for now and see what they do."

The marines did not have long to wait as the rows of humans turned in unison and started to walk towards the nearby structure. One of the armed aliens darted ahead of them to open the doors and then appeared to speak as the humans marched past into the building. Then when the last of them had gone inside the doors were closed again leaving just the three baton carrying humans and the various aliens standing outside. Then all of these walked towards another nearby building and disappeared from view as they went inside and closed the doors behind them.

Inside the building being used as slave quarters a large number of them gathered together to hear what Horst had to say. All of them had heard about the spacecraft that the burial team had witnessed arriving in the wilderness. The alien species that held the humans captive was not without its own criminal element and it was widely hoped that the vessel had brought smugglers to the planet who would be willing and able to provide the humans with supplies they lacked.

"Check the windows." Horst instructed one of the other slaves and the man darted to the nearest window and peered out into the street while the others directed their attention towards Horst.

"All clear." the man said, nodding. Then he remained by the window to keep watch.

"Did you speak with Multan?" one of the slaves asked and Horst nodded.

"Yes, I managed to catch him alone for a couple of minutes." he answered.

"And?"

"And he's going to suggest that a survey party is sent to hunt for the next construction site." Horst said, "It will consist of him and about half a dozen others. The bad news is that he doesn't think the Sissusk will let it go without one of the overseers as well. He says they're getting suspicious of him."

"Hardly surprising. His people have no more love for the Sissusk than us."

"The main issue is that we get to leave the camp and take a look at the area where that ship came down."

Horst said, "Multan will find us a way of getting away from the overseer I'm sure."

"Are you sure it's a smuggling ship?" someone asked.

"No, no I'm not." Horst admitted, "But what choice do we have? The overseers are withholding the supplies we need. The only thing that worries me is that they won't trade for anything we can get hold of."

"What about a way out?" another of the slaves suggested, "Maybe the smugglers will agree to take some of us."

"Where?" someone else asked.

"Anywhere's better than here."

"They'd be just as likely to sell you to another bunch of Sissusk."

"An escape is no good unless we can all get out anyway." Horst added, "You know that anyone suspected of helping someone to escape will be killed."

"And they won't die quickly either." someone else pointed out.

"I'll need an inventory of everything we have. Make sure to include the construction gear. We can make some of it vanish with Multan's help. Now get to work." Horst said.

As the meeting broke and Horst started to leave up one of the crowd, a young woman approached him.

"Mister Horst." she said.

"Yes Clara? What is it?" he asked in return.

"Do you really think that the ship belonged to smugglers?"

Horst sighed.

"I hope so. The signs are good though. There was no explosion so it didn't crash and from the search aircraft we've seen we can be sure that it wasn't an authorised landing."

"But we didn't see any signs of orbital weapons fire." Clara pointed out, "We know the Sissusk have put weapons in orbit. This place is too close to the war zone."

"Which only goes to show that whoever landed was well practised at slipping through such defences, just as a smuggler would have to be to survive for long."

"But-"

"Clara." Horst interrupted, holding up his hands for her to be quiet, "We will find out very soon who came down in that ship and whether they can help us. But for now there is work to be done before any of us can get the rest we'll need for tomorrow's shift."

Though the temperature dropped significantly after the sun went down, the marines from the *Warspite* did not dare light a fire that could give away their presence. Instead they relied as much as they could on their own uniforms as well as the camouflage cloaks they wore to keep them warm. The insulating properties of the cloaks was especially useful in this regard since by limiting the amount of heat that could penetrate them it meant that the marines' own body heat created a pocket of warm air around them.

The marines continued to watch the settlement closely even after the sun had gone down. There was no street lighting in place and out of the two buildings they knew to be occupied only the one that the aliens had entered displayed any internal lighting for any length of time. There was a short period just after sundown when there was a dim glow from inside the other structure but even that was soon extinguished.

"I don't like the look of this." Willis said, "I don't think that those people are here by choice."

"Thinking of going in for a closer look sir?" one of his men asked and Willis nodded.

"If this place really is as empty as it looks then maybe we can move our OP into one of the other buildings. Being inside would help if the weather turns bad." he replied.

"I'll take my squad-" one of the nearby squad leaders began before Willis interrupted him.

"I'm coming with you." he said, "Staff Sergeant Jackson will have command here while we're gone. Jackson, make sure you keep an eye on that building we saw those lizards head into. If any of them come out then I want to know about it. Understood?"

"Yes major." Jackson replied with a nod, "But didn't Doctor Thundercloud say something about the aliens being cold blooded? They aren't going to like it outside right now."

"Maybe not. But the doc also found heating elements inside their uniforms remember? If the aliens have found a way around their biological limitation like that then it's because they intend to take advantage of it."

Willis said, "And I don't intend to get caught out by them." then he looked towards the squad that was readying itself to advance on the settlement, "Ready Moore?" he asked.

"Ready major." the sergeant answered.

"Then let's move." Willis said, "We'll go in section by section. I'll take the lead."

Willis and half of the squad then started to advance, darting from cover and scurrying down the slope towards the settlement until they reached another rocky outcrop that was covered in vegetation and they halted. This was the cue for the other half of the squad led by Sergeant Moore to follow them, rushing down the slope and passing by Willis and his group as they covered their advance.

The squad continued to advance in this manner until they reached the edge of the settlement and they approached the nearest structure. This appeared to differ from the others in only the most minor details and as the marines took quick glances through the windows on the ground floor they rapidly confirmed that although it appeared to be in good condition it was totally unoccupied. Willis then waved the squad onwards and in two groups they darted across the empty street, making their way towards the two buildings that they knew to be occupied.

"Major heads up." Jackson's voice said through Willis' earpiece and Willis came to a sudden halt, raising a clenched fist to signal the other marines to stop and take up a defensive position. Then he responded.

"Report sergeant." he said softly, knowing that the throat mike he wore would pick up his voice no matter how quietly he spoke.

"Two of those lizard aliens just left their building and are moving in your general direction. They're armed."

"Thanks sergeant, if there's just two of them then they likely don't know we're here. There'd be more of them if they did. This is probably just a patrol." Willis said. Then he looked around, "Moore, your men need to spread out. Stay still and stay quiet." he said, "We need to handle this quietly." and then from beneath his

cloak he slid his standard issue bayonet.

The marines retreated away from the two patrolling aliens and took up positions from where they could watch the gap between two adjacent structures without being seen but could still rapidly move to attack. About half the squad drew their bayonets, wielding the weapons like ordinary knives rather than fitting them to their rifles while the rest of the squad raised their rifles just in case the knives proved inadequate.

Had the approaching patrol been humans Willis and the other marines would have known exactly where to strike to inflict the maximum amount of damage while still preventing their targets from raising the alarm. However, there were too many unknowns about the aliens' physiology to be certain of the same about them. But as Willis recalled the briefing he had been given he remembered how Thundercloud had told the marines that the aliens had a brain located in their skulls and a heart and lungs in their torsos. That meant that they had to be pumping oxygenated blood along their necks and that seemed like as good a target as any to Willis. He also hoped that plunging a knife into one of the aliens' throats would prevent them from calling out a warning to their comrades.

As the aliens neared the marines their hissing voices could be heard in the otherwise quiet night air, indicating further that they were not aware of the marines' presence. The two aliens walked right past the gap between the buildings where the marines were hidden without either of them even glancing briefly down it and the sound of their footfalls began to get quieter as they moved on. Willis stepped out of his hiding place and beckoned for the marines to follow him as he crept towards the main street and peered around the corner. There he saw both aliens with their backs to him as they continued to walk away and Willis waved his hand towards them.

At his unspoken signal every marine currently holding a bayonet in his hand charged out of the alleyway towards the aliens, none of them speaking. However, the sound of their heavy footfalls was enough to alert the aliens to their presence and they turned, expecting to see some of their slaves out after the curfew. When they instead saw five armoured Commonwealth marines, their camouflage cloaks making their outlines hard to determine in the darkness charging right at them they were momentarily startled and this was all the opportunity that the human troops needed to be upon them.

Rather than use his bayonet to attack either alien, the first marine to reach them grabbed hold of the muzzle of one of their rifles and lifted it upwards. Seeing his chance, Willis lunged forwards and he plunged the blade of his own bayonet into the alien's neck just behind its skull. Twisting the blade to open out the wound he was rewarded with a sudden spurt of blood as the alien let out a subdued cry that was accompanied by a mouthful of blood being spat over the two marines.

The second alien was reaching for its communication device when a pair of marines dived at it simultaneously and tackled it to the ground, pressing its rifle down across its chest. The alien reacted by lashing out with one of its powerful legs and a marine was thrown clear while the second struggled to keep the alien pinned to the ground. The final marine rushed to help but a swing of the alien's tail knocked his legs out from beneath him and he fell, his bayonet tumbling from his grasp.

The alien opened its mouth wide to call out for help but before it could utter a sound Willis leapt forwards with his fist held out in front of him. The blow stuck the alien in its throat and there was a 'crunch' as something was damaged and the cry that the alien had intended to let out instead became little more than a croak. The marine already holding onto the alien then struck, pushing the tip of his bayonet up from beneath its jaw and into its skull. The alien's eyes widened as the blade pierced its brain and it quivered briefly before it went limp.

"Hurry." Willis hissed, "We need to get these bodies off the street."

Picking up both of the alien corpses as well as their rifles, the marines hurriedly moved them into the alleyway where they were simply dumped as far from the main street as possible. The marines then set off again, alert for the possibility of more aliens coming to investigate why the first two had disappeared. Willis kept the squad away from the main street on which the two occupied buildings were located while making their way towards the one that held the humans from the back of the larger transport. The squad halted when they reached the building and Willis tried one of the ground floor windows located at the rear of the structure. Peering through this, Willis could see that the room inside was currently unoccupied but unlike in the other buildings the marines had seen so far there was simple furniture present. Significantly the basic chairs that he could see were clearly for the use of humanoid life forms rather than the alien equivalent that the crew of the *Warspite* had discovered aboard their space craft.

"Locked." he whispered, "Okay let's get this thing broken." and he started to remove his cape.

At the same time one of the other marines produced a roll of tape that he started to unreel and stick over the glass, starting at the very top of the pane and working his way down until the whole of the glass was covered. Willis then rolled up his cape and pressed it to the taped window, holding one end while a second marine took the other to leave the rolled up cape stretched out between them.

"Do it." Willis said, nodded at the marine who had covered the glass in tape and the man lifted his rifle before using the butt as a club to strike the window where the cape covered it. Starting from one end of the window, the marine move along the cape delivering blow after blow that produced a dull 'crunch' as the glass behind it

cracked but was held in place by the tape. Willis and the other marine repositioned the cape to allow the third marine to do this all around the edge of the window, creating a single large piece in the centre being held in place only because of the tape. Then when the marine grabbed the top corner of the tape and pulled on it the whole of the window came away in one piece without having made enough noise to give away their presence.

"Mind the glass." Willis said and he then placed his cape along the bottom of the window to cover the shards of glass still present before carefully climbing through into the room on the other side. Then while the marine squad was following him inside Willis made his way across the room to the doorway. The door appeared to be a conventional type with a manual handle for opening it and reaching out for this, he gently pushed down on it. The handle dropped under pressure from his hand and Willis felt the door release so he pulled it open just enough that he could see through to the room on the far side. He found himself looking into some sort of hallway. At first this looked just as uninhabited as the room the marines were currently in but just as Willis was about to open the door fully an step through it he heard the sound of footsteps as someone came down the stairs at the end of the hallway.

"Back." he hissed to the marines now gathered around him and they all retreated as Willis pushed the door shut once more and then removed his helmet so he could press his ear right up against it.

"Hello? Is someone there?" he heard a woman's voice say in English from the other side. Then he heard footsteps as the woman moved towards the doorway, "Marcus is that you? You know Horst wants us to get some rest before-" and at that moment she reached out to open the door.

Willis reacted quickly and the moment he saw the handle move he grabbed it himself and pulled the door open, causing the woman to stumble into the room. A pair of marines reached out to grab hold of her, pulling her away from the door while one clamped a gloved hand over her mouth so that she could not cry out while another marine aimed his rifle at her and she stared at him in terror. Willis closed the door as quietly as he could before turning towards the woman.

"Sorry about this miss." he said, "But we can't take any chances on being discovered before we're ready." then he glanced at the marine who had his hand over her mouth, "Now he's going to move his hand and you're going to answer a few questions as quietly as possible. Understood?" and the woman nodded.

The marine then lowered his hand from the woman's mouth and she gasped for breath.

"Who are you?" she asked, looking at the armed and armoured marines.

"Major Ben Willis, Commonwealth marines." Willis replied.

"The Commonwealth?" the woman said, "But what are you doing here? How did you get here?"

"I don't think she's quite got the hang of us asking questions and her answering them major." Moore said to Willis.

"Not yet, no." Willis agreed and he stared at the woman, "How about we start with your name?" he added.

"Clara." she told him.

"Well Clara, now how about you explain to me what's going on here?"

"You need to talk to Horst." Clara replied, "Nathaniel Horst. He can explain everything better than I can."

"And I suppose you're volunteering to go and fetch him for us?" Willis said.

"No." Clara answered, "I'll take you to him. He's upstairs."

Clara led the marine squad up the stairs, pressing a finger to her lips to indicate that they should stay quiet, knowing that if everyone in the building discovered the presence of the marines then the excitement would undoubtedly attract the attention of their captors. Unlike most of the slaves, who slept in dormitories Horst had a room to himself and Clara entered without knocking. Horst was already asleep when she entered and she shook him awake.

"Clara?" he said as he looked up at her, "What's wrong?" then he noticed the marines in the doorway and he gasped, "What's happening?"

"They're from the Commonwealth." Clara told him, "They're marines."

Horst got out of bed as rapidly as he could manage and hurried across the room, placing a hand on Willis' body armour as wanting to make sure that he was not hallucinating.

"You're real." he said, smiling, "Ha! You're really real."

"Yes we're real." Willis replied, "Now can you tell me what's going on here?"

"Okay let's hear it." Reeves said as he sat down in his seat on the bridge of the *Warspite*. Willis' report had been relayed from the observation post to the stealth ship and then broadcast into space as a rapid burst of information that was too brief for anyone other than the communication officers aboard the *Warspite* to detect.

"Playing back captain." Goldman said as she opened the message from the marines on the surface.

"Captain we have confirmed that the aliens have made contact with humans on a previous occasion." Willis began, "Have Lieutenant Lucas check out any records for the colony ship *Ocean Drift*. Apparently this ship encountered the aliens about fifty years ago after leaving Commonwealth space. The aliens captured the ship and its crew and since then have been using them and their descendants as forced labour. The settlement we're at has eighty-four captive humans at it but there are apparently around five hundred on the entire planet with more on other worlds. The people I've spoken to can't give me a figure for the total number of humans currently enslaved.

"The aliens themselves are called the Sissusk and they've enslaved other species as well. We've seen one of these ourselves. What looks like a humanoid reptile. According to the humans here this is a Fedrun and apparently they enslaved the Sissusk hundreds of years ago before there was some sort of revolt and now the Sissusk are in charge. If we could get this Fedrun alien back to the Commonwealth then it would likely be able to give us all the information we need about them. The local enemy strength is about a dozen with light arms only, plus three human collaborators. My plan is to engage these forces and eliminate them before they can alert their authorities to our presence in the system. That's all I have for now, over and out."

Knight looked at Reeves.

"Five hundred human slaves?" he said, "We can't just abandon them."

"No we can't." Reeves said in agreement, "But getting them off the planet is going to be an issue. I don't fancy having to fight their entire planetary defence system alone." then he looked at Lucas, "Anything to add lieutenant?" he asked.

"The *Ocean Drift* checks out captain." she replied, "It was an independent colonial expedition by a group that advocated the idea that humanity could only truly advance itself by spreading out further than the Commonwealth currently plans for. They were last seen at Gamma Pavonis before heading out into the Fringe Worlds and were never heard from again. Since they'd made clear their intention to make their journey a one way trip and there was no indication that they'd fallen foul of any known hostile force no search operation was launched."

"How many people was it carrying?" Knight asked.

"Total manifest had twelve thousand four hundred and sixteen passengers and crew." Lucas replied.

"Twelve and a half thousand." Knight repeated, "Even if we could find them all we'd never fit them all aboard the *Warspite*."

"There's also the legal issue to consider." Reeves added, "The people aboard that ship renounced their Commonwealth citizenship when they left. I don't have the authority to go to war to get them back. I can justify a rescue operation here on the grounds of intelligence gathering. But that's it. Plus there's the fact that we'd be just one ship against an entire species with an unknown level of technology." then he looked at Lucas, "Right lieutenant? You've not confirmed whether they're more or less advanced than us yet have you?"

"No captain. The cruiser and stealth ship show a similar level of technology to us but we don't know whether they represent the aliens' state of the art or if they are considered obsolete by them."

"Lieutenant Lucas," Reeves said, "I want you to liaise with Commander Bernard regarding the practicality of evacuating approximately five hundred people from the surface under fire. Bring me your best ideas.

Commander Goldman I want to record a reply to Major Willis."

"Ready when you are sir." Goldman replied.

"Major Willis," Reeves began, "your report is acknowledged. We are working on a way to try and evacuate the human captives but we don't have exact details of planetary defences so whatever further information you can provide will be appreciated. Our current position is about one light hour away from the planet so communication will be on a two hour delay. *Warspite* out."

As Lucas then left the bridge watched by both Knight and Reeves, the *Warspite's* first officer spoke up.

"Staging a rescue of five hundred people from a defended planet?" he said, "Do you really think that we can pull that off?"

"Let's just see what Bernard and Lucas come up with." Reeves replied.

"The Sissusk were just making a sweep of the area to make sure that none of the completed structures have been interfered with." Horst explained to Willis, "We're in the middle of nowhere here so they're pretty lax

about it. The good thing is that because they're on foot it can take them a long time to complete the patrol."

"More than a hour?" Willis asked and Horst smiled.

"Forgive me major." he answered, "I know about hours and minutes but I was just a child when the Sissusk seized the *Ocean Drift*. I've not had to think in terms of them for a long time. Many of those here have never used them."

"Okay then, do you know how these Sissusk will react if they consider the patrol overdue?" Willis said.

"I'm sorry, as far as I know it's never happened here." Horst replied, shaking his head, "The patrols are more of a formality than anything else."

"Okay, in that case since we've got a survey of their building we need to deal with them now." Willis said and he activated his communicator, "Jackson come in." he transmitted.

"Right here major."

"Jackson we're hitting the enemy ASAP. I want everyone for this so get here as quick as you can."

"Copy that major. On our way."

With three squads of marines plus his own command section available Willis was confident that he had enough men to accomplish the task at hand. One squad would be used to surround the target building, placing two men on each side to prevent any of the aliens from escaping. All of the machine guns available to the marines would be used for this to not only bolster the firepower of the blocking group but also so that the bulkier weapons would not impede the actions of the assault group. This second group was led by Willis himself and while the blocking group was taking cover in concealed positions around the building it was cautiously making its way towards the two doorways, one at the front of the building and the other to the rear. Once in place these marines removed their capes so that they would not get in the way during the assault itself. Positioning himself next to the main entrance, Willis waited for a signal from the second assault team at the rear.

"In position now major." one of the marine sergeants transmitted.

"Copy that Hall." Willis replied softly and he looked at his watch, placing his finger on one of the buttons, "Commence in thirty seconds. Mark." and he pushed the button to start the timer, knowing that Hall would have done exactly the same at the same time. Then he picked up his rifle and waited for the timer to expire. During the thirty second wait, marines whose rifles were fitted with underslung shotguns positioned themselves right by the two doors and aimed at the hinges so that the moment the timer was up and the watches belonging to Willis and Hall beeped they were able to open fire at one hinge after another in rapid succession before a well placed kick sent the doors flying inwards.

"Commonwealth marines!" Willis yelled as he charged in with his team, aware that the shotgun blasts would have removed any chance at a stealthy raid, "Identify your positions and surrender!"

The human slaves who had constructed the building had given the marines detailed information on its layout, though they had been unable to provide any about the deployment of the aliens or their human collaborators so the marines were forced to spread out to sweep the entire building. Willis' team headed straight for the stairs just inside the doorway and it was as they began to charge up them that they first came under fire. Several rapid shots from a pistol hit the lead marine and he fell backwards from the impacts on his armour. Then while his comrade behind him was helping him back up Willis returned fire. With his rifle on automatic he aimed at the ceiling above him, trusting in the bullets' ability to penetrate the material used to make the building and hoping to at least convince the alien above to pull back rather than keep firing. But luck was with Willis and there was an inhuman screech as one of the bullets struck the alien, followed by a 'Clump!' as it hit the floor. Back on his feet, the lead marine then fired two more shots into the alien to finish it off before rushing up to the next floor.

By this time the building's occupants knew that they were under attack even though the Sissusk themselves had no idea by whom. There was more gunfire from another part of the building, some of which Willis recognised as the familiar sound of Commonwealth issue rifles while the rest was obviously alien gunfire and he was thankful that the majority of it sounded like it was coming from his own side.

"Locked!" someone called out from nearby and Willis turned to see a pair of marines attempting to get through a closed door.

"Breacher." Willis shouted and a marine with an underslung shotgun rushed forwards to blow the hinges off the door. The marines then stormed through with their rifles ready and Willis heard unfamiliar voices speaking English.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" they called out and Willis went to investigate. The locked doorway led to a small dormitory that looked little different to the ones he had seen in the slave barracks. However, it did not take long for Willis to notice that there was more personal decoration in here than the barracks and that the presence of what looked like half finished rations suggested that these men were far better fed than the slaves.

"Secure them." he said, snarling at the trio of collaborators, "And make sure they're kept under guard."

Then Willis heard the sound of the shotgun firing again, meaning that someone had probably found another locked door and he turned around and hurried out of the room. Even as he was rushing towards the sound of

the shotgun blasts Willis received a signal from one of his marines.

"Major you need to see this." the marine reported, "We've found that other alien."

"I'm on my way." Willis replied, "Whatever you do try not hurt it."

When Willis reached the source of the shotgun blasts he found a pair of marines standing in the hallway and looking into the room on the other side. Looking through the doorway for himself Willis saw the humanoid alien was now cowering in the far corner.

"Well done." he said to the marines. Then he activated his communicator to address all of the marines, "Sit rep." he broadcast.

"Sir we've found the aliens' barracks on the ground floor." Jackson reported, "Looks like there's just a couple of them left now. They're retreating towards the front door."

"Keep after them but let them fall back." Willis ordered, "I'll deal with them myself." then he looked at the two marines, "Stay here and keep an eye on him." he said, "Once the building is secure we'll bring Horst in."

"Horst?" the alien said unexpectedly, lifting its head.

"You know Horst?" Willis asked, "You understand me?"

"Yes. Horst I know. Your language I know. Some." the alien said, his pronunciation not quite perfect as he struggled to form the words. Then Willis looked at the marines again.

"Be careful what you say." he told them, "I'll be right back." then he rushed back towards the stairs.

From below he could hear the continued sounds of gunfire as the marines searched the lower floor of the building. Willis positioned himself so that he had a view of the hallway at the bottom of the stairs and aimed his rifle along it. Then when an alien burst out of a doorway he opened fire and put a burst of three rounds into its chest. This alerted the other aliens coming through the doorway to Willis' presence and the next one held its rifle around the door frame and unleashed a sustained burst of fire. Willis leapt out of the way unharmed but in doing so he was unable to fire on the two aliens that then burst into the hallway. However, neither was interested in heading up the stairs after Willis. Instead they turned in the direction of the main entrance, intending to try and escape using the vehicles parked in the street outside. But the moment that they stepped outside there was a shout from somewhere in the darkness.

"Drop your weapons! Get on the ground!"

In response the aliens both hissed and raised their weapons as they searched for the source of the shout. But before either could determine where the hidden marines were positioned there was a sustained burst of fire from a machine gun that cut through them both.

Willis then listened and smiled as he heard no further gunfire and he headed down the stairs to the main entrance.

"Willis!" he shouted before he looked outside, not wanting to risk becoming the victim of so-called 'friendly' fire.

"Clear major." a marine responded from outside without leaving his hiding place and Willis stepped through the doorway.

"The building is secure." he announced, "Send someone to get Horst. I think we'll need him to help us."

Escorted by a marine, Willis could not help but notice Horst smile as he walked past the two bullet ridden bodies of the dead aliens outside the building that had been their headquarters.

"You know major, I've seen Sissusk killed on a handful of occasions before now. But this is the first time I've known that no-one is going to be executed painfully because of it." the older man commented.

"Yeah, payback's a bitch." Willis said, "Now if you'd like to come with me I need your help."

"Of course, whatever I can do." Horst replied.

Willis led Horst up the stairs, passing by marines carrying bags of items that had belonged to the Sissusk in the building. Now that their previous owners were dead they were being taken back to the Commonwealth for study. Willis made his way to one of the larger rooms in the building where the three human collaborators were sat on a simple bench with their hands bound behind their backs while the alien Fedrun sat on the other side of the room, all watched carefully by more marines.

"Do you know any of these individuals Mister Horst?" Willis asked and the other man smiled.

"Yes, I've come to know them all over the years Major Willis." Horst replied and he pointed to the sole alien,

"This is Multan. He is a member of the Fedrun species. The Sissusk used him to help administer this place but he was just as much a slave as the rest of us. He used his position to try and get us extra supplies when we needed them and helped manipulate records so that the Sissusk believed we had met quotas we had actually narrowly missed." then he looked at the three humans, "These three men on the other hand-

"You say one more word old man," Indigo hissed, "and you won't need to worry about the lizards skinning you alive. I'll slit your throat."

"These three sold out their own kind for a few petty privileges major." Horst continued, "Plus the opportunity to act as the small minded bullies they all are. People died because they hoarded needed supplies because they could profit from it."

Indigo leapt to his feet and started to rush towards Horst but with his hands bound he could do nothing as two marines tackled him and he cried out as they pushed him to the floor and slammed his head down as

hard as they could, producing a sharp 'Crack!' from the impact. When they lifted him back to his feet and forced him back to where he had been sat there was blood pouring from a cut across his forehead.

"That looks pretty nasty." Willis said, "Too bad I don't care."

"What will happen to these men major?" Horst asked and Willis guided him out of the room into the hallway before he replied quietly.

"To be honest I'm not so sure." he said, "Technically none of you are Commonwealth citizens and we're not in Commonwealth territory. So if we take them back with us I doubt that they could be put on trial."

"What about dealing with them here?" Horst said.

"You mean an execution?"

"It is only fair major."

"Fair maybe but even this far from the Commonwealth I still have to obey its laws and the ones governing murder are pretty strict." Willis told him.

"Then let my people deal with them major. If we're not subject to the laws of the Commonwealth then-"

"Oh no." Willis interrupted, "I'm not letting any of your people near them. But here's a question for you. How will the Sissusk react to losing the workers from this camp?"

"Angrily." Horst replied.

"And what if they only people for them to take that anger out on are those three?"

Horst smiled.

"Major, I think my people will be satisfied with that. Of course if you tell those three men in there what you are planning they may just beg you to shoot them now." he said.

"Let's just keep it as our little secret for now then." Willis said, "For now though, I want to talk with that alien. Multan did you say his name was?"

"Yes. That's correct."

Willis had Multan moved to another room so that they could talk privately. Horst remained present to not only help Willis with his questioning but also to reassure the alien that he was not going to be harmed, having witnessed the rough treatment given to the human collaborators. In addition one marine remained present as well just in case Horst's trust in Multan turned out to be misplaced. Just because he had helped the human labourers in the past was no guarantee that he would not try and alert the Sissusk about the crew of the *Warspite* given the chance.

"May I call you Multan?" Willis asked first.

"Yes. My name - Multan." the alien answered in his odd accent.

"Good. My name is Major Willis of the Commonwealth Marine Corps." Willis said and Multan looked at Horst.

"He is a military commander." Horst explained, "From the Commonwealth." then he looked at Willis and added, "He won't understand titles like major and he doesn't know what a marine is." he pointed out.

"Thanks." Willis replied with a smile, "Multan, we need to know about the human slaves on this planet. We have a ship nearby and want to help them escape." he then said to Multan, but the alien just stared back at him.

"Multan we need your help." Horst added, "You know more about where they're all being kept. If you help us then these soldiers can free them all."

"No." Multan replied and Willis and Horst glanced at one another.

"What do you mean 'no'?" Horst asked, "Won't you help us?"

"You take me. You take my family. Then I help you." Multan said and Willis smiled.

"Ah, so you don't want to be left behind?" he commented, "Well I think that the captain will be willing to evacuate your family as well. How many are we talking about?"

"Wife. Brother. Wife of brother. Five young." Multan told.

"Only nine? Shouldn't be a problem." Willis said, "Okay Mister Multan you've got a deal. You help us free the humans being held here and your family gets a ride to the Commonwealth. Where I'm sure that there'll be a lot of people with a lot more questions to ask you."

"He means that my people will want to learn about yours." Horst added.

"How about we start off with where the other humans are being held." Willis said, "Plus your family. How many more camps are there?"

"One." Multan answered, "This camp small. Other much bigger. Humans there. My family there."

"That's good." Willis said to Horst, "Having everyone in one place avoids the need to spread our resources thinly."

"Multan can contact his family." Horst said, "Then hopefully they can give you more information about the other camp."

"Sounds good to me." Willis agreed, nodding, "But how can he do that?"

"Major the Sissusk use the Fedrun to help organise their labour camps. They have access to the communication network. That's how Multan is able to arrange for additional supplies. He adds the request to scheduled messages and then his family slip them into the regular deliveries." Horst explained.

"Yes. A message to my family." Multan added, "They tell me what Sissusk guards are there. I tell you."

"We also need to know about what planetary defences are in place." Willis said, "And what craft are available to transport everyone up to our ship. The *Warspite's* too big to land."

"I can tell you now that most of the fleet that was defending this world is gone major." Horst replied, "Though where and for how long I cannot say. The Sissusk may use slave labour to load supplies for their warships but they do not discuss military deployments with them."

"That's okay." Willis reassured him as he remembered the wrecked alien warships in the Phi Two Pavonis system, "I don't think those ships are coming back any time soon."

Lucas was working in her quarters when Bernard arrived at her door.

"Come on in commander." she said, "I was just trying to figure out a way of fighting through an entire world's defences and holding orbital space long enough for our shuttles to ferry five hundred people aboard."

"Any luck?" Bernard asked.

"None. Every scenario I try running these Sissusk are able to launch their ships before we knock out the dock and between them and what I think are satellite defences we just get overwhelmed."

"Well I'm here to tell you that we can bring everyone aboard in a single run." Bernard told her, "Assuming that we don't need to land any more marines."

"How?" Lucas asked.

"Basically we rip the seating and every other piece of equipment that isn't absolutely necessary for flight out of every shuttle, skip and drop ship we have." Bernard explained, "That's ten transports that can cram about fifty or sixty people in each and still be within weight limits for reaching orbit. Of course I'm hoping that no-one has any grand pianos they can't bear to be parted from."

Lucas smiled.

"We'll tell them nothing bigger than a trombone then." she said.

"Let's see what you have." Bernard added, moving to stand behind her and looking at the various files open on her console, "Hmm, yes I see the problem." he commented, "Deploying those shuttles means slowing down and becoming a sitting duck for those satellites and that's before you bring their warships into the equation."

"I tried looking at taking out the orbital dock with a missile strike." Lucas told him, "The dock is in a geostationary orbit above what looks like the main colony so we know its position and we wouldn't need line of sight. We could perform a blind launch from behind this moon here and give the missiles a pre-programmed flight path." and she pointed to a small moon that orbited the planet, "But the problem is that the missiles would have to travel about half a million kilometres without being shot down by the station's defences. Defences that I can't predict the effectiveness of. Somehow we need to get in close without being seen."

"Without being seen." Bernard repeated as a smile started to spread across his face.

"Yes but-

"wait a minute lieutenant." Bernard interrupted, "What about that stealth ship that's already inside the aliens' defences?"

"What about it?" Lucas asked.

"Well its armed. It is a military ship after all." Bernard answered, "There's a light rail gun mounted in the nose. We've not tested it but I don't see why it should be any different to the gauss cannons aboard our fighters. Now what if that stealth ship was flown inside the atmosphere to a point right underneath the orbital dock where those warships are?"

Lucas smiled as well now.

"Then it could attack the dock knowing that the aliens couldn't risk returning fire without risking hitting their own colony."

"Exactly." Bernard said, "That's why space stations don't tend to have weapons mounted on the side facing any planet they orbit. Likewise any ground fire would risk hitting the dock. They'd have to launch fighters or something similar to try and intercept it and that would take time. Time in which Lieutenant Commander Shaw could disable those warships. We don't need to destroy them, just prevent them from launching."

"A few rounds into the engine modules on each of them ought to do the trick." Lucas suggested. Then her face fell, "But just because they can't manoeuvre doesn't mean they aren't dangerous. They could still fire their weapons as soon as we came into view. I doubt that the stealth ship could disarm them as well before getting shot down."

"No I agree. We'd need to keep out of sight." Bernard said before the intercom sounded and Lucas answered it.

"Lucas."

"Lieutenant," Reeves' voice said, "is Commander Bernard there with you?"

"Yes sir. Right here. Do you want to speak to him?"

"No. Just let him know that we've received another signal from Major Willis. You should both come to the bridge to hear it."

"Yes captain. We're on our way." Lucas replied.

When Bernard and Lucas reached the bridge they found Reeves, Knight and Goldman stood around the central console and they joined them.

"Okay commander," Reeves said to Goldman, "you may play back the message now."

"Yes captain." she responded and the next voice heard was that of Major Willis.

"*Warspite* this is Willis. Our assault on the alien position was a success. We've got two injuries but no fatalities. All of the Sissusk were killed but the three human collaborators and the other alien were taken alive. The humans are in custody and I've had the chance to speak with the alien who has some knowledge of our language from his dealings with the human captives. In exchange for he and his family being evacuated as well he has agreed to help us free the humans. According to him the rest of them are being held in a single facility about two thousand kilometres from here in what to us would be a westerly direction."

"That puts them out of the line of sight of the orbital dock." Lucas commented, looking at Bernard and he smiled back at her before they continued to listen to what Willis had to say.

"The slave workers had only limited knowledge about the Sissusk military strength in the system but they have been able to confirm that the majority of the warships normally stationed here departed some time ago so it looks like Lieutenant Commander Thomas was correct in his calculation that this is where the ships at Phi Two Pavonis came from. No-one here is familiar enough with the ships remaining to confirm how we would classify them but all three are believed to be fully functional. In addition there are satellite defences, plus several squadrons of fighters and at least a division of ground troops with armoured support. These are concentrated in the area around the primary colony and only a small portion are capable of being redeployed to the other side of the planet rapidly enough for them to be able to respond to any attack made by us on the facility where the other human captives are being held.

"Thanks to the assistance of the alien our position here is secure. We are able to fake the reports that need to be made but that will only buy us a couple of days at most. You need to come up with something by then. Willis out."

Reeves looked at Bernard and Lucas.

"Well?" he asked, "Do either of you have anything you'd like to add?"

"Possibly captain." Lucas replied, "Commander Bernard and I have been discussing the problems involved in assaulting the orbital dock where the enemy warships are located but Major Willis' report appears to negate the dock's influence all together."

"What about the warships docked there?" Knight asked, "If they are what we think then we may be able to go up against all three but that ignores whatever satellite based weapons they've got."

"Actually the warships may not be an issue either." Bernard said, "Assuming that Shaw is as good as she claims to be."

"Explain." Reeves said.

"We use the stealth ship to attack the warships while they're still moored to the space station." Bernard answered, "Hopefully it will take just one rapid pass to knock out their drives from below. Even if they're only damaged then it will make them more vulnerable."

"So we just need to knock out every satellite on the other side of the planet and then sit in orbit long enough to ferry all the captives up from the surface." Reeves said.

"Are we able to identify the defence satellites yet?" Goldman asked, directing her question to Lucas.

"It doesn't matter." Knight replied before the young intelligence officer could, "Even a civilian satellite could be used to relay targeting information around to the space station or any of the warships. Then they could blind launch any missiles they're carrying at us. Assuming they have that technology of course."

"Well since we've had it for centuries and we're working on the assumption that the aliens' technology is roughly equivalent to our own then I think we should assume just that." Reeves said.

"Where do we stand with evacuating the captives?" Knight asked.

"We can do it in a single run." Bernard told him, "I think. Of course that's working on the basis that nothing happens to any of our shuttles on the way down or back up again."

"There's also the fact that whatever we send to pick up the group Major Willis has released will come into the line of sight of the space station." Lucas added, "The station probably won't engage them directly for the same reason we don't think that they fire on the stealth ship when it's below them, but they could launch their fighters."

"Two ships will be needed to evacuate that group." Bernard said, "Three if the marines can't hitch a ride back on the stealth ship."

"Let's assume they can." Reeves said, "Presumably you think that it would be better to use marine dropships rather than unarmed shuttles for that run?"

"It would make more sense sir." Lucas said, "They're relatively heavily armoured and can protect themselves."

"We could assign a squadron of interceptors to escort them." Knight suggested and Reeves nodded.

"Sounds sensible to me." he said, "That still leaves us with the best part of four squadrons of attack craft to

protect the *Warspite* while we're in orbit."

"One question captain." Goldman said and the others around the table looked at her.

"Yes commander?" Reeves responded.

"What precautions do you intend to take regarding bringing these Fedrun aboard the *Warspite*?"

"No more than for any of the humans we'll be bringing aboard." Reeves answered, "None of them have security clearance so they'll be confined to the cargo hold or under armed marine escort if they have to be moved to anywhere else and I'll be asking Doctor Thundercloud to examine everyone brought aboard for any signs of communicable infection whether human or not."

"Excuse me captain," Ash said from his station, "but there's another issue that you've not covered. Where do we head for once we have all these people aboard the ship?"

"The admiral will be expecting us back at Phi Two Pavonis." Knight pointed out.

"We can't exactly take a ship full of civilians there." Goldman commented.

"No we can't." Reeves agreed, "So we'll head straight back for Gamma Pavonis instead. Then we can send a drone to let Admiral Mitchell know what we found here." then he looked at Bernard and Lucas again, "I take it you have an approach route planned for this operation?" he said.

"Yes sir. Our current course will take us into the shadow of the planet's only moon. It's not very large and none of our scans of the system have picked up anything more than a few small structures that don't appear to be emitting the sort of energy readings that a listening post ought to. I think that because of the moon's small size couple with it being a million kilometres from the planet itself the aliens aren't worried about someone using it to sneak up on them."

"If the system is normally guarded by more warships then they wouldn't need to bother." Knight said, "Sentry patrols would pick up anyone trying it. Only right now they don't look to have the ships necessary to maintain patrols like that and maintain orbital control as well."

"Our ETA is eighteen forty-five ship time. That should put you in daylight and the main target in darkness. We'll still be able receive signals from you for about two hours so if you do come up with anything extra you need to get it to us by then. Our time lag for receiving is down to just over half an hour though, so bear that in mind. *Warspite* out." Reeves' voice said to conclude the ship to shore transmission that explained the plan of attack that had been compiled and as he listened to this Willis checked his watch.

"That's a little over twelve hours until they get here." he said. Then he looked at Horst and Multan, "You need to let everyone know to be ready to leave." he told them.

"Don't worry major." Horst replied, "The people here would be ready if you told them the rescue ship was just over the horizon."

"Any additional information your family could find out would be useful." Willis added, looking at Multan.

"They make a list major." the alien answered and Willis smiled as he noticed that Multan was getting used to using his rank though it still sounded odd coming from his mouth, "Places were the Sissusk are. Places you can attack."

With just a few minutes to spare before the window of communication with the *Warspite* closed the information from Multan's family arrived. This was in the form of an image taken of the main camp where the human slaves were being held that had been taken using one of the Sissusks' own satellites. Someone had then simply marked this with two different types of symbol over numerous buildings.

"These Sissusk." Multan said, pointing to the buildings marked with one of the symbols. Then he pointed to one of the buildings marked with the other symbol and added, "These your people. Mine too."

"That's great." Willis replied, "Someone pass me a camera." and he held out his hand expectantly. Handed a compact camera by one of his men, Willis pointed it at the monitor that showed the image. Being in a Sissusk image format the marines had no way of easily forwarding the original image itself to the *Warspite* but by taking another image of this using a human camera would allow the information to be sent to the approaching warship. A still image would have reproduced the information exactly but Willis could not be certain that the crew of the *Warspite* would understand the symbols used so he instead switched the camera to its video mode and pointed it and a finger from his free hand at the display.

"This symbol indicates an enemy position." he said, "And this one means that there are friendlies in the building. Make sure you hit the right ones. Willis out."

"Well?" Reeves said after hearing the report from Willis and he looked towards Lucas.

"The image is clear enough to make out the details of buildings in the target zone captain." she replied, "I think it wise to distribute it to the evacuation pilots."

"What about the enemy positions?" Knight asked.

"Harder to say." Lucas answered, "Their positions are clearly indicated but until we can make a sensor sweep of our own I can't guarantee the safe distances between them and the workers' quarters."

"Okay we'll carry out an optical scan as soon as we break cover." Reeves said and he looked towards the

sensor stations, "Got that?"

"Yes captain." Cortez answered, "Optical sensors will be aligned towards the target zone as soon as possible."

"Good. As soon as it's confirmed that they are a safe distance from the civilians we're rescuing I want those positions hit with projectiles."

Multan watched as the camouflage sheets used to conceal the stealth ship were being rolled back and packed away.

"This is a Sissusk vessel." he said and Willis nodded.

"We – Err, we acquired it from them when its crew tried to kill my men." he replied with a smile, "Fortunately we were able to figure out how to fly it. Talking of which, here come your flight crew." and he pointed to where Shaw and Mori were exiting the ship.

"You must be Multan." Shaw said as she walked up to the alien and his marine escort, "Lieutenant Commander Lynn Shaw at your service. And this is my co-pilot Lieutenant Kazuyuki Mori. Just call him 'Kaz', that's what I do."

"Lieutenant commander and lieutenant are their ranks." Willis told Multan, "Shaw and Mori are their names."

"Thank you major." Multan replied and he looked at Shaw, "I help you attack Sissusk ships." he added.

"I hear you're familiar with their designs." she said.

"Yes. Correct. While younger I help build them."

"Well today you'll helping to take them apart again." Shaw said.

"What about you major?" Mori asked, looking at Willis, "Aren't you coming along as well?"

"Not yet no." he answered, "Price and Fowler will go along with you but I'm staying put with the rest of my men until you swing back around to pick us up."

"The civvies scared of being left alone?" Shaw said.

"More like I'm worried about what they'll do to those three collaborators if we're not keeping an eye on them." Willis told her and she snorted.

"Who cares?" she asked rhetorically. Then she looked at Multan, "Well the *Warspite* will be here within the hour so I suggest we get this party started."

It took only a few minutes to complete preparations for take off before the stolen stealth ship rose up into the air. By this time the marines had departed to join up with the rest of the platoon in the nearby settlement so the launch was not witnessed by anyone.

Despite the risk inherent in entering the airspace over the planet's primary colony that was exactly where Shaw headed, increasing altitude until the stealth ship was up high enough that it would not be easily noticed should anyone on the ground happen to look up as it flew overhead while still being low enough that the space station would not be able to target them with its weapons should it happen to notice the hole in radar and lidar returns from pulses sent towards the planet surface below where the stealth ship had absorbed them.

In the cockpit Shaw and Mori reviewed the controls for the targeting and operation of the small rail gun that was their only means of attack. Behind them in the passenger compartment Multan sat in the front row of seats so he could see through the open cockpit doorway and advise them while the two marine guards sat further back so that they could watch him.

"If this was one of our ships the targeting would auto-correct for gravity." Shaw called out to Multan, "Will this do the same?"

"If you attack another craft in air yes. But for craft in space while we are below it may not work." he replied.

"I guess we'll just have to try it then." Mori commented. Then he glanced back towards their alien passenger, "What about the best points to target to prevent the ships from leaving the dock?" he asked.

"Each side are engines. A lot of armour outside but weaker on inside." Multan said.

"Okay so we go for the exhausts themselves." Shaw said, "Should be easy enough. One projectile gets inside and it starts bouncing around because it can't get back out through the armour."

"Target ahead. Range six hundred kilometres." Mori suddenly announced and instinctively Shaw looked out through the transparent viewport in front of her. The problem in doing this was that they were on the daylight side of the planet and this meant that the orbiting space station was not visible in the sky overhead to the unaided eye. Instead she had to look at one of the monitors installed to provide her and Mori with the information that was normally provided to the Sissusk pilots by their console. The stealth ship's passive optical and thermal sensors were sensitive enough to not only provide an image of the space station but did so with enough clarity that Shaw could make out the three warships docked to it.

"Hey Multan get up here." she called out, "I want to know what these ships are so I know to target them in the right order."

Multan got out of his seat and entered the cockpit, looking at the monitors showing what the sensors had picked up. These clearly showed that the three warships were of two different classes, both of which featured the wedge shaped hull and long tail that appeared to be a standard design feature of Sissusk warships.

"This one has many guns." Multan said, pointing to the unique warship, "Used to defend groups of ships. These two have few guns. Use missiles to attack instead."

"Okay so it looks like we're looking at a frigate and a pair of destroyers." Shaw said.

"Target the destroyers first?" Mori responded and Shaw nodded.

"With any luck whatever damage we do will cause enough confusion aboard that they won't be able to focus enough to launch any missiles even while docked." she said.

Activating the targeting display in front of her, Shaw saw an enhanced image of the space station and the three warships overlaid by a cross hair. If Multan was right then just by placing the centre of this over her intended target point then the ship's computer ought to make the adjustments necessary for the magnetically accelerated projectiles to strike that precise point. Shaw lined the targeting cross hair up on the closest of the two destroyers.

"Status?" she asked.

"All systems look okay." Mori replied, "I'm picking up ground based tracking but I don't think it's anything unusual and if they have seen us they obviously think we're one of them." he replied.

"Well they're about to find out different aren't they?" Shaw said, smiling as she fired the rail gun.

Three solid projectiles shot from the weapon, hurtling upwards at more than a hundred kilometres per second. Even at this speed there was still a delay of several seconds before the projectiles would strike their target and Shaw did not waste any time on waiting to see how effective they would be before moving on to the next target. Adjusting the stealth ship's heading slightly, a second burst of projectiles was fired at the destroyer's second drive unit before Shaw turned the ship sharply to bring the remaining destroyer into her sights.

It was at that point that the initial burst found their target and two of the three projectiles entered the drive unit through the weak point of the rear exhaust port while the third struck the thick outer armour and was deflected into space.

"Bullseye!" Mori exclaimed as he watched the resulting explosion. With the engines inactive while the destroyer was docked to the space station this was not as large as it could have been, but there was still enough energy released that the flash was noticeable even through the forward viewport. This was rapidly followed by another flash as one of the next burst struck the destroyer's other drive unit but Shaw was too busy to stop and admire her handiwork. Instead, having already unleashed two more bursts of rail gun fire at the second destroyer she was already turning the stealth ship towards the frigate. However, it was at this point that the human pilots' luck ran out.

The moment that the rail gun was first fired it produced a magnetic pulse that triggered alarms aboard the space station, on the planet below and aboard the warships Shaw was attempting to disable. This came too late for the crews of either destroyer to take any action but the crew of the frigate was just about able to disengage from the space station and power up their engines. The flare of energy and trail of ions created as the warship pulled away from the space station as fast as it could manage was enough to deflect the magnetically charged projectiles away from their target and although two still struck the frigate they did so amidships instead of striking the engine exhausts.

"Damn it!" Shaw snapped, "She's on the move."

"And she's searching for us." Mori added, "Active radar and lidar just lit up. I've got comms signals coming from all over the place. The station, the ground and all those patrol ships."

"Okay we've done all we can." Shaw replied, "The *Warspite* will just have to deal with that frigate itself. Now we put our stealth tech to the test again." and she abruptly dropped the nose of their ship and dived towards the ground below.

As the *Warspite* came over the lunar horizon it was greeted with a world seemingly in chaos. There were active sensor emissions coming from every conceivable source whether on the ground or in space and these detected the heavy cruiser in the amount of time it took the electromagnetic pulses to travel to the moon and back.

"Well it appears that Lieutenant Commander Shaw has stirred up a hornets' nest for us." Reeves commented when he saw the level of activity around the planet. One advantage of the attack on the space station was that the various patrol ships that were supposed to be guarding all approaches to the planet were now converging on it, leaving the way open for the *Warspite* to approach from the opposite direction.

"Sensors report." Knight said.

"Optical scans confirm the intelligence provided from the ground." Goldman replied.

"And the margin of safety looks good enough for a projectile strike." Lucas added.

"Plot firing solutions." Reeves ordered, "Fire gauss cannons when ready. Be ready to fire again if they have anything to intercept the rounds."

"Locking on captain." one of the gunners responded, "Estimate three second to firing solution. Two. One. Targets locked."

The *Warspite's* two forward ventral turrets each mounted rapid firing gauss cannons that were much more powerful than the relatively small weapons carried by the cruiser's fighters or the stealth ship's rail gun and each one fired several rounds, the turrets moving just enough between each shot that the projectiles would

all strike separate targets on the planet's surface. But as with the rounds fired by Shaw, the distance that these had to travel meant that there was a noticeable delay before the projectiles would reach their targets and in the mean time the crew of the *Warspite* had other things to concern themselves with.

There were numerous satellites in orbit around the planet and although many were mundane types used for purposes such as communication and navigation some of them were defensive in nature and as soon as the controllers on the ground recognised the threat posed by the approaching *Warspite* they began to turn towards the cruiser.

"Enemy satellites locking on." Lucas announced as she studied the pulses of energy being emitted by these.

"Are we in their effective range yet?" Knight asked but before Lucas could reply there was a flash from one of the satellites as it fired a beam weapon at the *Warspite*.

"Impact on upper hull. No significant damage." Goldman reported.

"Looks like a free electron beam laser captain." Lucas added, "Energy output slightly lower than our own turrets."

"Return fire all turrets." Reeves ordered, "Missiles hold for now."

Acting independently of one another the gunners controlling the *Warspite's* eight light and two medium turrets began firing their weapons at the satellites, giving priority in targeting to those that Lucas marked as the ones most likely to be military in nature. The armour protection of the satellites was considerably less than that of the *Warspite* and the free electron beam lasers mounted in the cruiser's own turrets proved themselves quite capable of inflicting damage on them even at this extreme range. The two medium X-ray lasers were even more effective though, and each blast burned through a satellite to leave it as a lump of scorched metal and plastic tumbling through space.

In the meantime the projectiles fired from the *Warspite's* gauss cannon turrets now entered the planet's upper atmosphere, producing trails of fire behind them from nothing more than friction with the air. Striking the ground at many kilometres per hour the projectile impacts produced massive thunderclaps and the buildings they struck were utterly demolished, collapsing in upon themselves and hurled clouds of dust up into the air.

"Missile launched." Cortez called out as she detected a launch from one of the satellites.

"Gauss cannons. Rapid fire." Reeves ordered, "Keep our beam fire focused on the satellites. X-ray lasers hit that missile satellite now."

The single missile was joined by three more before the *Warspite's* two X-ray laser turrets swung round to target the launching platform and fired. The two beams struck the satellite together and the energy was enough to trigger the detonation of the remaining stored missiles causing the entire satellite to explode.

"Missile satellite neutralised captain." Lucas said, "No signs of any others, just the beam weapons."

"Their effectiveness is increasing the closer we get." Goldman pointed out.

"What about those missiles?" Knight asked.

"One's already down." Goldman replied, "Three more still closing."

"Keep at them with the gauss cannons." Reeves said. Then he looked at Goldman, "Give the order commander." he told her.

"All fighters scramble. Scramble. Scramble." Goldman said into the intercom and at the same time as the *Warspite's* squadrons of attack craft were launching the drone operators also deployed their craft. For now all of the various shuttles, skips and drop ships remained in the *Warspite's* hangars, waiting until the cruiser had cleared out the orbital defences and established a secure position in orbit before launching. But before the *Warspite* could enter orbit over the drop zone the Sissusks' own warships made an appearance.

Coming around the planet, the Sissusk frigate positioned itself at the lead of the formation to screen the smaller light warships following it as they all headed towards the *Warspite*, the stealth ship now forgotten in favour of this greater threat.

"Multiple contacts appearing over the horizon captain." Cortez said and looking up from her console she added, "One of them looks like a capital ship. Several smaller vessels and at least twenty attack craft of some kind."

"Agreed captain." Lucas added, comparing the information from the *Warspite's* sensors to that stored about the three warships that had been observed docked at the space station, "It's one of the ones we saw in orbit when we first arrived."

"Do we have a missile lock?" Reeves asked.

"Affirmative captain. Lidar locked on." one of the missile operators replied.

"Launch missiles. Two rounds. Direct drones to engage the supporting ships."

A pair of missiles burst from the launchers on the *Warspite's* upper hull and immediately angled themselves towards the Sissusk frigate. In response to this threat the frigate opened fire with its turret mounted weapons, laying down a barrage of energy beams that sliced through both missiles before either could reach their target.

"Captain the enemy capital ship looks to be equivalent to our frigates." Lucas announced.

"That's why it's at the front." Knight commented as he looked at the enemy formation again, "It's protecting

the smaller ships.”

“Then we must do something about that mustn't we?” Reeves replied, “Commander Ash, turn us towards that frigate if you would. Fire the main guns as it comes to bear.”

“Aye captain.” Ash responded, “Acquiring target.”

Ominously, the *Warspite* broke off its course towards the planet and brought its prow around to face the oncoming Sissusk warships as Ash lined up the main guns on the frigate.

“Locked on.” he announced, “Firing.” and at the same time he fired the *Warspite's* main guns. The twin neutral particle beam cannons were intended to give the heavy cruiser a direct fire weapon that was capable of taking on even the largest and most heavily armoured warships and against the Sissusk frigate that was only a little over half the length of the *Warspite* their effectiveness was devastating. The frigate's hull glowed brightly as the powerful particle beams burned their way through and into the inside of the ship, triggering explosions along the length of the hole burned into it. The frigate continued to head towards the *Warspite*, but now it did so only under its existing momentum. Fires blazing, its weapons ceased firing and the flare from its engines ceased as its remaining crew struggled to control the damage.

“Enemy vessel appears crippled captain.” Lucas said.

“Ready to finish her off.” Ash added.

“No.” Reeves said, “Get us heading for orbit again. Light turrets keep on at those satellites. X-ray lasers target the other enemy vessels. We don't know how much firepower they have and even if they aren't a threat to us they could be to our shuttles. Send the drones after them as well but have the fighters stay close to protect us from their attack craft.”

As the *Warspite* pressed on towards the planet the smaller Sissusk warship held back, firing what weapons they had available. For the most part this was a mix of light beam weapons, projectiles and a few missiles that failed to penetrate the screen created by the *Warspite's* fighters. But two of the smaller warships slowed, letting the others form a protective wall in front of them. Both of these vessels had hulls that were dominated by large forward firing weapon mounts that occupied much of the available internal space and as the *Warspite* continued towards the planet they turned to follow it. The two ships fired in unison, unleashing two beams of energy at the *Warspite*. There was no finesse to these ships, intended as nothing more than mobile gun platforms they were fitted with relatively crude laser cannons but they were designed to be capable of tremendous energy output.

“Two hits starboard hull.” Goldman exclaimed as the lasers found their target.

“Damage?” Knight asked.

“Light.” Goldman answered, “The armour's holding for now.”

“Weapons, prioritise those two monitors.” Knight ordered, using the Commonwealth's designation for small vessels mounting such heavy armament and both of the *Warspite's* X-ray laser turrets swung round to engage the two ships. In addition to this the squadron of drones that was currently heading towards the light warships were ordered to target these two ships ahead of the others.

“Thirty seconds to orbit captain.” Ash called out as the planet loomed ahead of them.

“Coming to a halt is going to be risky with those warships still out there.” Knight said to Reeves.

“I know.” the captain replied, nodding, “But we can't waste time flying around. What's the status on those warships?”

“Four appear to be fully functional captain.” Lucas replied, “While three more are damaged but operational.”

“Seven.” Reeves said to himself as he weighed the odds they faced. Studying the display in front of him, Reeves saw that the Sissusk warships were still maintaining their distance whereas their attack craft had rushed headlong towards the cruiser. These had been met by the *Warspite's* own fighter squadrons that outnumbered them and were taking a heavy toll on them.

“Over the target zone now captain.” Ash said out loud and Reeves turned his attention to a display showing the surface of the planet below, much of the picture now obscuring by clouds of dust and smoke.

“How effective was the bombardment?” he asked.

“Difficult to say for certain captain.” Lucas replied, “That cloud is interfering with our sensors sweeps of the surface. But the last images before impact indicated that all of the projectiles were on target.”

“Then that's as good as we're going to get.” Reeves said, “Launch shuttles. Divert one interceptor squadron to escort the drop ships heading for Major Willis' position. We can hold those warships off. Commander Ash, once the shuttles are clear you may turn us to face the enemy and use the main guns again.”

The various shuttles, skips and drop ships carried by the *Warspite* all launched from its forward and aft hangars in rapid succession, heading straight down into the planet's atmosphere. Accompanying these was a squadron of interceptors and as two of the four drop ships veered away from the rest of the small transports the interceptors turned to follow them.

The shuttles flew down into the clouds produced by the projectile bombardment, relying on inertial navigation to maintain a suitable distance between them until they emerged from the underside of the cloud. With the cloud blocking all sunlight from reaching the ground below the target zone was in darkness with only a

handful of lights active. Amongst other things, the bombardment had taken out the power and there was nothing available for the large spotlights that surrounded the labour camp, forcing the shuttles to engage their own running lights as they descended.

As they neared the ground the crews of these saw what effect the bombardment had had. All of the targeted buildings were no nothing more than craters and as the shuttles touched down the structures used to house the captive labour force opened and their occupants rushed out of them. Forewarned that the Commonwealth vessels were on their way, the humans had been ready for this moment and they were not about to let their one chance of freedom slip away. The moment each shuttle touched down it opened its hatches for the captives to get aboard. To try and maintain some sort of order the crews of each shuttle were armed with personal defence weapons and they made they held these up where they could be seen as they waved the captives towards them.

"From one of the structures a small group of Fedrun emerged and headed for the closest shuttle. As they drew nearer the two crewmen standing just outside its hatch brought their rifles to their shoulders, uncertain of how to react to the aliens.

"Multan brother." one of the Fedrun called out and the crewmen realised who these individuals were.

"Get aboard quick." one exclaimed and he waved them closer. Then all of a sudden more Fedrun started to appear and run towards the shuttles as well, individually and in small groups, "Who are they?" the crewman asked as Multan's family was climbing aboard.

"Others. Not us." one of the Fedrun replied in broken English and the two crewmen looked at one another before one looked back inside the shuttle and called out.

"Pilot! How much extra weight can we take?"

"When everyone who's suppose to be aboard is aboard we can still take another eight hundred kilos or so and make orbit." the pilot responded and the crewman outside looked towards the other Fedrun.

"Run!" he yelled, waving them on.

All of a sudden there was the unmistakable sound of gunfire as an armed Sissusk appeared from an outlying building and started shooting seemingly at random into the crowds of humans running towards the shuttles. There were screams as unarmed humans were hit, some fatally while others were helped back to the feet and supported by others in the crowd. In response to this the Commonwealth personnel who had a line of sight to the Sissusk levelled their personal defence weapons and returned fire, with bursts of gunfire coming at the alien from several directions at once. The compact automatic weapons fired pistol ammunition rather than the armour piercing rounds fired by rifles and had the Sissusk been wearing body armour it may have been sufficiently protected to survive the barrage. However, like those encountered by Willis and the platoon accompanying him to the other settlement this guard lacked the level of protection that the Sissusk gave to the troops encountered at Phi Two Pavonis and the alien collapsed under the volleys of gunfire aimed at it.

In orbit the *Warspite* held its position but turned on the spot to align its main guns towards the enemy warship. The destructiveness of the neutral particle beams when employed against the Sissusk frigate already demonstrated, the twin heavy cannons were devastating when used on the smaller warships. Both of the monitors had been reduced to flaming wrecks from single blasts and already the other less well armed ships were starting to withdraw. But as they did so another group of sensor contacts appeared as a volley of missiles launched from a destroyer that had been able to get its internal fires under control long enough to launch them so that they could be guided towards the *Warspite* by the smaller warships.

"Nineteen contacts captain. Closing rapidly." Goldman warned.

"Switch all light turrets to defensive fire." Knight ordered before Reeves had to and the *Warspite's* turrets, both free electron beam lasers and gauss cannons swung towards the oncoming missiles and fired. Aiming at targets the size of missiles would not be helped by the *Warspite* manoeuvring to keep its main guns pointed at the retreating light warships so the powerful weapons were silenced for the time being while just the X-ray lasers continued to target them.

"How many drones do we have left?" Reeves asked.

"Ten captain." one of the operators answered.

"Have them break off from the enemy warships and move to intercept those missiles." Reeves ordered, "Let the enemy withdraw if they want we just need to get those shuttles back aboard and get out of here."

"Captain there's activity on the planet." Goldman warned him.

"Confirmed." Lucas added, "Looks like aircraft heading for the drop zone."

"We can't re-task our turrets to deal with them while we're defending ourselves from those missiles." Knight pointed out.

"No we can't." Reeves agreed, "But we still have more than two squadrons worth of attack craft available to us up here. Will they be able to intercept the enemy in time?"

"I think so captain." Goldman replied, "Shall I send in another squadron?"

"Do it." Reeves said, nodding, "And warn the interceptors providing cover for Major Willis that they may have company on the way. The bad sort of company."

Willis looked outside when he heard the sound of aircraft overhead. But rather than the marine dropships he was hoping for he saw a pair of sleek atmospheric fighters banking around after having made one pass over the settlement and now coming back for a second look.

"I don't suppose anyone knows whether they're expecting any sort of signal from the ground do they?" he asked, looking around at the gathered human labourers.

"Multan may have." Horst replied, "Though I doubt that the Sissusk would accept such a signal from anyone but one of their own kind."

"In that case everyone get down." Willis ordered, "If they-" but before he could finish his sentence he saw something drop from beneath one of the fighters and a flash from this as a rocket engine ignited, "Incoming!" he yelled, throwing himself to the floor of the room.

However, the missile was not aimed at the settlement. Instead it flew overhead towards the squadron of Commonwealth interceptors now heading towards it as well. There was an explosion in front of the intended target as a set of countermeasures was fired, producing a cloud of reflective particles and a pair of burning flares to try and deceive any infra red tracking being used. This obviously fooled the missile's guidance as it immediately veered away, losing its lock on the interceptor before spiralling into the ground some distance from the building occupied by the humans.

"I think they missed us sir." one of the other marines commented and Willis scowled as he looked up.

"I don't suppose there's any way I can still make myself look calm and collected is there?" he asked rhetorically, feeling foolish now he had thrown himself to the floor for no reason.

"Not really no sir." the marine said before the Commonwealth interceptors flew above them and Willis activated his communicator.

"They're coming." he transmitted, "Get out on the roof and pop that flare."

In response to this a marine rushed out onto the building's flat roof and triggered a flare to mark it for the two drop ships that were following behind the interceptors. The Sissusk aircraft had seen no sense in remaining to fight the interceptors that outnumbered them six to one and had already turned and fled, releasing countermeasures of their own to ward off any missile attacks the Commonwealth craft may have attempted. But the pilots of the interceptors made no attempt to shoot down the fighters, allowing them to escape while saving their missiles for any others that may appear in greater numbers.

Guided to the correct building by the flare one of the marine dropships descended to touch down on the roof and its hatches opened immediately while the second ship hovered overhead.

"First group go!" Willis ordered from beside the doorway that led to the roof. He had already organised the captive humans into two groups that would fly in each drop ship and he hoped that this would make the boarding process go more smoothly as the drop ship crew waved them forward. The humans rushed aboard the drop ship and the two crewmen directing them boarded it behind them before the hatches closed and the drop ship's engines roared as it lifted off to trade places with the second one.

"Second group you're up." Willis called out and the rest of the liberated humans ran towards the waiting drop ship. This left only Willis and his marines waiting for the return of Shaw and the stealth ship. Looking up into the sky Willis saw no sign of this ship and he beckoned for a marine with a long range communicator to link with his own, "Major Willis to all ships." he broadcast, "Does anyone have eyes on Lieutenant Commander Shaw?"

"Major this is Jack-hammer" one of the interceptor pilots responded, "There's no-one up here but us."

"Look harder Jack-hammer" Shaw's voice announced over the same channel, "Archangel seven o'clock high." then after a moment's pause she added, "It's a stealth ship remember?"

"What's your ETA?" Willis asked her.

"Two minutes. Hope your guys are ready." Shaw told him.

"Ready and waiting commander. See you in two."

The stolen stealth ship descended out of the sky to hover over the roof. Given the roughness of her previous landing Shaw did not want to risk damaging the ship now that they were so close to completing their mission. Instead the outer airlock hatch slid open and the two marines who had gone along with Shaw lowered a rope ladder.

"Move!" Willis exclaimed and the platoon rushed towards the bottom of the ladder before they climbed up one at a time and were helped aboard by the marines at the hatch. Willis was the last aboard and as soon as he was inside the hatch was closed and the marine who had sealed it called out.

"Clear!"

"Okay everyone hold on." Shaw responded, "We're heading home."

The pilot and co-pilot of the skip watched the readout of their vessel's weight as the two crewmen in the back continued to wave passengers aboard. As well as the expected humans they also had several Fedrun among their passengers who, even though they had not been a part of the evacuation plan were clearly just as eager to escape the Sissusk as the humans were.

"We've just passed maximum launch weight." the co-pilot said.

"Oh you know there's some tolerance built in." the pilot responded, "But I think we should call that our lot." and he activated the intercom, connecting directly to the other two crewmen, "Okay we're full. Seal us up and let's get out of here." he ordered.

"Yes sir, doors sealing." came the reply and without waiting for confirmation that everything was in order the pilot took off, increasing power slowly but steadily to avoid putting too much strain on the engines that he knew he was pushing close to the limit of their design.

The other shuttles were also reaching their maximum capacity weight as well and less than two minutes after the first of them lifted off the last one was rising up off the ground. Luckily the crews had not been forced to leave anyone behind, no-one living that was and the bodies of some of the slaves who died while running last few metres to the ships there to save them still lay abandoned in the landing zone.

From orbit the shuttle launches were not immediately visible thanks to the effects of the recent bombardment but the transmissions to the *Warspite* from the flight crews confirmed that every shuttle got off the ground safely.

"All shuttles now on approach captain." Goldman announced, "I'd say less than ten minutes until they arrive."

"What about Lieutenant Commander Shaw? Reeves asked.

"Also closing according to her signals sir. Though she's not visible to us yet."

Any more missiles incoming?" Knight added.

"No sensor activity near the horizon at all sir." Cortez told him. The Sissusk warships had all withdrawn and their satellites on this side of the planet had been shot down but that did not mean the *Warspite* was safe just yet. Before retreating out of the *Warspite*'s line of fire the Sissusk had seen the heavy cruiser settle into orbit and it would have been quite possible for them to launch missiles programmed to travel to that specific location rather than being guided towards the vessel.

"Signal all attack craft." Reeves said, "Tell them to be ready to make emergency landings. Commander Thomas is our escape course laid in yet?"

"Yes captain. Course plotted and programmed. One light at thirty degrees off axis before we angle direct for Gamma Pavonis."

"Very good commander." Reeves said, "We might just make it back in time for Christmas after all."

Knight watched the display that showed the progress of the shuttles heading up from the surface and frowned.

"Those shuttles are getting spread out." he commented, "More than they ought to considering the differences between standard shuttles, skips and drop ships."

"I see what you mean." Reeves said.

"Sir some of the shuttles are reporting that they are carrying more evacuees than expected." one of the communication staff said, then he looked around at Reeves and added, "They say the extras are aliens sir."

"Looks like risking coming with us was preferable to staying with the Sissusk." Reeves said and he looked at Knight, "Those shuttles will be here soon. I want you to oversee the security operation."

"Yes captain." Knight replied, undoing the safety harness bridge crew wore despite the *Warspite* being equipped with an artificial gravity field before departing from the bridge.

The rear hangar was much closer to the bridge than the forward one was so Knight headed there and when he arrived he found two squads of marines and a lieutenant making final preparations. To avoid damaging the *Warspite* if events got out of hand most of the marines were armed only with pistols while a few had shotguns as well.

"You with shotguns stay out of sight unless you're called for." Knight said, "I'd rather not panic anyone we don't have to. Bear in mind that some of the passengers coming in aren't human so they may not understand verbal instructions."

"In other words don't even think about drawing a weapon unless ordered to or if someone's actually under attack." the marine lieutenant added, "Let's just get these people out of the hangar and to the hold as quickly and quietly as we can."

"Do you know if everything in the hold is prepared for them?" Knight asked and the lieutenant nodded, "I came from there sir. Doctor Thundercloud and his people are set up and ready to check everyone for signs of infection. Though if the aliens that are arriving are in addition to the numbers we were given then we may need some more beds."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. For now let's just concentrate on getting our guests there safely."

It was then that Goldman's voice sounded from the public address system.

"All hands shuttle are incoming." she announced moments before the first of the shuttle entered the *Warspite*'s aft hangar. For now however, the inner hangar door remained sealed as the main outer doors were kept open for the following shuttles and attack craft. Each of these craft headed for whatever hangar would allow them to get back aboard the *Warspite* as quickly as possible and each of them moved away from the central take off and landing strip to make room for the craft still coming in to land. The aft hangar was more convenient for most of the approaching craft and as soon as the flight controller there indicated to

the bridge that it was full the outer doors began to slide shut, the remaining craft outside now all being routed towards the forward hangar instead. Meanwhile the doors to the airlock leading to the aft hangar opened and Knight and the marines rushed in.

Inside the hangar the pilots of the attack craft docked there were already opening up their cockpits as deck crew hurried into the hangar from other airlocks and moved ladders to allow the pilots to disembark. For the time being the four shuttles and two drop ships present remained sealed until there were marines positioned outside them and only then did the hatches open.

"Please proceed in an orderly fashion." one of the marines announced as the first of the freed human captives stepped out of a shuttle and onto the hangar deck, "Come on keep moving." he added as this man came to a stop and looked around, having never been aboard a starship other than a Sissusk slave transport before.

This was repeated for each of the other shuttles, with the newly liberated humans and the handful of Fedrun being guided towards one of the inner airlock. Knight watched the crowd closely for any signs of anything out of the ordinary and among the more than three hundred people now being offloaded from the shuttles he noticed one that stood out for the simple reason that they appeared to be trying too hard not to be noticed.

The figure was shorter than many and possessed a more feminine gait but the facial features that would have confirmed for certain that it was a woman were hidden beneath a hood. However, as Knight took the first steps towards this person another of the freed humans pushed through the crowd to them and ripped back the hood to expose the face of the woman beneath it. Also exposed was one of the collars that the the Sissusk used to communicate with the slaves they used to relay orders to the others.

"Collaborator!" he screamed before all of a sudden he struck the woman in her face and she collapsed, "Where are your Sissusk friends to protect you now?" the man yelled as he kicked the woman while she lay helpless. Around them the other released captives looked on, none of them moving to intervene and some actively yelling for the man to kill the woman.

"Get back!" Knight yelled, rushing towards the man. Around him marines were also moving in to stop the attack and as Knight and one of the marines dragged the man back from the woman the other marines drew their sidearms as a sign that the rest of the crowd should stay back.

"Support group get in here. We have a casualty." the marine lieutenant ordered and the four shotgun armed marines who had been waiting out of sight came rushing into the hangar and pushed through the crowd.

"Get these two out of here." Knight ordered, pointing to the woman on the floor and the man he and the other marine were still holding back, "Take her to medical and don't let her out of your sight." then he looked at the man and added, "And he can go to the brig."

"She's a collaborator." someone in the crowd called out.

"Kill her!" another added.

"Anyone who has a problem with how this ship is run is welcome to get off in an escape pod and return to the planet." Knight responded loudly, "Otherwise you can all go with the marines to the hold where our doctor is waiting to examine you. Now would anyone like to go back?"

None of the crowd responded directly to Knight but he could hear muttering that he could not quite make out quite coming from various places within the crowd. However, no-one said anything further to contradict him.

"Good." Knight said as both the injured woman and the man who had attacked her were being led away by the marines, "Now go with the marines and they'll show you to the hold."

The interceptors escorting the stealth ship and drop ships from the secondary target site were the last craft to land in the *Warspite's* forward hangar and before the last of them had even come to a halt the controller had already started to close the outer doors.

"All craft accounted for captain." Goldman reported, "Hangars sealed."

"Very good." Reeves said, "Commander Ash, take us home if you would."

"Yes captain. Leaving orbit, preparing to engage faster than light drive." Ash replied as he piloted the *Warspite* away from the planet, keeping it between the cruiser and the Sissusk warships and satellites still on the far side of it. The cruiser accelerated rapidly, all the while building up the required mass of tachyons to propel it at faster than light speeds and once this had been reached there was a briefly flash of light and the *Warspite* was gone, leaving Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 far behind.

14.

Reeves sat in his quarters pouring over the reports he had received regarding the *Warspite's* actions at Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66° 34'31". In addition to the ship operation reports from Knight, Bernard and Goldman he would expect to receive regularly he also had to deal with reports from Lucas, Willis, Shaw and Thundercloud regarding the role each of them had played and the information they had gathered. The report submitted by Lucas was declared as just a preliminary one. The *Warspite's* sensors had recorded so much information during their brief visit to the system that it would probably take several weeks to go through it all. In all likelihood Lucas would not need to do all of this herself. As soon as they returned to Commonwealth space every intelligence officer in the fleet as well as those from national forces would be wanting to examine every detail recorded about starships built by an alien civilisation. Humanity had waited centuries for this and Reeves did not expect the reaction to contact with an advanced alien species to die down anytime soon.

A knock at his door made Reeves look up from the report from Doctor Thundercloud that confirmed no hazardous pathogens.

"Come in." he called out and the door opened to allow a marine to enter, "At ease." Reeves said as the soldier stood at attention, "Now what is it private?"

"Sir the alien, Multan I think his name is, has requested to speak with you in person. It – err, he is outside now."

"Bring him in private." Reeves replied and he stood up and Multan was guided into his quarters by two marines who positioned themselves either side of the door in keeping with their standing orders that none of the rescued captives whether human or alien would be allowed to go anywhere on the ship without an armed escort. For a few moments Reeves just stared at Multan and took in all he could. Though humanity had been in regular contact with the Brekken for several decades now only a handful of them ever left their home world as ambassadors and Reeves had never met one in person, making this his first personal encounter with an intelligent alien being. All of a sudden he realised that he was staring at Multan and considered how rude that could appear if the Fedrun was familiar with human mannerisms.

"Mister Multan." he said, "Captain Reeves. Pleased to meet you." and he smiled as he held out his hand, "Ah." he added before Multan could react, "I don't even know if you shake hands."

"I learn some human actions." Multan replied and he took Reeves' hand in return. Reeves noticed that the hand was warm, something he had not expected given the reptilian appearance of the Fedrun, but it was obvious that unlike the Sissusk the species was warm blooded rather than cold.

"Please sit down." Reeves said as he also sat back down, still watching Multan carefully, "Now how may I help you?"

"Two things I wish to say." Multan answered, "First I thank you for my people. You do not know us but still help us."

Reeves smiled.

"You're welcome." he replied, "To be fair you did trade your freedom for helping us to rescue some of our own people as well. I hear that more than sixty of your people were able to get aboard our shuttles."

"Your promise you could break by not allowing any on to your ships. Guns your guards had, nothing we had."

"Multan you and your people still have a great deal to offer us." Reeves pointed out, "Mankind has been searching for advanced alien life since before we left our home system and now here you are. When we get back to the Commonwealth there will be a lot of people hoping to learn all about you. The Sissusk as well. You know more about their society than we do."

"Sissusk live a life we made for them." Multan said and Reeves was unsure of what he meant by this. But before he could question the comment Multan continued, "When first met we made them our workers by force. The collars that let them give orders to workers we designed. Their words we could not speak and ours they could not. We have always been few and they were many, primitive but able to learn. Taught them too well though. One day they rose up and made us serve them instead. Now they do the same to others."

"So there are others species enslaved by the Sissusk then?" Reeves asked, curious to know just how many intelligent alien species there could be in this region of space.

"Six peoples the Sissusk control. Plus others like humans who they have some who enter Sissusk space and are taken." Multan replied and Reeves' eyes widened. In one single sentence the number of intelligent species known to exist by humanity had just more than doubled.

"That will interest my people greatly." Reeves said, "They'll want to know about as many of them as you can tell us about. But you mentioned a second reason for asking to see me."

"Yes. My work on the world where you found me." Multan said.

"Construction wasn't it? The Sissusk used you as an administrator or some such role."

"I tell workers where to build and what." Multan replied, "Then overseers watch them build. Collaborators you

call them.”

“Ah yes.” Reeves said. He had heard all about the humans who had worked for the Sissusk in exchange for increased perks even if they were no more free than those they gave orders to and the issue of what would be done with the woman currently under guard in the *Warspite's* medical facilities had yet to be determined. In all likelihood she would have to be released though the Commonwealth may be less willing to assist her in building a new life than they would the other humans.

“On that world I tell workers to build living places for others.” Multan said, “Many others. Many more humans.”

“Are you saying that the Sissusk are planning to relocate their human slaves to CPD sixty-six three four three one?” Reeves asked. Then realising that Multan may not understand the name given by human astronomers to the system where he had been rescued he added, “That's the star system where we found you.”

“No Captain Reeves.” Multan answered, “I say that more humans the Sissusk plan to take. Many thousands more.”

Reeves paused as he took this in. If the Sissusk were planning to acquire such a large number of additional human slaves then they could not be planning on simply seizing a few starships and their crews. They had to be planning on attacking a human world.

“Would the Sissusk really start a war with the Commonwealth to get more slaves?” he asked.

“No. No war.” Multan replied, “The Sissusk attack the weak. Your Commonwealth too strong. Your weapons and numbers too great. But they know not all humans part of it. They attack one of these places.” Reeves knew that there were many human settlements beyond the reach of the Commonwealth in the Fringe Worlds and for a moment he considered the possibility that since it was located between Sissusk territory and Commonwealth space the Sissusk could be planning an attack on the Caliphate. No formal state of war had ever existed between the Caliphate and the Commonwealth but there were few in the Commonwealth who would shed any tears to see them attacked by hostile aliens, “Take its people. Take anything they want. That is the way of the strong. But no war is wanted. Sissusk already at war and need more workers. Not more enemies.” Multan continued and Reeves considered this last point for a moment.

“We encountered a large warship in the system where we found the wrecked Sissusk fleet. It fired on us when we tried to contact it.” he said and he quickly looked at the computer on his desk and accessed the *Warspite's* records to bring up an image of the mysterious dreadnought that had forced the cruiser to retreat from Phi Two Pavonis, “It looked like this.”

“The enemy of the Sissusk.” Multan said when he saw the image, “Ticik they are called.”

“So you know about them as well.” Reeves said, “That information could be useful. We were forced to retreat when we encountered them. If they're going to be coming after us as well we'll need all the information we can get.”

“We know little.” Multan said, “But they wanted to force you away and you went. They may not think you threaten them. They leave you alone for now. The Sissusk try to take a world from them. Ticik worlds hard to see. No cities and only some have orbitals. When the Sissusk land the Ticik fight them. The Sissusk did not know they there. Did not know them strong. Now they are losing war.”

Reeves snorted.

“So basically the Sissusk only pick on civilisations they think are weaker than them and now that they've encountered one that isn't they're losing. We have a word for that. We call them bullies.” he said.

“Would you not be the same? What if the Sissusk had no ships or weapons as we found them?”

“As a matter of fact our only previous experience of other civilisations has been of ones lagging behind us and we've not resorted to enslaving anyone.” Reeves told Multan, “Hundreds of years ago things may have been different but most of humanity ended that practice a long time ago. Those that still practice it don't have the power to enslave anyone but their own people.” Reeves then considered where the Sissusk may be planning to strike again. The Caliphate was weak compared to the Commonwealth but it could still offer some defence of its four main worlds and if the Sissusk were the bullies he thought them to be then they would be more likely to attack elsewhere, “What can you tell me about where the Sissusk plan to attack?” he asked.

“I know little. Only it is a single world with many people but no ships such as yours to defend it.” Multan said and Reeves instantly knew that he could not be talking about the Caliphate with its fleet, no matter how small and ineffective the Commonwealth considered it to be.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention Multan.” Reeves said, “I'll have my people take a look at the information and see what they can figure out. Now the marines will take you back to the hold.” and he nodded to one of the guards.

“Iota Pavonis.” Lucas said to the gathered officers around the bridge's central console, “There's one inhabited planet named Liberty and it's population matches the number that could be sensibly housed in the structures Major Willis described and at fifty-seven point nine light years from Earth is well beyond the Commonwealth's area of control.”

"What can you tell us about the planet and its people lieutenant?" Reeves asked.

"It was settled not long after the Genex War captain." she answered, "One of a number of colonies established by groups who were concerned that the creation of a standing Commonwealth military was an indication that the Commonwealth was going to become more than the trade and mutual defence pact it is and instead become a multinational government."

"And it's undefended?" Knight said.

"It has a defence force of its own and intelligence is aware that the population is in the process of constructing a small force of light warships that we believe are intended to protect against incursions by the Caliphate rather than us. It is known that they purchased an obsolete destroyer but this was so that they could use its particle inductor for industrial purposes, generating tachyons and gravitons for use in other ships as well as keeping their FTL communication system operating without needing to import tachyons."

Lucas explained.

"I get the feeling that they won't be too happy to see us suddenly turn up." Willis said, "Their ancestors came the best part of sixty light years to get away from us."

"The Commonwealth didn't become the multinational government they were afraid of though." Thomas said.

Then he looked at Reeves, "Captain plotting a course there is no problem but I wouldn't recommend we leave it too late. The closer we get to Gamma Pavonis the closer we get to the Caliphate and it's located right between Gamma and Iota Pavonis."

"I hate to point this out captain," Knight began, "but given that Liberty isn't a Commonwealth member we can't act in its defence without permission."

"I know." Reeves responded, "But once we get there then maybe the-" then he frowned and looked at Lucas, "What do your records indicate that the people of Liberty call themselves lieutenant?"

"The only nation on the planet is called Libertas from the Latin sir." Lucas said, "So the people call themselves Libertans."

"Well maybe the Libertans will let us use their communication array to contact Commonwealth Fleet Command and get the permission we need to defend the planet from any Sissusk attack." Reeves said.

Liberty was the fourth planet in the Iota Pavonis system, orbiting a star that was significantly brighter than Sol meant that the comfort zone for habitable planets was further out than the one occupied by Earth and Liberty was eleven light minutes from its star. Settled in the years following the Genex War when the establishment of a standing military by the Commonwealth had made some believe that it was the first step in transforming the organisation from one of international co-operation to a unified government, the population of Libertas had grown to millions. The *Warspite* made no attempt to conceal its approach from the planet's orbiting defence system, a small network of sensor and weapons satellites along with an orbital dock that resemble the one around Centaur only on a much smaller scale. Whereas the stations that orbited Centaur were designed to be capable of handling the largest of warships and freighters the one orbiting Liberty would struggle to handle the *Warspite*.

"Tachyon activity in proximity to the star captain." Cortez called out seconds after the *Warspite* slowed to sub light speeds just over one light minute away from Liberty.

"Then we got here before the Sissusk at least." Knight commented, "You know the communications array would have to be their first target."

"What about those ships I can see in their orbital dockyard?" Reeves said as he studied the image of the frame-like structure that held several starships, all significantly smaller than the *Warspite*.

"They all appear incomplete captain." Lucas replied, "I count seven vessels between ninety and a hundred and eighty metres in length. I'd say that this is the fleet the Libertans are constructing."

"Any of them look finished enough to be of use lieutenant?" Knight asked and Lucas shook her head.

"I'm afraid not sir. I don't even think that their hulls are air tight yet." she said.

"What about that larger ship?" Ash asked when he caught sight of another vessel docked at the space station that appeared to have a fully intact hull from the point of view offered by the *Warspite's* visual sensors. This had a cylindrical appearance to it with a large drive unit at one end but only smaller manoeuvring thrusters elsewhere, "Isn't that one of those old Raven-class destroyers?"

The Raven-class of destroyers had served in the space fleets of several nations for more than a hundred years prior to the Genex War. At just under four hundred metres long they were large enough to carry a reasonably sized crew, enough fuel for patrols of more than two months duration and held enough medium missiles in forward launching tubes to threaten ships up to twice their size. Developed long before the advent of true artificial gravity they were designed to fly under constant acceleration from the large drive unit located at the rear of the ship, periodically reversing the direction in which they pointed and decelerating to avoid the effects of relativistic travel increasing the effective mass of the ship so much that it drained their fuel supplies too rapidly. In the aftermath of the war many of the class had been upgraded with particle inductors that could produce gravitons as well as tachyons to give them true artificial gravity but the class' days were numbered by this point with the need to turn the ship around to achieve maximum deceleration now seen as

a flaw and the more advanced nations had long since disposed of their ships of this class.

"Confirmed. Raven-class destroyer." Lucas said, "Captain, that's the ship that the Libertans bought for its particle inductor. From the looks of it they've also been stripping out anything else usable."

"Probably using the parts to help build their own ships." Knight commented and Reeves nodded in agreement.

"Sounds reasonable to me." he said.

"Launch detected. Incoming." one of the sensor operators called out suddenly.

"Action stations." Knight ordered before Reeves needed to.

"Drones." Lucas announced, "Looks like an obsolete pattern of attack drone. They aren't shooting at us yet."

"Well that's a relief." Reeves said, "Get me a line to the colony. Use our tachyon comms, I'm not waiting two minutes between halves of an urgent conversation."

Having a direct line of sight to Liberty enabled the *Warspite* to align its tachyon antenna to allow for real time communication even at their current distance. Whether the Libertans decided that it was worth responding in kind was another matter altogether. Even with a particle inductor to generate the tachyons for a reply they could decide that using them for communicating with a Commonwealth warship that had just arrived uninvited in their system was wasteful and respond with a much slower radio transmission.

"Tachyon transmitter ready captain." one of the communication officers announced.

"This is Captain Reeves of the Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite*." Reeves said clearly, "We have no hostile intent and request that you call off the drones you have launched. I require direct communication with a representative of your government or military urgently. The safety of your world may depend on it." then he waited.

As it happened the Libertans decided to respond to the tachyon signal in kind and just a few moments later the communication officer indicated that he was receiving a response from the planet's surface.

"Link established." he said, "Connecting them now." and a man's voice was heard from the communication system.

"Commonwealth warship *Warspite* this is Colonel Calum Davis of the Libertan Defence Force. Your presence in our space is unauthorised and you are ordered not to approach any closer than one half light minute to the planet. Any violation of this order will be considered a hostile act and dealt with accordingly."

"Helm do as he says." Knight ordered while Reeves switched his access to the tachyon transmitter on again.

"Confirmed colonel." he said, "We will hold at one half light minute. As stated I require direct communication regarding the security of your planet. With this in mind I would like to invite you aboard my ship."

Knight glanced at him.

"Bringing them on board?" he asked.

"I may need to offer them proof of what we're saying is true." Reeves replied, "We can't really do that over a communication link and I'd rather not risk loading our physical evidence onto a shuttle and sending it down to the planet just yet."

"Commonwealth warship *Warspite* hold at one half light minute." Davis responded, "I'll meet you there."

"That seemed easy." Knight said.

"Too easy." Ash added, "He's probably just coming aboard to tell us in person to go-"

"Regardless of his motives," Reeves interrupted, "I want him brought to the bridge as soon as he arrives."

"The bridge captain?" Goldman said, "Wouldn't the briefing room be more appropriate?"

"The colonel isn't security cleared." Lucas added.

"I am aware of that." Reeves answered, "As captain I'm clearing him for access to the bridge. If we're going to be defending Liberty then we're going to need the co-operation of their defence forces such as they are and keeping him away from operational areas of the ship doesn't show much good will on our part." then he looked at Lucas, "Lieutenant by the time the colonel gets here I'll need you to have all our intelligence on the Sissusk ready to present on the main console."

"What about the bodies we've got in storage?" Knight suggested.

"He may want to see them." Reeves replied, "Make sure that Doctor Thundercloud has them ready. This has priority over everything else right now."

It took more than an hour for a shuttle carrying Colonel Davis to arrive at the *Warspite* and it was directed in the aft hangar, room having been made since the cruiser departed Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 by moving shuttles and attack craft to their proper storage hangars. When the outer hangar door was sealed inner doors opened to allow not only a ground crew but also a squad of marines functioning as an honour guard to rush towards the shuttle. Knight was also present to formally greet the colonel as the marines formed a single line and stood at attention he stood at the very end so that he faced the hatch. The shuttle's hatch opened with a 'hiss' and a set of steps extended before Colonel Davis himself appeared in the hatchway, accompanied by a younger officer. Both men wore military uniforms that differed only in the rank markings on their shoulders and both carried sidearms.

"Welcome to the *Warspite* gentlemen." Knight announced, "My name is Commander Douglas Knight, first

officer of this ship. The captain has asked me to escort you to him but I will have to ask you to surrender your sidearms first.”

“Your captain didn't say anything about expecting us to be unarmed while we're surrounded by your troops.” Davis replied.

“With respect colonel,” Knight said, “the captain didn't think it would be necessary to remind you of the obvious. Only authorised personnel carry weapons aboard this ship.”

Davis took a deep breath.

“We'll leave them with our pilot.” he said, “I'm not handing my weapon over to you.” and both he and his younger assistant unclipped the holsters from their belts and passed them back into the shuttle where Knight saw their pilot.

“Thank you.” Knight said, “Now if you'd like to follow me the captain is waiting for you on the bridge.”

“The bridge?” Davis commented, “You're taking us to the centre of this ship's operations?”

“That's right colonel. The captain was quite specific about it.”

“Lead the way commander.”

Knight proceeded to lead the two Libertan officers to the *Warspite's* bridge, two of the marine honour guard following them just in case they had come aboard with less than honest intentions. When they reached the bridge Reeves and Lucas were already stood at the central console, facing their guests.

“Welcome to my ship colonel.” Reeves said when he saw them and he held out his hand. Davis accepted the handshake but his expression was stern.

“Let's just get this over with Reeves.” he said, “I don't know what you're doing in this system but you've upset a lot of people by coming here. Our ancestors left the Commonwealth to get away from what this ship represents.”

“Colonel I have brought my ship here at great risk to save your colony.” Reeves replied, “Perhaps you ought to listen before rushing to judgement.”

“Fine. Go head and say what you've got to say.” Davis said looking around the bridge at the Commonwealth personnel at work rather than Reeves himself.

“Lieutenant if you would.” Reeves said, looking at Lucas.

“Yes captain.” she replied and on the central console she called up a large image of the Sissusk cruiser encountered in the Phi Two Pavonis system, “This vessel is of alien origin.” she said, “It was encountered in the Phi Two Pavonis system where it was adrift. A boarding party was sent aboard that was subsequently attacked by these creatures.” and then she opened a video file showing part of the exchange between the *Warspite's* marines and the Sissusk troops sent to prevent their cruiser from being salvaged by anyone else. While this played Reeves watched the colonel for any reaction but if the footage had any effect on him, he was hiding it well, “We were able to track the cruiser back to a world in the CPD sixty-six three four three one system where we learned they are called the Sissusk. We also learned that they had a number of humans being used as slave labour.”

“We rescued about five hundred of them.” Reeves added, “And information has been presented to us that indicates these Sissusk are planning to attack your planet in the very near future. Colonel, they need new slaves and your nation has millions of people that they consider ripe for the taking. We're here to help defend your planet colonel and so-”

“Do you take me for a fool Captain Reeves?” Davis said before Reeves could finish, “Because you must if you think I'll be fooled by a few computer generated images of a supposedly alien starship and some badly lit footage that could come from any cheap science fiction movie. There are no alien species advanced enough to be capable of interstellar travel without human help.”

Rather than respond directly to the colonel's accusation, Reeves activated the intercom he was stood beside.

“Major Willis could you bring Doctor Thundercloud and our guest to the bridge please?” he said before shutting off the intercom without waiting for an answer.

“Captain I hope you don't expect me to believe some bedraggled individual dressed in rags you drag in here to try and convince me that they're some freed prison of an alien species.” Davis continued but while his attention was focused on Reeves he failed to notice Willis and Thundercloud entering the bridge in the company of a second marine and Multan. On the other hand his assistant saw the alien entering the bridge and his eyes widened at the sight of Multan, “This is frankly the most ridiculous pack of lies that I've ever-” Davis went on when his assistant sudden placed a hand on his arm and pointed across the bridge, “Oh my God.” he said, astounded by what he was looking at. Just like Captain Reeves earlier, Davis was well aware of the existence of intelligent alien beings but this was the first time he had ever encountered one in person. “Colonel Davis,” Reeves said, “meet Multan. Multan, this is Colonel Davis of the Libertan Defence Forces.”

“Hello Colonel Davis.” Multan said as Davis and his assistant continued to stare back at him.

“Multan is a member of the Fedrun species colonel.” Reeves explained, “The Fedrun once enslaved the Sissusk but following a major uprising their situations have become reversed and now the Sissusk are in the habit of seizing anyone they can to be added to the slave labour force they need to support a war against

another alien species. Unfortunately it appears that Liberty has been targeted by them.”

At this point Davis regained his composure.

“But why?” he asked.

“Because the Sissusk think they can.” Multan answered and for a moment Davis stood visibly stunned to hear an alien speaking English.

“Colonel the Sissusk have probably been conducting surveillance missions in this system for some time now.” Reeves said, “They’ll know that you don’t have much in the way of defences and will be expecting little effective resistance. I’d like to help you out with that.”

“They’ll also want to attack soon.” Thundercloud added, “As well as their urgent need for manpower they are cold blooded. I’ve taken a look at the information we have on your world and it looks like your nation is currently in its summer. The longer the Sissusk wait, the more likely it is that the climate will turn against them and they’ll have to rely more on their technology to overcome this.”

“I need to speak with my government.” Davis said, “They have to hear about this.”

“Of course.” Reeves replied, “But I have a favour to ask of your government as well colonel.”

“Go on.”

“We came here straight from CPD sixty-six three four three one. The Commonwealth has no idea that an attack on your world could be imminent. Legally we can’t intervene to defend you unless we’re attacked first so I want to try and get permission to help you directly, maybe even drum up some reinforcements from the fleet station at Delta Pavonis. But to do that we need access to your tachyon communications. It has far greater range than our does.”

Davis nodded.

“I’ll let them know.” he said, “I can’t see it being a problem.”

The news that a hostile alien force could arrive at Liberty at almost any time shocked the Libertas government into immediate action. The crew of the *Warspite* were given access to the system’s tachyon communication system to send a message back to the Commonwealth while on the planet below the defence forces began the process of full mobilisation.

It was obvious that in the absence of any functional local warships the *Warspite* would be essential to the defence of Liberty and Reeves had expected to be summoned down to the surface to discuss how he intended to make use of the heavy cruiser. Therefore, it came as something of a surprise when the government of Libertas instead requested that initial briefings take place aboard the *Warspite*. However, when Reeves introduced Multan to the assorted government ministers and military officers who came up on the shuttle he realised that their decision had been motivated by a desire to meet the alien face to face, the novelty of there being a member of an intelligent species other than a human aboard the *Warspite* obviously being too much to overcome.

The number of people to be present for the briefing meant that holding it on the bridge was out of the question so instead one of the *Warspite*’s dedicated briefing rooms was used. Reeves, Goldman, Lucas, Willis, Shaw and Thundercloud were all present to represent the *Warspite*, they being the officers who would know most about what would be needed to organise the defence against the expected invasion. Meanwhile Davis and his assistant were joined by President Cooper, the head of state of Libertas along with government ministers for defence, foreign relations, health, industry, transport and justice who once again represented those departments who would be called upon during the organisation as well as the actual fighting. Completing the list of those present at the meeting were Horst and Multan, both of whom were present to offer what advice they could regarding the capabilities and likely behaviour of the Sissusk.

“Perhaps you could tell us what we will be facing captain.” President Cooper said.

“I’m afraid we can’t say for certain Mister President.” Reeves replied and he looked at Lucas.

“We do know that the Sissusk appear to have a similar level of military technology to us.” she said, “But the composition of their attack force is unknown.” then looking at Multan she added, “It is, isn’t it?”

“Unknown, yes.” Multan answered, “I have not seen the ships. But I know they come.”

“Do you have any idea of what these Sissusk would be likely to put in a fleet they’d send here?” Davis asked.

“They send troop ships to invade. Some warships for protection but opposition is not expected. Cargo ships to take away slaves and what else they want.”

“What else do they want?” President Cooper asked, wondering whether it could be as bad as the idea of his people being shipped off into slavery.

“Your people can make space vessels. The Sissusk need more of these for their war. Your people will build for them.”

“So they’ll take everything they can from the shipyards.” Davis commented and he glanced at the defence ministers, “A shame we didn’t just buy ships off the shelf like I recommended.” he added.

“Producing our own vessels brings more long term benefits.” one of the ministers for industry replied before any of his opposite numbers in defence could say anything, “Buying them in would only-”

“If we could keep to the subject at hand.” Reeves said impatiently. Being the captain of a warship that often

spent weeks at a time beyond the range of communication with any government meant that he was generally spared from political bickering and he had no patience for it now.

"I'd like to discuss the ships you're building." Lucas said, "Firstly I'd like to know what types of ships they are. Also we can see that they're incomplete but is there any chance that even one could be made combat ready?"

"It's a balanced force." a defence minister replied, "Four corvettes, two scouts and one each of cutter and picket."

"What do you need a force like that for?" Thundercloud asked.

"You're not the first uninvited guests we've had." Davis told him.

"We've had a few drones from the Caliphate turn up and start broadcasting their propaganda." a minister added, "We took them out fairly easily with the two gunships we have available but the people didn't like the idea that our planet was open to attack."

"What about the forces you do have?" Goldman asked, "What about that destroyer?"

"We bought it surplus purely for the particle inductor it contained." President Cooper told her.

"That's now located in an armoured bunker beneath our capital." a defence minister added.

"We don't need it to travel faster than light." Reeves said, "What about its weapons and other systems?"

"The missile system from that destroyer was enough to outfit all four of the corvettes we're working on."

Davis told him, "And its turrets were removed and used to arm our space station."

"Can it still fly?" Reeves asked, "By remote if possible."

"I suppose so." Davis said, "The avionics and engines were designed for a ship originally built without artificial gravity though, it wasn't designed for anything more than an eight gee thrust. If these aliens have the same level of technology as the Commonwealth then they'll run rings around it."

"Plus there's the matter of it not having any weapons." President Cooper added.

"As long as it can fly we can make use of it." Reeves replied, "Now what about the situation on the ground?"

"We've got an almost full strength marine company." Willis said, "But we're light infantry."

Davis sighed.

"I've got a regiment of eight hundred full time combat troops plus another six hundred support staff." he said, "But again it's all light infantry. We have some armoured vehicles and a few anti-armour weapons but nothing that can stand up to a heavy armoured force."

"Are the Sissusk likely to send enhanced or heavy infantry?" Willis asked, turning towards Horst and Multan.

However, neither of them replied right away, "Sorry." Willis added, "My marines are considered light infantry. Enhanced infantry are equipped with an exoskeleton to give them greater manoeuvrability and carrying capability while heavy infantry adds armour to the exoskeleton."

"The Sissusk have no such technology." Multan responded.

"But that sort of technology is hundreds of years old." Davis said, "I thought they had a similar level of development to us."

"Sissusk technology taken from Fedrun." Multan said, "Our armies had this, but it was not made for Sissusk. When they take over they cannot make for themselves and no Fedrun would do it for them. The Sissusk still trying to learn such things for themselves."

"Well that's something at least." President Cooper said.

"But the fact is that our forces are still bound to be heavily outnumbered." Reeves pointed out, "The *Warspite* is our only functional capital ship and we've got less than two thousand troops to defend against a force intended to round up millions of prisoners."

"I don't see the Sissusk force being anything less than twenty thousand strong captain." Lucas said, "That number would allow them to round up one settlement at a time while they use their control of space to prevent any local forces from responding. Any signs of movement and they'll just use a precision projectile strike from orbit to take it out."

"Our reserves will take us over that." a defence minister said, smiling, "We should be able to contain them easily."

"Not while they control space we can't." Davis responded, glaring at the minister in a manner that suggested to Reeves the pair did not often see eye to eye, "We need to deploy our forces to protect every settlement as well as the orbital structures whereas they can concentrate their forces wherever we're weak."

"What about civilians?" Willis asked, "Are many of them armed?"

"Sporting and hunting weapons." President Cooper replied, "There are some that are semi-automatic versions of military types but that's it. No match for a military force with armour."

"We may be able to help there Mister President." Reeves said, "A bullet from a hunting rifle will kill a soldier as easily as one from a machine gun and I'm sure Major Willis can see to the distribution of targeting sights for our missiles."

"That shouldn't be a problem captain. We've got spares and they're easy enough to use." Willis added.

"Won't it fall foul of rules governing acting in support of a non-Commonwealth nation unless we're attacked first captain?" Thundercloud asked.

"Deploying the missiles themselves is going to be a bigger problem." Willis pointed out, "If we could defend the colony openly then I'd suggest a ring deployed about five thousand metres outside the capital. That would give us coverage of every major settlement."

"The launchers are supposed to be deployable in under five minutes." Lucas pointed out.

"Ever tried deploying any support weapon under fire young lady?" Davis asked, "Those five minutes are enough for an enemy to kill you fifty times over. Especially if they've got control of the air or space."

"And those five minutes are for a surface deployment, not dug in." Willis added before the intercom activated and Knight's voice was heard.

"Captain we just received a signal from Admiral West via the system's tachyon communication satellites. It's marked urgent but there's no classification." he said and Reeves sighed.

"Transfer it down here." he said, looking at the others gathered in the briefing room with him, "We may as well hear it together."

As Reeves had instructed the message was transferred to the briefing room and Reeves pressed the monitor screen in front of him to activate the playback, tapping a second button to duplicate it on the larger wall mounted screens that were visible to everyone. The image that appeared was of a white haired man in the uniform of a Commonwealth admiral, his chest decorated with awards. Though they had never met in person, Reeves instantly recognised this man as Admiral West, the chief of staff of the Commonwealth fleet who was based on earth.

"Captain Reeves," the admiral began, "I can't understate the reaction your message has got here. The idea that multiple hostile alien species existed has come as a massive shock and it looks like heads are going to roll in intelligence for this. The joint chiefs have met with the Commonwealth Defence Committee in a meeting that lasted all of about five minutes. Despite Iota Pavonis not being part of the Commonwealth your orders are to render all aid you can, including the use of armed force to defend the colony against any external threat.

"I know you were hoping that we'd be able to send reinforcements from Delta Pavonis but that's not going to happen. It looks like the Caliphate spotted the battle group from Gamma Pavonis heading out and they've been probing the system's defences. The *Maasai* has seen them off so far, even if it can only manage a two gee acceleration a two kilometre dreadnought is pretty intimidating when it's heading right for you, but there's no telling whether they'll decide to commit more forces to try and sneak something through. With that in mind the ships at Delta Pavonis have already been ordered to reinforce Centaur.

"The good news is that the ships at Gliese Six Seven Four in the Ara Sector are available and I've ordered Admiral Chang to bring his forces to support you. They'll be accompanied by a marine armoured division as well. Chang has been ordered to respond as fast as possible so he'll be sending his squadrons individually with the lead elements due to arrive in about six days and the rest following over the space of about a week. You need to hold out until then.

"Good luck captain. If the aliens attack before then I've got a feeling you'll need it. West out."

The screen went blank and for a few moments no-one spoke.

"Well that's good news isn't it?" one of the civilian ministers from Libertas said, "The Commonwealth fleet is coming."

"Lieutenant, what does the Commonwealth task force at Gliese Six Seven Four consist of?" Reeves asked, looking at Lucas and she quickly tapped at her tablet to call up the information.

"There are four fleet squadrons sir." she said, "A battlecruiser group, two dreadnought groups and a carrier group. This totals three battlecruisers, two dreadnoughts, a battleship, a carrier, two light cruisers, nine frigates and fourteen destroyers. Plus light vessels and attack craft of course."

"And those squadrons will be travelling individually." Reeves said, "The battlecruiser group will reach us first but that's still six days away and for all we know the *Sissusk* could be about to drop out of FTL right now."

"It gives more hope to the people of Liberty though." Thundercloud said, "Have them scatter and go to ground and at least some ought to be able to evade capture for that long."

"That makes them harder to defend doctor." Willis said. Then he looked at Reeves, "At least now we can deploy those missiles and distribute targeting equipment."

"Do it." Reeves responded before looking at the Libertan president and adding, "If that's acceptable to you Mister President."

"Of course." President Cooper replied, "Colonel Davis how long until we're fully mobilised?"

"Our regular forces will be ready in about six hours sir. The reserves another twelve after that." Davis replied, "I'll have to do some checking up on the most suitable units to receive targeting gear from the *Warspite* though."

"Distribution shouldn't take long at least." Willis said, "We've got fifty extra units."

"In the meantime we ought to discuss who will take command of the space forces." the same minister who had attempted to defend local production of warships over importing them said, "Obviously it's unacceptable for a Commonwealth officer to-"

"Well if you know of anyone other than Captain Reeves who's qualified to take charge of a force centred

around this ship I'd like to hear about it." Shaw interrupted, "Captain you can't let them take command over you."

"No I can't." Reeves agreed, "Mister President my orders are to assist you, not give you control of this ship."

"And yet you expect me to give you control of our space forces." President Cooper replied.

"Because this ship and its fighters represent the bulk of the space forces available in the system." Reeves pointed out, "Major Willis and his marines will be subordinate to Colonel Davis on the ground but I must insist on being given a free hand to act in space."

"Very well captain, you may have control of our space forces such as they are. But I would at least like to know what it is that you are planning." President Cooper said and Reeves smiled.

"Of course Mister President." he said.

INTERLUDE.

The door opened automatically when Vale rushed down the hallway towards it and Hayes looked up from her computer.

"In a hurry this morning Enrico?" she asked.

"Haven't you heard?" he asked in reply and Hayes frowned.

"Heard what?" she said and Vale hurried across the office to her desk and handed her his tablet.

"We've just picked this up." he told her.

"From Martins?"

"No." Vale replied, shaking his head, "This was received through our regular intelligence channels. Everyone has it. The Commonwealth has given orders to deploy a force of ships to Iota Pavonis."

"Iota Pavonis? But there's nothing there but a colony of misfits who couldn't tolerate life in the Commonwealth. Why send a task force to the outer edge of the Fringe Worlds? Surely the Commonwealth isn't planning on invading."

"No, but the Sissusk are. The *Warspite* has shown up again at Iota Pavonis and apparently the Sissusk are hot on its heels."

Hayes smiled.

"So we've got what we wanted then." she said.

"No we haven't. We're not even close. The plan was to trigger a conflict between the Ticik and the Commonwealth. All my calculations are based on that. The Sissusk weren't supposed to be involved at all. Don't you see that?"

"Does it really matter who the Commonwealth goes to war with Enrico?" Hayes responded.

"Commander, our observations of the Ticik show them to be relentless. They'll just keep on coming at anyone who they consider a threat. But so far they've no reason to consider the Commonwealth a threat. They've driven off every Commonwealth ship they've encountered. On the other hand the Sissusk are far more opportunistic. They're attacking Liberty in the Iota Pavonis system purely because they think there'll be little resistance. A Commonwealth cruiser defending the colony will make them more cautious in the future. If they're defeated they'll pull back. Neither the Commonwealth nor the Sissusk are looking for a war with one another and the distance between them makes it easy for them both to avoid one another. I didn't plan for any of this."

"So what are the implications then Enrico? Tell me how we can salvage something from this because if we end up with nothing but the Commonwealth being aware of the existence of other species and that their SETI program has been systematically tampered with then both you and I are going to have some serious questions to answer."

"The implications are that this has gone too far now. Iota Pavonis is too far away and in any case sending our ships there will only complicate matters further if there are any survivors who can enable the Commonwealth to identify them. Right now all we can do is wait and see how this plays out. Then once the dust has settled I can evaluate the best way to go forwards. Now they know about the existence of advanced civilisations other than their own it's likely that the Commonwealth will undertake a program of mass exploration, sending drones and ships into regions where other species can be found. Perhaps we can still engineer a conflict between them and the Ticik. They know that species exists now and the defeat of the *Warspite* by their dreadnought makes them a security issue. They won't be able to afford to ignore it."

Hayes paused while she considered this.

"So you're saying that we could still make the original plan work?" she asked.

"With some modification it may be possible." Vale answered, "Though I wouldn't put the odds at more than sixty-five percent." and Hayes smiled.

"Get working on it." she said, "I want a briefing by the end of shift."

"Yes Miss Hayes." Vale replied and he turned to leave. As the doors slid open to allow him to exit the office he almost walked right into Kane who had been standing outside.

"Excuse me commander." Vale said as he stepped aside.

"Not at all." Kane responded.

"Lurking outside doors now Alex?" Hayes said, "Is that really how low you're stooping now? Because someone ought to tell you that all the important doors are soundproof nowadays."

"Soundproof maybe Jennifer." Kane replied, leaning on the door frame so that his hand blocked the doors from closing, "But you can learn a lot from the expression on someone's face as they leave a room and so when I happened to see your little minion Mister Vale come scurrying in here I just had to wait find out how you'd both look when he came back out again. My guess is that he brought you the news that the Commonwealth appears to be mobilising for war, yes? And since he was in such a hurry to tell you rather than wait for you to find out yourself I'm guessing that it's all because of your little scheme. Am I right

Jennifer?"

"Guess." Hayes replied, "You seem to be doing a lot of that. Listening at doors and guessing. Hardly the actions of someone whose job it is to gather and process intelligence. Did you get all that from Enrico's expression?"

"Actually all I got was a sense of frustration. I get a sense of frustration from you as well, but that's not professional, more sexual."

"Screw you Alex." Hayes said, snarling at Kane and he smiled as he held up his left hand to show off the ring on his finger.

"Thanks for the offer but I'm married. You should try it sometime Jennifer. Seriously, it's a better option for you than the risks you're running now. The old man's already had people looking into our department. All my projects are in order. Can you say the same?" Kane said before removing his hand and stepping back so that the doors could close again.

"Damn it!" Hayes snapped, bringing her hands down on her desk. She had been so engrossed in her own project that somehow she had failed to notice that one of her superiors had been checking up on her activities and the superior in question did not have a reputation for tolerating even the most minor of mistakes and all she could do was hope that Vale was as good as the reputation that had led her to recruit him suggested he was and that he was still able to find a way for her project to succeed in its aims. If he failed in this then she knew that her days here could be numbered and the consequences of being removed from her position could be serious in the extreme.

Reeves looked up when the door to his quarters opened and Lucas entered.

"Yes lieutenant?" he asked.

"I just wanted to let you know that everything's prepared captain." she answered, "Commander Bernard has configured the Libertan destroyer for remote operation and Lieutenant Commander Goldman has set up a control link on the bridge." then she noticed the book that Reeves had been reading when she entered. Bound in what looked like black leather, there was gold lettering on the front cover that clearly stated its title. HOLY BIBLE.

"Problem lieutenant?" Reeves said as he saw her staring.

"No sir. It's just I'm kind of hoping that you have enough confidence in the plan that you're not relying on a miracle. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"Perhaps not lieutenant." Reeves replied as he got up and returned the bible to his shelf, placing it between a copy of Sun Tzu's 'Art of War' and more colourful book with the title '1001 Jokes About Space Travel', "My father is a church minister and when I first joined the Commonwealth fleet he told me two things. Firstly that civilisation extends only as far as Yorkshire men travel and secondly to be careful that while travelling the heavens God didn't decide to save me a journey by taking me while I was closer to him. Every so often I read a few passages in the hope that it will offer me some inspiration."

"And does it?"

"Occasionally. Now I think we should be on the bridge. We've got a little over four days until that battlecruiser squadron arrives to reinforce us and I can't help feeling that the Sissusk are going to beat them here."

Knowing the approximate direction that the Sissusk were likely to approach from, the *Warspite* along with the Libertan destroyer orbited Liberty at a geostationary altitude where they would be hidden from detection by the Sissusk when they arrived. The same would not be true about the Sissusk however, the sensors on satellites and ground stations on the far side of Liberty were being relayed around the planet to the hidden cruiser. These were less effective than the *Warspite's* own state of the art sensors but the advantage of keeping the warship hidden was considered to be preferable to getting the most of the superior performance of its sensors. Thus when the Sissusk force finally did arrive it was first detected by the sensors fitted to the tachyon communication satellites orbiting Iota Pavonis itself. This information was transmitted in effective real time via tachyon link to Liberty and from there was relayed around to the far side of the planet where the *Warspite* waited in the planet's shadow.

"Multiple contacts less than thirty light seconds from the system's star." Cortez announced.

"Sound action stations." Reeves ordered, "Hold position until I give the word."

"Can we tell what sort of ships they are? Or how many?" Knight asked.

"Ah." Lucas commented and Reeves looked at the display in front of him.

"What do you mean 'Ah' lieutenant?" he asked before as he saw the details of the ships that had just arrived in the system he added, "Oh."

The Sissusk armada appeared huge and it was clear that the majority of the ships that made it up were far larger than the *Warspite's* own eight hundred metre length, most more than twice that length. Some of the smaller vessels were familiar, with two of them being frigates and a destroyer of the same types encountered in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 system while the six light warships positioned on the outside of the fleet's formation were also of types encountered there or spotted very briefly at Phi Two Pavonis. Even those types that the *Warspite* had not previously encountered had the familiar Sissusk design style to them, with a wedge shaped forward hull and a tail section behind it. However, on these newer types these tails were much longer in comparison to the forward hull and had numerous modules fixed to them.

"That's a lot of ships." Thomas commented.

"Twenty eight captain." Lucas added, "Definitely two frigates and a destroyer plus six light warships of types all encountered before. But there are nineteen larger ships of two different types I can't positively identify. However, given what we know about their mission here I'd suggest that we're looking at five assault carriers and fourteen transport ships of some kind. Alternatively they could be some kind of modular vessels that have been configured for a planetary assault role."

"Enemy fleet is splitting up captain." Cortez announced as the lighter warships peeled off from the rest of the fleet while the larger vessels continued towards Liberty itself. Meanwhile the lighter warships angled closer to the star, or more precisely towards the satellite network that orbited it and almost in unison they opened fire, launching a volley of missiles that streaked towards the closest of the satellites while the launching vessels swung around the star to engage those located on the opposite side. Though not especially powerful, the weapons carried by the light warships were more than sufficient to deal critical damage to the defenceless satellites and one by one they ceased broadcasting their images and other data to Liberty and the monitors

on the *Warspite's* bridge that showed the feed went black.

"Cutting off Liberty's long range communications." Knight commented, "Very clever."

"If we weren't already here then it could have been weeks before anyone noticed that the planet had stopped communicating." Goldman added.

"And by the time the Commonwealth decided to investigate an independent system there'd be nothing left." Thomas said.

"Then it is fortunate for all that we are here." Reeves said, "Are we ready to engage the Sissusk?"

"Yes captain." Goldman answered, "All systems on line and ready to go."

"Should we make our presence known captain?" Ash asked.

"Not yet commander." Reeves replied, "Let the enemy enter orbit first."

The bridge crew waited patiently as the Sissusk fleet travelled the distance between Iota Pavonis and Liberty, a journey that took them just over four hours. After destroying the tachyon communication satellites the lighter Sissusk warships had no difficulty in catching up with the slower moving fleet that had to travel at the pace permitted by the slowest vessels they contained. Having no tachyon based detection systems other than those aboard the now destroyed communication satellites, the Libertans were forced to rely on more conventional EM based sensors and to begin with this meant a significant time lag. The first evidence of the arrival of the Sissusk in the system was only reported by these eleven minutes after it had been detected by the tachyon communication satellites and by this time the satellites had already been destroyed. But as the Sissusk drew closer the time lag lessened and during the entire period the government of Libertas broadcast messages to the aliens to warn them that they were not defenceless and would respond if they did not immediately withdraw. In return the Sissusk made no effort to communicate and so when they closed to a distance of thirty light seconds the Libertan defences acted.

The handful of defence platforms orbiting Liberty had turned towards the Sissusk fleet as soon as it had been detected and now the controllers on the ground ordered them to engage it. A flurry of missiles erupted from the launchers aboard the satellites and immediately swung towards the Sissusk fleet. In response the Sissusk frigates accelerated slightly, positioning themselves at the head of the fleet and opening fire with their numerous turret mounted weapons they created a screen in front of the fleet that destroyed the missiles one after another before they could get close enough to do any damage.

"Looks like they know what they're doing." Reeves said.

"I take it launching a nuke into the middle of them is out then?" Knight asked and Reeves nodded.

"They'd just shoot it down before it got close enough to do any good." he replied, "No, we're going to have to do this one ship at a time."

"Now captain?" Ash asked, becoming impatient as they sat and watched the Sissusk continue to close on Liberty.

"Not yet Lieutenant Commander. They haven't started to deploy their ground forces yet."

"You're planning on letting them land?" Goldman asked.

"Oh yes." Reeves answered, "If their own troops are already on the ground then they can't just obliterate the entire colony out of spite."

"Looks like they're hitting back at the orbital defences." Knight said as he remained focused on the feed from Liberty.

The Sissusk destroyer unleashed a further volley of missiles at the orbiting defence platforms while one of the frigates broke off and headed for the construction docks. The space station was armed with several turret mounted ballistic cannons for close in defence that opened fire as soon as the frigate came within their effective range. The storm of projectiles slammed into the warship but the weapons had been intended to deal with incoming missiles, not a capital ship and all they managed was to pit the frigate's armour in places where they hit. The frigate returned fire with its own turrets, targeting the sources of the projectiles one by one with beam weapons and all were silenced just as the frigate pulled alongside and moved in to dock with the space station.

"Let's hope the crew can get out of there." Knight commented.

"Captain the Sissusk fleet is entering orbit." Goldman announced, "All orbital defence platforms have been destroyed."

"Then I hope the Libertans are under cover." Reeves said, "Because things are about to get serious."

Several of the Sissusk warships opened fire in rapid succession, sending projectiles of their own down into the atmosphere of Liberty. These were targeted against the known positions of active tracking systems as well as towards targets that had been identified as likely being command and control centres for the Libertan military. Unknown to the Sissusk however, every one of these was a fake. The tracking stations were broadcasting only to retain the appearance of operation while their operation centres were abandoned and the command and control centres had already been evacuated in favour of deeper shelters that remained hidden. Confident that they had inflicted serious damage on the Libertan defences however, the Sissusk proceeded with the next stage of their plan and aboard all five assault carriers hatches opened on their outer hulls to reveal the drop ships that would carry the Sissusk ground forces to the surface. But before these

were released there was another wave of launches as the assault carriers released the attack craft that would provide close air support to their troops on the ground and to clear the way for the drop ships through any air defences that had survived the initial bombardment from space.

The streets of the Libertan capital were almost entirely deserted as Willis looked up into the sky from his camouflaged position. The Libertans themselves had sought shelter as soon as the Sissusk fleet had arrived in their system and now only military and rescue units were supposed to be active in the city streets.

Inevitably there were some looters and more than one group had been detained and secured by troops to be handed over to the police as soon as the opportunity arose. For now though, both the Commonwealth and Libertan troops focused their attentions on what was going on above them.

The arrival of the Sissusk fleet and their attack on the tachyon communication satellites had been too far away to be noticeable by the troops on the ground but when the fleet neared Liberty and the orbital defences began to engage them the flashes of weapon fire in both directions had been visible from the ground even during daylight, followed by the projectiles unleashed against targets on the surface. The passage of these was marked by columns of flame accompanied by a clap of thunder as each round struck the ground and completely obliterated its target. But this was nothing to what came after the Sissusk fleet settled into orbit and began to disgorge first a wave of attack craft and then drop ships into the atmosphere. As they entered the atmosphere each one of these small craft produced a trail of fire from the friction of the air around their hulls. To observers on the ground these multiple trails appeared to merge together giving the appearance that the entire sky was on fire. Willis knew that a number of anti-aircraft weapons had survived the bombardment but for now these remained silent and hidden, allowing the fleet of drop ships to get to the ground unmolested so that the weapons would still be available for engaging their air support afterwards. "They're coming down to the north of the city." Willis exclaimed, "What have we got there?"

"About four thousand men spread out between half a dozen settlements as well as the capital itself." one of his men replied.

"Okay warn everyone to stay undercover until we get confirmation that the enemy aren't going to start dropping projectiles on us." Willis ordered, "For now those four thousand will have to get by on their own."

"Now captain?" Ash asked and Reeves nodded.

"Now Commander Ash." he said, "Keep us in a low orbit and limit our acceleration to that of our destroyer. All weapons may fire as targets come to bear."

"Launch attack craft." Knight added.

The *Warspite's* drives flared into life, as did those of the destroyer being operated under remote control. Surrounding the two capital ships were the drones and gunships operated by the Libertan military. These were joined by the more modern fighters and interceptors carried by the *Warspite* and when the Sissusk fleet appeared over the planetary horizon the formation was ready to engage them. The drones accelerated forwards ahead of the rest of the force, prompting the Sissusk to open fire and revealing the weaker firing arcs while the frigates and destroyer repositioned themselves to better protect the larger vessels.

"Send in the package." Reeves ordered.

"Target?" Goldman asked.

"Just send it straight through the middle commander." Reeves replied and she transmitted a command to the destroyer that sent it accelerating ahead of the rest of the force, its engines operating at a higher level of thrust that they were designed to tolerate. When this vessel had been built the degree of acceleration would have incapacitated the human crew and even after it had been refitted with an artificial gravity field such an acceleration would have rapidly caused the engines to overheat and fail. However, on this occasion this was not an issue as the crew of the *Warspite* did not intend for the destroyer to survive the engagement. Instead the combination of its mass and acceleration were being used as a battering ram to smash its way through the Sissusk fleet. At the same time the *Warspite* opened fire, its main guns burning a large hole through one of the assault carriers as it turned to evade the oncoming destroyer. This was followed by blasts from its turrets that were aimed at the escorting Sissusk warships instead. Most of this fire was targeted at the smaller vessels but the two X-ray laser turrets instead focused on the destroyer.

Identifying the *Warspite* as the greatest threat to the Sissusk fleet, the alien destroyer manoeuvred around the remotely operated human destroyer that was racing ahead of the other human vessels and locked onto the cruiser instead. But in doing so it separated itself from the two frigates that were pouring fire from their turrets into the other human capital ship, unaware that it was unmanned and unarmed.

"Target locked." one of the *Warspite's* missile gunners announced.

"Four round spread." Reeves replied and four conventionally armed missiles erupted from their launching silos on the *Warspite's* upper hull simultaneously, all four steering towards the destroyer.

The alien warship responded in kind, launching six smaller missiles of its own at the *Warspite* before both warships turned their attention to defending themselves against these attacks and it was here that the differences between a heavy cruiser and a destroyer were demonstrated. The *Warspite* carried enough

turrets for its own protection that it was able to focus all eight free-electron beam lasers on the incoming missiles while the destroyer was fitted with only the bare minimum of defensive weapons, in this case a pair of turret mounted lasers. The various turret mounted energy weapons turned to face the missiles fired by the two warships at one another and fired as rapidly as they could. But the relatively short range of the combat gave little time for the turrets to acquire their targets and although the Sissusk destroyer was able to intercept two of the heavy missiles fired at it, there was too little time left for its defensive weapons to adjust their targeting to engage the other two and both of them slammed into the destroyer before detonating. One missile struck one of the side mounted drives units and there was a massive explosion as it was blown apart, putting the destroyer, into a spin and leaving a trail of glowing debris behind it. The second missile impacted near the front of the destroyer's hull where its missile launchers were located and there was a series of secondary explosions following the detonation of the *Warspite's* missiles as many of the weapons carried by the destroyer were triggered by the blast. Fortunately for the crew of the destroyer both the drive units and its missile system were isolated from the rest of the vessel by thick layers of dense armour that prevented the damage from tearing the entire ship apart. But with its ability to manoeuvre compromised and its primary weapon system not currently functioning the destroyer was effectively out of the fight.

Meanwhile the two Sissusk frigates had been slowly blasting the unmanned destroyer apart. None of their weapons were designed to deliver a single killing blow to a vessel the size of the destroyer but with so many smaller weapons available to them the damage continued to increase. Despite this the destroyer continued to accelerate towards the Sissusk fleet and with the human vessel gathering speed as it headed directly towards them the Sissusk assault carriers were forced to act. Carrying only limited defensive armament, the massive warships began to accelerate away, each one of the five moving off along a different heading to try and force the destroyer to follow only one of them while the two frigates continued to hammer at it with their weapons.

But this was all a part of Reeves' plan and while the two frigates were focused on the unmanned destroyer the attack craft and gunships that accompanied the *Warspite* were able to slip by them relatively unmolested and engage the rest of the fleet from point blank range. The first victim of this was a Sissusk corvette that suddenly found itself attacked by a squadron of interceptors and the two Libertan gunships. None of these craft were intended for attacking anything much larger than themselves but acting together they easily overwhelmed the corvette's defences and a dozen missiles designed for use in dogfights between attack craft tore one side of its hull off.

Reeves smiled as he saw the effectiveness of this initial wave of attacks on the Sissusk fleet. So far the enemy destroyer had been disabled and the human attack craft had penetrated the enemy fleet's outer defences but the fight was far from over. The lack of any return fire from the unmanned destroyer had caused the Sissusk to realise that it was nothing but a diversion and as the remains of the obsolete warship continued to pass through the Sissusk fleet the frigates turned their attention to the *Warspite* instead.

"Signal Shaw." Reeves said, "Tell her to take her squadron into the atmosphere to support our ground forces. We'll handle things up here."

In the cockpit of her fighter, Shaw smiled when she received the order from the *Warspite*.

"Okay boys," she broadcast to the fighters of her squadron, "let's go show those marines how wars are really won." and she abruptly turned her fighter towards Liberty and headed towards it.

The first major kill in the ground conflict was made by a Libertan farmer called Isaac Monroe. Isaac had long been used to having to shoot at local predators to keep his livestock safe and also hunted to supplement his food supply. But today the hunting rifle he had owned for many years sported an optical sight provided to him by the Commonwealth marines from the *Warspite*. He was positioned in an area of thick undergrowth that concealed him from the Sissusk armoured column that had positioned itself on a road about a thousand metres from his position while they awaited orders to attack. Isaac studied the individual vehicles through the sight while beside him a uniformed reservist from the Libertan army did the same through a more conventional set of digital binoculars. Aside from appearing proportionally longer than human armoured fighting vehicles those fielded by the Sissusk had a similar layout. Mounted on tracked or wheeled chassis many mounted turrets that gave not only an all round field of fire but also a height advantage for observation while other looked like mobile armoured boxes with just a few light weapons for defence.

"Third one from the front has a lot of antennas on it for an APC." the reservist commented as he stared at a wheeled vehicle without a turret, "Looks like a C and C vehicle to me."

"Looks like junk to me." Isaac replied, "Or at least it will if this gizmo does what those Commonwealth boys boasted it does." and he lined the sight up on the command and control vehicle.

Rather than pull the trigger on his rifle, Isaac reached his finger up to the button now fixed to the side of his rifle and pressed it down, holding it in place. This triggered a sudden radio signal that was too brief for any of the equipment possessed by the Sissusk column to lock onto and this signal went back to where the marines from the *Warspite* had deployed their anti-armour missiles. Contained in four round launchers, each launcher had been buried vertically so that their tops were level with the ground to not only conceal them from the

enemy but also to provide a degree of protection should its position be identified. When the signal from the sight was received the engine of one of the four missiles ignited immediately and it shot up into the air, angling itself towards the source of the signal. It then flew along this heading, scanning for the laser energy being reflected off the target vehicle where the targeting sight was projecting it. As soon as this was detected the missile angled itself downwards and swooped in for the kill. Despite being intended for use supporting infantry, the buried missile launchers themselves had no need to be man portable and thus the limitations on size and weight that went along with such weapons did not apply. This allowed the missile to carry a much larger and more powerful warhead than a shoulder fired weapon could and so when this struck the Sissusk command and control vehicle the effect was devastating. Lacking the same level of armour protection as the human made main battle tanks the warhead was designed to knock out, the command and control vehicle was utterly destroyed. The warhead detonated on impact with the vehicle's thinner top armour, sending a blast of molten metal through into the interior and filling it with flames that incinerated the occupants. At the same time the internal pressure was increased to such a degree that the hatches were all blown off, sending jets of flame out of the burning wreck moments before the fuel cells exploded and the entire vehicle was blown apart.

Initially there was panic from the Sissusk as soldiers fired small arms in all directions at perceived sources of the attack before an officer was able to impose some order and organise a proper reaction. The Sissusk started to spread out, forming a perimeter while their vehicles deployed smoke screens not only to restrict further observation of them but also show up the presence of any targeting lasers of the type they correctly deduced had been used to mark their command and control vehicle for the missile attack. While this was being done the new Sissusk commander was communicating with his superiors and informing them of what had happened to his predecessor.

The Sissusk had come to Liberty not expecting to meet much determined resistance. The planet had next to no defensive spacecraft and what surface and air forces it had ought to have been taken by surprise.

However, in space they had now encountered a heavy cruiser and a large number of attack craft while the humans on the surface appeared not only better armed than had been expected but also far better prepared than if this attack had been the surprise it was supposed to have been. Fortunately for the Sissusk although they had not expected to meet heavy resistance they had come well prepared for it.

The missile's flight had been tracked by radar and the co-ordinates of what was taken to be its launch site were passed to the artillery batteries being deployed in the Sissusk landing area. The large turret mounted howitzers mounted on one of these batteries promptly swung around as the crews adjusted the angles of their weapons to send shells the correct distance to strike the missile's launching spot. Then in rapid succession the self propelled guns opened fire, sending several volleys of shells out before the first had even landed in the target zone.

"Orbital observations indicate that the enemy transports have fallen back and the warships are engaged with the *Warspite* major." one of Willis' marines reported. The local forces were keeping a watchful eye on events in space, aware that it represented the ultimate high ground. Whichever side controlled the space around Liberty could rain down projectiles on its surface and provide up to the minute details of troop movements beyond the line of sight of ground or lower altitude air units. The fact that the warships dedicated to planetary assault had been forced back while the *Warspite* battled for control of space with the other Sissusk vessels meant that neither side had such an advantage for the time being and the fighting on the surface would play out more in the fashion that wars had been fought in the years before mankind had first ventured away from Earth.

"Signal all units," Willis said, "enemy positions to the north. Advance and engage. Tell our drop ships and the locals that we need air support. That artillery has got to be taken out if we're going to have any hope of holding them back. See if you can get a channel open to the *Warspite* as well. We're going to need additional fighter support."

"Captain, Major Willis is requesting additional air cover." one of the *Warspite*'s communications officers announced. At that moment the *Warspite* was making another attempt to line its main guns up on one of the Sissusk frigates. The problem was that the two alien capital ships were working in concert with one another, switching between firing at the *Warspite* and manoeuvring out of its forward firing arc while the smaller warships attempted to break through the screen of attack craft as well as the two Libertan gunships to try and strike at the cruiser. The gunships stayed as close to the *Warspite* as they safely could, like remoras feeding from a shark. Little more than heavily armed shuttles with cramped living spaces to allow them to remain in operation for longer than similar sized attack craft these two vessels concentrated on providing additional anti-missile and fighter cover for the *Warspite*. On their own they would have been cut to pieces making attack runs on the Sissusk vessels and they lacked the speed to keep up with the Commonwealth fighters and interceptors. The fighters and interceptors carried by the *Warspite* remained further out, weaving between the Sissusk warships and carrying out brief strafing runs before pulling away along paths that made

it difficult for the Sissusk to target them without risking hitting one of their own ships on the far side. So far these competing tactics had resulted in something of a stalemate. The *Warspite* was too well protected for the Sissusk attacks to inflict any serious damage while the *Warspite* and its fighters were so far unable to bring sufficient firepower to bear on the frigates to remove them from the fight.

"Signal Commander Shaw." Reeves replied, "Tell her to take her squadron into the atmosphere and coordinate with our surface forces." Reeves had selected Shaw's superiority fighters over the lighter interceptors for a reason. The two man crew of the fighters would make it easier for the pilots to carry out attack runs on ground targets while their co-pilots kept watch for enemy aircraft rather than asking the single pilot of an interceptor to do both jobs at once.

"Archangel this is *Warspite*." Goldman transmitted, "We have a request for support from Major Willis. Break off and enter planetary atmosphere. Contact surface forces for targeting priorities."

In the cockpit of her fighter Shaw smiled.

"Hear that Kaz?" she asked, "Those marines need saving."

"Recommend a re-entry path south of the capital." Mori replied, "There's a lot of fire to the north."

"Understood." Shaw said before switching her communications to address her entire squadron, "Okay everyone we're heading for the floor. Follow me in and keep tight, the enemy may have high altitude triple-A and I don't want to get hit by a heat seeker on the way down."

"Copy that Archangel." one of the squadron's other pilots responded, "We're right behind you."

Diving down into the atmosphere of Liberty, the nine fighters that remained from the original twelve maintained an arrowhead formation that spread the heat of their entry over a wide area that made targeting them with high altitude heat seeking weaponry more difficult. But if the Sissusk had any such weapons then they chose not to employ them at this time and instead the active sensors of Shaw's squadron picked up a number of contacts turning towards them from the north of the capital just as the interference caused by their entry into the atmosphere cleared.

"Looks like we've got company." Mori said, "Between eight and ten fighters bearing zero two six. Closing at Mach two point six."

"Damn it!" Shaw snapped, "That was too close. They almost got the drop on us." then she switched back to a squadron wide broadcast, "Okay we've got incoming. Break into pairs and attack. Raptorman you hold back and watch for anyone else trying to crash this party."

"Understood Archangel. Falling back." the pilot call-signed Raptorman responded as one of the fighters in Shaw's squadron dropped out of formation while the others organised themselves into pairs before turning directly towards the Sissusk.

"Reveal your locations and surrender and you will be well treated." a voice blaring out from loud speakers fitted to one of the Sissusk armoured vehicles said. This was no alien voice or pre-recorded propaganda message though. Instead the Sissusk had brought along with them several of the human collaborators who worked for them to speak on their behalf. The intent was that they would be able to flush out humans more easily than could be managed if every building had to be searched individually by Sissusk troops. However, the settlement that was ordinarily home to just over a thousand Libertans now appeared empty, the residents having been evacuated to deep shelters closer to the capital and the Sissusk commanders hissed angrily at one another as they prepared to have their troops carry out a full search. But whereas the civilian inhabitants had been evacuated Willis and a force of his marines had moved in to take their place while the Sissusk in space were too distracted to notice the column of fast moving vehicles that had brought them here to head off the alien advance.

"Sir look!" a marine hissed from a nearby window and he waved Willis towards him. Standing beside the other marine he looked out into the street below where they saw part of the Sissusk force at a junction at the far end. This appeared to be a relatively light force with no armoured vehicles in sight. Instead the only vehicles visible to the marines looked like the lighter ones used by the Sissusk at their labour camp. But this was not what the marine was pointing out, instead it was the human standing amongst several Sissusk. The man did not appear to be a captive of the aliens and around his neck he wore one of the collars that allowed humans and Sissusk to communicate verbally.

"Well, well." Willis said as he brought his rifle to his shoulder and took aim, "Looks like we've got ourselves one of those traitors. Too bad he made the mistake of siding with the enemy during an armed conflict." then he briefly looked away from his rifle's scope to address his men, "Get ready to move." he told them, "Let's see how well these Sissusk can round up potential slaves without their minions to help lure them in." then looking back down his rifle sight he lined it up on the man's chest and squeezed the trigger to unleash a single round.

Although the Sissusk troops that surrounded the human wore body armour and helmets, he wore neither and so when the bullet struck him in the centre of his chest the armour piercing projectile was able to pass straight through before entering the light transport vehicle behind him. The collaborator meanwhile simply collapsed in a heap, his heart ripped in half by the passage of the high velocity round. It was fairly obvious to

the experienced Sissusk troops which direction the bullet had come from and without any of them bothering to check on the status of the human collaborator they took cover and returned fire.

“Back!” Willis yelled as small arms rounds started to hit the building he and his men currently occupied, “Fall back to secondary positions.” then he activated his communication headset, linking to the larger transmitter carried by one of his men so that he could talk with the Libertan command structure, “This is Commonwealth Marine Major Willis to Libertan command. We are in sector four north under heavy fire.”

“Major this is Colonel Davis. The enemy are pushing south all across the board from their landing zone. Our air support is trying to suppress their artillery but its dug in and well protected. I'll see what I can do about sending something your way but I can't promise anything. The good news is that their artillery hasn't managed to take more than a handful of those missiles you buried and word is that they're smashing anything they hit to pieces.”

“Copy that colonel.” Willis said as he burst out of the side door of the building and into the street. The Sissusk were not in view from here and he waved his men on down the street towards their prepared fallback position, “Go!” he yelled, “I'll catch up.” and he ran in the opposite direction towards the junction with the street covered by the Sissusk. At the corner he dived to the ground and peered around the corner to see the Sissusk still firing at the now abandoned building while officers issued orders for their vehicles to rearrange themselves. Using a heavy anti-armour missile against lightweight vehicles like those Willis could see was something of a waste but he was hoping that he would be able to make use of the missile to eliminate more of the Sissusk than just the crew of one vehicle and he lined his rifle sight up on the nearest Sissusk truck before summoning a missile from one of the buried launchers.

The sight indicated that the missile had been launched and was on its way and all Willis had to do was keep the targeting laser trained on the truck while Sissusk troops started to advance down the street towards him, their attention still focused on the abandoned building.

“Come on, where are you?” Willis muttered to himself, aware that a number of the Sissusk were getting further away from the target point of the missile until all of a sudden the weapon suddenly swooped down out of the sky, closing at supersonic speed that made sure its approach was not heard before it struck its target. The missile was travelling at such a speed that the nose cone smashed through the lightweight truck before the warhead was triggered and the shaped charge it held sent most of its explosive force down into the road instead of the truck. With no hollow space to direct the released energy into, the warhead instead produced a shock wave centred on the impact point that tore up the road surface and hurled it as well as pieces of the truck in all directions like a large fragmentation device. Some of the Sissusk troops were already far enough away from the centre of the blast to avoid being struck by any of the flying debris while others were protected by the armour they wore though all of them were still thrown to the ground by the force of the blast. On the other hand the Sissusk officers had remained closer to their vehicles and most of them were killed either by shrapnel or the expanding fireball that consumed everything in the immediate vicinity of the truck.

Without waiting to properly evaluate the effectiveness of the missile strike Willis pulled back from the corner, got to his feet and broke into a run as he headed to catch up with his men.

Behind him he left panicked Sissusk troops and a handful of junior officers attempting to determine who was now in command of their force. When one of them was finally able to assert his authority over the remains of the force he ordered a withdrawal, pulling back his troops out of the settlement. The force had been ordered to round up the human inhabitants of the area and it was now clear that there were none present to be taken as slaves. Therefore, in order to deal with the human troops that were obviously present there was nothing to stop the Sissusk from levelling the entire settlement and the Sissusk officer started to issue co-ordinates to the artillery batteries in the landing zone.

Shaw's fighter squadron fired a volley of missiles at the oncoming Sissusk at extreme range. Designed for use in space, the missiles accelerated rapidly and closed the gap between the human and Sissusk craft in a matter of seconds. Some of the Sissusk pilots reacted fast enough to veer off, jettisoning countermeasures to try and confuse the missiles' sensors but four were too slow and their fighters were simply torn apart as the warheads' proximity fuses detonated them right in front of the fighters, producing a cloud of shrapnel that the lightweight craft flew right into.

"That's it boys!" Shaw exclaimed, broadcasting to her entire squadron, "The skies are ours to rule! Now let's send these cold blooded bastards back to whatever hell spawned them."

"Target at two o'clock low." Mori said, "Looks like he's heading for the deck to hide among ground clutter."

"Oh like I'm going to let him get away with that." Shaw responded and she put her fighter into a steep dive. The Sissusk fighter was descending rapidly in its attempt to escape but in doing so its pilot had placed himself on a straight course and Shaw smiled, "Sloppy." she said to herself as she switched to the two gauss cannons her fighter carried and squeezed the trigger. In the space of barely more than a second more than sixty projectiles shot out of the two cannons, aimed directly for the Sissusk fighter. Already travelling downwards and almost directly behind the target, there was no need for the targeting computer aboard Shaw's fighter to have to compensate for either gravity or the target's speed and more than half of the projectiles punched through the Sissusk fighter. Smoke and flames billowed out of the holes made by the projectiles and the fighter's steep dive became an uncontrolled tumbling before it slammed into the ground at more than a thousand kilometres per hour and exploded.

"Confirmed kill!" Mori said excitedly before he noticed something else on the sensor display in front of him, "Multiple contacts." he added, "Eight o'clock high."

"Coming this way?" Shaw asked.

"Negative. I'm reading multiple targets ascending sharply. Looks like a couple of squadrons heading for vacuum."

"Then I guess things up there aren't going the way the enemy wants them to." Shaw commented, "Now let's see if we can't mess things up for them down on the ground as well."

The impact of each shell was preceded by a whistling sound and each explosion made the ground shake. The Commonwealth marines were sheltering in the basement level of a water pumping station that before the invasion had brought water up from an underground source for the settlement. It and much of the rest of the settlement had been levelled above ground as the Sissusk artillery pounded it. Fortunately the structure of the pumping station had been strong enough that the basement provided adequate shelter against the bombardment and there were no injuries amongst the marines. All of a sudden the sound of the shelling ceased and the marines waited in silence for it to start again.

"Could their guns have been knocked out?" one asked.

"Not likely." Willis replied, shaking his head, "They all stopped together. The sort of bomb it would take to knock them all out at the same time would be big enough that we'd probably feel the impact from here. No, the reason the Sissusk have stopped firing at us is because they think they've killed us by now."

"So what are your orders major?" one of the platoon commanders said.

"What else? Make them realise they haven't." Willis told him.

If the marine company had included any heavy or enhanced troops then they could probably have forced open the rubble covered door and cleared a path to the surface on their own. But given that the company consisted of only light infantry it took the combined effort of several men to achieve this before they slipped out of the basement to the surface and looked around at the destruction wrought by the artillery bombardment. When the marines had entered the basement there had been buildings all around them but now not one of them was left standing. Instead only small sections of vertical wall remained as evidence of where the buildings had been. The shelling had scattered the rubble from each collapsed structure as it continued and so even the roads were covered in it. But as it happened this turned out to be of benefit to the marines.

The Sissusk officers were unwilling to just go around the ruined settlement without verifying that the marines were no longer a threat. To do otherwise risked having them strike at the Sissusk from behind while another force met them head on. But lacking heavy tracked vehicles that could crush the rubble beneath their treads the Sissusk had been forced to abandon their wheeled vehicles and proceed on foot. On paper the odds were even.

The marines made use of their camouflage cloaks to mask their advance and the uneven nature of the ground and multitude of hiding places among the ruins made this much easier. Squads of marines alternated between moving and providing cover as the company moved north, the direction that the Sissusk had first

approached the settlement from and spread out into a wide line to cover the maximum possible area. On the other hand the Sissusk lacked the advanced camouflage of the Commonwealth marines and they advanced in three separate groups that made use of surveillance images taken before the bombardment to identify where the larger structures had been and concentrated on searching the ruins of these for signs that anyone had been hiding in them.

Willis ordered his men to a halt when they first spotted the Sissusk advancing towards them and the marines took cover, watching the enemy force carefully.

"Stand by." Willis said softly, his throat mike picking up his words as clearly as if he had spoken loudly, "Take aim and wait for my command, we'll hit them all at once." then he waited. For the time being the Sissusk were well within range of the marines' rifles and grenade launchers but were far enough away that if their artillery was able to adjust with the same accuracy as the Commonwealth equivalent could they could call down indirect supporting fire without worrying about being caught in their own bombardment. While he waited for them to get too close to be able to take advantage of any artillery support they could call upon, Willis used his rifle's optical sight to observe the actions of one Sissusk after another until he was able to identify an officer from the way the alien gestured to the troops around it. Smiling, he lined his rifle up on the alien and set it to semi-automatic and watched the built in range finder as it counted down.

The Sissusk officer was positioned behind the forward elements of his force and when Willis saw that the range counter indicated that he was about a hundred metres away from his own position he knew that the forward Sissusk troops were only about half that distance from him, too close for artillery to be called in to deal with his marines. He squeezed the trigger of his rifle and there was a sharp 'Crack!' as he fired a single round at the officer. The bullet struck the alien in its armoured chest plate and it let out a sharp cry as it fell to the ground. The other marines reacted to this shot by opening fire with their own weapons, using a mixture of single shots, limited bursts and sustained fire as well as grenades launched from underslung launchers to create as much havoc among the Sissusk as they could.

With cover among the ruined settlement plentiful the Sissusk were able to rapidly take cover while they searched for the sources of the ambush. Though Willis had removed one of their officers from the picture, there were others ready to take his place and while the Sissusk troops made liberal use of automatic fire and grenades of their own to fire at the locations they guessed were occupied by the human troops he was calling for support. It was obvious that heavy artillery could not be used without risking casualties from friendly fire but the Sissusk had other support assets available and it was one of these that the officer summoned.

The drop ships that had brought many of the Sissusk infantry to the surface were now circling the landing zone in a holding pattern while they waited for instructions and when requested one broke off from this and headed directly towards the ruined settlement. The sensors aboard the heavily armed and armoured craft allowed the crew to pick out the marine positions on the ground more easily than the Sissusk infantry were able to and the drop ship came swooping down in a steep dive before unleashing a pair of missiles from its stores and pulling up just as steeply. The engines of the missiles had barely ignited when their guidance systems determined that they were at the correct altitude to burst open and release a cloud of small explosive charges that exploded on impact. The effect of individual charges was little more than an ordinary fragmentation grenade but given that each missile had contained several dozen of them the effect was magnified massively, with the combined contents of each missile covering a large area in shrapnel.

Willis himself took cover as soon as the missiles were launched and he felt the force of the blast pass over him along with debris bouncing off his helmet and body armour.

"Sound off!" he snapped, signalling all his platoon commanders at once, "Casualty reports."

"Eight men down in first platoon. That air strike took an entire squad out in one go."

"I've got five men down in second platoon. Three wounded."

"Lieutenant Jones is dead. At least four more dead and a dozen wounded in third platoon."

"Four dead in fourth. Another six wounded."

Willis grimaced as he considered these figures. They represented a significant portion of his company and he could see the Sissusk drop ship coming around for another attack run. His company had a number of support weapons, man portable free-electron beam lasers and shoulder fired missiles that could be used to attack the drop ship but they would take time to deploy and that was a commodity that appeared in short supply. However, the threat of another attack run by the drop ship was too great to risk doing nothing about it.

"We need triple-A now." he ordered, "Bring that drop ship down."

As his marines worked to bring their support weapons into action Willis watched the drop ship's nose dip as it began its next run, seemingly heading directly for his position and he closed his eyes in expectation of a missile strike that would end his life. However, he opened them moments later when there was the sound of a massive explosion from overhead and he saw the burning remains of the drop ship plummeting towards the ground, tumbling away from the marines' positions.

"I swear whoever brought that down is not going to need to pay for a drink for the next year." he broadcast to

his men.

"Not us major. We're not set up yet."

"Then who?" Willis said before all of a sudden the familiar shape of a Commonwealth superiority fighter flew overhead, followed by several more of the craft.

The fighters were not equipped specifically for a ground support role, their missiles being designed for use against targets in the air or space, but the gauss cannons they fired were effective against anything that was in the path of their projectiles.

"Archangel to Major Willis. Tell your boys to take cover." Shaw's voice announced as the fighters turned back for another pass and as they dove towards the Sissusk positions their gauss cannons fired. Arranged in a side by side formation the fighters were able to cover a wide area with fire as they pulled up in unison. The projectiles that slammed into the ruins tore apart whatever they hit whether it was a Sissusk soldier or some piece of debris left by the artillery bombardment that had levelled the settlement. The Sissusks' armour was useless against projectiles with as much kinetic energy as the ones being fired at them now possessed and even a miss of up to two or three metres proved lethal as the impacts sent fragments of concrete flying in all directions like shrapnel from a grenade.

"Archangel this is Willis. Thanks for the support."

"Thank Captain Reeves. He told me you needed cover. Now I've got contacts heading in from the north so I suggest you get ready."

One of the two Sissusk frigates was trailing fire now, the result of a lucky shot from an X-ray laser that had burned through its hull just behind its port side drive module. However, despite this damage the vessel was still able to fight and manoeuvre almost as well as its undamaged comrade. The lighter Sissusk warships were suffering more than the frigates, with half their number now disabled or reduced to floating debris. Even the arrival of Sissusk fighters diverted from providing air cover to their ground forces had proven to be inadequate against the *Warspite's* interceptors and drones as well as the two Libertan gunships that had broken away from the larger cruiser. But while the frigates remained operational the fighting would continue. "Lieutenant what can you tell me about the armament of those frigates?" Reeves asked Lucas. Both here and in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 system she had been processing the sensor data received on the various Sissusk warships and creating profiles of them all.

"One main gun of medium yield and six light turrets." she replied, "No missiles at all."

"But what sort of weapons are they using?" Reeves said.

"Conventional lasers for the turrets and some kind of positively charged particle beam for the main gun. Looks like our proton beams."

"But all directed energy weapons, yes? No projectiles."

"Yes captain. Energy weapons only."

"What are you planning?" Knight said.

"This is a stalemate." Reeves replied, "We can keep hammering at them with turrets but it'll take too long to disable both of those frigates and if the reports from the surface are right their ground forces will be all over the capital by the time we're able to provide orbital support. But if those frigates don't have any projectile weapons then they can't provide their troops with supporting fire regardless of whether we're here or not. I want to force their hand."

"You're going for the transports aren't you?" Knight responded and Reeves smiled.

"Missiles." he announced, "I want six aimed at each frigate and launched in one go on my command."

"Captain the enemy frigates may be able to intercept those missiles." Lucas pointed out.

"But they won't be shooting at us while they're dealing with the missiles lieutenant." Knight told her.

"Exactly." Reeves added, "Helm as soon as those missiles are launched I want you to bring us about to face the enemy transports and close at full power. Target the assault carriers first and fire the main guns as soon as you can. Medium turrets are to do the same. Light turrets watch for enemy vessels and keep them back. Otherwise engage the transports as well."

"Firing solution plotted captain. Missiles ready to launch."

"Do it." Reeves ordered and a volley of a dozen missiles burst from their launchers and angled towards the Sissusk frigates. At the same time Ash diverted more power to the *Warspite's* engines and the heavy cruiser turned towards the assault transports and freighters that had retreated away from the combat zone over Liberty. Just as Reeves had expected the two Sissusk frigates immediately turned their attention towards the missiles heading towards them, using their lasers to shoot them down before they could hit either ship and while they were pre-occupied defending themselves the *Warspite* closed the gap between it and the transports. Realising what was happening the remaining three lighter warships turned to try and intercept the *Warspite* but the combination of the interceptors and drones launched by the *Warspite* and fire from the cruiser's light turret held them back while it lined itself up to attack.

One of the assault carriers was Ash's first target and the *Warspite's* main guns struck the drive module on the side closest to the *Warspite*, the resulting explosion tearing a gaping hole in the side of the vessel. The other

assault carriers turned their weapons on the *Warspite* as it charged towards them but these lacked the range and power to be a threat, most of them being projectile turrets for use in supporting ground forces.

"Missiles." Reeves said, "One per target. Fire when ready."

One at a time more missiles emerged from their launchers and headed for the Sissusk transport vessels. The assault carriers turned their turrets towards these, all but one managing to shoot them down before being hit. However, the final assault transport failed to intercept the missile and when the powerful warhead detonated about half way along its length the explosion tore the vessel in half. Additionally the unarmed freighters had no defence against the missiles other than to try and evade them for long enough that their escorting warships would be able to come to their aide. But with all of the Sissusk warships facing problems of their own and of the fourteen freighters, nine were struck before the warships could respond. Lacking significant armour as well as weaponry each freighter hit was utterly destroyed, ripped apart from within as the missiles punched through their hulls before they detonated.

"Captain we've got their attention." Goldman said, "Both frigates on an intercept course."

"Hard about!" Reeves snapped, "Main guns fire at will."

The *Warspite* pivoted without changing its direction of travel, a manoeuvre that left it facing directly towards the approaching Sissusk frigates and also placed them both in the firing arc of the cruiser's main guns.

"Target acquired. Firing now." Ash announced as he fired the neutral particle beam cannons. The twin beams of energy hit one of the frigates head on, burning through its forward armour and then proceeding to burn along its entire length. A series of explosions ran along the frigate as secondary detonations ripped the ship apart from the inside out and in a matter of seconds the frigate became nothing but glowing debris tumbling along the frigate's heading. Now travelling in reverse, the *Warspite* decelerated as Ash fired its main drives until it began to travel forwards once more on a course that took it straight at the remaining frigate. The Sissusk warship veered off as sharply as it could, taking itself out of the neutral particle beams' line of fire and instead as the two warships passed by one another at point blank range they fired at each other with every turret at their disposal. As with the destroyer that had been destroyed in the opening stages of the battle, now the Sissusk frigate found itself completely outmatched. It had fewer turrets than the much larger cruiser and had less protective armour to defend against the multiple hits it suffered. Compounding this was the sheer power of the *Warspite*'s two X-ray laser turrets that blasted holes right through the frigate.

At the end of the pass the *Warspite* had several holes in its armoured hull where lucky shots from lasers had been able to inflict some minor damage but on the other hand the frigate was now nothing but a burning wreck drifting through space.

The reaction of the remainder of the Sissusk fleet to the loss of both their capital combat ships as well as more than half of their transports was stark. The attack craft broke off from engaging the *Warspite*'s interceptors and accelerated back towards the two remaining assault carriers as the large warships turned to head away from Liberty, the freighters following behind them. The light warships also made to break away, but in their haste to escape they found themselves caught between the interceptors, drones and gunships and the *Warspite* as its course brought it back towards Liberty.

"Enemy entering firing range." Goldman reported.

"All guns fire at will as they pass." Knight ordered.

"Helm get us back into orbit." Reeves added, "I want firing solutions on the enemy landing zone."

On the surface the Sissusk continued to advance, though at a cost. The armoured vehicles that gave them an advantage over the more lightly equipped Libertan forces and Commonwealth marines were vulnerable to missile strikes that could be called in by small groups of soldiers hiding out in terrain they knew much better than the enemy did. Their air power had been stronger than what the defending human forces could muster even with the addition of the squadron of fighters from the *Warspite*, but this changed all of a sudden when the fleet in space began to withdraw and the fighter pilots all headed back out of the atmosphere in the hope that they would be able to reach one of the assault transports before they withdrew from the system. But the Sissusk troops still had air cover in the form of drop ships and their landing zone was heavily fortified with both surface to surface and surface to air artillery.

But all of that counted for nothing when the *Warspite* re-entered orbit above it.

Willis and his marines were involved in a skirmish against the remains of a Sissusk armoured company. Backed up by some of the armoured vehicles the Libertans had had at their disposal as well as a force of army reservists, the marines had been able to knock out the five Sissusk battle tanks with missile strikes while the troop carriers were engaged using lighter shoulder fired weapons or with the beam weapons carried on the Libertan armour vehicles. With the Sissusk no longer having the advantage of heavy armour or mechanised mobility the human troops moved in for the kill, surrounding their position and advancing from all sides to prevent them from withdrawing and calling in air or artillery support. The Sissusk were determined to fight however, even given the disadvantage of their current position and they used the shells of their ruined vehicles for cover, making use of the holes punched through their hulls by anti-armour weapons to fire their weapons through.

Leaning around a corner Willis saw a cluster of Sissusk troops working to mount a weapon on a tripod they had erected and fired a brief burst from his rifle before ducking back to avoid the return fire.

"Looks like they're setting up some sort of support weapon." he told his men, "If we let them get too dug in we won't be able to shift them before more turn up."

"What about using one of the locals' armoured cars?" one of the marines asked but Willis shook his head.

"They're right the way around the other side to slow down any reinforcements." he pointed out, "By the time they got around here the Sissusk would have already set up their weapon and for all we know it may be capable of knocking out an armoured vehicle. Especially when it's hemmed in in a street and can't move out of the line of fire. No, what we need to do is-" but then he was interrupted by a sound like thunder and looking up into the sky he saw a trail of fire, "Incoming orbital bombardment!" he yelled, "Take cover!"

The bombardment was not aimed at the area where the marines were fighting but they still felt the force of the impact as one projectile after another struck the ground in the Sissusk landing zone. Shuttles still on the ground as well as prefabricated structures erected hurriedly after landing and armoured vehicles were no protection against the starship scale weaponry. Structures were levelled and vehicles tossed aside by the impacts while the debris hurled up into the air first acted to cause more destruction as larger pieces fell back to the ground and then left behind a thick cloud as smaller particles remained suspended in the air.

"Major Willis calling Libertain Command." Willis transmitted as he looked up, "Can you give me an update?"

"Willis your ship just re-entered orbit and launched a strike." Davis' voice replied.

"Yeah, we noticed that. Any word on its effectiveness?"

"Not yet. Our observatories have confirmed that what's left of the enemy fleet is in full retreat but we're still trying to get surface images of the bombardment area. Looks like the *Warspite* targeted the enemy landing zone though."

"That would be my guess as well." Willis said, "Perhaps we can get Lieutenant Commander Shaw to-"

"Willis? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here colonel. The Sissusk are doing something odd." Willis replied as he watched the Sissusk positions through his rifle sight.

Several of the alien soldiers had emerged from cover and were carefully advancing towards the human lines. But unusually none of them were carrying their weapons and rather than standing upright as they normally did they had their heads lowered and their arms extended out to each side.

"Hold your fire. All units hold fire." Willis broadcast as he continued to watch what was happening. Then he looked at the marine carrying the larger communicator set, "I need to speak to the *Warspite*." he said, "If they're in orbit you should be able to get a direct link. Someone get me a camera as well."

The clouds of debris created by the bombardment made evaluating the effectiveness of the attack difficult but the mere fact that there were no indications of any Sissusk or their vehicles attempting to leave the landing zone suggested that it had achieved its aim.

"Captain I've got Major Willis on the line for you." one of the communications officers announced.

"Put him through." Reeves replied.

"Weapons stand by to provide supporting fire if the major requests it." Knight added.

"Captain Reeves." Willis' voice said as he was connected to the captain.

"Major Willis. What's your status?" Reeves asked in response.

"Captain the Sissusk are behaving strangely. I'm sending a video stream with this transmission, could you get Multan to take a look at it?"

"Get Multan up here now." Knight ordered, looking at the two armed crewmen standing in for the marine guards normally stationed on the bridge.

"Hold on major, we're getting him now." Reeves said and just over a minute later Multan was escorted onto the bridge, "Ah Mister Multan, would you mind taking a look at this footage our marine major is sending us from the surface?" the captain added.

"You can use my console." Thomas said, getting out of his seat and making room for Multan as he brought up a copy of the video file being sent by Willis. Multan walked over to the console and looked at it for just a brief moment before he turned towards Reeves.

"The Sissusk not fight now. They surrender." he said.

"Status of the Sissusk fleet?" Knight asked, looking at Goldman.

"They're gone sir." she replied, "They split up and jumped to FTL while we were moving back into orbit. There are a few fighters that didn't make it back to their base ships in time but nothing that could threaten us."

Knight then turned to Reeves.

"I think we won." he said.

In turn Reeves looked at Lucas.

"How's that for a miracle lieutenant?" he asked.

Iota Pavonis was secure. The arrival first of the battlecruiser group and then the heavier combat elements of

the Commonwealth task force meant that the Sissusk would have to devote significant fleet resources to any further attempts to take the system. In addition to this the arrival of a large marine force that included heavy infantry and a strong mechanised element would make an invasion just as arduous.

"You asked to see me captain?" Bernard said as he entered Reeves' quarters.

"Ah yes Adam." Reeves replied and he walked over to the desk where his computer terminal was located, "I thought you may want to see this." and he opened a video file that had been sent to him. The video showed the Sissusk light cruiser encountered in the Phi Two Pavonis system. At first nothing happened, the alien warship appearing lifeless in the centre of the frame but all of a sudden there was an orange flash that was followed by several more as preprepared explosive charges ripped the ship apart.

"Admiral Mitchell scuttled her?" Bernard asked, amazed and horrified at what he was watching, "That ship was priceless."

"It was in a system the best part of sixty light years from our nearest base." Reeves replied, "It would have taken months for a salvage vessel capable of getting that cruiser back to Commonwealth territory to have reached it and the Sissusk or those Ticik could have come back at any time. The admiral had no choice but to make sure that no-one else could get their hands on it."

Bernard sighed.

"I suppose so. Besides, I'll bet that thing was just a shell by the time the admiral's people finished tearing out everything that looked interesting. I just wish that I could have gone aboard her again."

"There's always that stealth sloop down in our hangar." Reeves pointed out, "Not to mention all of the wreckage here now."

"The Libertans are going to let us take it?" Bernard asked and Reeves smiled.

"It would seem that they no longer see us as the oppressive regime they feared we would become." he answered, "Plus the fact that they know that their colony is within range of the Sissusk means that they're anxious to improve their defences. They're not talking about joining the Commonwealth, not yet at least, but they have indicated that they would co-operate with a Commonwealth military base on Liberty. We get access to the Sissusk wrecks and a base located close enough to Sissusk space to be able to react against any further aggression on their part while they get the added security of our presence and the expedited sale of a dozen particle inductors for their own defence fleet."

"And what about the Sissusk themselves?"

"Well since Multan indicated that they aren't looking for a full scale war the Commonwealth is hoping to be able to open up some diplomatic channels. First order of business is likely to be exchanging all of the Sissusk troops we took prisoner for the remaining humans they're holding."

"Including the ones that co-operate with the Sissusk?" Bernard commented.

"Unlikely. I think they'll be on their own but I can't say for certain. The Commonwealth has much bigger things to worry about than them. The Fedrun we rescued are being transferred to the Core to be debriefed about the Sissusk and their empire while the Commonwealth needs to re-evaluate its security."

"Yes, who knows how many more alien species we could discover now that the SETI program is being rebuilt?"

"More than that. The *Saint Lawrence* was sent to Phi Two Pavonis deliberately by someone with access to government and who was capable of sabotaging SETI. They probably knew that dreadnought would be there and they may have known about the Sissusk as well. Now the questions are who are they and what are they up to?"

INTERLUDE.

"Lights." Hayes said upon her return home but the voice recognition system failed to respond, "Lights." she said again, louder this time as she took off her shoes but still there was no reaction. Sighing she walked over to the physical switch and activated the apartment lights manually.

"Hello Commander Hayes." a male voice said and Hayes gasped as she turned to see the people in her apartment who had been sat waiting in the dark for her to return home. There were four of them in total. The first, the one who had spoken was an elderly man who glared at her intensely was sat on her couch with a woman somewhat younger than Hayes sat beside him, smiling. Either side of them stood a pair of muscular figures who were obviously supposed to be bodyguards to the pair on the couch. However, Hayes knew her superior and his grand daughter's reputations well and if they were accurate then the young woman needed no protection other than what she could provide for herself, "I hope you'll forgive this intrusion but I thought we should have a little chat about your recent actions away from the office."

"I should call-" Hayes began, reaching to the pocket that held her personal communicator but she froze when the two bodyguards suddenly produced pistols and aimed them at her.

"Perhaps you should take a seat Commander Hayes." the old man said, "And avoid making any sudden moves. My security detail takes its duties rather seriously as you can see."

"Of course sir." Hayes replied, keeping her hands in view as she sat down and the old man indicated to the two guards for them to put their weapons away.

"Now Commander Hayes, or may I call you Jennifer?" he said, "Your actions recently have not gone unnoticed. What you did was extremely risky and the full consequences have yet to be determined. What exactly were you thinking when you came up with this scheme?"

"I was thinking that the Commonwealth is too powerful." Hayes answered, "You can't deny that, none of us can. My plan would have brought it all crashing down and allowed us to take our rightful place without continuously looking over our shoulders for the first sign of a Commonwealth patrol."

"Yet instead you may yet led them right to us." the young woman sat beside the older man said, "Our sabotage of the SETI program will be undone and the Commonwealth will start to discover what we've known for more than a century now."

"I just need a little more time." Hayes replied, "The involvement of the Sissusk was unintended but not necessarily a disaster. Vale is running scenarios now. He's confident that we can still engineer a major conflict between the Commonwealth and another species. Having the SETI program fixed may even work in our favour."

The old man looked at his grand daughter.

"Help me up." he said and she stood up to help him stand as well. Hayes barely managed to suppress a smile at this charade. She knew full well that he needed no such help and that he just tried to portray himself as physically weak to trick opponents into becoming over confident. Once on his feet the old man looked at Hayes and continued, "I suggest you reconsider your scheme Jennifer." he said, "Finish it before it finishes you." then he began to walk towards the exit, accompanied by his grand daughter and followed by their bodyguards, "We'll leave you in peace now. I suggest you call an electrician to come and fix your lights. Oh and you may want to have someone take a look at your security system as well. I'm afraid we had to disable it to get in here and I'd hate to think of an attractive woman such as yourself all alone and vulnerable. Even our society has never been able to rid itself of the element that would take advantage of that. Good night Commander Hayes, I'm sure we'll meet again."

As soon as the old man and his group were gone from the apartment Hayes leapt to her feet and rushed to the door to make sure it was properly sealed.

"Damn it!" she snapped, knowing that her superior would be watching her every move very closely from now on, most likely ready to take credit for any success while leaving her to pay the price for any failure.

Meanwhile the old man, his grand daughter and their guards made their way to the nearest elevator and got inside. Only then did the young woman speak.

"Grandfather, do think she suspects?" she asked.

"How could she my dear?" he replied, "She would have said something if she did. No, I'd say that Miss Hayes has no reason at all to suspect that we were able to manipulate her plan so that the Commonwealth encountered the Sissusk as well as the Ticik and just at the right time to save the colony on Liberty. Her plan may not have yielded the results that she hoped for but I'd say that ours was a resounding success. Miss Hayes may not know it yet but she is critical to what is yet to come."