

WARSPITE: DEAD AND BURIED

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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A remote human colony becomes the centre of the investigation into how the Commonwealth's first contact with an alien species as advanced as itself came to occur and the *Warspite* is ordered to transport investigators there. However, the ship's arrival arouses suspicion among the locals that the Commonwealth has come to take something they have discovered beneath the surface of their world.

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PROLOGUE.

Howard Denton had taken a great many risks in his seventy-two years of life and looking back he considered most them well worth taking. By investing early in several business ventures he had been in at the start when there were fortunes to be made and now he was regarded as one of the richest individuals in North America. As a boy he had grown up in a typical middle class household but by the age of forty he had moved into the same penthouse apartment that occupied the top six floors of one of Toronto's most expensive districts and it had barely made a dent in his bank balance. Some said that if he chose to then he could buy up every last piece of land in the city, knock down every structure there and have them replaced with solid gold replicas. But the problem was that it took just one bad decision to take a risk too far and lose everything.

"Kelly!" he called out as he put more of his personal belongings in to a case. Largely this was filled with cash, split between several different currencies from the major nations of Earth and the Core Worlds but there were also several bags of gold coins and precious stones that could be converted into cash or used to pay a bribe on any one of almost two hundred settled worlds.

"What is it Howard?" a woman several decades younger than Howard asked as she answered his summons. Then when she saw the case she stared at its contents, "You're going away? How long for?" she added. "No me. Us." Howard told her, "I won't be coming back and I'm not leaving you behind."

"But why? What's happened?" Kelly said.

"The police have just raided my office down town. They must know I've been selling restricted technologies. They've locked down the entire building and are seizing everything. If I hadn't been delayed in leaving this morning I'd already be in custody. Now come on, the shuttle's waiting on the roof." Howard said, closing his case and then taking Kelly by the hand as he rushed from the room.

The pair took an elevator up to the roof where Howard's personal shuttle was parked and as soon as they stepped outside the pilot came rushing up to them.

"Is the shuttle ready for take off?" Howard asked.

"Of course Mister Denton, but there's another problem." the pilot replied.

"What?" Howard said.

"It's air traffic control sir, they won't give us clearance to launch."

"I don't care about air traffic control." Howard said angrily, "We need to leave now. What are they going to do? Shoot us down over the city? I don't think so. Now get back in that ship and take off."

"I'm sorry sir I can't. I'll lose my licence if I-" the pilot began and in the distance Howard thought he heard the sound of police sirens.

"Then get out of my way!" Howard snapped, "I can fly the thing myself." and he pushed past the pilot, dragging Kelly along with him as he rushed up the steps into the shuttle.

Inside the shuttle was just large enough to seat four people, including the pilot. Howard owned several much larger shuttles but this was the largest that was practical to keep on a rooftop landing pad. Howard sat in the pilot's seat and began to strap himself in while Kelly sat beside him and did the same. Howard was just starting up the shuttle's engines when all of a sudden the communication system came to life.

"Attention shuttle golf charlie four six nine, this is the police. Power down your engines and evacuate your craft. You are not cleared for launch."

"Look!" Kelly exclaimed pointing through the shuttle's forwards viewport to where a pair of thrust vector vehicles painted in the colours of the Toronto police department were approaching the rooftop landing pad. Seeing these, Howard knew that he had to get the shuttle into the air immediately. Standard police procedure would be to hover one of the craft directly above the shuttle to prevent its departure while officers would disembark from the second and force open the hatch. Fortunately for Howard he had always insisted that the shuttle be kept ready for rapid departure and so all he had to do was engage the engines and pull back on the control column to lift the shuttle up into the air.

"Shuttle golf charlie four six nine you are ordered to set down immediately." the same voice from one of the police craft said, "You are in violation of-" but before the sentence could be finished Howard reached out and simply switched off the radio.

"Here goes." he said as he lifted the nose of the shuttle and then he applied the full power of its engines to send it racing up into sky, flying right over the police thrust vector craft, their startled occupants watching helplessly as their quarry escaped them.

Howard knew that at that moment the police pilots would already be contacting their superiors and in turn they would be scrabbling to determine where he was likely to be taking his shuttle. The vessel's small size limited his options greatly but it would get him outside of Canadian jurisdiction in minutes. The next stop would then be the orbital facility where Howard kept his personal yacht berthed. Despite this being an

obvious destination he knew that the simple fact of it being operated by a different country meant that the Canadian authorities would have to go through the procedure of contacting that nation to arrange for him to be detained and Howard was confident that before that could happen he would have already departed, then he could go wherever he wanted to. Like the shuttle Howard had always insisted that the yacht be kept fuelled and ready to depart at a moment's notice but unlike the shuttle, his yacht was built for long range travel. Custom designed to his own personal specifications and considered top of the range, despite its relatively small size for a space going vessel it even possessed its own particle inductor that was capable of creating both tachyons for faster than light travel and also gravitons for artificial gravity. Howard's accountants had told him that buying the yacht was a waste of money but now Howard smiled as he considered how it was turning out to be one of the best investments he had ever made.

1 .

Captain Reeves, commanding officer of the Commonwealth Essex-class heavy cruiser *Warspite* looked up from his computer screen when he felt the slight shudder of his ship dropping out of faster than light travel when he was not expecting it to and he reached for the nearby intercom.

"Bridge this is the captain. Have we just come out of FTL?" he asked.

"Yes captain." Commander Knight, the *Warspite's* first officer responded, "We've just picked up a tachyon burst. It looks like a ship dropping out of FTL."

"Out here?" Reeves said, knowing that it was rare for vessels to drop to sub light speeds beyond the reaches of a solar system.

"Yes captain. We're trying to get an ID on the ship now." Knight said.

"I'm on my way." Reeves told him and he put the intercom down before getting up out of his chair and leaving his cabin.

The bridge was located just a short distance from the captain's cabin and when Reeves arrived he found the duty staff busy trying to identify the ship they had detected. Knight was stood close by with his back to the captain, looking over the shoulder of Lieutenant Lucas, the *Warspite's* intelligence officer as she compared the data coming from the *Warspite's* sensors to the ship's database of starships in an attempt to match the vessel to something in it.

"So what do we have so far?" Reeves asked as he joined Knight and Lucas.

"Not much yet captain." Knight replied, "The ship's about a light year from our current position so all we have is the tachyon burst right now."

"We do know it was travelling relatively quickly before it dropped out of FTL though." Lucas added, "That, combined with the strength of the tachyon burst tells us we aren't dealing with a very big ship. Perhaps a hundred metres long or so."

"Could be a scout." Reeves commented, "What course was it following before it stopped?"

"I know what you're thinking captain," Knight said, "but it was outbound. If it is something from the Sissusk or Ticik then they managed to slip right past us and turn around." The reptilian Sissusk and mysterious Ticik had been unknown to humanity even two years previously when the only contact with truly intelligent aliens had been societies that had yet to develop space flight of their own. Now as well as countering threats from hostile human nations the Commonwealth had to contend with the threat of alien attack. Fortunately both species occupied territory that was far beyond the borders of the Commonwealth and, apart from one initial attempted Sissusk invasion of a human colony outside the Commonwealth neither of them had shown any signs of turning their attention towards human occupied space.

"It could be smugglers." said Lieutenant Commander Ash, the *Warspite's* helmsman, "Interstellar space is a good place to meet if you don't want to be seen."

"Or it could just as easily be a ship in distress." Reeves commented. Then he looked towards the flight operations station, "Just because no distress beacon has been activated doesn't mean they aren't in trouble." then he looked at Knight again, "We'll take the *Warspite* in." he said, "One light year should only take us about three hours, that's more than enough time for Commander Shaw to prep her fighters and Major Willis to organise a boarding party."

"I've already got an intercept course plotted captain." the navigator Lieutenant Commander Thomas said and Reeves nodded.

"Pass the data to Commander Ash and let's go." he said, "I want us at action stations ten minutes before we arrive. Just in case Ash is right."

When the *Warspite* dropped to sub-light speed it was fully prepared for battle. Rather than just several key bridge stations manned, every position was occupied, the cruiser's entire complement of conventional weaponry was ready to be fired and the squadron of fighters and remotely operated drones it carried were ready for deployment.

"Target vessel dead ahead captain. Range four thousand kilometres. Velocity approximately six hundred kilometres per second." one of the ship's sensor operators reported and Reeves nodded.

"Thank you Petty Officer Cortez," he said, "and congratulations Commander Ash on a well executed trip."

"It's all about the navigation of course." Thomas commented and Ash briefly looked around from the helm station to smile at the other man.

An image of the mystery starship appeared on the main bridge viewscreen. This revealed the sleek lines of the vessel and the outline of its hull that tapered at the front and rear like the body of a fish as well as the wings that stretched out from either side that in this case made atmospheric flight a possibility.

"Signal them, find out what they're doing here." Reeves said and one of the communication technicians activated the *Warspite's* external communication system.

"This is the Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite* to the ship dead ahead of us. You are ordered to identify yourself." he said but there was no reply.

"Try adding a visual signal." Knight said and as the first communication technician repeated his verbal request for communication his comrade typed a brief order to make contact into his keyboard and the *Warspite* turned this into a pattern of pulses of light that were bright enough to be detectable even at the distance between the two ships. Even if the radio system aboard the yacht had failed its occupants may be able to detect the pulses and respond in kind. However, there remained no response at all from the mysterious ship.

"They don't look to be in the mood to talk." Thomas said.

"Can you identify the ship lieutenant?" Knight asked, looking at Lucas.

"It's a civilian ship alright. One hundred and fourteen metres long, no visible armament. It's obviously a yacht of some pattern, probably custom built though." she responded

"Expensive." Knight said.

"Yes commander, especially considering these readings suggest that it's got its own particle inductor." Lucas added.

"Captain we've got a transponder signal." the lieutenant sat at the flight operations console announced.

"I see it." Lucas said, "I'll run it through the database and see what I can come up with."

"In the meantime I want to get a closer look at it." Reeves said, looking at the flight operations officer,

"Lieutenant tell Commander Shaw she's clear to launch. I want a pair of drones out there as well." he said.

"Yes captain." the lieutenant replied as he reached for the intercom, "Hangar this is the bridge, launch alert fighters."

"Copy that bridge, Archangel and Jack-o'-lantern launching now." the voice of the hangar controller responded and the status display in front of Reeves showed a pair of manned fighters being propelled from the *Warspite's* forward launch tubes at the same time as a pair of remote drones were being deployed from the launcher mounted at the stern of the cruiser.

"*Warspite* this is Archangel," Lieutenant Commander Shaw, the fighter squadron leader transmitted as soon as her fighter was clear of the launch tube, "I've got a lock on the target, what are your orders?"

"Just observation for now commander." Reeves told her, "We've not seen any signs of hostility from that ship. In fact we haven't seen any signs of life at all."

"Captain I've got a hit on the ship's ID. The *SS Jackpot*." Lucas said, looking up from her console, "It's flagged by Interpol."

"Interpol? Is the ship stolen?" Knight asked.

"No sir, according to the alert the owner fled from the Canadian authorities just over a month ago." Lucas said, "The database doesn't go into any more detail than that."

"That's okay lieutenant." Reeves said, "We'll have the drones do a close pass and then send over a boarding party. After we get the ship back to Centaur it's the police's problem."

"Copy that *Warspite*, we're heading in." Shaw responded when she was ordered to perform a closer flyby of the yacht. Then as she began to accelerate she briefly glanced sideways as she addressed her co-pilot, Lieutenant Mori, "Okay Kaz, you and I both know we're better at this than those drones. I want to know everything about that ship by the time we're on our return path. Understood?"

"Understood." Mori replied and he began to focus the fighter's sensors on the yacht. There was little that these could tell the crew of the *Warspite*, the cruiser's sensor suite was far superior to what could be crammed into a craft the size of a fighter but it was possible that while circling around the yacht, the fighter would manage to get a better angle on some highly directional emission that the larger capital ship had missed.

The two drones also heading towards the yacht raced ahead of the two fighters, their course taking them much closer to the yacht than either of the manned attack craft. Standard procedure called for the fighters to maintain a minimum safe distance from any suspect vessel just in case anything went wrong. The loss of remotely operated drones was nothing compared to the loss of the two crew members aboard each fighter. The drones slowed as they neared the yacht and spun so that their forward mounted primary cameras could get the best view possible of the ship while maintaining their course, effectively flying sideways through space as they scanned their target. Further out the two fighters copied this manoeuvre and trained their gun cameras on the yacht.

"I don't see any signs of damage at all." Shaw commented as she studied the yacht using her gun camera. The hull was unblemished by any signs of impacts or internal explosions and all of the externally mounted components appeared intact.

"The engines are cold." Mori said from behind Shaw.

"I can see lights." Shaw commented and Mori nodded.

"The power plant's still running but the ship's just coasting." he said.

"At the speed it's travelling it's not going to be getting anywhere quickly. Gamma Pavonis is only four light

years away and it'll still take a couple of thousand years to get there from here." Shaw said, "So what is working aboard that ship? Apart from the lights obviously."

"Thermal scan suggests the heating is running normally and I'm picking up bleed from the gravity field." Mori answered, "But the transponder is the only deliberate emission we're seeing. No radar. No lidar and no FTL emissions."

"*Warspite* this is Archangel. I recommend you send those drones in closer. I'm seeing lights on inside the ship from here but no signs of movement. Maybe you'll be able to see inside from point blank range." Shaw transmitted.

"Understood Archangel. Drones moving in now." one of the *Warspite's* communication technicians responded and right away the engines of one of the drones flared into life as it began to move closer to yacht. The drone's course took it towards the largest cluster of viewports located towards the upper section of the hull. As a civilian vessel this could logically be expected to be the cockpit, placed where it would give the crew the best possible visibility. This was the opposite of the case with the bridge of the *Warspite* or any other human design capital warship. The bridge of such a vessel was invariably buried deep within the structure to prevent it from easily being targeted and destroyed by an enemy. In the case of the *Warspite* itself, the bridge was located towards the rear of the ship not far from the main engineering decks. The feed from the drone's forward cameras was transmitted straight back to the *Warspite*, revealing only a compact cockpit with four empty chairs positioned at the control consoles.

"Doesn't look like anybody's home." Knight commented when he saw this.

"That ship looks big enough to carry a small shuttle. Are there any signs that the crew abandoned ship before we got here?" Reeves asked.

"If they did then they didn't leave at FTL." Cortez answered, "We've not picked up any more tachyon signals since that ship arrived here."

"No EM emissions either captain." another of the sensor operators added, "Though they could be running silent."

"Running to where?" Thomas said and he looked behind him to where Reeves and Knight sat at the rear of the bridge where they could see what the rest of the cruiser's command crew were doing, "We're the only people out here captain."

"Somebody brought that ship out here." Reeves said and then he sighed before looking at Knight, "Time for Major Willis and his men to become involved?" he said.

"I think so." Knight replied, "A couple of squads of marines could secure that ship in a few minutes."

"Okay we're sending over a boarding party. Two squads of marines and four robots. Warn them that collateral damage needs to be kept to a minimum."

Major Willis commanded the company of Commonwealth marines carried aboard the *Warspite*. The primary purpose of this force was to provide shipboard security and defend it in the event that it was boarded, but the force of almost one hundred and fifty marines also provided the ship with the ability to conduct limited ground operations as well as carry out their own boarding actions as they were doing now.

With two squads of marines crammed aboard a single skip, the interior of the small craft was crowded as the marines performed their final checks on their weapons. Accompanying were four of the *Warspite's* compliment of general purpose robots. These were humanoid in construction and to protect them standard marine body armour and anti-ballistic helmets had been fitted to them. The programming of these machines prevented them from harming human beings, or indeed any of the few sentient lifeforms that humanity had encountered so far but they could still be used in a non-combat support role and it was common when boarding an unknown vessel to send a robot in first to test the conditions aboard the vessel.

"Two minutes." the skip's pilot announced as the vessel neared the yacht and Willis reached for his radio.

"Where are we docking?" he asked.

"There's a docking port about half way along on the port side. We can hard lock there." the pilot answered and Willis nodded before looking at the robot stood nearest the skip's hatchway.

"You'll be required to override a hatch lock and enter the airlock ahead of us." he said.

"Confirmed." the robot replied.

"Everyone else get your masks on. We don't know what the air's like over there." Willis added as he pulled an oxygen mask over his face and tightened it in place.

The other marines copied this, protecting themselves against any harmful gases that may be present aboard the *Jackpot* before drawing their weapons. Given the obvious danger of using firearms that fired armour-piercing ammunition aboard a spacecraft of any type most of the marines were instead relying on their standard issue automatic pistols, though a pair of marines in each squad also carried shotguns loaded with low velocity crowd control ammunition for support.

"Thirty seconds." the pilot announced.

"Okay here we go." Willis said, his voice muffled slightly by his oxygen mask.

There was a sudden 'clump' as the skip made contact with the hull of the yacht and moments later a buzzing

as the light above the hatch turned from red to green, indicating that a seal between the two vessels had been established.

"Okay you're up." Willis told the robot he had ordered to go aboard the *Jackpot* first.

"Confirmed." the robot responded and the machine opened the skip's hatch to expose the outer airlock door of the yacht. There was a simple control panel located next to this that featured basic open and close buttons, a keypad featuring numbers 0-9 as well as the letters A-F for sixteen in total. A display above these controls allowed a user to see what they were doing.

The robot began by pressing the button marked with two arrows pointing away from one another, this being an obvious indication for the airlock to open. It turned out that there was no security seal in place and the *Jackpot's* outer airlock door retracted back into the yacht's hull slightly before sliding sideways to reveal the empty airlock on the other side. The inner door of this was closed and as the robot stepped inside it looked down at the environmental sensor it carried in one hand.

"Temperature and gravity measuring within normal limits. No atmospheric contaminants detected." the robot announced.

"Okay seal the outer door and proceed inside. Maintain wireless contact." Willis ordered and the robot turned around to close the outer airlock door.

Getting through the inner door was as straight forwards as the outer one, no security seals being in place and the pressure already being roughly equal. Stepping into the narrow hallway beyond the airlock the robot paused and looked around. Any defence set up to defeat a boarding action would look to push it back here before any boarders had the chance to reach any critical systems but the robot was able to stand motionless outside the airlock without attracting any sort of resistance.

"The corridor is clear." the robot said, using its internal radio transmitter to send its words back the marines waiting aboard the skip. Then it checked the handheld sensor it carried once more, "Temperature and gravity measuring within normal limits. No atmospheric contaminants detected." it said again.

"Okay we're going in. No need for these." Willis told his men and he lifted his mask away from his face. Then he walked to the *Jackpot's* airlock and opened the outer door, "Divide by sections." he ordered. With two sections to a squad this meant breaking the boarding party up into four teams each of four men, one of which would be joined by Willis himself, "Number one section come with me to the bridge. Two head for the engine room and secure it. Three search the upper decks and four the lower. One robot with each section. Now let's move."

As soon as the marines exited the yacht's airlock the differences between the *Warspite* and this vessel became obvious. Whereas the heavy cruiser had been built with pure functionality at its core, no excess had been too great to be included and the vessel was luxuriously decorated.

"Tens of millions for just the hull and whoever owned this still had money for gold fittings." one of the marines in Willis' own section commented, "Must be nice to be that rich."

"What do you need gold fittings for? Too heavy to carry and too shiny to hide" Willis responded. Then he spotted a stairwell ahead of them that led upwards, "That looks like it could lead to the bridge." he added. Cautiously Willis and his team made their way up the short stairwell to the door that it terminated in, keeping their weapons trained on it.

"On three." Willis whispered and as he stood beside the door control panel he held up his free hand with three fingers raised. Then he began to lower these one at a time until at the same time as he lowered his final finger he pressed the control panel with his other elbow and the door slid open with a 'hiss'. Immediately the marines rushed forwards, finding themselves in the yacht's cockpit just as they had expected. There were few places to hide in the cockpit, with just beneath the consoles to be double checked. However, Willis simply stood up and looked out of the forward viewport while the other marines completed their checks, staring at the fighter that appeared to hover right outside.

"Hi there major." Shaw transmitted from her own cockpit, close enough that his personal radio could pick up the signal, "Find anyone at home?"

"Not yet Archangel." Willis replied, "It's all quiet over here."

"Okay, see you back on the *Warspite*."

"Readouts are all in the green major." one of the other marines in the cockpit said after sitting down at one of the consoles. None of the team was a trained pilot but they all knew the basics of interpreting a starship's instruments for just such an eventuality. If there was the risk of an engine explosion then the boarding party would have to know to evacuate as soon as possible.

While Willis and his section made their way to the cockpit another made its way down to the yacht's lower levels. This portion of the ship was where the crew would reside and so was not as luxurious as the upper levels intended for its passengers but all of the equipment remained top of the line. Through an open hatchway the marines saw a coffee maker fixed to a wall and they knew instantly that they had found the yacht's galley.

The corporal commanding the section tapped one of his men on the shoulder and then pointed towards the open hatch, indicating that he was to go through first. The marine nodded and advanced cautiously before

leaping through the hatchway and turning so that he saw everything in the galley in just a matter of moments. "Corp! We've got a body." he exclaimed and the rest of the section hurried forwards to see. The galley included a small table at the far end of the compartment from the only door leading in or out and there were chairs arranged around this. One of these had toppled over and next to it lay the body of a man in late middle age wearing a robe. The marine corporal holstered his pistol as he crouched down next to the body and then reached out to check for a pulse.

"Dead." he said before activating his radio, "Major this is Corporal Leary."

"Go ahead corporal." Willis responded.

"Major my section is in the galley. We have a body here."

"Let me see." Willis said, taking a compact tablet from his webbing and using it to call up the feed from Leary's helmet mounted camera, "I don't see any obvious injuries." Willis added.

"There are none sir." Leary replied, "Could be natural causes."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves corporal." Willis said, "*Warspite*, are you getting this?"

"We're seeing it clearly major." Reeves responded from the bridge of the *Warspite*. Rather than still sitting in his command chair Reeves was stood at the main console located in the centre of the bridge along with Knight and Lucas, "Can we get Doctor Thundercloud up here?" he added.

"Summoning him now captain." the lieutenant at the flight operations station replied.

"Think he's the owner?" Knight asked, looking at Reeves and in turn the captain looked at Lucas.

"What can you tell us lieutenant?" he asked.

"The yacht is officially registered to a company called Toronto Tachyon Technologies." Lucas said, checking her tablet onto which she had copied the results from her database search, "But the flag by Interpol did give a name as well, Howard Denton. Age seventy-two, nationality Canadian. There's a picture but it's not great. It could be that guy."

"If I didn't know he was dead I'd say he looked the picture of health." Reeves commented.

"Yeah, this picture from Interpol doesn't do him credit." Lucas added.

"I've not seen any signs of damage on any of these feeds." Knight said as he looked at each of the marine and robot camera feeds from the yacht, "Whatever brought that ship out of FTL it doesn't look like it was technical failure."

"Corporal Leary," Reeves said, "is there any sort of personal monitoring device on the body?"

"You're thinking that he had a health monitor linked to the ship and when he died it automatically shut off the FTL?" Knight asked and at the navigation station immediately behind the main console Thomas frowned and stood up.

"But why would anyone do that? If there's a health emergency then dropping out of FTL and coasting is the worst thing to do. The ship ought to have sent a distress call and done its best to reach a medical facility." he pointed out.

"Not if someone was trying to cover up a murder." Reeves said.

"Murder?" a voice said from the rear of the bridge as Doctor James Thundercloud, the *Warspite's* chief medical officer arrived and walked over to the console, "Who's been murdered?"

"Possibly some billionaire industrialist." Thomas said.

"Let me see." Thundercloud said and Knight reached out to the console, expanding the feed from Corporal Leary that offered the best view of the body in the yacht's galley.

"No obvious signs of violence." Thundercloud said, "Are there any signs that he was eating or drinking anything before he died?"

"There's a glass that's been knocked over on the table." Leary replied and the marine corporal picked up the knocked over glass to inspect it, "Looks like something was spilt from it." Leary added, looking at the colourless liquid on the table and then at the little that remained in the glass. Then he sniffed briefly at the glass, "I don't smell anything."

"Make sure nothing happens to that glass corporal." Thundercloud said, "I may need it to run toxicology tests on."

"This is Truman, we've got another body." another marine broadcast suddenly and the officers gathered around the main console turned to search for the feed from his camera.

"Here." Thomas said, reaching out and expanding it.

Truman and his section of marines had been searching the yacht's upper decks where the passengers' cabins were located and it was in one of these that they had found the second body, that of a woman lay on her side in a large bed.

"She looks asleep." Knight said, "Are we sure she's dead?"

"Commonwealth marines!" Truman shouted and Lucas flinched, prompting a smile from Reeves.

"Well you definitely proved that our intelligence officer is alive and well corporal." he said.

"Though I think being woken by four armoured marines in my bedroom would probably scare me to death." Lucas added.

The woman in the bed had not reacted to the shout and Truman walked over to her and pressed his fingers

to her neck.

"There's no pulse." he said.

"Are there any signs of injury?" Thundercloud asked.

"Hang on, I'll check." Truman replied and he began to lift up the covers of the bed before suddenly dropping them again, "Err *Warspite*, she's naked. This just feels wrong." he said.

"I need to do a proper post mortem anyway captain." Thundercloud said.

"Okay corporal, just prepare the body to be brought back here to be examined." Reeves told Truman,

"Corporal Leary that goes for you as well."

"What about the yacht?" Knight asked.

"Our hangars aren't big enough to house a vessel of that size. We'll have Commander Bernard send some people over to inspect her." Reeves said, "If she is capable of FTL travel then we'll put a crew aboard to fly her back. If not then we'll have to leave a team aboard to wait for a suitable transport. Major Willis, is it your opinion that that vessel is now secure?"

"There are a couple more places to check captain, but other than that I'd say that it's safe enough for Commander Bernard's people to come over here. I'll leave a squad of marines behind to protect them."

"Very good major. Now get those bodies back over here for Doctor Thundercloud to take a look at. In the meantime let the authorities on Centaur know what we've found." Reeves ordered.

2.

Doctor Thundercloud began by examining the body believed to be that of Howard Denton and the first thing he noticed was the discrepancy between the appearance of the body and its temperature. The skin still had a ruddy appearance to it, suggesting that the body was that of someone who had only just died. On the other hand the body had clearly had the chance to cool down since death and Thundercloud would have expected the skin to adopt a more bluish hue as the blood became deprived of oxygen. On the other hand this anomaly also offered a line of investigation to the doctor.

Taking a syringe from his tray of instrument Thundercloud drew a sample of blood from Denton's arm and smiled when he saw the bright red colour of this.

"The first body is of an adult male," he said, activating a voice recorder, "believed to be Howard Denton, aged seventy-two years. The general condition of the body is good. From the temperature of the body I would say that death occurred six to eight hours ago. However, the skin has retained its colouration and drawing a blood sample reveals that the colour of this is bright red, contributing to the colour of the skin." then he looked towards the trolley on which the body of the woman lay beneath a sheet and walked towards it, taking the recorder with him, "The second body is of an unidentified female." he said as he pulled the sheet down to expose the woman's face, "Her skin has also retained its normal colour while the body temperature has fallen. This body was found naked but in bed so refrigeration of the body prior to or just after death is unlikely." Thundercloud then set the recorder down as he leant in closer to take a blood sample from the woman as well. Pressing his finger against the side of her neck he felt something odd and frowned, "What the hell?" he muttered to himself and then he pulled open one of her eyes and looked into it with an illuminated magnifier, "Now this is interesting." he said to himself, smiling.

From the trolleys on which the bodies were laid out, Thundercloud walked over to the nearest intercom panel.

"Engineering this is the infirmary, is Commander Bernard available?" he asked.

"He's right here doctor. I'll put him on." a member of the *Warspite's* engineering crew responded and then Thundercloud heard the man call out for Bernard, the cruiser's chief engineer.

"What can I do for you doctor?" Bernard said when he picked up the intercom handset.

"Bernard are you heading over to the *Jackpot*?" Thundercloud said.

"No, I've sent a team over there that can handle everything. Why? Do you need to see me?"

"Yes. I need your professional opinion on something. Also there's something specific I need your people to look for aboard the *Jackpot*."

When Major Willis stepped off the skip he was approached by one of the hangar ground crew.

"Major Willis sir, Doctor Thundercloud has requested your presence in the infirmary."

"Did he say why? Is there a risk of contamination?" Willis asked, suddenly wondering what he and his marines could have been exposed to aboard the yacht. On the other hand there was no medical team present with an isolation suit that they were asking him to put on so whatever was wrong the *Warspite's* chief medical officer did not consider Willis to be infectious.

"He didn't say sir. Only that he and Commander Bernard wanted to see you as soon as you arrived back aboard."

"Bernard? What's he got in common with the doc?" Willis commented.

"I don't know sir, but Doctor Thundercloud definitely said that the commander would be there as well."

Willis sighed.

"Thanks crewman, I'll head there now." he said and then he strode across the hangar deck towards the exit. With no rifle needing to be returned to the *Warspite's* armoury, Willis had been planning on heading straight to his quarters after arriving back aboard the *Warspite* but now that he had been summoned to the infirmary he headed in that direction instead, still wearing his body armour and with his sidearm holstered on his leg. Opening the door to sickbay he saw one of the nursing staff attending to a crewman with a minor injury to her arm and Willis called out to her.

"The doc asked to see me." he said.

"In there." the nurse replied, pointing towards one of the isolation chambers meant for keeping infectious crew members or passengers quarantined. As he approached the open door to the room he heard the sound of voices as Thundercloud and Bernard chatted. Then as he peered in through the doorway he saw the two officers standing on the other side of the room with mugs of coffee in their hands.

"Ah major." Thundercloud said when he saw the marine officer.

"You asked to see me doc." Willis responded and Thundercloud nodded as he set down his drink and walked to one of the two beds present in the room, each of which had one of the corpses recovered from the *Jackpot* on it under a sheet.

"Yes I did." Thundercloud replied, pulling back the sheet just enough to reveal the head and shoulders of the woman's body, "Tell me what you think of her major."

Willis frowned.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"He means describe her." Bernard said and Willis shrugged as he looked at the body.

"I don't know. Good looking I guess. At least if she was still alive, she obviously looked after herself and I'd say dying that young is a genuine waste. If she was still breathing then I wouldn't turn her down." he said.

"Take a close look major. There's something very interesting about that body." Bernard said and Willis approached the body while Thundercloud backed away.

"Looks the same from here." Willis said, shaking his head as he stood beside the bed and looked down at the dead woman's face.

"Closer major. Very close." Thundercloud said and Willis set down the helmet he had been carrying on the table beside the bed before he leant closer to the body then glanced up at the other two officers.

"You have to get right up to the face to see it. Focus right between the eyes." Bernard said and Willis lowered himself further until there were just a few centimetres between his own face and that of the woman.

"Hello." she said, suddenly opening her eyes and smiling at Willis.

The marine yelled in surprise, leaping backwards and grabbing hold of a nearby stool that he instinctively lifted up to use as a weapon against the suddenly living woman. Before he could swing it though he realised that both Thundercloud and Bernard were laughing out loud at him and he glared at them.

"What the hell is going on?" he said, "You managed to revive her? She was dead."

"No major, Kelly here was never alive to begin with. Were you Kelly?" Bernard said and he looked at the figure now sitting upright in the bed and holding the sheet across its chest.

"No." she said, still smiling, "My name is Kelly and I am a series fifty-four advanced personal companion automaton."

"She's a sex robot." Thundercloud said, "State of the art, almost indistinguishable from a real human being unless you know what you're looking for."

Willis looked back at the robot calling itself Kelly.

"A machine?" he said.

"I am the best money can buy." Kelly replied, "My database allows me to perform any act my designated owner requires of me. I can act out any desired scenario and behave in whatever manner is desired. My external construction is matched to human anatomy perfectly and my internal workings even allow me to consume food and drink should that be required." then she looked around, "Where is Howard by the way?"

"Ah so you were aboard the *Jackpot* with Howard Denton." Thundercloud said and the robot nodded.

"That's right. Shouldn't he be here?" she said.

"Unfortunately he is." Thundercloud told her as he walked over to the other bed and pulled back the sheet far enough to reveal the face of the male corpse brought aboard with Kelly, "Is this Howard Denton."

"Yes it is." Kelly said without any trace of emotion.

"Doesn't it bother you that he's dead?" Willis asked.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand that question." Kelly said.

"She's a robot major." Bernard said, "Even after centuries of developing AI systems humanity has only created one with true sentience and that was by accident. This thing doesn't care any more for her owner than his toaster did."

"If Howard is dead then who owns me now?" Kelly asked.

"Legally you're just property." Bernard said, "I suppose that unless he left you to some specific in his will then you'll be the property of his nearest next of kin."

"That would be Howard's daughter then." Kelly said, "Though she always forbade me from entering her home and insisted I was put in the closet whenever she visited Howard. She'll probably sell me."

"By the way major, even second hand a robot this lifelike is worth more than you can afford if you were thinking of making an offer." Thundercloud said.

"I wasn't even considering it." Willis said, "My girlfriend would freak out if I brought this home."

"The important thing is that now we have something we didn't have before." Bernard said, "A potential witness to what happened aboard the *Jackpot*."

Reeves, Knight and Lucas were still gathered around the bridge's central console when Bernard entered and looked to see who was watching the doorway. However, apart from the two armed marine guards just inside the bridge no-one paid him any attention and he waved for Thundercloud, Willis and Kelly to follow him. To make her blend in with the rest of the crew, an officer's formal uniform had been found for the robot to wear as she entered the bridge without speaking.

"Ah Commander Bernard," Reeves said when he noticed the group, "your engineering team has just re-" and then he noticed the woman in the formal uniform among the rest of the crew members present in more mundane duty uniforms, "Commander what is the meaning of this? Who is this woman and why is she on my

bridge?" he said, knowing that the woman now walking towards him was not one of his officers.

"Hey isn't she the dead woman from that yacht?" Lucas asked.

"I have a name." Kelly said, "It's Kelly and I'm very happy to meet you Captain Reeves. I'm sorry but Adam, Ben and James didn't tell me your first name."

Reeves glared at Thundercloud and Bernard.

"Explain yourselves gentlemen." he said.

"It seems that Howard Denton preferred a personal companion that was artificial rather than human captain." Bernard said.

"Oh that's so creepy." Lucas said.

"So it's a sex robot." Knight said.

"Quite." Bernard replied, "Captain I'd like to dump it's short term memory and see if it can tell us what happened aboard Denton's yacht."

"We may be closer to knowing that anyway commander." Reeves replied, "I believe you asked your engineering team to inspect the *Jackpot's* laser communication array.

"They checked on the laser emitter?" Bernard asked.

"They did." Knight replied, "And as you suggested to them it is a carbon monoxide infra red laser with a gas supply housed locally to the emitter. However, it seems that all of the gas is missing, every tank is empty."

"I assume that Mister Denton died of carbon monoxide poisoning doctor?" Reeves said and Thundercloud nodded.

"He did. There aren't that many sources of carbon monoxide aboard a starship but medical texts note the possibility for the gas to escape from certain types of laser system." Thundercloud answered.

"Thankfully every laser aboard the *Warspite* uses electron beams rather than gas so we're in no danger of anything like that happening aboard this ship." Bernard commented.

"Shouldn't there be alarms to warn about a dangerous gas leak?" Reeves asked.

"Yes, though like anything else technological there are ways to disable them if you know what you're doing." Bernard said.

"So it was murder then." Lucas said and then looking at Kelly she added, "Of Denton obviously, this thing is still fine."

"My guess would be yes, the escaping gas would kill Denton and then the life support system would scrub it all from the internal atmosphere by the time we arrived to investigate. Only the traces inside his body would remain."

"Download that thing's memory commander." Reeves said, looking at Kelly, "Then box it up ready to be collected by whoever owns it now. I don't want it wandering about my ship."

"Yes captain." Bernard replied and he looked at Kelly, "Follow me." he told her.

"Oh and one more thing commander." Reeves added.

"Yes captain?"

"I want it out of that uniform right away." Reeves told Bernard.

"Oh I can manage that by myself." Kelly said, her hands reaching to her collar and pulling her tie loose before starting to undo her shirt buttons.

"No!" Reeves yelled.

INTERLUDE.

Arriving at her office in the morning Jennifer Hayes turned on her computer and began as she so often did by checking her messages. Her system was set up to pick out messages from a handful of select individuals and place these in a priority section that she was always sure to check first. One of these individuals was her assistant Enrico Vale, an expert in strategic studies and his messages were always moved right to the top of the list.

Subject: Information on Canadian source – Important

Vale had worked closely with Hayes on her scheme to provoke an armed conflict between the Commonwealth and one of its neighbouring space faring alien civilisations. However, even after almost two years since engineering the Commonwealth's first official encounter with another advanced alien species and battles taking place between Commonwealth ships and ships of two of these species no wider conflict had been triggered yet. On the other hand in order to establish a barrier between the source and Hayes' organisation it had been necessary to cut all ties with it and thus the organisation's route into the Canadian government had been lost. In addition to this the encounter between the Commonwealth and the Ticik had revealed the sabotage by Hayes' organisation of the network of SETI listening posts that were supposed to detect signs of advanced alien life. Hayes knew that both of these setbacks were being blamed on her by her rivals and had resulted in her superiors suddenly paying closer attention to what she and Vale were up to. Matters had not been helped when news had been received that the Canadian source had disappeared entirely just as it appeared that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had been closing in. Reading through the message Hayes quickly saw that the news she had received for was not good. The last news regarding the source was that an alert had been put out by Interpol for the ship that it had been travelling on and now it seemed that this had been located. However, it had not been discovered by anyone allied to Hayes' organisation, instead a Commonwealth fleet patrol had reported finding the yacht *Jackpot* adrift in deep space. Initial reports suggested that the source had been permanently silenced but Hayes was not satisfied with what she was reading and she reached for her office phone, pulling Vale's number from the memory and dialling him.

"Enrico." she said as soon as the phone at the other end was picked up but before Vale could speak, "So why didn't you call me as soon as the news came in about the *Jackpot* being found?"

"Because it was after eleven at night. I didn't want to disturb you at home with it." Vale replied.

"Oh that's nonsense." Hayes said, "I think the reason you didn't call is the same reason you weren't already here when I got into the office, you just didn't want to have to break the news to me directly."

"I wasn't." Vale began but Hayes did not give him the chance to finish.

"Enrico forget it. What matters now is making sure that I can claim the credit for making sure that we don't have a security breach. I want you to find out exactly what's happening with that yacht. If there's even the slightest chance that there's anything incriminating aboard it then we need to deal with it."

"Of course commander." Vale replied, "But what about the main operation?"

"That's going to have to be put on hold for now. If there's even a hint that we let the Commonwealth find out about us then Stein is going to sever his ties to us permanently and we lose our only official backing. Alert Martins that we may need his ship and have Conrad prepare his team."

"You'd risk sending them to Centaur?" Vale said in disbelief, "There's a Commonwealth base there. The *Grey Dawn* would never make it past their patrols."

"I'm not thinking of sending them straight there Enrico, but if I can't get Alex to help then we'll need to do something more radical before the *Jackpot* can be searched." Hayes told him and she heard Vale sigh at the other end of the phone.

"I'll be at the office soon." he said, "I'll contact Lieutenant Commander Martins then."

"I knew I could count on you Enrico." Hayes said before immediately hanging up.

Then rather than continue to go through her messages Hayes got to her feet and exited her office, making her way just across the hallway to the opposite door that was labelled 'Commander Alexander Kane' and she held up her hand as if to knock before pausing. Kane was Hayes' chief rival in her department. Though they shared the same ultimate goal, that of the destruction of the Commonwealth, their opinions on how that would best be achieved differed radically and he had spent much of the last two years mocking Hayes for her lack of tangible results while his more cautious plans had continued steadily.

After a moment's hesitation Hayes finally knocked on the door and waited. However, there was no response from inside the office and so she turned to leave, but as soon as she did so she found herself face to face with Kane after he had managed to sneak right up behind her.

"Now this is a surprise Jennifer." he said, smiling at her and then he looked at his watch, "It's not even half eight yet but here you are coming pleading to me to help you with something. Come on in, I want to be sat down while I listen to you beg."

"I'm not begging Alex." Hayes replied while Kane presented his key to the lock sensor and then opened his door.

"Of course not. You always come to my office just to chat." he said.

Hayes followed Kane into his office and over to his desk where the pair of them sat down. Kane turned on his computer and as it began the process of starting up he looked across his desk at Hayes and waited for her to speak first.

"Alex I need your help with something." she said Kane grinned.

"Of course you do." he replied, "Your little plan to start a war has failed miserably and now you need me to help you clean up your mess before the old man comes down on you as hard as he can."

"No, it's not that. I need access to one of your agents." Hayes said and Kane's grin disappeared.

"You've got to be kidding me." he said.

"No. Look, the source we had in the Canadian government has turned up again."

"The source you cost us." Kane pointed out.

"Never mind that now. The source has reappeared. Now it looks like the Commonwealth won't be able to find anything out directly but I want to make sure that the ship is clean before any of their engineers can go over it." Hayes said.

"The ship?" Kane commented.

"A Commonwealth patrol found a yacht drifting in interstellar space. It looks like it was sabotaged to keep the source from leading them back to us. The thing is that I don't know how much the Commonwealth will be able to find out from that ship."

"Well fortunately it can't be leading them back here." Kane said.

"No, but it could give them a lead to our communication channels." Hayes said.

"Then you had better hope that no-one in the Commonwealth checks, hadn't you?" Kane replied.

"Alex-" Hayes began, already thinking of the arguments she would use to try and change his mind.

"I'm not interested Jennifer." he interrupted, "Your blundering had already cost us a source of information from a major Commonwealth member state. If I let you have access to any of the people I have pipelines to then what guarantee do I have that you won't just screw up again and leave me without their services?"

"I can assure that won't happen." Hayes said.

"No you can't Jennifer. Now I've already had the old man and that grand daughter of his call on me personally thanks to you and it's something I'd rather not repeat. If you'd bothered to have a family yourself then you'd understand. Now I suggest that you go back to your little minion Vale and do your best to find out what the Canadian police, the Commonwealth or whoever you've got snapping at your heels are up to before the old man pays you another visit."

Hayes got up from her chair and Kane watched as she strode angrily towards the door. Just before she left Kane's office Hayes turned and glared at him.

"Trust me on this Alex," she said, "I'm on my way up and when I'm running things around here you're going to wish that you were more supportive of my plan."

Wanting to leave before Kane could respond to this Hayes quickly opened the door to leave but was prevented from doing so when she found a group of four people standing right outside Kane's office. Two of these were large, muscular men whose jackets were open enough to make the pistols they carried beneath their shoulders visible while the third was a slender young woman that Hayes knew to be more fearful of than either of the two large bodyguards. Most significant was the final member of the group though. An older man with short, white hair he commanded the division that Hayes and Kane were a part of and he smiled at Hayes.

"Ah there you are Commander Hayes." he said, "I was wondering whether you had broken with your characteristic punctuality and were running late for work."

"No sir. I was just-" Hayes began before the old man interrupted her.

"I just thought I'd drop by to see if you were aware of the latest developments with our Canadian source." he said calmly and Hayes got the feeling immediately that the old man was fully aware not only of the events surrounding the recovery of the *Jackpot* but also knew word for word what had been contained in the message Vale had sent to her regarding it.

"Yes sir, I've been informed. Don't worry though, I've got everything under control." she said.

"That's good news isn't it grandfather?" the young woman in the group said, looking at the old man.

"Of course it is my dear." he replied before looking back at Hayes, "At least I hope for your sake that it is Commander Hayes. Of course if your current post does turn out to getting too much for you then I'm sure I'll be able to find a position for you that's more suitable." and then he looked down the hallway to where a man in overalls silently cleaned a window, "Come now dear," the old man continued, turning his attention back to his grand daughter, "We have important work to do and so does Commander Hayes."

The old man and his grand daughter then began to walk away, followed by their bodyguards as they headed for the nearby lifts. Hayes was about to rush back into her office when all of a sudden Kane called out from behind her.

“Oh Jennifer, just remember I like my windows cleaned before I get in.” he said and even though he could not see the expression on her face she frowned.

3.

With the *Warspite's* patrol over and now back in port over the planet Centaur in the Gamma Pavonis system Reeves was making the most of the opportunity to take care of some basic jobs, starting with cleaning his issue sidearm. He had just finished cleaning the weapon and was reassembling it when there was a knock at his cabin door.

"Come in." he called out and the door opened to permit a woman in a lieutenant commander's uniform to enter. She closed the door behind her and saluted.

"Lieutenant Commander Denise Goldman reporting for duty sir." she said.

"At ease commander." Reeves replied, returning her salute, "Now how is your expanding family?"

"Very well captain." Goldman answered with a smile, "Although I think that David's somewhat nervous about being left at home with two children now while I'm aboard the *Warspite*. The word 'outnumbered' has been used once or twice. How was my replacement?"

"Oh he was fine on the bridge, you've taught him well." Reeves said.

"But?" Goldman commented, noticing how her commanding officer had specified the bridge duties of a flight operations officer specifically when praising the lieutenant who had stood in for her while she had been on maternity leave.

"Let's just say that some of his other organisational skills aren't quite up to the standards required for running a vessel of the *Warspite's* nature." Reeves said, "Fortunately Commander Knight was able to double check all of the parts and supply orders so we didn't run out of anything but there were one or two things that got misplaced for a while. Thankfully you're back now so everything can get back to normal."

"I'll start by explaining to my deputy how to organise a cargo hold properly." Goldman said, "Not that I mind being indispensable though. It's just that I'd like to be able to take some leave every now and again now that I have two children and a husband to see at home."

"A very good idea commander." Reeves said and the pair saluted one another before Goldman turned to leave.

Just as she stepped out of Reeves' cabin she met Lucas heading towards it with a tablet in her hand.

"Denise." Lucas said, "Oops sorry. Lieutenant Commander Goldman. I've just got so used to addressing you by your first name."

"That's okay. I'm kind of used to you being Jessica right now." Goldman said. Then they both glanced at the closed door the captain's cabin.

"I suppose he's always Captain Reeves though isn't he?" Lucas commented and Goldman smiled.

"I wouldn't dare use his first name." she said.

"Well it's good to see you back aboard," Lucas said, "but I have an intelligence update to give to he who must not be called anything other than 'sir' or 'captain'."

"I'll let you get on." Goldman replied, walking away as Lucas side stepped out of her path as was traditional when a higher ranking officer wanted to pass.

Lucas then walked up to the door of Reeves' cabin and knocked.

"Come in." Reeves called out and Lucas opened the door to go inside.

"Captain is now a good time to give you the intelligence update?" she asked.

"It's perfect lieutenant. Take a seat and tell me what's happening."

Lucas sat down and turned on her tablet, entering her access code to allow her to show Reeves the more classified parts of what she had to tell him.

"I can start by telling you that there's nothing more from either the Sissusk or the Ticik." she began, "Frankly we just don't know what's going on with either species right now."

"So blackmailing the Sissusk Emperor into releasing humans held as slaves didn't do us any good then?"

Reeves asked, remembering telling the supreme leader of the Sissusk Empire that he expected every human being held against their will in his territory to be released.

"No sir. For all we know the robots that the Sissusk constructed from the technology they acquired from that unknown signal have destroyed their empire completely and every last Sissusk, human, Fedrun, Krawlek or whatever has been transported away through one of those gates to wherever it is that they are taken."

"That could mean that the only Sissusk, Fedrun and Krawlek left alive are those within our borders." Reeves commented, remembering how on both of the trips the *Warspite* had made into Sissusk territory the ship had returned with freed slaves of previously unknown alien species while the survivors of the abortive Sissusk invasion of the independent human planet Liberty had been brought back to Centaur as prisoners.

"Yes sir, which could be an issue for the Fedrun. We only brought a few of them back with us and there probably aren't enough of them to establish a viable gene pool that will last more than three or four generations without inbreeding." Lucas said. Then she looked at her tablet again, "On the other hand we do know that Ticik are still out there. Drones have been sent to conduct long range scans of the Phi Two

Pavonis system and they've picked up several vessels there over the last two months. Nothing that would suggest they have any interest in finding their way here though."

"They don't need to bother. They won the only engagement between us and at our last meeting we just watched one another suspiciously." Reeves said then he frowned for a moment before adding, "I don't suppose we know what they look like rather than just their ships do we?"

"Sorry captain but their appearance along with pretty much everything about them remains a mystery. Even the Sissusk prisoners we took don't know what they look like and they've been at war with one another for years."

"A war that could be over now if the Sissusk Empire is gone."

"Yes sir." Lucas said before swiping across the screen of her tablet, "This is a more worrying development, however." she told Reeves and she held out the tablet so that he could see the screen. On it he saw what was obviously a large starship under construction. Little detail was available about the ship at the stage of construction shown in the image but it was clearly large possibly as big as the *Warspite*, "Taken at Luyten one-six-five two just over three months ago." Lucas said, "Then the next one was taken last week." and Reeves swiped his hand across the tablet to move on to the next image. This showed the same vessel at a much more advanced stage of construction. Whereas the initial image had shown little more than a basic framework with the beginnings of a power plant in the middle this next one showed a warship that had engines and most of its hull properly armoured. Worryingly it also showed the extent of the armament that was in the process of being added.

"Are those missile or bomb tubes?" he asked, pointing to a grid like arrangement of tubes along one side of the hull. In zero gravity it could be difficult to determine directions like 'up' and 'down' and what could easily be bomb tubes on the underside of a hull could be a missile system mounted on top instead.

"We think that they're bomb tubes. It's an assault cruiser captain." Lucas said, "You'll notice the tracks running around the hull about half way along."

"A rotating section?" Reeves said. Until just over a century earlier during the later stages of the war between the Commonwealth and the Genex starships generated gravity for their occupants either by continually accelerating or by rotating part or all of the ship. The advent of artificial gravity fields had made these techniques technically obsolete and had played a major role in the Commonwealth's victory over its enemy that was still limited to the older vessels it had stolen from Commonwealth members in the opening stages of the war. The drawback was that true artificial gravity was technically difficult to implement and for nations and colonies that could not guarantee a steady supply of gravitons or parts for the more modern particle inductors that could generate them themselves returning to these older methods of maintaining gravity inside a ship remained viable choices.

"That's the assessment captain."

"So the Caliphate is building a warship that can sit in orbit around a planet for extended periods and drop bombs on it at their leisure." Reeves said, "Do we have any idea what their target will be?"

The Caliphate was one a number of smaller interstellar societies established by humans with views radically different to those of the Commonwealth member states. Without exception these consisted of no more than a handful of planets and lacked the technology to manufacture starships that included their own particle inductors for faster than light travel or artificial gravity and had to rely on stored tachyons or gravitons for either of these. Although the Caliphate was considered actively hostile to the Commonwealth, it was not considered to be a real threat while its technology lagged behind as much as it did.

"None sir. Of course they'd never be able to hit any of the nations here on Centaur. Even without our battle group the local national armed forces have enough firepower to beat back the Caliphate's fleet."

"But how long will that advantage last if they're starting to build ships like this lieutenant?" Reeves said,

"Once they're done with this assault cruiser they could start building carriers filled with drones that don't need to worry about things like gee-forces due to acceleration."

"So far there's no indication that they are doing that captain. Our best estimate is that the ship won't even be ready to be launched for another four to six months. After that we'll keep a close eye on how it's deployed."

Just then the intercom on the wall sounded and Reeves reached for the handset.

"Excuse me while I answer this lieutenant." he said and Lucas nodded, "Reeves." he said into the handset.

"Captain, I have Admiral Mitchell for you." the lieutenant who had been filling in for Goldman during the past few months said.

"Put her through." Reeves said.

"Captain Reeves?" he then heard the voice of Admiral Mitchell, the overall commander of the Commonwealth fleet battle group stationed at Centaur say.

"Yes admiral." Reeves responded.

"Captain I'm sorry to have to tell you this but I need the *Warspite* ready to depart again in twenty-four hours." the admiral told him.

"Twenty four hours?" he repeated back to her, "But we've only just got back into port."

"I know that captain but we've had a request from Interpol. They need an agent transporting." she said.

"An Interpol agent being transported aboard a warship? That's not normal."

"Nothing about this is normal captain, it has to do with your encounter in the Phi Two Pavonis system. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police have been investigating why one of their ships was sent to the system in the first place and it looks like the instruction was planted in their defence computer network from somewhere inside Howard Denton's company. They've supplied a lot of electronic equipment to the Canadian armed forces over the years and it looks like some back doors were left in some of them."

"So where are we heading to admiral?" Reeves asked.

"Have you ever heard of the planet Verne captain?" Admiral Mitchell responded and although she could not hear what the admiral was saying Lucas saw Reeves wince.

"Yes, I think everyone out here knows about it. Futurists interested only in advancing technology. Ironically they lag behind us somewhat in several key areas." he said.

"Well apparently that's where Denton was heading and the RCMP is sending someone out there to ask around. An Interpol agent will go along as well to make introductions. Verne isn't in the Commonwealth but they are signed up to the Interpol treaties. They should both be with you in about twelve hours. Your job is to get them to Verne and make sure they get back safely."

"Understood admiral. I'll tell my people that they need to get the ship prepared to leave again following that." Reeves said.

"Excellent. Good luck captain." the admiral said and then the line went dead.

"So I take it that we're leaving again?" Lucas commented as Reeves returned the intercom handset to its mounting on the wall beside him.

"We are. Tell me lieutenant, how much do you know about the planet Verne?" Reeves replied.

"About as much as everyone else I suppose. It's a colony world in the Fringe inhabited by futurists. Weren't there stories that they collaborated with the Genex during the war?" Lucas answered.

"Yes and that's clouded relations between us and them every since, despite nothing ever being proven of course. We do know that a few Genex actually lived on Verne before the war but by the time it was over they'd all left. Officially we're friendly towards them but I'm going to need you to liaise with Commander Bernard. We leave tomorrow and its about three and a half days from here to Verne. By the time we get there I want to know that our computer system is locked down as tightly as possible."

"You think they'll try to hack our system captain?"

"It's a possibility. Technology is prized on Verne and this ship is full of interesting pieces of technology that they'd love to get their hands on. I'll need you to get all the latest information on their capabilities and brief the senior staff before we leave."

"Yes captain, will there be anything else?" Lucas said and Reeves shook his head.

"No thank you lieutenant. You are dismissed." he said.

Reeves was on the bridge discussing the course to be taken to Verne with Ash and Thomas when the intercom sounded and the communication technician on duty spoke up.

"Captain it's Corporal Kennedy. He says that there are two people at the docking port asking to speak with you personally. There's a woman from the Canadian police and a man from Interpol." the technician said. It was standard procedure for a warship in dock to have a pair of marine guards stationed at each docking port to make sure that only authorised personnel could gain access to the vessel and from what he had just been told Reeves knew that this meant that the two individuals Admiral Mitchell had told him to expect had now arrived.

"Ah our passengers are here ahead of schedule." Reeves replied, glancing at the time display on the main console and seeing that there were still just under two hours to go until the pair of law enforcement agents were supposed to arrive.

"Shall I have them shown up here sir?" the technician asked.

"Yes, but I don't want them wandering around unescorted. They aren't cleared for unrestricted access."

Reeves said, "Oh and summon the senior staff as well. We may as well do the briefing for everyone at once."

"Yes captain." the communication technician replied.

The delay required for the two law enforcement officials to be briefed on how they should act while aboard the *Warspite* was long enough for all of the cruiser's senior staff to have gathered in the bridge around the central console.

"Welcome to the *CSV Warspite*." Reeves said as he shook the hand of each of them in turn.

"Thank you. I'm Inspector Anne Boucher, Royal Canadian Mounted police." the female officer said.

"And I'm Senior Agent Jack Smith. Interpol." the man accompanying her added as he shook hands with Reeves.

"I'll allow my people to introduce themselves." Reeves replied and he looked at Knight.

"Commander Douglas Knight. XO." Knight said and then the officers went around the console, introducing themselves one at a time until it got back around to Reeves.

"And I'm Captain Reeves, commanding officer of the *Warspite*. So how about you tell us why the

Commonwealth is sending a heavy cruiser to an independent colony rather than just booking you passage on a liner or chartering a courier." Reeves said.

"Frankly I'm not so sure about that myself captain." Smith said, "Interpol is independent of the Commonwealth as well."

"I think it's more down to what we found in our investigation of Howard Denton." Inspector Boucher said.

"So the body definitely was Denton's then?" Thundercloud commented.

"Oh yes, it was him alright. Howard Denton, billionaire industrialist with fingers in a lot of pies." Boucher replied, "One of those is defence and we think that is how he was able to manipulate our fleet control computers and send the *Saint Lawrence* off beyond the Fringe Worlds."

"So what does this have to do with Verne?" Ash asked.

"Verne is where Denton was heading." Boucher answered, "We went over the navigation system and he'd set something of an indirect course, but that was his final destination. We know that he had business dealings there and we think that he may have been channelling restricted technology to the planet without the proper paperwork. Even if all his dealings there were above board then there could be something that would explain what he hoped to gain from manipulating our system like that."

"If he was transferring restricted technology then he could have had government backing on Verne." Knight pointed out and Boucher nodded. "That's why we requested a warship. They won't dare fire on a Commonwealth cruiser."

"Don't they have a fleet?" Ash said.

"Yes, but it's heavily flawed." Lucas replied and she quickly brought up an intelligence file on the central console they were gathered around. The start of this showed several images of starships that all looked like pairs of flattened cones placed base to base to create hulls oval in cross section that widened as they got closer to a point about a third of the way along and then tapering again almost to a point. "When the first settlers arrived on Verne about a hundred and fifty years ago they had a ship with true FTL capability." Lucas continued, "Of course at that time there was no artificial gravity but they could still have used their colony ship's particle inductor to generate all the tachyons they needed for any ships they built or for their long range communication system but instead they chose to take it apart and try to reverse engineer it."

"Oh I've heard this." Shaw said suddenly with a grin, "They couldn't get the thing back together again. All those geniuses and none of them knew how a particle inductor worked well enough to undo what they'd done."

"The technology is very complicated." Bernard added.

"I know." Knight said, "I spent years studying it. You can count the number of nations who can make them on your hands and still have fingers left over."

"All this left the colonists without the capability to produce tachyons at all." Lucas went on, "Then after the war when artificial was being introduced they couldn't create gravitons either. For both they are entirely reliant on importing them from outside the system."

"Their supplies are limited." Ash commented and Lucas nodded.

"Very." she said, "There are no rotating sections so intelligence believes that the ships they construct arrange the decks vertically and burn their engines continuously to provide gravity for their crew. Normally this limits their ships to low gee manoeuvres and slower than light travel but they can make tachyon storage jars and singularity jars to maintain stocks of the particles for use if really needed."

"So they can manage short bursts of high acceleration and limited FTL hops but nothing more?" Thomas asked and Lucas nodded.

"Pretty much." she said and the Warspite's navigator looked at the helmsman.

"So we just keep making sharp turns and force them to expend more gravitons keeping pace with us." he said and Ash nodded.

"Sounds good to me. I know I can get more gees out of the *Warspite* than a human body will tolerate." he said.

"They have been attempting to buy a modern particle inductor that they can use industrially but no one will sell them a state of the art system and that's all they'll accept. If anything looks even remotely out of date they refuse to have anything to do with it." Lucas said, "However, given the rumours about them collaborating with the Genex during the war there isn't anyone willing to sell them what they want. Let alone teach them how to make one from scratch."

"Seems like they won't be a problem then." Shaw said.

"They might." Lucas said, "We don't know exactly what their stocks of tachyons or gravitons are but we estimate that they at least have enough for their fleet to carry out two full engagements."

"How big is their fleet?" Willis asked.

"They have a squadron consisting of seven destroyers and two frigates. Plus a pair of ships we think are light cruisers and at least two dozen smaller ships, half of which are just gunships." Lucas told him.

"No attack craft though." Shaw said.

"Just unmanned drones." Lucas answered, "There is one thing to note above everything else though. The

locals use antimatter for power generation almost exclusively.”

“Isn't that kind of dangerous?” Goldman said.

“Extremely so. That's why it remains just a technological curiosity in the Commonwealth.” Bernard replied.

“To the inhabitants of Verne all that matters is that it's advanced.” Lucas said, “All of their ships are powered by antimatter annihilation and they use it widely in their space based weaponry as well. They use it in particle beams and the warheads of missiles. Intelligence thinks that their weapons and engines all draw antimatter from a central reserve rather than maintaining different stocks for different systems.”

“What happens if we put a gauss cannon round through this central reserve?” Knight said.

“Boom.” Bernard said, using his hands to mime an explosion, “The matter of the projectile would react with the antimatter fuel and be annihilated. The energy release would destroy any ship in existence.”

“I don't suppose we know where those fuel reservoirs are located in their ships do we lieutenant?” Reeves asked but Lucas shook her head.

“I'm sorry captain but no. Part of the problem relates to their drive system, they use a magnetic ion drive that expels magnetically charged particles for thrust. Again it's very advanced but not necessarily better than our more conventional fusion drives but it does give off a powerful magnetic field that hides where the field around the stored antimatter is located.”

“What about their ground forces?” Willis asked.

“The same as their space fleet.” Lucas answered, “Their method of warfare appears geared around using the most advanced equipment available regardless of whether it's the most efficient. As far as we know they don't use any conventional firearms or heavier weapons based on ordinary ballistic technology.”

“So what are they using?” Thundercloud said, “If their weapons cause specific types of injuries then I need to be able to treat them.”

“They do have projectile weapons in their armoury,” Lucas replied, “but they're basically scaled down versions of the gauss cannons we've got aboard the *Warspite*. From what we know of them they're effective enough but complicated and much heavier than our own small arms. They also have a lot more personal laser weaponry than we have, as small as handgun sized. Again they're heavier than our weapons though not necessarily any more effective. When it comes to vehicles a lot of what they have is similar to our own but they've also developed a number of more unconventional types. They've developed some anti-gravity types but because of their limited supply of gravitons they've not put them into widespread service. More common are a range of walking vehicles. As you'd expect they've got good cross country capability but their speed is incredibly limited.”

“Their personal armour could still be a problem.” Willis commented, “It'll take a lot of firepower to deal with troops in powered armour.”

“Captain I'd like to remind you that your mission is not to engage the defence forces at Verne.” Smith said.

“Of course not.” Reeves said, “But the *Warspite* is a warship and I want to be prepared for all eventualities. How does Interpol see this going?”

“My purpose here is just to make introductions captain. I'll take Inspector Boucher to the Interpol office on Verne and meet with an agent there. Then they'll put her in touch with the local police who can help with her investigation.” Smith explained.

“You're just in case they don't prove co-operative.” Boucher added.

“One problem,” Thomas said, “Verne is at CPD sixty-seven thirty-seven oh three, about twenty-eight light years from here. That's well out of range of our tachyon communications.”

“There are local satellites.” Lucas said, “The cost is high because of the limited availability of tachyons but we may be able to seize control of one of them long enough to send a message if we have to.”

“We might also want to think about offering to produce tachyons in exchange for access to the satellites.”

Goldman added and Reeves nodded in agreement.

“It's a possibility but we aren't going there to solve their tachyon shortage. Frankly I'd rather be taking courier drones with us.” he said.

“Fourteen hours is enough to swap out a module.” Bernard said, “But we'll have to get started soon.”

“Then do it.” Reeves said and then he looked at Lucas again, “Is there anything more lieutenant?” he asked her.

“Just one more thing captain.” she replied, “It's probably nothing. But apart from the primary colony on Verne, which is also a nation called Verne there's a second settlement on a different continent.”

“Why don't I like where this is going?” Willis said.

“Who are they?” Knight asked.

“They're more of a back to nature group.” Lucas said, “They shun most technology though they occasionally need it to adapt themselves to their surroundings and Verne is one of the few places in human space where the procedures can be carried out.”

“Oh great.” Willis said, wincing, “Ferals.”

“Ferals aren't going to be a threat to the *Warspite*.” Thomas said, “We'll be in space and they'll be climbing trees.”

"It would be nice to know how many we're dealing with though." Reeves said, "Lieutenant Lucas I want you to try and find out. Commander Bernard please begin preparations to exchange one of our cargo modules for a drone hangar and requisition long range courier drones and finally Lieutenant Commander Goldman could you please find our guests somewhere to stay? We have just under fourteen hours before we depart. I'd like to be ready at least an hour before that."

Chancellor Susanna Eriksson had led the nation of Verne for several years and during that time contact with the Commonwealth had been minimal. Now with the news that a Commonwealth warship was on its way to her planet she was anxious to make sure that her government was prepared for every possible eventuality and for that reason she had called this meeting. Two of those present were military officers, Admiral Gregory commanded the small space fleet that protected the system while General Marino commanded the air and ground forces. Two government ministers completed the list of those present, Adelmarr Van Rijn was Minister for Science and Technology, an important role in a society such as that on Verne and Mary King was minister for Defence and Security. Minister King was considered only a junior member of a government that paid little attention to what went on outside its own system, especially given Verne's technological deficit in many areas related to military operations but on this occasion her involvement was important.

"A Commonwealth cruiser is four days away from Verne." the chancellor said, "The claim is that it is merely acting in support of Interpol, but I doubt that is the whole truth, if it is true at all."

"You think the Commonwealth intends to attack?" Minister Van Rijn asked.

"One cruiser against our entire fleet?" Minister King responded.

"What class is it?" Admiral Gregory said.

"According to the message from the Commonwealth it is the *CSV Warspite*. The Essex-class cruiser based at Gamma Pavonis." Chancellor Eriksson told him.

"State of the art then. A Commonwealth ship like that possesses true FTL capability and artificial gravity." Admiral Gregory pointed out, "If their purpose is just a limited strike then they could theoretically drop out of FTL, hit their target and then withdraw before our ships can get into position to retaliate. In a broadside to broadside engagement it out guns and can out manoeuvre any of our ships one on one. They'll probably try and isolate units from our fleet to pick them off in that way and there's not much we can do about it unless my ships can have carte blanche to use whatever tachyons and gravitons from our stockpile they want for the duration of the Commonwealth ship's presence."

"I'm sorry admiral but that stockpile is too valuable for me to authorise your ships being given any more than the levels they already have." Chancellor Eriksson replied, "However, I do want you to run war games with your ship commanders to determine the best strategy for protecting us against an attack without depleting our resources below critical levels."

"Of course chancellor." the admiral replied.

"And General Marino I want the same from you. It is possible that a raid could be launched against a surface target. If that happens then I want the army ready to defend against it."

"A surface target?" Minister Van Rijn said, leaning forwards, "Do you think they know about my project?"

"That possibility can't be entirely discounted." Minister King said, "My ministry did vet your staff as much as possible but given your involvement of off world-"

"I needed skills not found here on Verne." Minister Van Rijn interrupted, "Had we tried to do this on our own then we'd risk destroying everything."

"Nevertheless Adelmarr," Chancellor Eriksson said, "the Commonwealth may have discovered what you are doing."

"I don't even know what they're doing," General Marino said, "and it's the military that were called upon to transport all the equipment to the other side of the planet. If you want a garrison as well then-"

"No. No garrison." Minister Van Rijn said, "The Commonwealth will detect a build up of troops. Even if they do know about the project then they may not know exactly where it is located."

"Outside the established borders of our country." Admiral Gregory commented, "Unless those ferals have suddenly acquired an army of their own that puts you a long way from help. Especially with a Commonwealth cruiser in orbit where it can shoot down aerospace craft carrying reinforcements."

"That is why your plans need to include keeping that Commonwealth ship from getting into a position where it can do just that." the chancellor said. Then she looked at the two ministers present, "While our military are preparing to defend ourselves against an attack I want the pair of you to try and determine exactly why that cruiser is coming here. Mary, have our intelligence service do all it can to access the cruiser's computer so we can get a look at its mission orders and Adelmarr, I want you to find someone qualified to speak directly with the cruiser's crew. Try and get them to open up about what they're doing here."

"You expect the crew of the cruiser to be open to having guests?" Admiral Gregory commented.

"No. But we can be. I believe that the annual academy graduation dinner is being held at about the same time as the Warspite will arrive here?" Chancellor Eriksson said.

"Yes, if your timings are accurate then a day after." the admiral replied, nodding.

“Then invite the captain and his senior officers to attend. Providing they don't just attack as soon as they arrive in our system we should be able to find out what their real purpose here is.”

INTERLUDE.

Hayes slowed her car on the drive home as traffic began to build up and at that moment her phone began to ring and the car radio automatically reduced its volume. Looking at the display in the centre of her dashboard that was linked wirelessly to the phone in her pocket she saw that it was Vale calling her.

"Pick up." she said and the ringing stopped as the call was connected, "What is it Enrico?" she asked.

"We've got a problem. A big problem." he said excitedly.

"Calm down. Tell me what's happened." Hayes replied.

"The Canadians have tracked Denton's escape route to Verne. They've raised the issue with Interpol and now there's an Interpol agent and RCMP inspector on their way there. They'll arrive in under four days."

"So find the name of a suitable agent there and arrange an accident." Hayes said, "Problem solved."

"They're not travelling commercially. The Commonwealth has provided them with a ship. It's the *Warspite*." Vale told her and Hayes swore.

"What's the status of the *Grey Dawn*?" she asked, "Conrad's team as well."

"On standby, both of them. But it'll take the *Grey Dawn* six days to reach Verne." Enrico said.

"Then they need to get going as soon as possible. Oh and find Doctor Horst as well. They'll need someone who can make sure there's nothing left to connect Denton to us. Have Conrad's people pick her up."

"I don't think she'll like that commander. She was brought in to offer technical support, not as a field agent." Vale said.

"Would you rather go yourself Enrico?" Hayes asked, knowing that people like Vale avoided situations where physical conflict could be involved. Horst would as well given the choice but Hayes intended to make sure that she was not given one.

"I'll track her down." Vale said and Hayes smiled.

"Very good Enrico." she said, "Let me know as soon as the *Grey Dawn* has left." and then she tapped the dashboard display to hang up the phone.

Back in his office Vale quickly dialled his phone again, this time calling the barracks where a team of special forces troops that had been made available for Hayes' use was quartered.

"Yes?" a voice asked when the call was answered.

"Put Conrad on." Vale said and there was a delay as the phone was passed to someone else.

"Conrad." another voice said.

"It's Vale."

"What do you want little man?" Conrad asked.

"Get your team together, you're being deployed." Vale told him.

"About time too. So what's the op?"

"Two parts. You're being sent to Verne. Your assignment is to make sure that the Commonwealth can't trace anything there back to us."

"Sure, we'll take out any investigators." Conrad said.

"No, that's to be avoided. A technical specialist has been assigned to the operation. Your orders are to protect them while they take care of any evidence."

"Are you coming with us little man?"

"No. My speciality is strategic analysis. You'll be accompanied by Doctor Angela Horst."

"Sure. You said there were two parts to the operation. What's the second?"

"Collect Doctor Horst. She's probably at home and may not be co-operative. Get her to the *Grey Dawn* as soon as possible." Vale said and he was about to hang up when he thought to add an extra warning, "Oh and whatever you do, remember that when you collect her Doctor Horst and her family are not to be harmed in any way."

4.

The roar of engines could be heard well before the thrust vectored vehicle appeared above the area of ground that had been cleared of trees to create a landing zone and came in to land beside the similar vehicle already present. A man and a woman both walked towards this vehicle and paused to give the pilot time to shut down the engines that were spreading debris churned up from the ground by the exhaust blast. Both the individuals waiting to be able to approach the aircraft had heads that were shaved at the backs and around the sides, leaving just a patch of hair on top that in the case of the woman was long enough to hang down to her shoulder at one side. This style was for more than just the sake of fashion though and then shaved areas of their heads revealed the external parts of cybernetic implants made into their skulls, including ports that could be used to establish a physical connection to other equipment.

When the engines of the thrust vector vehicle were finally powered down the pair continued to advance towards it and they saw a hatch slide open in the side to permit one of the passengers to disembark. Like the pair here to meet him, this man had shaved most of head to leave just a patch of short grey hair on top. However, in addition to the implants at the back of his skull this man had also had one of his eyes replaced with an obvious artificial one.

"Where is professor Gruber? I need to speak with him right away." he asked, "In private."

"In the cavern." the man here to meet him replied, "I'll take you to him. Do you want me to message ahead and let him know we are coming?"

"Yes, this will be easier if we don't need to wander around the site looking for him." the new arrival said and the other man paused.

"It is done." he said, "A message has been relayed to the operations centre for the professor to be summoned there. We'll escort you down."

The new arrival nodded and the pair who had met him then proceeded to guide him to a nearby cluster of prefabricated structures that had been set up among the trees and painted with a camouflage pattern to mask their presence from aerial or orbital surveillance, one of which had a set of winching gear connected to the outside and it was into this that the group headed. Here they stepped onto an elevator platform that, in response to a command sent from the woman's skull implants it began to descend.

"Minister Van Rijn," the woman said, "forgive me for asking but is there a problem with our project? I thought progress had been good since the arrival of the professor. He may not be as enlightened about the use of technology as we are but he is capable in his field."

"I'm sorry but I'm afraid that I cannot discuss the reasons for my visit in detail with Doctor Jansen. There may have been a security leak." Van Rijn replied.

"A security leak? Surely you don't suspect one of us?" the other man said, "Every member of the team has been fully vetted and the security software uploaded to our implants is the best available."

"Yes, I realise this Doctor Hague. However, we have received word that a Commonwealth warship is on its way here and the ministry of security thinks that they are aware of the dig."

The elevator came to a halt and the three occupants got out, stepping into yet another prefabricated structure that had been assembled underground.

"This way minister." Doctor Jansen said, pointing towards a nearby door, "The professor will be brought to you here shortly."

"Thank you." Minister Van Rijn replied. Passing through the doorway he found himself in a meeting room that contained a table and several chairs positioned around it while most of one wall was dominated by a viewscreen on which a government logo revolved. There was a jug of water and several glasses in the centre of the table but the minister did not touch this as he sat down to wait.

He had been in the room for just a few minutes when the door opened again and a man in coveralls and holding a hard hat with a flash light fixed to a mounting on the side entered.

"Minister, this is a surprise." he said, "Your timing is somewhat awkward as well, we were just about to begin clearing another structure. From the look of the cabling that leads into it your people think that-

"I apologise for interrupting your work, as important as it is to us." Minister Rijn interrupted, "But I am here to take you back with me to the capital. The government thinks that there has been a breach in security."

"Whatever gives you that idea?" Professor Gruber asked.

"There is a Commonwealth warship on the way. It is our opinion that they intend to secure the dig site for themselves." the minister replied.

"But they can't. This planet isn't part of the Commonwealth." Gruber protested.

"Perhaps, but neither is this site within the borders of our nation and you know the contempt that the locals are held in by most Commonwealth citizens. You yourself have been heard to make comments about their use of genetic manipulation professor."

"I hope you don't think that I would-"

"Believe me professor, if I thought you had leaked information about this site to the Commonwealth I would not have come here. I would have sent agents to place you under arrest. My department monitors all signals into and out of this site very carefully, an advantage of there being only one communication node available and we do not think that anyone here is responsible for the leak. However, we need to know how much the Commonwealth knows and for that we need you."

"How can I help?"

"The Commonwealth expects us to believe that their ship is coming here just to deliver a pair of law enforcement agents hunting for evidence in a criminal case back on earth. Though this seems unlikely to us. We shall still welcome them with open arms, however and treat them with the care they are due. A dinner is being arranged by the ministry of defence to welcome the crew of this ship and I want you there."

"I'm not a soldier minister." Gruber pointed out.

"I know. But the guest list will include people from several government departments and so your presence will not arouse suspicion. I want you to speak with the crew of the Commonwealth ship and tell me what they have to say about their presence here."

"Okay I'll do it." Gruber said as he walked across the room to where a window looked out into the artificially lit cavern outside the structure and looked out at the ancient and incredibly advanced alien city that his staff were in the process of digging out of the ground.

The *Warspite* dropped to sub light speed on the outer edge of the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -67' 3703 system. Often when entering a system that contained no Commonwealth nations a warship like the *Warspite* would do its best to avoid detection. However, given that on this occasion the cruiser's presence was official Reeves had no such concern and he took the opportunity to gather as much information about the system as he could.

"Give me a full sensor sweep of the system." he ordered, "Passive and active. Use tadar for real time."

"Commencing scan captain." Goldman responded.

Most of the *Warspite's* sensors were limited to gathering information at the speed of light and so the results returned by them could be several hours out of date. On the other hand the tadar system emitted bursts of tachyons that functioned in a similar manner to conventional radar and the results of that would provide the *Warspite's* crew with a current picture of activity within the system. Of course it also massively increased the chance of the vessel being detected immediately by adding another burst of faster than light particles to the one created when it dropped to sub light speed and discarded the shell of tachyons that had enabled it to travel faster than light.

"Captain I've got two vessels at six million kilometres turning to face us." Cortez reported, "Accelerating at approximately one gee."

"Providing gravity for the crew." Knight commented before looking at Cortez and adding, "Size?"

"About three hundred metres in length commander." Cortez answered and Knight turned towards Lucas.

"Any ideas lieutenant?" he said to her.

Lucas checked the sensor readings against the information that Commonwealth Fleet Intelligence had been able to provide her on the warships of Verne before answering when she recognised the configuration of both of them.

"The profiles match what we know about their warships." she said, "Looks like a frigate and a destroyer."

"Convenient for them to be right where we arrive." Thomas said.

"A welcoming committee perhaps." Ash suggested.

"Then let's be gracious guests." Reeves said, "Lieutenant Commander Goldman please identify us to those ships and get our passengers up here. I'm sure they'll want to hear what the locals have to say."

"Yes captain." Goldman replied and, knowing that the local warships would be unlikely to want to communicate in real time using tachyon based communications she opened a radio channel to the approaching warships, "This is the Commonwealth Space Vehicle *Warspite*, registration charlie hotel three zero seven to the two vessels approaching our position. We are in your system on a diplomatic mission enacted under Interpol treaties and request direct communication. Over."

Even if the crew of either local warship responded the moment they received the message sent by Goldman it would still take around forty seconds for a reply to reach the *Warspite* and in the meantime Reeves wanted more information about the system, even if that information was older than the tadar scan.

"What have we got from passive scans?" he asked.

"I'm picking up numerous orbitals around Verne sir." another of the sensor operators replied, "Very large in scale, at least two thousand metres across."

"Let me see." Reeves said and he looked down at the monitor in front of him as the sensor operator provided him with an image of a large open framed structure. In addition to the visual image there was also data on thermal profiles and magnetic resonance.

"That's a strong magnetic field for us to be able to read it from here." Goldman commented as she too studied the image and accompanying data.

"It's for collecting anti-matter from cosmic rays." Knight said and he pointed to several large spheres clustered at the end of the structure facing Verne itself, "See? That's where the anti-matter is being stored."

"How long would it take to fill one of those pods though?" Thomas asked.

"Several hours." Knight replied, "There's not much anti-matter in cosmic rays to begin with. But I suppose it's still free, unlike what can be made in a lab."

"Captain I'm picking up a radio signal from one of those warships." Goldman said suddenly.

"That was quick." Thomas said, looking at his console to double check the relative positions of the ships from the *Warspite*.

"They must have sent their message before receiving ours." Reeves said, "Commander, put them through." Goldman nodding and the transmission from one of the approaching ships was then heard over the bridge speakers.

"This is the Verne frigate *Alvin Toffler* to the Commonwealth warship entering our system." the message began, "You will identify yourself and not proceed any closer to Verne until authorised. Signal your compliance. Over."

"Commander Ash kindly turn us towards those ships while keeping our distance from Verne itself." Reeves said and Ash nodded.

"Coming about." he said. Meanwhile Knight leant closer to Reeves.

"You know that heading straight for those ships could be interpreted as a hostile act, don't you?" he said softly and Reeves nodded in response.

"In which case they can ask us to turn away." he said before adding, "Goldman, let them know we aren't planning on attacking. Just in case."

"Yes captain." she said as she activated the *Warspite's* radio transmitter again, "*Alvin Toffler* this is the *Warspite*. We are coming about as per your instruction. Over."

It was then that Boucher and Smith arrived in the bridge, escorted by a marine.

"Ah," Reeves said, "we've encountered a pair of local vessels. My guess is that they'll be waiting for instructions from Verne but then they'll be wanting to speak to the pair of you."

"That's normal." Smith said, looking around the bridge, "Where do you want us?"

"By the central console is fine. We'll give you everything you need." Reeves replied and the pair of law enforcement agents made their way to the centre of the bridge as Goldman transferred details of the two warships from Verne as well as transcripts of the communication from the *Alvin Toffler* to the central console.

"Captain I think I've got the rest of their ships." Lucas said and both Reeves and Knight looked at her.

"Are they heading this way?" Knight asked.

"No sir, they're still in dock. Or at least they were six hours ago when this image is from." Lucas replied and she shared an image of another large structure in orbit around Verne with both Reeves and Knight. Unlike the largely open framed anti-matter collecting satellites, this particular orbital structure consisted of a single large ring that rotated in such a way that decks arranged so that the 'up' direction was towards the very centre of the ring would have gravity pulling towards the outer edge. Mounted around the edge of this station were numerous large docking ports that extended out several hundred metres. Each of these ports consisted of a single long arm that the spin of the space station would cause to push into a ship manoeuvred into their path where it could then be secured and five more ships the same size as the two that were now approaching the *Warspite* were docked against some of these, with each ship occupying an arm of its own. In addition to these were two more ships about twice the length of these that also both had an arm to themselves and several much smaller ones that were docked two or three to an arm. However, there was also something else docked to the station on an arm that was surrounded by a large framework.

"Lieutenant, care to hazard a guess as to what that is?" Reeves asked and he pointed to the ship within the framework that, by comparing its size to the other ships present, was clearly much larger than the *Warspite*.

"The ship looks incomplete captain." Lucas replied.

"Maybe, but I'd say that it's not far off being finished." Knight commented.

"The Caliphate aren't the only ones upgrading their fleet." Reeves added, "So lieutenant, what is it?"

"It's obviously at least a battlecruiser." Knight added.

"I can see what look like four large turret mountings." Lucas said, "Plus a number of much smaller ones but nothing in the mid range. I can't be certain but I think it's a dreadnought."

"Last time we faced something like that we got our asses handed to us." Ash commented, remembering their first encounter with the Ticik.

"That ship had artificial gravity." Thomas pointed out, "We'd run rings around this one after they run out of stored gravitons."

"That's probably the purpose of the heavy turrets." Knight said, "If they can turn fast enough to track us then it won't matter what sort of high gee manoeuvres we make."

"We aren't at war yet gentlemen." Reeves said, "Lieutenant Lucas, I don't suppose any of the ships docked at that station match the profile of that scout we caught spying on us in Sissusk space do they?"

"Not as far as I can tell captain." Lucas answered, shaking her head, "There are a number of ships of about

that size but given the limited data we have on that ship I doubt I could get a positive match even if it was right in front of us.”

“Captain the Verne ships are turning.” Cortez announced suddenly and the *Warspite's* senior officers turned their attention back towards the closer warships.

“They’re slowing down.” Goldman said, “About one gee again, using their main drive to provide reverse thrust and keeping the crew under normal gravity.”

“How quaint.” Thomas said, “Just like we did more than a hundred years ago.”

“*Warspite* this is the *Alvin Toffler*,” the same voice as earlier said over the radio, “we will escort you into port. Over.”

“Captain I'd recommend against that.” Lucas said.

“I agree.” Knight added, “In port they could try to sneak someone aboard.”

“Our proximity sensors would be useless captain.” Goldman added.

“Yes, I realise all of that.” Reeves said, “Commander Goldman, let the Verne know that we will hold at one light second from their planet.” then he looked at Boucher and Smith, “I'm afraid your shuttle ride to the surface will be more than just a short orbital hop.” he told them.

“*Alvin Toffler* this is *Warspite*. Our orders are to hold at one light second from Verne.” Goldman transmitted.

“Think they'll go for it?” Knight asked.

“What choice do they have?” Reeves responded, “From one light second at least they know they'll be able to react to any major attack we launch.” then he smiled and added, “Plus we'll be able to see anyone heading our way from behind the horizon much easier than in a lower orbit.”

“*Warspite* this is the *Alvin Toffler*. Follow us in, do not exceed one gee acceleration. Over and out.”

“I guess they went for it.” Knight said.

“That was too quick for them to have got instructions from Verne without using FTL comms.” Reeves pointed out, “The *Alvin Toffler's* captain probably just wants to avoid any delay and is waiting to hear from his superiors about how to proceed.”

“Your orders captain?” Ash asked.

“You heard our hosts commander. Follow them in. Nice and slowly.” Reeves replied, “Commander Goldman, launch a courier drone back to Gamma Pavonis. Let them know we have arrived and established initial contact with the Verne. Oh and let them know about that dreadnought, someone in intelligence really dropped the ball on not knowing about that before now.”

With its own artificial gravity field to protect the crew from the stresses of extreme acceleration the *Warspite* could have made the trip to Verne in several hours, even at sub-light speed. However, the limitation imposed of having to match pace with the two Verne warships, that were clearly unwilling or unable to make use of any stored gravitons to increase their acceleration, meant that the journey took more than a day. The problem lay not only in the time taken for the two escorting warships to build up speed but also for them to slow down again in order to be able to dock and the only change to this gradual build up and shedding of speed came when the *Warspite* reached a point just over one light second from the surface of Verne.

“At one light second now captain.” Ash reported.

“All stop.” Reeves ordered and Ash applied the full power of the cruiser's engines to its deceleration. At this point the three starships were still travelling at more than seventy-five kilometres every second and the *Warspite* was able to come to a dead halt in just a few minutes. On the other hand the two Verne warships carried on slowing down at the same steady one gee of thrust, putting them still two hours away from their base.

“Captain there are heat blooms coming from one of those cruisers. I think she's preparing to launch.”

Goldman announced as she checked the feed from the *Warspite's* sensors. Now that the ship was closer to Verne the information being gathered by the electromagnetic based sensor systems was far more current than it had been when the *Warspite* first arrived in the system.

“Agreed, heat build up in the engines of one light cruiser. Intelligence identifies that ship as the *George Orwell*.” Lucas added as she double checked the information.

“Probably to keep an eye on us.” Knight commented.

“Think they'll keep burning fuel to circle us or stop and go zero-gee?” Thomas commented.

“We'll find out in due course.” Reeves said, “In the mean time do we have a shuttle ready to launch?”

“Yes captain. Fuelled and ready in the forward hangar as you requested.” Goldman replied and Reeves smiled.

“Excellent. In that case have Inspector Boucher and Agent Smith report to the forward hangar to be transported to the surface. Oh and let the pilot know that he can feel free to use up as much of the stored gravitons in his singularity jars as he wants to get them to the surface as soon as possible.”

“You're wanting them to see that shuttle overtake their warships aren't you?” Knight said and Reeves' smile widened.

“Maybe.” he replied.

"Captain we're getting a signal from the space dock." Goldman said, "Audio and video. They're asking to be connected to you."

"By name?" Knight asked.

"No, they want to speak to the commanding officer of this ship." Goldman answered.

"At least their intelligence isn't good enough to know who I am." Reeves commented, "Put them through to my station lieutenant commander." and Goldman nodded.

On the display in front of Reeves an image of a man wearing a military uniform sat in an office with a map of the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -67' 3703 system dominating most of the wall behind him. The rank markings were similar to those used by many Commonwealth nations and from these Reeves guessed that he was speaking with an admiral of the local fleet. What made him stand out from any of the flag officers that Reeves had dealt with before was the obvious presence of cybernetic implants to his body. Completely bald, it appeared that his head was kept shaved to keep some of these implants exposed and easily accessible while both his eyes were nothing but jet black orbs with rims of silver just about visible around the edges.

"You are the commanding officer of the Warspite?" the Verne admiral asked.

"I am." Reeves answered, "My name is Captain Reeves."

"And I am Admiral Gregory." the admiral responded, "I have an offer for you captain. You and some of your officers."

"I hope this doesn't involve access to my ship." Reeves said.

"No, nothing like that. Something far less serious. We're having something of a formal dinner here at the Ministry of Defence to honour some of our servicemen and women tomorrow night and I'd like to extend an invitation for you to attend. We don't get very many visitors out here and it's always nice to add a few new faces into the mix. In the spirit of friendship of course. Those two law officers you bright with you will be welcome as well of course." Admiral Gregory explained.

"Sounds like a party." Goldman commented.

"I'll need to keep most of my people here to keep the ship running but I'm sure that some of us, myself included, will be able to attend." Reeves replied, "What time would you like us there?"

"Any time around eight."

"Then I'll see you at eight. I send you a list of the officers attending." Reeves replied and the admiral smiled at him briefly before the signal was abruptly terminated.

"I suppose I have to stay here while you go to this party." Knight said.

"Somebody has to be in command." Reeves replied, "Besides, I'm not sure that I trust this invitation. The fact that they're scrambling warships to monitor us shows that they don't exactly trust us and yet we're being invited right into their Ministry of Defence. That doesn't add up to me."

"So why go at all?" Goldman asked.

"To see if I can find out what they're up to." Reeves said.

"And if it's a trap?" Knight asked.

"Then I won't be alone. I'll take Lieutenant Commander Shaw, Major Willis and Doctor Thundercloud with me. All of them are of high enough rank for their presence at a formal dinner to be convincing but none are essential to the running of the ship or have technical knowledge that the Verne could try and coerce out of them."

"Captain there's something odd going on with our data traffic." Goldman said unexpectedly and Reeves and Knight both looked at her.

"Define 'odd' commander." Reeves said.

"Well there are all the usual transponders and wide band data broadcasts you'd expect in an inhabited system but my system is also registering a number of specifically targeted attempts to establish data links with our network."

"Sounds like someone down on Verne is trying to hack us." Knight said.

"When did this start?" Reeves asked.

"I picked up the first trial pings of our data ports about seven hours after we dropped out of FTL but it's really starting to build up now that we're closer to Verne."

"Seven hours is about right for someone on Verne trying to hack us as soon as they saw we'd arrived." Knight said.

"Does it look like an organised effort to hack us or are there just a bunch of amateurs out there thinking they can steal our data?" Reeves said.

"I can't tell captain. All I can say is that the attempts appear to be coming from more than one place. Our firewalls are holding them for now but there's no guarantee that that will remain the case."

"Very well." Reeves said and he activated the intercom, "Bridge to engineering, Commander Bernard are you there?"

"I'm here captain." Bernard responded.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman has made me aware that there are people trying to break into our computer system commander." Reeves said.

"I think I see it captain." Bernard said as he checked a network monitor in engineering, "They aren't getting through yet though."

"And I want it to stay that way commander. I'm sending Lieutenant Lucas down to you now. Making sure that our firewalls remain intact is your primary goal but I wouldn't mind you coming up with some way of identifying who's trying to get into our system and turning the tables on them without me needing to order an strike from orbit."

Sat alone in his office in the orbiting military space dock Admiral Gregory used his implants to activate the office communications with a thought, establishing a link to the office of Minister Van Rijn where the communication system linked with the implants of the minister and enabled the pair to speak as if they were sat in the same room.

"Ah admiral, you have news for me?" Minister Van Rijn asked.

"I made the offer just as you wanted and I understand that the Ministry of Defence is hurrying to get everything ready as you ordered. Though why you can't just hold this dinner at the Ministry of Science and Technology I don't know."

"Because I don't want to call any more attention to what we're doing than necessary. Nor do I want Commonwealth spies in the same building as my office."

"Ah yes, your secret project with the ferals. When will the military find out what it is that we're shipping supplies and personnel half way across the planet for minister?"

"When you need to and not before admiral. Don't worry, there is nothing about my project that poses a threat to any of us." Van Rijn said before abruptly breaking off the connection.

5.

As soon as the tiny craft left the *Warspite's* forward hangar the pilot of the shuttle brought the engines up to full power and accelerated towards Verne, singling out the nation's capital city as the shuttle's destination. The pilot was a marine who was more used to flying dropships used to deliver troops to the surface of a planet and then providing them with air support, all while under hostile fire. This meant that he was trained to make rapid and severe manoeuvres and in the seats behind him both Inspector Boucher and Agent Smith flinched when they saw the various satellites orbiting Verne suddenly come rushing towards them through the forward viewports.

"How's the Interpol building marked?" the pilot asked, glancing back over his shoulder for a moment.

"A transponder broadcasting the letters ICPO." Agent Smith replied. Then he noticed the two Verne warships that had escorted the *Warspite* from the outer edge of the system ahead of the shuttle. In the time taken for the shuttle to be launched and get this far from the *Warspite* the two Verne warships had made it only half way to the orbiting space dock, "Lieutenant, are we catching up with them already?" he added.

"Oh yeah, Captain Reeves wants me to make a real show of this." the pilot responded and he deliberately steered the shuttle closer to the nearest ship of the pair, the destroyer that had made no direct contact with the *Warspite*, "Let's see if this gets a response from them." he said, maintaining the shuttle's acceleration as it sped past the destroyer.

"Commonwealth shuttle this is Verne orbital traffic control. Slow your approach. Over." a voice said over the shuttle's radio.

"Looks like you attracted someone's attention." Boucher said but the pilot did not reply to her, instead he addressed the traffic controller.

"This is Commonwealth shuttle to Verne orbital traffic control, requesting diplomatic clearance to approach beacon india charlie pappa oscar. Over." he transmitted.

There was a brief pause from the traffic control before a reply was received.

"Confirmed Commonwealth shuttle. You are cleared for approach to beacon india charlie pappa oscar. You will not land at any other location. Signal your understanding. Over."

"Understood Verne traffic control. Setting course for Jules Verne city region. Over and out."

The pilot followed the order to decelerate, something required for a safe entry into Verne's atmosphere in any case and outside the shuttle its occupants saw the flames caused by the friction between the shuttle's hull and the air around it as it descended. Breaking through the clouds the shuttle's occupants were finally able to see the city of Jules Verne, Verne's capital. Like many modern cities there were many tall skyscrapers and every building was bedecked with wireless antennas. Where the city differed from what they were used to though was the vast network of monorail tracks suspended high above the ground and the numerous small monorail cars moving around this at high speed, each car carrying a small number of passengers directly to the building of their choice on the network while automatically avoiding any of the other cars.

"I've got the beacon." the pilot announced, "Four thousand metres dead ahead."

Agent Smith looked ahead of the shuttle, watching as the pilot flew towards the Interpol office building and smiling when he saw the organisation's logo mounted on each side of the structure. The Interpol building was far from being one of the larger buildings in the city of Jules Verne but it was among the tallest in its local area, enabling the marine shuttle pilot to easily descend towards its rooftop landing pad and touch down.

"Okay we're down." he announced as he began the procedure of shutting down the shuttle's engines. At the same time as this was happening a man emerged onto the rooftop and began to approach the shuttle. Like both of the shuttle's passengers he wore what looked like an ordinary business suit but in keeping with other Verne the sides and rear of his head were shaved to permit access to numerous cybernetic implants in his skull.

"Agent Smith." the man called out as Boucher and Smith disembarked from the shuttle and he held out his hand in greeting, "I'm Frank Downs, Verne Interpol office."

"Good to meet you Agent Downs. This is Inspector Boucher, Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I take it you've been briefed on the purpose of our visit here?"

"Howard Denton? Yes, if you'd like to come with me I can show you what the Jules Verne PD have been able to supply to me. A detective will also." Downs replied, shaking Boucher's hand as well and then he led the two new arrivals from the landing pad.

They took a lift to the floor where Downs' office was located and Boucher and Smith exchanged glances when the doors closed behind them as soon as they were aboard and it began to move without any obvious action from any of them.

"Did you just do that?" Boucher asked, looking at Downs and he smiled back at her.

"Sorry. I suppose it can seem odd at first but yes, I can control the lifts, lights and pretty much anything else in the building directly using the wireless link I've got implanted." Downs answered, "I can even use it to

communicate directly with other people via their implants. Trust me you won't find anyone here wasting their time looking for a lost cellphone." and the other two law enforcement agents smiled as the lift doors slid open again, "Here we are, this is our floor." Downs added.

An office had been prepared for the two visitors to Verne just along the corridor from the lift and as soon as Downs opened the door the lights inside it came on, again thanks to a command sent from his implants.

"I see there's still a light switch." Smith commented as he walked through the doorway.

"This room is designed for use by off world visitors." Downs replied, "You'll also find an ordinary telephone over there on the desk if you need it."

"Very good." Boucher said, "Now how about that information?"

"Of course." Downs responded and the computer terminal on the desk in the centre of the office suddenly activated, as did the large wall mounted screen. This was promptly split into two halves as a close up image of Howard Denton appeared on one half of the screen while the other listed the files that had been provided by the Jules Verne police.

"Let's start with what Denton did here on Verne." Boucher said and Downs nodded. Then before Boucher or Smith could touch the computer in front of them Downs opened one of the files.

"As you can see Howard Denton has had numerous visas to visit Verne, all based on business interests. We have an address for an office as well as an apartment in one of the city's more expensive areas. I believe that the police have been speaking to his staff at both. In fact we'll be able to confirm that now, a Detective Orban has just arrived downstairs and is on his way up."

"I am never going to get used to that." Boucher said.

"I can't imagine not being able to do it." Downs responded, walking over to the office door and opening it just as Detective Orban arrived outside, "Come in detective. Allow me to introduce Agent Smith of Interpol and Inspector Boucher of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

"Jose Orban. Jules Verne Police Department." Orban said as he shook hands with the two visitors, "I've been checking up on your Mister Denton."

"And what did you find?" Boucher asked.

"That no-one here had a bad thing to say about him." Orban answered, "He supplied a lot of items that we aren't set up to manufacture yet as well as materials that we don't have access to."

"Tachyons? Gravitons?" Boucher said.

"No. More like advanced composites and rare metals. Here, let me show you." and he looked towards the wall mounted screen, calling up a set of customs documents, "This shows the manifests submitted to customs over the last two years. I have more going back twenty but these will do for now. Howard Denton was a key source of many different resources."

"No finished goods?" Smith said.

"No, he dealt with local manufacturers instead. I also have a list of meetings between him and agents of our revenue service. Apparently he was lobbying to get the various duties being imposed on him reduced. He argued that he was supporting our local economy by providing it with needed raw materials."

"And what did the tax men have to say?" Boucher asked.

"They told him to pay up." Orban said abruptly and Smith grinned.

"Tax collectors, always the same no matter what planet you're on." he said.

"I also talked to the people who worked for him." Orban went on, "They said he was a good guy to work for. Paid well and was easy to deal with."

"He didn't have the implants that everyone in your society has though, did he?" Boucher pointed out, "He couldn't have had them and retained any sort of security clearance in Canada."

"That's your loss," Orban said, "but no, as far as I can tell he didn't have any upgrades. But he did have this." and Orban called up another image on the wall mounted screen, this time a shot of Denton standing with a group of people who from the way their heads were shaved and the exposed cybernetic implants were all Verne as well as a figure that was familiar to Boucher, "That's a robot." Orban said, "A top of the line service model designed to look perfectly human."

"We're aware of the robot." Boucher said, "It's not a service model though."

"Then what is it?" Downs asked.

"Howard Denton bought himself an artificial girlfriend." Smith told him.

"Well he used her for more than the obvious." Orban said, "We know she's fitted with a wireless link and she used that to access systems that we'd normally access with our implants and save Denton the time of working with a tablet. People said he just told her what he wanted and she did it."

"I'll bet." Smith muttered.

"So it could contain addition records of his dealings here." Downs added.

"What happened to that thing?" Smith said, looking at Boucher.

"I don't know. No-one in my department saw it in person, just pictures. I'll have to ask someone from the *Warspite*. They found the thing after all." she said, "Now I'd like to see more of these manifests. I've got copies of what he told Canadian customs he was exporting and I want to make sure that they match up. Plus

I'd like to know what he was supplying the parts for.”

Martins had the arrival of the *Grey Dawn* in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -67' 3703 system delayed by a few hours so that he could match it with the arrival of a civilian transport ship that was coming in on an almost identical heading to the one he had followed. The crew of this transport were conducting only the bare minimum of scans to make sure that they did not crash into anything while travelling faster than light and so by keeping the *Grey Dawn's* emissions to a minimum the scout ship was able to conceal itself in the shadow of the transport and by shedding its shell of tachyons at the same time the *Grey Dawn's* drop to sub-light speeds was also hidden from observation. Then as the larger transport carried on towards Verne, Martins ordered a scan of the system.

“Tell me what we can see.” he told his bridge crew, “Passive scans only though.”

“The interstellar communications satellites are right where they ought to be around the star.” his sensor technician told him, “Plus I can see all the usual orbitals around Verne.” then he looked up from his console, “Captain I have the Commonwealth ship. It looks like the same one we were tracking in Sissusk space. Definitely Essex-class though.”

“Show me.” Martins ordered and the technician put an image of the *Warspite* on the main viewscreen, “Are they stationary?” he asked.

“Roughly yes sir. It looks like they're holding at one light second from Verne.

“Somebody doesn't trust someone else.” Martins said, “Either the crew of the cruiser are worried about someone trying to get aboard their ship or the Verne don't want a nuclear armed Commonwealth warship sat in low orbit over their planet.”

“How do you want to proceed captain?” the first officer asked.

“We need to send a copy of our scans back home but I don't want to risk giving our presence away with a tachyon transmission. Are our access codes for the local tachyon satellites current?”

“Yes captain, though there's no way of knowing whether the system is online before we send a transmission.” the *Grey Dawn's* communication officer told him.

“Try it anyway. Then get Conrad and Horst up here, I want both of their assessments on this.” Martins ordered.

On a ship the size of the *Grey Dawn* it never took very long for someone to travel from one part of the ship to another and soon after ordering them to the bridge both Conrad and Horst arrived together. It would have been difficult for the pair to look more different from one another. While Conrad was tall with a muscular physique and wore military combat fatigues, Doctor Horst was much smaller and she wore more formal business attire.

“As you can see we've arrived.” Martins said, pointing to the viewscreen showing the space around Verne, “We've sent an update home but it'll take at least five hours to get a reply. I wanted your assessment. Both of you.”

“Do you need anything destroying?” Conrad asked.

“Probably, but we'll need to find a way of getting you and your men to the surface.” Martins replied.

“Then just get us into the upper atmosphere and we'll do a direct drop. We'll take out whatever you want us to and steal a shuttle to get back. We'll need a pilot though.”

“Getting into the atmosphere light be difficult.” Martins said, “With that Commonwealth cruiser sat out there they'll see our entry trail. They may even spot a heat corona if we try waiting until they're over the horizon. What about you Missus Horst?”

“What about me?” Horst responded, glaring at Martins.

“What do you need to do your job?” Martins asked.

“My job is to offer a scientific assessment of alien civilisations to your Commander Hayes.” Horst replied angrily, “Being kidnapped by this thug and his band of killers wasn't part of any agreement I made.”

“Well you are here now and since I am in command of this vessel you'll do as I tell you.” Martins said, “Right now that means accessing the local computer networks to see how close the Commonwealth is to tracking what has happened back to us.”

Horst sighed.

“Well I need to be closer as well.” she said, waving a hand at the viewscreen, “I can see from here that we're well over a light minute from Verne. Unless you're willing to start firing off tachyon bursts at the planet then I can't do a thing with a two minute delay. Ideally I need to be on the surface as well so I can plug in directly, though don't count on me jumping out of this ship in the upper atmosphere, parachute or no parachute.”

“Sir the transport is one of ours. A transport registered as the *High Tide*.” the sensor technician reported.

“It comes from our system, that's not the same as one of ours.” Martins responded, “They might not be co-operative if we approach them openly. On the other hand I doubt they'd take the risk of exposing us either. Get me a secure link to that ship.”

Aligning the *Grey Dawn's* communication laser with a receptor on the *High Tide's* hull the scout ship's communication officer nodded at Martins.

"You have your channel captain." he said.

"*High Tide* this is Captain Martins of the *Grey Dawn*. We are sending our identification. Acknowledge, over."

Martins said and after a brief delay there was a response from the transport.

"*Grey Dawn* this is Captain O'Neil of the *High Tide*. Our presence in this system is authorised by-"

"I am not disputing your presence in this system captain." Martins interrupted, "I have a team aboard my ship that needs delivering to the surface without attracting the attention of that Commonwealth cruiser. Over."

"That's not my mission *Grey Dawn*. What's your authority? Over."

Martins knew that using Hayes' name would mean nothing to the captain of the transport. Members of the intelligence service of the government that both Martins and O'Neil worked for. On the other hand Martins had not been assigned to support Hayes under her own authority.

"Minister Stein. Over." Martins said, using the name of Hayes' government backer. Martins could not prove that he was working with the politician but he hoped that the mere mention of the name would be enough to intimidate Captain O'Neil.

For a few moments there was no response from the *High Tide* and Martins was tempted to order his helmsman to pull away and risk an entry into Verne's atmosphere out of the direct line of sight of the Commonwealth cruiser but then Captain O'Neil's voice was heard again.

"You may dock *Grey Dawn*. We will carry your team to the surface. Though I will be making a note of this in my mission report. Over and out."

"Captain we've got a visual beacon on a docking port on the nearside." the *Grey Dawn's* helmsman reported.

"Follow it in. Prepare to soft dock." Martins ordered. Then he looked around at Conrad and Horst and added, "And you two should get down to our port side airlock with your gear. That's where we'll make contact with the *High Tide*."

Concealed from detection by the bulk of the much larger transport ship, the *Grey Dawn* moved in close enough to make physical contact with the ship and there was a dull 'thump' as the docking clamps engaged to tether the two vessels together. Standing just inside the air lock, Conrad watched the monitor above the outer door as the airlock tested the seal between it and the *High Tide*. Then as soon as the seal had been confirmed Conrad opened the outer door. At the same time as he did this a team from the *High Tide* opened their own air lock and aimed weapons into the *Grey Dawn*.

Horst gasped when she saw this but Conrad and his men all reacted instantly, raising the weapons they carried and pointing them back through the air lock. The firearms carried by the crew of the *High Tide* were basic small arms, mainly pistols but with a pair of shotguns added for heavier support. On the other hand Conrad's team were armed with automatic carbines and wore body armour that only served to make them appear even larger than their muscular frames were.

"Do you really think you can win this?" Conrad said and one of the *High Tide's* crew reached for a radio handset he had clipped to the front of his shirt.

"Captain the *Grey Dawn* is carrying an assault team. How should I proceed?" he said.

"Allow them aboard ensign. I promised them passage to the surface and that's what they'll get." O'Neil replied and the ensign lowered his pistol, prompting the rest of the *High Tide's* defence party to do the same.

"Please come aboard." the ensign said and Conrad advanced, still holding his weapon in a ready position.

"Huh." he said as he too lowered his weapon, "Never send a worker to do a warrior's job."

"Commander I've got something strange here." Cortez said, looking up from her console.

"What is it?" Knight asked from his position at the back of the bridge. With Reeves not present he was in effective control of the *Warspite*.

"There's a freighter on its way to Verne. From these readings I'd say she's carrying a mix of tachyon storage and singularity jars."

"Ah, so we're witnessing the delivery of the particles the Verne can't produce for themselves." Knight said,

"What's the issue with that petty officer?"

"I'm picking up heat from what I think is a communication laser array but I can't see who they're talking to. All of the communication with traffic control has been via broadcast radio."

"What's the Verne fleet doing?" Knight asked.

"Not much sir. We've got the *George Orwell* holding station one hundred thousand kilometres away and another destroyer heading out system but apart from that they're all in dock as far as I can tell."

"That freighter must have come from the Commonwealth. I doubt that anyone else within fifty light years has spare tachyons or gravitons to trade. See if you can get a positive ID and we'll ask Lieutenant Lucas to check whether it's been flagged as a potential smuggling ship before now."

6.

Gruber watched as a robot drilling machine bored into the rock face at the side of the cavern. An ultrasound scan had revealed the presence of a significant metallic mass several metres behind it and he knew that the large machine was the only way to reach it in a reasonable amount of time even though the use of such equipment went against every rule of careful excavation he had learned as a student archaeologist. All of a sudden the pitch of the drilling changed and the machine lurched forwards, accompanied by a cheer from the crew who had been controlling it.

"Get it back out." Gruber called out as he ran towards the hole cut into the rock, "Let's see what we've got back there. Can we get some recorders down here?"

"You keep asking that professor." Jansen said as she ran with him, "We're our own recorders, remember?" and she tapped the side of her head to indicate her implants..

"Of course." Gruber replied with a sigh, still not used to the idea of human beings with such machines implanted into their skulls.

The robot was backed out of the short tunnel it had created and Gruber and other members of his research team hurried into it, activating the lights mounted to their hard hats as they exited the well lit cavern that was the centre of their operation.

"Incredible." Jansen said as she looked at the ancient alien built machinery that filled the large chamber they had just broken into. The area around the end point of the tunnel was covered in debris and it was clear that some of the machinery that had stood here for thousands of years had been crushed by falling rock as the drilling robot broke through.

"I wonder what these did?" Gruber said as he knelt down to pick up a piece that had broken off one of the destroyed machines. Meanwhile Jansen turned her attention to the intact pieces of machinery that filled the chamber. Though they were of varying sizes, all of the devices had a similar composition. At their heart was a long tube that ran for the entire length of the device and numerous ring shaped modules were fixed around this at regular intervals. The smallest of the devices was around ten metres long according to the implants Jansen used to process what she was seeing, while the largest was well over a hundred and Jansen smiled when she saw them.

"What's the matter professor?" she asked, "Haven't you ever seen linear particle accelerators before? Do you know what this means?"

"That this civilisation had a good understanding of nuclear physics? Forgive me Doctor Jansen, but my area of expertise is in societies that may not have even invented the wheel."

"Professor these aren't just any particle accelerators." Jansen said even as other members of the team were already beginning to spread out around the chamber and inspect the machinery they had uncovered, "They look like particle inductors."

"You mean the things starships use to create tachyons and gravitons for space flight?" Gruber said and Jansen nodded.

"Exactly. Professor the only reason to have all of these here is if this is where the builders of this city manufactured them. That means it could hold the key to Verne being able to reverse engineer the process. After more than a hundred and fifty years of depending on imported tachyons and possibly gravitons as well we'll finally be able to mass produce them ourselves." Jansen said excitedly.

"Professor Gruber!" a voice called out from the other side of the newly drilled hole and Gruber turned to see what was happening, "Professor Gruber the transport is approaching to take you to the capital."

Gruber sighed.

"Doctor Jansen, in my absence I'm leaving you in charge of the dig. I have to go and find out whether what we're doing here has already provoked a response from the Commonwealth." he said.

"On the plus side whoever is doing this doesn't appear to be very familiar with our operating system." Bernard said as the system monitor he and Lucas were watching reported yet another unsuccessful attempt to break into the *Warspite's* computer network.

"But they're learning." Lucas commented.

"Not fast enough though. I'd say we know more about this last individual than they know about us." Bernard replied.

"Much more. Oh and it's 'she'." Lucas said and Bernard turned towards where she sat looking at her tablet.

"You've tracked them, sorry her?" he said and Lucas nodded as she passed him her tablet.

"Found her data address and linked it to an online discussion forum where a bunch of wannabe super villains are plotting to steal our technology and become heroes among the Verne."

"Very good." Bernard said as he took the tablet to study it closer and then he smiled, "They're even describing the tools they're using and there are links to where they can be taken from. I can easily block their

access now. Or even better make them think they're getting somewhere while I push them into a quarantined section of the network." then he frowned, "Mind you there are still some others at work." he said, passing the tablet back to Lucas and he turned back around in his chair to point to a section on the system monitor that identified a particular attempt at breaking into the *Warspite's* computer network, "This one looks far more methodical. In fact I've got the feeling that this isn't just some nerd in their bedroom playing at being a spy. I think it could be a genuine attempt by the Verne government to get into our system."

"That wouldn't surprise me. Their intelligence service probably knows that they won't get another chance to study one of our ships up close in their own backyard for a while after we leave. I bet every telescope and EM detector in the system is going to be pointing at us. I know that's what I'd be doing." Lucas said in agreement, "Perhaps we should let the captain know before he heads off to this dinner. Maybe he can raise it with the Verne. Warn them off."

"Point out the effects of having a fifty mega-tonne fusion bomb detonating over their capital you mean?" Bernard said and Lucas smiled as he reached for the nearby intercom handset, "Captain Reeves, it's Bernard." he said when the call was answered.

"Ah commander, you have news for me?" Reeves asked.

"Yes sir. Lieutenant Lucas has identified and tracked one of our hackers and from that I think I can keep most of them out permanently. But the issue I wanted to raise with you is that some of what's left look like they're coming from more official sources. I thought you might like to know that before you go to this dinner."

"Yes, thank you commander. I'll see what the Verne have to say about it. My shuttle should be ready to depart soon so I'll have to leave this with you. In the mean time keep going, I want our system one hundred percent secure." Reeves told him.

"Yes captain." Bernard responded.

Reeves was dressed in his formal uniform when he appeared in the bridge and made his way towards the central console where both Ash and Thomas were stood. Given the chain of command aboard the *Warspite* Lieutenant Commander Thomas was currently in control of the ship.

"Ready for the party I see captain." he said.

"Yes, I just thought I'd check in before I left." Reeves replied and he looked at the console to see a representation of the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -67' 3703 system shown on it in the middle while specific areas of interest had been magnified and were shown around the edge, "What's all this?"

"Plotting combat manoeuvres captain." Ash told him, "Given that the Verne fleet's ability to redeploy and turn is limited by their limited stores of tachyons and gravitons we're trying to calculate the best course to take that would force their ships to either burn through their supplies rapidly or give up the chase."

"We figure they can't have massive supplies of them or they'd be using them routinely." Thomas added.

"And what have you come up with so far gentlemen?" Reeves asked.

"So far a good hard burn away from Verne towards this lump of frozen methane four and half light hours out from the sun. According to my records the locals call it Huxley. It's got six moons, one of which is large enough to have an atmosphere itself. Plus a ring system about a hundred thousand kilometres out." Thomas explained.

"We're thinking of making several rapid slingshot manoeuvres between the planet and the moons." Ash said, "It'll use less fuel and all the obstacles will impede any long range missile fired at us from ships further away." Reeves nodded.

"Keep looking at this." he said, "If we do have to face down the Verne fleet then we're going to have to split them up in order to take them on and this is the sort of thing we'll need. Bernard and Lucas are still looking into the hacking so you may hear from them if they have any requests. They can have pretty much whatever they need but don't compromise the security of any part of the ship. I'll check back in with you when I get back." he said. Then as he began to walk away Thomas called out after him.

"Don't forget to bring us some cake captain."

Reeves made his way to the *Warspite's* forward hangar where another of the cruiser's shuttles had been prepared and moved into launch position. He was the last of the four attendees to the dinner at the Verne Ministry of Defence to arrive and he found Doctor Thundercloud, Lieutenant Commander Shaw and Major Willis already aboard the shuttle waiting for him. Like Reeves they too wore their formal uniforms though Willis was also checking a pistol that he had a holster for under his shoulder.

"I think the main course will already be dead when it's served major." Reeves said, removing his tunic and hanging it over the back of an unused chair to prevent it from being creased.

"Just in case captain." he replied.

"Just make sure it stays out of sight." Reeves replied, "And if the Verne do ask for it to be surrendered then I will instruct you to hand it over."

"Pay up." Willis said, looking at Shaw and she curled her lip at him.

"Fine." she said, reaching into a pocket for her wallet and then taking out a single note, "But you're just lucky my uniform has a pocket for a wallet. If I'd known we were going to a party then I'd have brought my best

dress along. That doesn't have room for it."

"Your best dress doesn't have room for a lot of your anatomy." Thundercloud commented.

"What's this about?" Reeves asked, confused.

"I said that you wouldn't let him take it with him at all captain." Shaw said.

"And I knew you wouldn't mind as long as it stayed hidden. What the Verne don't know can't hurt them." Willis added.

"You aren't worried about them having one of our pistols then captain?" Thundercloud asked and Reeves shook his head.

"There's nothing special about a ten millimetre machine pistol doctor. I doubt the Verne would even be interested in a conventional firearm like that. Too primitive." he said.

"Perfect for a marine then." Shaw commented, grinning at Willis.

"Besides," Reeves went on, "not only am I a firm believer in that bit of the bible that tells a man to sell his cloak to buy a sword if he doesn't have one, the Verne have also annoyed me with their attempts to hack our network. I spoke to Commander Bernard a few minutes ago and he's convinced that not all of the attempts have been by misguided amateurs."

"I could go and draw a machine gun from the armoury if you want captain." Willis suggested.

The sound of the shuttle's engine powering up told its passengers that it was about to launch and glancing out of a viewport immediately beside him, Reeves saw that the ground staff had all left and the exterior door was in the process of opening to permit the shuttle to leave.

"It doesn't look like we'll have time actually major." he said.

The shuttle then rose up off the deck before moving slowly out of the hangar. The pilot then engaged the drives at full power and the shuttle sped towards the planet below.

"There's our escort." Shaw said as she looked out of a viewport as well to see a pair of the *Warspite's* fighters emerging from their launch tubes before taking up positions either side of the shuttle. The fighters followed the shuttle as it entered the atmosphere of Verne, right the way until it began to pass over the capital city. From this point on the fighters could do little to protect the shuttle, their rules of engagement prohibiting them from engaging a target over populated areas such as Jules Verne city and so they pulled away and began to circle instead while the shuttle headed straight for the Verne Ministry of Defence.

The safe house where Horst and Conrad's team were to shelter while they made sure that Howard Denton's activities could not be traced back to Commander Hayes was located close to the spaceport where the *High Tide* landed and as the freighter was being offloaded its passengers disembarked and made their way directly to it in a ground van carried aboard it. The building was a large residential structure set back from the road and a three metre wall hid it from the view of passers by as well as the occupants of the neighbouring properties. This enabled Conrad's team to unload their equipment without worrying about anyone seeing either the equipment that was being unloaded or the fact that none of them had the implants that were near universal in Verne adults.

While Conrad's team was bringing their equipment into the safe house Horst took the opportunity to quickly familiarise herself with the layout and soon found a set of computer terminals that had been set up to give whoever was occupying the building access to Verne's own planetary computer network. This was specifically designed to provide easy connections to all of intelligence assets on Verne and this included a hidden back door into the computer system of Howard Denton's local business office. Anyone could of course view the public areas of this that advertised the services his company offered but what Horst wanted to see were the technical details behind all of this, normally only visible to the administrators of the system. This showed her how the system had been accessed recently and it did not take her long to be able to pick out where the local police had trawled through looking for information on Denton's local business contacts. On a planet with a population running into just over twenty-million like Verne this constituted several hundred individuals, none of whom were connected to the reason for Horst's presence here at all. However, it was clear that someone had accessed this list recently and a remote copy had been created. Horst smiled as she realised that she could use this fact to try and divert attention away from Commander Hayes' organisation and she scrolled down the list, randomly removing four names from it. Now if anyone came back to the list and compared it with the original it would become obvious that those names had been removed, focusing attention towards them.

"Found what you need?" Conrad asked as he appeared in the doorway behind her with two mugs in his hands.

"Is that coffee?" she replied and Conrad shook his head.

"Chicken soup. I thought we could all do with something more than coffee just in case we need to move out in a hurry. So how's it going?" Conrad said and he placed one of the mugs of soup down beside the keyboard Horst was using.

"The police have been through Denton's system and downloaded data from it. There's no indication yet that they've found any of the communication paths that would lead back to us so I've tried to plant a few false

leads. If they go back again then they'll find the names of some of his business contacts have mysteriously vanished. They already have a copy so they should be able to track them down without much trouble."

"How did you decide which to remove?" Conrad said and Horst shrugged.

"At random." she said, "Who they are doesn't matter. What does matter is that the police spend their time rushing around after them rather than us."

"What about that Commonwealth cruiser? Have you found anything out about it yet?"

"No, I haven't looked."

"Then do. I want all the information available if my men are going to have to take action against any of its crew."

"Okay I'll check." Horst replied, running a search for any information on the *Warspite*. Most of the results were related to news stories posing questions about why the Commonwealth was sending a powerful warship to a planet that the organisation was barely on speaking terms with. Some of these included assessments of how the *Warspite* would fare in battle against the Verne fleet and Horst smiled when she saw some of these. It was obvious to her that the authors of those assessments had about as much military experience as she did. However, unlike them she at least had the scientific and historical knowledge to tell her that despite Verne's pursuit of technology at all cost the Commonwealth still had the massive advantage of being able to fit its warships with particle inductors, particularly where these were capable of creating the gravitons needed to create an artificial gravity field. The introduction of this towards the end of the Genex War had been a critical part of the Commonwealth's victory over their enemy, with smaller Commonwealth forces able to easily out manoeuvre and defeat theoretically more powerful Genex ones. Many news networks were playing up the destructive power of their ships' anti-matter based weaponry without any consideration of whether or not they would even be able to bring those weapons into play before the *Warspite* shot them down in a high velocity flyby. She also found several online groups of private individuals bragging about how they intended to hack into the *Warspite*'s computers and download the files on Commonwealth technology, without any thought at all to the possible consequences of performing such blatant acts of cyber theft. Then something else caught Horst's eye. The search system she was using was also capable of searching through several supposedly secure computer networks on Verne, as well as the public ones and here she found an interesting return to her search query.

"They're coming here." she said and Conrad lowered his mug.

"They've found us?" he said.

"No, not right here but to the surface. The *Warspite*'s Captain Reeves and some of his officers are scheduled to attend some dinner being held by the Ministry of Defence to honour their top new officer training graduates."

"How many officers and what sort of security?" Conrad asked, leaning over Horst's shoulder and prompting a frown from her at his proximity.

"Seats reserved for four Commonwealth officers including Reeves. There's no mention of a security escort coming with him but one of the other officers is a major. That means a marine."

"My team can deal with one marine." Conrad said.

"And every guard in the Ministry of Defence building? They'll have powered armour and-" Horst began before she suddenly stopped talking.

"What's wrong doctor?" Conrad asked.

"There are ten guests listed at the table the Commonwealth officers will be at. As well as them there's a Canadian detective and Interpol agent, some local reporter and a university professor." Horst answered.

"So they've grouped all the outside guests together." Conrad commented.

"No." Horst said, shaking her head, "The full listing has people from outside the military or Ministry of Defence spread all around the room. I can understand why a reporter would be placed at the same table as people from off world to try and get an interview with someone who could have a different perspective on things but why the professor. What does Michael Gruber bring to this party?"

"Maybe he's related to one of the graduates being honoured."

"I'll take a look." Horst said, running another search before shaking her head, "No-one called Horst listed as being honoured. But this is interesting."

"What is?"

"The guest list has been revised and updated several times. That's not unusual but what is odd is that every person previously allocated to that table suddenly got either moved to another or dropped from the guest list entirely at the same time. All ten people assigned to it now were added at the same time. None of them were on the list at all previously. To me that's a connection."

"Someone wants a university professor at the same table as Canadian cops and Commonwealth fleet officers? What's the reporter for?"

"Maybe nothing. What bothers me is why someone is so interested in getting this university academic close to them. Trust me, we don't mix with that sort of person much."

"You are late professor." Minister Van Rijn said as Gruber came running along the hallway towards him.

"I know, I'm sorry. But you won't believe what we found. It could be the answer to all your people's prayers."

Gruber replied, somewhat out of breath.

"I know exactly what you found professor, Doctor Jansen signalled my office as soon as she saw the particle inductors. It is not however, the answer to any prayer of mine or my people. The people of Verne do not offer praise to mythical beings."

"It was just a figure of speech minister." Gruber said.

"Very well professor. But please be careful with your figures of speech tonight. I want you to find out how much the Commonwealth knows. I do not want you to provide them with any information they do not already have. Now come with me, I'll get you seated before our guests from the Commonwealth arrive."

The minister then led Gruber into the large room that had been set up as a dining area for the evening. This consisted of a main table on a raised platform at one end that included a central podium from which speeches could be given while a set of circular tables had been set up in a 'U' shape around the rest of the room, leaving a small open area right in front of the main table. A number of the seats were already taken up, especially on the tables nearest the main one where a group of military officers in their dress uniforms all sat together.

"Your names please." one of the serving staff asked as he approached the two men.

"Minister Van Rijn and Professor Gruber." Van Rijn replied.

"Very good." the waiter said, "Minister Van Rijn you are at table four seat six right over there and Professor Gruber you are seated with our other off world guests. If you'd like to follow me I'll show you to your seat."

There were three other people already sat at the table that the waiter led Gruber to, two were Agent Smith and Inspector Boucher. For the purpose of this dinner the inspector was wearing her bright red dress uniform while Smith remained in plain clothes. There was a third individual present at the table as well and despite the waiter having said that it was for off world guests the shaved portions of this man's head and the visible implants indicated that he was a local.

"Good evening." he said to the others as he sat down, "I am Professor Michael Gruber. Jules Verne University."

"Agent Jack Smith. Interpol."

"Inspector Anne Boucher. Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

"And you are?" Gruber asked the local man who had not yet spoken.

"Raymond Gomez. I'm a reporter assigned by the VPBN to cover this event." he replied.

"I wasn't aware that it was important enough to warrant the Verne Public Broadcasting Network to report on it." Gruber replied.

"To be honest I doubt it will be more than a side story for those who know where to go looking for it." Gomez admitted.

"Oh look, here's Captain Reeves and his party." Boucher said when she saw the four Commonwealth military officers being led towards the table and she waved towards them, prompting a return wave from Thundercloud.. as the group approached the table another local man in civilian attire suddenly stepped into their path and held out his hand towards Doctor Thundercloud in greeting with a smile on his face.

"Doctor James Thundercloud?" he said and Thundercloud took his hand and shook.

"Yes, I'm sorry I don't now who-"

"Of course you don't. My name is Doctor Lee Ma. I have read your paper on comparative alien biologies and thought we might be able to discuss it." the man said, still smiling, "I lecture on alien environments at the university but I've never met even a single member of one other intelligent species. Let alone five entire different species. I'm especially interested in how compatible their nutritional requirements are with us and one another."

Thundercloud glanced at Reeves.

"I'm sure there'll be the opportunity after dinner doctor." Reeves said, "Though I think discussing it over dinner itself may put people off their appetites."

"I'll try and catch up with you after dinner." Thundercloud told the biologist and the other man nodded before letting the Commonwealth officers proceed the rest of the way to their table.

"Professor Gruber," Boucher said, "this is Captain Reeves, Major Willis, Lieutenant Commander Shaw and Doctor Thundercloud from the cruiser that brought us here."

"Isn't it unusual for a Commonwealth cruiser to transport passengers such as yourselves?" Gomez asked.

"And this is Raymond Gomez, he's a reporter from the Verne state broadcaster." Boucher said.

"Yes it is unusual Mister Gomez." Reeves said, "But when the need is serious enough the Commonwealth will make a ship available." then he looked at Gruber, "So what are you a professor of?" he asked.

"Archaeology." Gruber answered, "That's why the Verne recruited me to teach their students. I've got the practical experience that they lack."

It was then that a group of senior military officers was escorted into the room and to the top table. More guests began to follow them and the waiter who had guided the people sat at the table to their seats returned

to the table.

"The first course will be served in ten minutes, can I take your orders for drinks?" he said.

"Is there a menu?" Willis asked, looking around.

"The menu is online," the waiter replied.

"He means that we need computer ports stuck into our brains to read it," Gruber commented, "I wish I could say you get used to it but you never do."

The door discovered on the far side of the chamber holding the particle inductors was jammed shut and in the absence of Professor Gruber, Jansen gave the order for a cutting torch to be used to break through it. When the door dropped out of its frame Jansen peered through the hole, using a flash light to illuminate what lay beyond and when she saw what this next room held she could barely contain her glee.

"Computers!" she exclaimed, stepping through the hole in the door.

The precise sizes and shapes of the computer drives contained in this room were different to anything used by humans, being squat cylinders about half a metre in length and diameter but the dig team had already recovered and examined several such devices. Most of those had been damaged to the point where no useful data could be recovered and to see that all three of the drives in this room appeared intact was a joyous moment for Jansen.

"Let me see," Hague said from behind her, following her through the hole, "This is incredible. If this place really is a manufacturing plant for particle inductors then it stands to reason that the knowledge of how to create them is contained in these."

"We may not even need to reproduce them to feel the benefits," Jansen replied, "If there are full technical details on their operation in here then we may be able to use those examples out there directly. There are enough for every capital ship in our fleet with some left over for industrial use."

"You assume that they are advanced enough to be worth using. What's the point if they aren't as good as the ones used by the Commonwealth? We'd be deploying inferior technology," Hague pointed out.

"Oh come on now, can't a girl dream?" Jansen said, "Even from just those broken drives we've already found we know enough to be able to patch into them. This is the discovery of a lifetime Colin."

Hague nodded.

"Yes it is. But first we need to access these drives and unless I'm very much mistaken there's no power. I'll have some of our support boys link this place up to our power distribution system and one of those data adaptors they've created. Though I think we'd be better waiting for Professor Gruber to get back before you try plugging into any of them."

"Of course, we wouldn't want him to miss anything just because he got invited to a party," Jansen commented while still staring at the rows of computer drives in front of her.

Following the meal several of the attendees at the top table got up to speak, each of them heaping praise on the graduate officers being honoured before each was called up in turn to be given their rank badges by Minister King herself while Admiral Gregory stood beside her. Every one of the graduates was told that they would be serving on the *Jules Verne* once it was completed and Reeves guessed that this was the name being given to the dreadnought under construction in orbit.

"That ship must be almost complete if commissions for it are already being handed out," he commented.

"So the Commonwealth hasn't been observing its construction then?" Gomez asked.

"If anyone has then they chose not to tell any of us about it," Reeves answered.

"I think they're done. Applaud politely," Shaw said suddenly as the last of the graduate officers returned to his seat and Minister King turned to address the other guests.

"And now that I've finished subjecting you to my speeches we shall relocate to the Bertrand De Jouvenel Suite where after dinner drinks shall be served. The serving lists are now active on link four and your selections will be waiting for you when you arrive."

"I think that means we need to use that tablet again," Thundercloud commented as he looked around for the tablet the Commonwealth officers had used to order drinks with their meal, "Where is it?"

"Willis spilt his main course on it," Shaw commented.

"It's here, it's fine," Willis responded, taking the tablet from under his napkin and rubbing the screen, "Don't worry doc, you'll be able to have another stiff drink inside you while you're talking to your new best friend over there," and he glanced towards the table where Doctor Lee was getting up and rather than walking towards the exit that most of the room's other occupants were heading for he began to make his way towards the Commonwealth table.

"Doctor Thundercloud," he said, "now we can discuss your work with alien lifeforms," then he looked at the other people at the table and focused on those not in Commonwealth uniforms, "Though where are my manners? I don't believe that any of us have been introduced."

"Doesn't Professor Gruber teach at your university Doctor Lee?" Reeves asked.

"Oh, err. We are in different departments," Gruber said.

"Ah that would explain it then." Reeves replied.

"Really? I thought I knew all the senior staff at the university. I do apologise, what is it that you lecture on professor?" Lee asked.

"Excuse me Doctor Lee." a voice suddenly said from behind the biologist and he turned to see one of the Ministry of Defence security guards standing there.

"Yes?" Lee asked.

"There is a message for you at reception. Could you please come with me to collect it?"

"Can't it wait? I was about to speak with Doctor Thundercloud here about his work. I assure you it's far more exciting than anything that could be happening here." Lee said.

"Do please come with me doctor." the guard said and he reached out to put one hand on the biologist's shoulder while the other hovered close to his sidearm. In response to a silent wireless message transmitted by the guard directly to Lee's implants he then looked towards the door where three more armed guards had appeared.

"Of course." he said and then he looked at Thundercloud and added, "I do apologise doctor. It seems we shall have to have this conversation some other time."

"That was weird." Willis commented.

"Maybe he's double parked." Shaw added.

"I don't think so." Reeves replied and he threw a glance towards Gomez who was more interested in Gruber than the odd events involving Doctor Lee.

INTERLUDE.

Vale entered Hayes' office in an obvious hurry.

"Enrico," she said, looking up from her desk, "is the building on fire?"

"No, the alarms would have gone off if-"

"I was joking Enrico. What's so important?" Hayes said, sighing.

"Oh, of course. Sorry. We just received an update from Lieutenant Commander Martins sent via our relay stations." Enrico said.

"And what does he have to say?" Hayes asked.

"He has arrived safely in orbit around Verne and is running silent to try and avoid detection. Conrad's team and Doctor Horst have been transferred to the surface using the transport ship *High Tide*." Vale explained.

"The *High Tide*?"

"One of the regular tachyon shipments we use to hide our operations on Verne." Vale said, "According to Lieutenant Commander Martins the captain of the ship was not happy about being used to carry our team as well. We'll probably be getting a complaint about it."

"The ship's not operated by Alex is it?" Hayes asked, frowning at thought of giving Kane something else to criticise her over.

"No commander, it's not." Vale replied, "A Commander Jessop has responsibility for that operation. He works on the third floor."

"Oh I'm not bothered about any of those idiots down there." Hayes said, "I've seen more imagination in taxi operators. If Jessop complains let me know and I'll let Stein know that he's trying to disrupt our operation. Let's see what that does for his career. Is there any more?"

"Yes, there's an initial report from Doctor Horst as well." Vale said, "The local police have already accessed Denton's business records so she's altered some of them to try and create false leads for-"

"She did what?" Hayes exclaimed, "That idiot!"

"What's wrong?" Vale asked.

"For crying out loud Enrico, aren't people like you and Angela supposed to be smart? If the police on Verne have already seen the records then what will that tell them?"

"That they've been altered." Vale said.

"Exactly. Altered by someone who must be still on the planet. She's just given our team away. The police will be looking for them even if they aren't linking them to us."

"Shall I tell her to-" Vale began.

"Just tell her to do exactly what she was sent to Verne to do. Sever all links between our source and us and then get out of there without being caught." Hayes said, "Does she have anything else to say? Has she taken out a public help wanted ad perhaps?"

"She looked into the actions of the *Warspite* and its crew and found something interesting." Vale said and he passed his tablet to Hayes, "It looks like the Verne government was keen for this man to speak to several of the cruiser's senior officers."

"Michael Gruber PhD. Professor of-" Hayes began and then she stopped talking and frowned, "Now that is interesting." she said, "What could he possibly have in common with a Commonwealth fleet captain? Tell Doctor Horst to find out what the good professor is up while she's on Verne. That could be a useful piece of information to trade to the likes of Jessop if he kicks up a fuss."

"Yes commander, I'll send word right away." Vale replied as Hayes returned his tablet to him before he turned to leave.

"What are they doing on Verne?" Hayes said to herself when she was alone again.

7.

"So how is your investigation progressing inspector?" Reeves asked Boucher when the pair stood together collecting drinks, "Don't worry, I know you can't give me specifics."

"It's curious." she replied, "We can't find anything that provides Howard Denton with a motive to want to hack into the Ministry of Defence computer."

"Money?" Reeves suggested, "There must be people willing to pay for the information he could get."

"If he wanted money then he'd need to sell the data on and we can't find any trace of what he did with any of it." Boucher said, "We know the data reached his computers back in Canada but that's where the trail goes cold. There's no evidence that any of it ended up in his offices here at all."

"A wasted trip then?"

"Possibly. But there's still one thing we're trying to track down. Denton had a robot that he used to stand in for all the cybernetic junk the Verne stick in their heads." Boucher said and then both she and Reeves glanced in the direction of a Verne military officer who happened to be passing by them and glared at them at the mention of the implants he too had in his skull.

"A robot?" Reeves said, frowning for a moment when the Verne officer had gone past, "This robot wouldn't happen to be an incredibly realistic android would it? Built to look like a woman, not exactly young but looking good for the age she's supposed to be?"

"That's the one. It looks like Denton got it here on Verne but there's no record of the actual purchase. What do you know about it?" Boucher asked.

"I've had it stood right in front of me on my bridge. The boarding party that went aboard Denton's yacht found it and thought it was an actual woman. We only found out it was a machine when Doctor Thundercloud tried to carry out a post mortem exam. But it's not a secretarial robot."

"Then what is it?"

"A pleasure model." Reeves said.

"You're kidding me." Boucher replied.

"No, the marines found it naked in bed and brought it aboard the *Warspite* for the doctor to examine. Then he and Commander Bernard amused themselves by passing it off as a real person."

"Do you know what happened to it?" Boucher said.

"I'm not sure." Reeves replied, "I ordered it shut down and put in storage. It ought to have been unloaded and shipped back to earth with his yacht and everything else aboard but I can't confirm that. I've just got my regular operations officer back and we had to get started on organising for coming here pretty much as soon as we got back to Centaur."

"Well I'd really appreciate knowing captain. Access to that robot could be important."

"There you go Doctor Jansen." a technician said when he had finished plugging the power cable into the compact power regulator that had been connected to the massive computer system to provide it with the correct voltage to operate. It had taken more than an hour to make sure that the power to the system had been properly isolated from the rest of the facility. If that was not done then there was no telling what other devices could attempt to power up when the computer was brought on line and if the current requirement was too great then the regulated power supply would collapse, potentially corrupting the data held inside the computer drives at a critical point in their start up procedure.

"Thanks, that will be all." Jansen replied as the technician stood up and stepped back from the generator.

Then he noticed her connecting the data interface device that he had also brought into the room with him into what was believed to be the core of the alien computer system.

"I thought we were supposed to be waiting for Professor Gruber to return." he said.

"I said that will be all. I know what I'm doing." Jansen said, you can go now.

The technician nodded and made his way back out of the room, with Jansen watching as he disappeared.

Then as soon as she knew she was alone she linked herself wirelessly to the data adaptor and made her way to the newly installed power supply where a switch kept the power isolated from the computer.

"Just one quick look. What harm can it do?" she said to herself as she reached down and switched on the power.

All around the room status lights began to activate on the drives. All began as red but after several seconds most of them had turned to yellow. At the same time the core of the system began to output a stream of data that the adaptor Jansen had plugged in converted to something her implants and thus she, could understand and immediately she saw that the drives showing yellow lights had survived their thousands of years of disuse without damage while the others had become corrupted somehow. Whether this was a limitation of the technology used to create them or if they had been exposed to some damaging influence before becoming inactive Jansen could not tell, but for now she knew that most of the data in the room had survived

intact.

The alphabet and language used by whatever species had created this complex remained a mystery to the research team but work had already been carried out to identify the difference between text and image data so Jansen was able to search for image files, hoping that these would provide her with the proof about the facility's purpose. She quickly found multiple sets of construction blueprints for the particle inductors stored in the adjacent room and just as she hoped there were charts that showed them to be capable of creating two different types of particle. For a split second Jansen wondered whether the ancient aliens who had created the particle inductors could have found a way to create anything other than tachyons or gravitons in them but then she put this idea aside. In the hundred years since the development of true artificial gravity by humanity no-one had even theorised about any further particles that could be beneficial to space flight and so Jansen chose to proceed under the assumption that the particle inductors they had found could produce tachyons and gravitons only. For now though Jansen did not have enough information to enable the Verne to be able to recreate any of the particle inductors and so she began to press deeper into the stored files, wondering what other treasures they might hold.

The same system monitoring functions that allowed Jansen to see which individual drives were functional in a single go also told her that there were other devices not responding to the computer network's start up process. Jansen knew that this was owing to the closed nature of the portable generator being used to power the computer core but there was also a section of the file system that listed devices that could be accessed wirelessly rather than over a hard wired link and Jansen decided to see what would happen if she tried connecting to one of these.

She expected her attempt to fail. Without power for the receiving device there could be no response but the attempt would at least confirm that the computer core's wireless transceiver was functioning. Selecting the first device in the list of those that were intended to be accessed wirelessly, Jansen issued an instruction for it to respond with its status and almost immediately she realised her mistake. Though the technicians had been told to isolate the power supply to the computer core from the facility's other devices they had not possessed a full schematic of the core and so had not known that there was a large scale transceiver unit located somewhere else in the facility that was fully controlled and powered via the core. This had been inactive when the core first started up but now that Jansen had told it to send a test signal it powered up and emitted a swift burst of data.

"There looks good." Mori said, pointing to a section of the map representing the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -67' 3703 system that was shown on the bridge's central console. That particular section showed a large comet that was making its way deeper into the system after having spent several decades in the more remote areas of it. Thomas had asked the fighter navigator to help them construct a plan for fighting the Verne fleet so that the *Warspite's* fighter squadron could be used to best effect.

"I told you." Ash said, looking at Thomas, "Remember, before my accident I was a fighter pilot too. If we can get into the shadow of that comet and its tail before we launch our fighters then they can use it as a screen while they slingshot around to take the Verne by surprise."

"They'll be pinned between us and the *Warspite*." Mori added, "We could do a rapid strafing run and—"

"Lieutenant Commander Thomas." Cortez called out suddenly from her sensor console, "I've just picked up an energy spike from the surface. It looks like a transmission being beamed into space."

"I assume that it doesn't look like the Verne talking to any of their fleet." Thomas responded.

"No sir, it's being beamed into empty space. Plus it's not coming from within the borders of Verne. In fact it's coming from the area of the planet we have listed as the territory occupied by the ferals." Cortez said.

"Ferals aren't exactly known for their use of electronic technology." Ash commented.

"No they aren't." Thomas agreed, "Petty officer can you show us this signal?"

"Yes sir, I've got it recorded." Cortez answered and a window appeared in the map the three officers had been gathered around that showed a diagram of the planet Verne with a cone projecting outwards from it that represented the angle of the transmitted signal. Alongside this was a graph that showed the data bits in terms of their strength and duration.

"That didn't last long." Mori said when he saw the time scale associated with the graph.

"Less than a microsecond." Ash added.

"Yes sir, the sensors picked it up and grabbed it automatically." Cortez said, "Do you want me to run a surface scan?"

"No. For now let's not let on that we've picked it up. I think we should tell Commander Knight before doing that." Thomas said, picking up the closest intercom handset and pressing the buttons that would connect him to the first officer's quarters.

"Knight." Knight's voice said after a few moments.

"Commander it's Thomas. We've picked up some odd activity on the surface. I think you ought to come and take a look at it." Thomas told him.

"Can you do better than 'odd'?" Knight asked.

"Not really sir. All we know is that someone down there just beamed a signal into space we can't identify from somewhere that there aren't supposed to be any transmitters of that scale." Thomas said.

"I'm on my way. I'll be with you in five minutes." Knight said and then he hung up.

After dressing quickly Knight hurried to the bridge, darting across the room to the central console where the representation of the signal as well as its source were still dominating the display.

"This is all there is of it?" he asked as soon as he saw how brief the duration of the signal had been.

"Yes sir." Cortez answered, "I only caught it because the automatics kicked in to record it. It lasted less than a microsecond and hasn't been repeated since."

"I don't recognise that digital format." Knight said, looking at the way the data bits switched between high and low states.

"Obviously some sort of binary encoding." Mori said, "Could it be something the Verne have come up with?"

"If it is then it's not something the computer is familiar with." Cortez said, "The computer's already run it through our communication filter but it reads as gibberish."

"Intel managed to miss an entire dreadnought. Who knows what else they missed?" Ash said.

"Have you run any scans of the point of origin?" Knight asked.

"No, I didn't want to take any action that could let anyone know we'd picked up the signal without running it by you first." Thomas said.

"You did the right thing." Knight replied, "But we've got to find out what's going on at the source of the signal. Petty Officer Cortez run a passive sweep of an area centred on the signal source with a radius of twenty kilometres. Full EM spectrum analysis."

"Yes commander, aligning sensor receptors on the surface now."

"And give us a visual feed." Knight added and he and the other three officers all looked at the console they were gathered around as an image of the source of the signal joined the diagram of the planet and the data bit graph. Sitting roughly on the planet's equator, the terrain was mountainous with the same dense tree cover that was common across most of the continent.

"That clear patch there." Thomas said, pointing to a rectangular break in the tree cover, "That doesn't look natural."

"No it doesn't." Knight agreed, "Petty officer, where is that clearing in relation to the source of the signal?"

"Just under four thousand metres away from it commander." Cortez answered.

"Can you get us a better look at it?" Knight asked.

"Yes sir. Increasing magnification." Cortez said and the image zoomed in on the clearing until it almost filled the area of the console's display allotted to it. Now it was possible to see the trunks of the trees that had been cut down to create the clearing piled around its edges. A scale placed around the edges of the image indicated that the clearing was almost a hundred metres long and fifty wide and although it was empty at present the way in which the ground had been disturbed made its purpose obvious.

"An airfield." Mori said, "You can see where the landing gear of whatever was set down there has left imprints in the ground."

"But what sort of aircraft?" Thomas said.

"Where's Lucas?" Knight said.

"Last I heard she and Commander Bernard were working on bolstering our computer security." Thomas said, "But they could have turned in for the night by now."

Knight nodded and picked up the intercom handset, calling the *Warspite's* engineering section.

"Is Lieutenant Lucas there?" he asked the engineer who answered.

"No sir. She left about an hour ago." the engineer replied.

"Okay thanks." Knight said, hanging up and then calling Lucas' quarters directly.

"Lucas."

"Lieutenant it's Commander Knight. I'm sending you a surveillance image of a clearing we think is being used as an airfield by the Verne. Can you identify what sort of aircraft they're operating out of it?" Knight asked and he nodded at Cortez who in turn sent a copy of the magnified image of the clearing to the computer in Lucas' quarters.

"Okay I've got it." Lucas said when she started up her computer, "Is there any thermal data to go with this?"

"Hang on, I'm switching to the speaker." Knight said as he switched the intercom setting so that everyone on the bridge could speak directly to Lucas, "Cortez, Lieutenant Lucas wants to know if there's thermal data as well."

"Yes commander, I'm sending it to the lieutenant's terminal now." Cortez said and in her quarters Lucas compared the infra red scan to the visual image. Now in addition to the imprints in the ground where aircraft had set down Lucas could see the warm spots where the exhaust from aircraft engines had heated the ground on take off as well as an outline where the presence of an aircraft had affected the way in which the sun had been able to heat the ground beneath it.

"Looks like we're dealing with four engined thrust vector vehicles." Lucas said as she called up her intelligence database and opened the files on known Verne military aircraft. With a silhouette, engine pattern

and positions for landing gear to work from it did not take long for her to identify the exact type of aircraft that had touched down in the clearing.

"Got it." she said, transferring a copy of the vehicle's profile to the bridge's central console where the other senior officers could see it, "VT-six Da Vinci transports."

"This profile shows an attack transport." Mori commented as he studied the data supplied by Lucas, "Is there a civilian version?"

"Not that we know of. Intelligence only identified them three years ago. That's not much time for the Verne to be passing them into civilian service as well."

"So the Verne military is operating in what we'd classify as a foreign country." Knight said and he looked at Thomas before adding, "I am right in saying that's feral territory aren't I?" he added.

"It is." Thomas confirmed.

"How far to the nearest settlement?" Knight asked, looking at Cortez again.

"There's nothing within the search area specified commander." she told him.

"Widen the scan in ten kilometre steps until you find something." Knight ordered and Cortez began to repeat the passive thermal scans looking for the characteristic heat signatures that would identify the location of even the most primitive of human settlements, increasing the area covered with each sweep.

"I've got a cluster of heat signatures at thirty-five kilometres from the airfield commander." Cortez reported, "They look like camp fires but I'm not picking up any EM emissions."

"That could be a feral settlement." Thomas commented and Knight nodded in agreement.

"Increase the scan resolution and see if you can pick up anything else." he ordered before Cortez repeated her scan, this time focusing on the area localised around the heat sources.

"I've got multiple heat sources of about normal human body temperature." she said, "Around a hundred I'd say."

"So a village then." Ash said, "I wonder if they know the Verne are there?"

"As far as we know the Verne and the ferals are on good terms." Lucas said, overhearing what was being said on the bridge via the intercom, "If not for the Verne there wouldn't be any ferals at all and there is a trading relationship."

"I'd say that the airfield could be the start of an alternative means of maintaining contact if not for the distance to the closest settlement." Knight said.

"There must be something nearer." Mori said.

"Maybe something they haven't finished constructing yet?" Ash suggested.

"That means there'd be construction equipment down there somewhere." Thomas said.

"That could be hidden beneath all that tree cover." Knight added.

"A radar or lidar scan would pick it up." Mori pointed out, "We'd have to switch to active scanning though."

"That Verne cruiser will spot us pointing our active sensors towards the surface in a moment." Thomas said.

"Petty Officer Cortez maintain your monitoring of the transmission source and the airfield but don't change from passive scans unless ordered to do so. When Captain Reeves gets back I want to be able to give him as much information as possible." Knight ordered.

"Yes captain." Cortez responded as Knight turned his attention back to the initial diagram showing the data pattern and transmission path of the signal that had been detected.

"So who or what were they trying to talk to?" he said.

"That signal path just leads into deep space." Thomas said.

"Lieutenant Lucas are there any Verne facilities anywhere along that path?" Knight asked.

"No sir. The Verne have only limited off planet assets and with the exception of a hydrogen collecting platform orbiting the nearest gas giant all of those are either orbital or located on one of their three moons. Their nation is too small to have a need to look further afield for resources." Lucas replied.

Knight reached out and touched the image showing the path of the transmission, copying the data before dragging it across to the map of the system where it could be further extended to show where the signal went. Limited to travelling at the speed of light, the contents of the transmission had yet to get very far from Verne in terms of space travel but the map enabled the *Warspite's* officers to see its entire path even before it had reached most of the places shown.

"What's that line?" Knight asked, pointing to another line marked on the map that in its two dimensional format appeared to intersect with the transmission path. Apart from that the transmission did not appear to be aimed at anything that appeared on the map.

"There's a comet following that orbit." Ash said.

"We were discussing using it to conceal launching our fighters if it comes to a fight." Thomas added.

"We'd use its tail for cover as we looped around behind any pursuing Verne ships." Mori explained.

"It's not there yet though." Ash pointed out, "We were planning an intercept further out in the system."

"How long until the comet does reach that position?" Knight asked.

"Hang on, I'll just check." Thomas said and he made his way back to the navigation station located just behind the central console and called up his database of navigational hazards for the system, "Eight

months." he added.

"And the signal will be there in about two and a half hours." Knight said, "So I think we can safely say that it's not being aimed at the comet."

"Maybe we just can't see what the signal's aimed at." Thomas said suddenly and he hurried back to the central console before reaching out and using his hands to outline an area of the map around the crossing point of the transmission path and the orbit of the comet that represented several million kilometres. The display promptly zoomed in on this area and Thomas pointed out two obvious features, "Look, we've got the primary gas giant here and its largest moon here."

"Yes and the transmission will pass between them but it won't get close to either." Knight said.

"No, but if we draw a line between the planet and the moon the spot where the transmission crosses it is a Lagrange point." Thomas said.

"So an object could sit there without being dragged towards either." Mori said and Thomas nodded.

"An object such as a ship running silent that doesn't want to risk detection by using its engines to maintain its distance from moon or planet." he said.

"Lieutenant Lucas how good is Verne stealth technology?" Knight asked.

"On a par with ours but slightly less effective because of their reliance on anti-matter propulsion." Lucas answered, "This far out though they should be able to hide a ship from passive detection. Possibly even visual detection if it's painted properly."

"So since we can't exactly leave orbit ourselves while the captain is down on the surface, that only leaves us with risking an active sensor pulse. EM or tachyon, either of which tips our hand if there is someone out there." Thomas said.

"Especially since we aren't shooting at anyone yet." Ash added.

"We could send a drone." Lucas suggested, "Aim it off and it would look like a test launch."

"At sub light it would more than a day for a combat drone to get there even at maximum thrust," Mori pointed out, "and then there'd be a six hour time lag for sending and receiving signals while we're in orbit."

"But not if we use one of the courier drones we're carrying in our mission pod." Knight said, smiling, "We've got dozens of the things anyway so we can afford to lose one or two on this."

"So have it jump to FTL just long enough to get out that far and then drop back to sub light." Thomas said and Knight nodded.

"Where its tachyon communications will give us a real time command link." he said, "If we limit its speed getting there then should be plenty of reserves to use for communications."

"Courier drones don't exactly have lavish sensor suites." Mori said.

"Good enough to spot a ship if we already have a good idea where it is though." Knight said and he turned towards the officer sat at the flight operations console while Goldman was off duty, "Lieutenant I want a courier drone prepared for immediate launch. There's no message to be uploaded but it needs configuring for remote operation once it drops back to sub light speed. Lieutenant Commander Thomas will provide you with the destination co-ordinates."

The *Warspite* was not the only vessel to pick up the transmission triggered by Doctor Jansen and aboard the *Grey Dawn* the sensor operator reacted immediately.

"Captain I've got an unidentified radio transmission from the surface." she said.

"For us?" Martins asked, concerned that their presence had been discovered despite the ship doing its best to avoid detection by remaining over the horizon from the *Warspite* and the various Verne ships keeping an eye on the Commonwealth cruiser.

"No sir. It appears aimed into space."

"Where?"

"Unknown sir. Plus I can't reconcile the source with any known Verne installation. It's coming from the secondary inhabited continent."

"Ferals using radio? That doesn't sound likely. Helm, can you move us into position to take a better look without getting us seen ourselves?"

"Not at our current orbital altitude captain." the helmsman answered.

"Okay someone get me a closed link to our team on the surface. Maybe Horst can find out what's going on." Martins said.

"Let me get this straight," Horst said as she and Conrad sat next to the communicator in the safe house, "you've picked up some sort of transmission from half way around the planet and you expect me to figure out who sent it, where they sent it and why?"

"Exactly doctor. You are a physicist after all." Martins said, "A good one I'm told."

"No, not just good. The best." Horst replied, "That's why your Commander Hayes came to me for advice."

"So how about you put that skill to good use and tell me what's going on here. Need I remind you that I'm your ride home? What do you think is going to happen if the Verne or worse still, the Commonwealth figure out we're here? I won't put my ship at risk."

"Don't worry captain." Conrad said, "My men can take care of themselves. We'll stay out of sight until a rescue mission can be organised if you need to leave." and Horst winced at the thought of being cooped up with Conrad and his troops if Martins decided to leave them on Verne.

"I'm sending everything we have on the signal via tachyon link back to Commander Hayes but I'd rather not have to wait however long it takes for someone back home to figure out what it's all about if I can help it so since you're here I'm asking you to take a look at it as well." Martins said.

"Oh very well. Send it down. But I'm making no promises." Horst replied reluctantly.

"Very good doctor. *Grey Dawn* out." Martins said and the audio channel promptly went dead. At the same time the communicator indicated the arrival of a data stream.

"Well I'm turning in for the night." Conrad said as he got to his feet, "Enjoy yourself doctor."

8.

Reeves and the other officers from the *Warspite* as well as Agent Smith and Inspector Boucher found that few of the Verne approached them when the dinner guests moved into the nearby bar for drinks. Only Gomez, who never seemed to stray too far from them at all paid them any serious attention and many of the questions he asked followed up something Professor Gruber would say as he continued to ask about the circumstances that had brought the *Warspite* to Verne. Growing tired of this continual line of questioning, Reeves made his excuse when he noticed Admiral Gregory and Minister King move away from a group of about half a dozen military officers.

"Excuse me, I think I'd better just go and say hello to our hosts." he said before he calmly left the group and made his way across the room. As he walked past many of the other guests he noticed them briefly look towards him and then avert their eyes before he could make direct eye contact with them until he walked up to the admiral and minister, "Admiral Gregory," he said, reaching out to shake the other man's hand, "it's good to meet you in person. It's the only real way to thank some for an invite to an event such as this."

"What? Oh of course." Admiral Gregory replied.

"And I understand from your speech that you are Verne's Minister of Defence." Reeves added, moving to shake hands with King.

"Defence and Security." King corrected him before her eyes suddenly widened.

"I'm sorry if I said something wrong minister." Reeves said, not wishing to be the cause of a major diplomatic incident.

"No captain, it's not you. However, I have just received an urgent summons." King said and she looked at Admiral Gregory, "Admiral, please keep our guests entertained." she told him and then she hurried out of the room. Watching her leave, Reeves also saw Professor Gruber hurrying out of the room in the company of another Verne man that he did not recognise, though his lack of a uniform suggested that he was not a part of the military.

"That was strange." Reeves said, "Does that sort of thing happen a lot around here?"

"The benefits of direct neural interfacing captain." Admiral Gregory replied, "It does wonders for fleet efficiency. Perhaps the Commonwealth should try it sometime."

Reeves smiled.

"The security implications have always put us off." he said, "If someone uses a wireless port to hack into a neural storage device or sensory upgrade such as a cybernetic eye then a loyal crewman becomes a liability. Speaking of which we've been noticing a lot of attempts to break into our network since we arrived in orbit. Most of it is obviously amateurs but there are a few well organised hackers at work as well. Very well organised according to my chief engineer and intelligence officer."

"You think the Verne government is behind these?" the admiral replied.

"It has crossed our minds. No harm's been done so far admiral, but if that changes there could be serious repercussions. You might like to warn Minister King to make sure that none of Verne's intelligence agents are risking a major diplomatic incident for the sake of trying to steal a few military secrets." Reeves said.

"An accusation like that could just as easily trigger a diplomatic incident Captain Reeves."

"Oh I'm not accusing anyone of anything yet." Reeves said, "After all every attempt to break into the *Warspite's* computer network has failed. However, my crew are learning some interesting things about all of the computers being used to try and attack us."

"I'll make sure to advise the minister against doing anything against our national interest." Admiral Gregory said.

"Thank you admiral. Now I think I'll just go and rejoin my crew." Reeves said and the two men shook hands once more before Reeves made his way back across the room to where he had left the other three members of his crew, "So what happened to the professor?" he asked when he reached them.

"Some guy in a suit whispered something in his ear and all of a sudden he looked like he'd seen a ghost." Shaw replied, "Then the pair of them ran out of here as fast as they could."

"Must have been one of those archaeological emergencies." Willis commented.

"My guess would be a family emergency." Reeves said, glancing briefly at Gomez. The reporter had remained with the Commonwealth officers all the while that Reeves had been gone rather than leaving to speak with any of the other dinner guests and then he noticed a smile appear on the face of Doctor Thundercloud.

"What the hell's going on at that dig professor?" Minister King snapped as she and Professor Gruber entered an office where Minister Van Rijn was already waiting and a wall mounted screen showed an image of Chancellor Eriksson.

"I've no idea. I didn't authorise the sending of any signals in my absence. The entire site is supposed to be

maintaining a communications blackout." he protested.

"Well they aren't." Minister Van Rijn said sternly and using his neural implants he sent a command to the wall mounted monitor that split the screen to show a diagram of the signal sent into space from the dig site that was almost identical to the one that the officers on the bridge of the *Warspite* saw.

"Professor," the chancellor said, "the *George Orwell* picked this signal up coming from the location of your project twenty minutes ago. We have no idea of who sent this or who they were trying to talk to. The modulation doesn't match anything we've seen before and for all we know it's a new Commonwealth encryption protocol we aren't familiar with yet. Obviously this is a major security violation."

"Chancellor, was the Commonwealth cruiser in a position to see it as well then?" King asked.

"Yes they were." the chancellor replied, "The captain of the *George Orwell* reports that the *Warspite* did nothing to suggest that it had seen anything unusual but about ten minute ago they launched one of their courier drones. That accelerated to faster than light but it didn't leave the system. Instead we've just picked up a second tachyon burst that I'm told is indicative of that drone dropping back out of FTL somewhere in the region of Friedman."

"Are any of our ships near there?" Van Rijn asked.

"The nearest is the destroyer *Meredith Thring* but it's still two days away unless it goes to FTL as well." King replied, using her implants to call up a list of current fleet deployments and finding the vessel currently allotted to system sentry duty, "We could get a drone of our own there more quickly at sub light but we'd need to accept a time lag in communication."

"How much do the crew of the *George Orwell* know?" Van Rijn said.

"They've been ordered to turn over all recordings of the incident and wipe their own internal files." Chancellor Eriksson told him, "The same with any other unauthorised personnel who have had knowledge of what happened. If what has been found at the dig site is as important as current reports suggest then I don't want word leaking out before we've had the chance to fully assess the implications."

"I should get back there as quickly as possible." Gruber said.

"Not before you tell us how much the Commonwealth knows professor." Van Rijn replied.

"Oh for all I know they could know everything or nothing. I'm an archaeologist, not a spy. I asked why they were here and all of them stuck to that story about helping out Interpol." Gruber said, "Now can I leave? I can be back at the site in-"

"There's going to be a delay in getting you back to the dig site professor." Van Rijn said, "We can't risk sending you back via aircraft now that the Commonwealth cruiser may be watching the airspace around the dig site so we'll have to send you back on a GEV and then via walker the rest of the way."

"But that'll take days." Gruber protested.

"In the meantime I want that site properly locked down." Chancellor Eriksson ordered, "There are to be no repeats of this incident. Am I being clear enough about that?"

INTERLUDE.

"You asked to see me grandfather?"

"Ah yes my dear, do come in. Take a seat." The Old Man said, looking up from the tablet he was reading while he sat in his office. Then he looked at the two guards standing just inside the office door, "Leave us." he commanded and without a word both the large men left the room.

"What's that you're reading grandfather?" his granddaughter asked as she sat down, looking at the tablet and The Old Man handed her the tablet, "A transmission profile?" she commented and her grandfather smiled at her.

"Yes. That was picked up by the *Grey Dawn* and most likely all the other military vessels in orbit around Verne." he replied.

"The *Grey Dawn*? Then this came via Jennifer Hayes' office."

"It did. I expect Mister Vale is briefing her about it now. Though I expect her to take little interest in it, her immediate concerns are focused on other things. Mister Vale on the other hand would relish the opportunity to study it further."

"You know what this signal is, don't you grandfather?"

"I have my suspicions. Suspicions that happen to fit all of the available data." The Old Man said, "You know of the alien ships we have been keeping track of since the end of the war?"

"Of course grandfather. Mister Vale was looking into those himself last year wasn't he?"

"Yes he was and I gave him access to the classified files that held the full survey and technical data. What I don't know is how much of that he looked at. He's had a year so I'm guessing that someone of Mister Vale's disposition will have read every last word by now. That included details of the ships' communication systems."

"Let me guess grandfather, they send in this protocol."

"Or one very much like it." The Old Man said, "If you check that tablet you'll also see that it has been encountered somewhere else."

His grandfather looked at the tablet again, scrolling to the next document in the set he had opened.

"Epsilon Pavonis. The Sissusk home world." she said, "But the ships found at Tau-Six Eridani weren't Sissusk vessels."

"Technically neither were the ships fighting in the Epsilon Pavonis system." The Old Man pointed out, "They had been commandeered by whatever artificial intelligence system was embedded in the transmission the Sissusk received from deep space."

"The one that appeared to be offering technology that was then used to destroy their Empire?"

"Exactly. If the Verne have intercepted a similar signal then there could be trouble brewing on that planet."

"But I thought the same modifications that we'd made to the Commonwealth's SETI system to prevent it registering alien radio signals had been made to the Verne equivalent as well."

"It had. However, the Commonwealth's discovery of the sabotage and their efforts to rebuild the system have been major news. The Verne will undoubtedly have heard about it and since their system is much smaller they may have been able to restart it ahead of the Commonwealth." The Old Man said.

"Then we have to find out more."

"My thoughts exactly. The existence of an alien civilisation that is eliminating all life in others has a major bearing on our own plans for the Commonwealth and I'd like to know exactly how it will affect our timetable." The Old Man then reached out for his intercom. The handset was just out of reach and his granddaughter got up to hand it to him.

"Here you go grandfather." she said.

"Thank you my dear, you're so kind." The Old Man said as he checked the handset for a connection to the officer he wanted to speak to.

"Jessop." a voice said.

"Ah Commander Jessop. I'd like to discuss the situation on Verne with you." The Old Man told him.

"Of course sir." Jessop responded, not sounding as confident as he had when he first answered the call, "I'll be with you in-"

"Not here commander. I want to speak to you in Commander Hayes' office." The Old Man interrupted.

"What's next?" Hayes asked as Vale went through his list of the latest data regarding the activities of other intelligent space faring species in the space surrounded the Commonwealth.

"Telemetry has been received from the latest set of drones sent into the Sissusk Empire, or what used to be the Sissusk Empire." Vale replied.

"Are they all gone?" Hayes asked.

"That is still unknown. There could be some colonies still holding out against their machine uprising but if

there are then they're keeping quiet. Even the machines that overthrew them seem to have gone." Vale answered.

"How have the Ticik reacted? Are they moving in?"

"It's hard to tell with the Ticik. Our survey drones have picked up some evidence of their ships but they seem to be doing the same sort of scouting as we have been. Of course we've never had any luck in picking up signs of their settlements anyway so they could have."

"I get it Enrico. You don't know." Hayes interrupted, "How about you skip to your assessment of what this does for us?"

"Actually there may be an opportunity here." Vale said.

"How so?"

"The Commonwealth is still trying to establish diplomatic contact with the Sissusk. That means they're sending a lot of drones into Sissusk space, twenty in the last month alone." Vale began.

"But the Sissusk aren't there to respond to any of them." Hayes pointed out.

"No but the Ticik definitely are. One of our own drones spotted a Ticik gunship engage one of the Commonwealth probes and shoot it down. If we could lure a manned Commonwealth ship into a system where we know the Ticik have a presence then--"

"Then maybe we can do what we intended two years ago and get them to start shooting at one another, only properly this time. So what's your strategy this time? I know you don't just make suggestions off the cuff Enrico, you've already thought about this." Hayes said.

"Our last attempt failed because the first warship sent withdrew when it became clear that it was outclassed and when the Commonwealth fleet arrived with sufficient strength to defeat the Ticik dreadnought it had already left after its engagement with the Sissusk squadron. We need to guarantee that one side or the other is conclusively defeated in such a way as to provoke a response from the other. My plan is to get the Commonwealth to deploy even just a token ground force to the surface of a planet in a system patrolled by the Ticik. A single squad of marines would probably do. When the Ticik respond the Commonwealth ship won't be able to withdraw without abandoning its people on the surface."

"Very good Enrico." Hayes said, smiling before there was a knock at the door to her office, "Come in." she called out and the door opened as Commander Jessop entered.

"Commander Hayes." he said in greeting.

"Yes?" she responded, not recognising the man.

"It's Commander Jessop." Vale said softly and Hayes frowned.

"Look if this is about getting my team to Verne then--"

"I hope it is." Jessop interrupted as he walked over towards Hayes' desk and took a seat without being asked, "I'm sure the old man will explain when he gets here."

"The old man isn't." Hayes began before her office door opened again and one of The Old Man's bodyguards entered, followed by The Old Man himself with his granddaughter and then a second bodyguard.

"Ah Commander Hayes." he said, looking around for the best place to sit before settling on a couch at the other side of the office from her desk, "I've asked Commander Jessop to join us since what I have to say concerns you both."

"If you don't need me I can leave." Vale said.

"Oh no Mister Vale, this will be of interest to you as well I'm sure." The Old Man said as he sat down, "Now where was I?"

"CPD six-seven thirty-seven oh-three." his granddaughter said.

"Oh yes, Verne." The Old Man said, "I take it you all know about the transmission that was sent from Verne, though not from the country itself, instead somewhere on the other inhabited continent."

"I didn't know anything about a transmission." Jessop said.

"The *High Tide* may not have been in space at the time." The Old Man's granddaughter said.

"The *Grey Dawn* picked up a surface to space radio transmission." Vale commented.

"A transmission with a very peculiar pattern of digital encoding." The Old Man added, "Though not unique. Such an encoding method has been observed on at least two other occasions. One was last year when Commander Hayes had the *Grey Dawn* monitoring a Commonwealth cruiser in the Epsilon Pavonis system."

"The Sissusk ships controlled by an alien AI." Vale said.

"Quite correct Mister Vale. In addition the derelict starships found in the Tau-six Eridani system used such a method of encoding data." The Old Man said.

"I don't understand." Jessop said.

"Enrico has a nice little theory that there's an alien civilisation out there that has broadcast a radio signal into space that is designed to destroy other civilisations using an artificial intelligence system that takes over the technology of a receiving civilisation." Hayes said.

"And I think he is correct in his assessment." The Old Man said, "We know that the Sissusk received such a signal and that only after they decided to make use of the technology, particularly the robotics technology that it offered them did their empire collapse. I know that both of you have teams on Verne right now and I

want you both to get word to them to find out as much as they can about this transmission and whether the Verne have also picked up any signals from space of any sort.”

9.

Reeves waited for the shuttle carrying him and his officers back to the *Warspite* to be on the verge of leaving the atmosphere before saying what he had been waiting to say most of the night.

"So did anyone else get the feeling that our presence tonight was to try and gather information?" he said.

"By the galaxy's worst spy." Shaw commented, "That Professor Gruber was way too interested in an Interpol operation to be real."

"Actually I think the Verne may really suspect us of having an ulterior motive for being here." Reeves replied.

"You mean we don't?" Willis asked, "The Commonwealth sent us here because it suspects the Verne."

"I don't think Professor Gruber is a spy though." Thundercloud added, "Though he's definitely hiding something."

"Yes as soon as he told us his speciality I knew there was something wrong." Reeves said.

"Why's that captain?" Willis said.

"There are exactly two planets in known space that have any need for archaeologists like Professor Gruber. Earth and Brekka. The most that anyone would want to dig up on any other planet is the odd fossil of some primitive animal." Reeves said.

"Could Verne have been inhabited at an earlier point in its history?" Shaw said.

"That's the logical answer." Thundercloud responded, "But why hide that? What do they have to gain?"

"I don't know, but it was worth having that Doctor Ma thrown out before he could say something to expose the professor." Reeves said.

"Do you think that journalist was in on it as well?" Willis suggested.

"It's possible. Posing as a journalist makes a good cover and he was standing right there while Doctor Ma was contradicting Gruber's claims." Shaw pointed out.

"Coming up on the *Warspite* now." the shuttle pilot announced.

"Good. I want to see what Lieutenant Lucas has to say." Reeves said, then he reached for the intercom,

"Pilot take us in via the rear hangar. I want to get to the bridge as quickly as possible." he told the pilot.

"Yes sir. Rear hangar dead ahead."

The rear hangar door slid open as the shuttle approached and he guided his craft inside before setting it down on the hangar deck. There followed a brief wait while the hangar door was sealed again and then the hangar itself pressurised before the occupants of the shuttle could disembark. Reeves and the other officers who had attended the dinner then headed directly for the bridge and when they arrived they were surprised to find a large number of the bridge crew present rather than the skeleton staff that would normally be expected at this time during the ship's day and night cycle, this having been adjusted on the journey from Centaur to match that of Verne for convenience. In addition to members of the bridge crew this also included Bernard and Mori who were both stood at the central console with Knight and Lucas.

"What's going on commander?" Reeves asked Knight

"Another party?" Shaw suggested.

"Captain there have been some odd goings on since you left." Knight responded.

"Yeah, those are all the rage." Willis commented.

"Show me." Reeves said as he joined the officers at the central console, his formal uniform standing out against their standard duty ones.

"We picked up this signal from the surface." Knight said and he pointed out the diagram of the transmission's bit pattern, "It's not one of ours and it doesn't match anything the Verne are known to use. The signal was beamed into space past a Lagrange point between this gas giant and one of its moons. We suspected that there could be some sort of stealth vessel hiding out there so I ordered a courier drone sent out there to take a look."

"Did you find anything?" Reeves asked and Knight and Bernard looked at one another.

"You might say that captain." Bernard replied, "The sensors aboard a courier drone aren't up to much but its radar system was good enough to pick up this." and on the central console he brought up a false colour image of the moon's surface and set against a background of greens and blues there was an obvious bright red ring, "That's a metallic mass captain." Bernard said, "Just over six thousand metres across."

"That sounds eerily familiar." Reeves said, remembering the giant ring shaped structures that his crew had come across during their expedition into Sissusk space a year earlier. Built by the rebellious robots created by the Sissusk from information contained within a message from another as yet unknown alien species, these had been hypothesised to be massive gateways intended for accelerating starships to speeds much faster than anything the Commonwealth was capable of. Unfortunately the opportunity for studying the gateways had been limited by a self destruct mechanism built into them.

"Captain the encoding of the signal from the surface of Verne matches recordings taken while we were fighting the AI controller battleship squadron near the Sissusk home world." Lucas added.

"So Verne has had previous inhabitants." Thundercloud said.

"Yeah and they fell victim to the same thing that killed off the Sissusk." Shaw added, "And yes I know that there are still thousands of them being held as POWs on Centaur before anyone decides to say something." "Why do I get the feeling we've all missed something as well?" Knight asked.

"The Verne have hired themselves a professor of archaeology." Reeves told him, "Just the sort of person you'd want to excavate what's left of a dead civilisation."

"Captain," Goldman said from her console at the rear of the bridge, "if there was a civilisation here that was destroyed by the same the same AI that destroyed the Sissusk Empire then doesn't that mean that the Verne could be excavating the technology to make particle inductors?"

"That's why they didn't want word getting out." Reeves said, "If they can make their own particle inductors then they leapfrog over most of the other human nations in existence."

"Or if word gets out before they get chance to reverse engineer them someone else might come along and try and take them for themselves." Willis added.

"That must be why they're so suspicious of us." Thundercloud suggested and Reeves nodded in agreement.

"Just bad timing, that's all." he said while staring at the image of the ring on the surface of the moon.

"Well shouldn't we warn them?" Thundercloud said, "If they're about to reactivate some ancient AI that will take over their planet and send their people to God knows where then perhaps we should get them to stop."

"They'll never believe us doctor, not without proof." Bernard said.

"And our proof is right there on that moon." Reeves said, "But there is one thing I'd like to know, the rings we saw in Sissusk space were in space. How did this end up on the surface of a moon?"

"Lieutenant Commander Thomas figured that one out." Knight said and he looked towards the navigation station.

"There's a comet that passes close by that moon every few decades captain. The next time it passed by after the ring had been built it shifted the exact position of the Lagrange point further out and the ring was suddenly caught in the gravitational pull of the moon. Probably only just and I wouldn't be surprised if it took months or even years for it to hit the moon but it was enough to pull it down to the surface. Then over time it got buried by a layer of surface dust that was probably kicked up by its own impact." Thomas explained.

"Set a course for that moon." Reeves ordered, "I want to take a better look at that ring than our drone will allow. Commander Thomas we'll be going to FTL."

"What about Agent Smith and Inspector Boucher?" Goldman asked.

"They're booked into a hotel in the capital. They won't be disadvantaged by our departure." Reeves answered.

"Captain the Verne may not like the idea of us poking around that moon." Douglas pointed out.

"Since it's outside the borders of their territory they can dislike it all they want." Reeves said and then he looked at Thomas again, "But just to be on the safe side how far did you get with your plan for dealing with their fleet?"

"Ah." Thomas commented as Ash turned to look at him and the two officers stared at one another.

"We managed to identify a number of possibilities for out manoeuvring them." Ash added.

"But that was when the signal was detected." Mori said.

"Then we'll just have to hope that the ideas you had turn out to be good ones." Reeves said, "Commander Thomas, plot us a course please, everyone else to your stations." and he started to walk towards his seat at the rear of the bridge. As he passed by Thomas' console he reached out a hand that had been holding a small bag since he had returned and handed it to the navigator.

"What's this captain?" Thomas asked.

"Cake. Just like you asked for." Reeves replied.

Admiral Gregory was being driven home when his implants notified him of an incoming message from fleet headquarters and with a thought he opened it.

COMMONWEALTH VESSEL DEPARTING.

HAS ENTERED FTL ON A HEADING FOR THE FRIEDMAN SUBSYSTEM.

The admiral frowned, trying to figure out why the *Warspite* would suddenly pull away from Verne in this manner and leave behind the two law enforcement agents that the cruiser was supposed to be watching out for. If anything it made him even more certain that there was more to the *Warspite's* visit than acting as a liner for the pair.

Immediately he placed a call using the same communication implant to the Ministry of Defence.

"This is Admiral Gregory. Put me through to the operations centre." he said to the woman who answered and moments later he was connected with the compartment aboard the orbiting space dock from where all of the Verne fleet's actions were directed from and his implants told him the names of all of the officers on duty,

"Commander LeClerc, I just received your message about the Commonwealth cruiser." he said.

"Yes sir, the ship jumped to FTL just a few minutes after receiving a shuttle from the surface." LeClerc said.

"That will have been Captain Reeves and his officers returning." Admiral Gregory replied, wondering for a

moment whether something had occurred at the dinner at the Ministry of Defence had triggered this unexpected action.

"Is there any indication of why the ship is heading for Friedman?"

"No sir, they merely stated their intention to depart and then jumped to FTL. The captain of the *George Orwell* is asking permission to engage his own FTL and go after them. What should I tell him."

"Is the *George Orwell* the closest ship?" Admiral Gregory asked, wishing that the security surrounding the fleet operations centre did not prevent him from having all of the fleet deployment data sent straight to his implants for observation in real time.

"No admiral. The *Meredith Thring* is already heading for Friedman as well."

"Why?"

"I'm sorry sir that information is not available. The order was declared restricted and all memories of it were removed from staff not cleared for access."

"By whose order?" the admiral demanded, furious that orders would be given to his officers that he was not aware of.

"By Minister King sir." LeClerc told him.

"Damn that woman." the admiral hissed, "Whatever she and Van Rijn are up to out there with the ferals, I'm sure that's what's brought the Commonwealth down on us. I want all fleet units placed on one hour alert immediately. I'm going to find out what's going on." and then he disconnected the link and leant forwards, "Driver, turn around and take me back to the Ministry of Defence. I want to speak to Minister King." Admiral Gregory then hesitated for a moment, "No wait forget that. Take me to Chancellor Eriksson's residence, I want to speak to the chancellor herself."

"Yes sir." the river replied before changing their direction of travel as soon as he could.

"What did you do Britt?" Hague demanded. The signal beamed into space had been detected by the rest of the dig team, its strength at the point of origin almost overwhelming the implants of those closest to the transmission machinery that had now been located thanks to this. Hague and several other members of the team had then rushed to the computer core and removed Jansen from the room, taking her back to an office in the administrative centre that had been set up in the main cavern.

"I just thought I'd take a look at the core, that's all. How else are we supposed to figure out what anything around here does?" Jansen responded.

"We're supposed to wait until we're told that equipment has been declared safe to use before doing anything." Hague replied, "Do you have any idea of the trouble you've caused? I've had Minister Van Rijn screaming at me to secure this sight and wait for Professor Gruber and a full ministry security team to arrive."

"You told Van Rijn?" Jansen said angrily.

"I didn't need to. You triggered a transmission that got sent into space. Every ship out there listening picked it up, including that Commonwealth ship no doubt." Hague snapped back.

"So does this mean I'm fired?" Jansen asked.

"Fired? Frankly Britt from the way the Ministry of Science and Technology have been talking you could end up being prosecuted. Now you stay right here while I try and sort out your mess. Maybe if we can get something important out of your screw up it will be overlooked but I wouldn't get my hopes up if I were you." Hague replied and then he turned around and walked out of the room, leaving Jansen alone.

Jansen waited a short time and then tried the door, wondering whether after what Hague had said about her possibly facing criminal charges he would have locked her in. However, the door opened without resistance and when she peered out into the hallway outside the office she saw that no guard had been posted to keep her in the office either. Technically she was still free to leave but she decided that this would only make her current situation worse and so instead she used her implants to activate the office's coffee maker and then walked over to pour herself a cup.

It was just as she sat down that her wireless communication implant activated again as someone tried to contact her and she frowned. The caller's identity was not being specified and there was no opening message to give an indication of what the subject might be. Such attempts at communication were typically mass marketing calls that most Verne ignored but given that calls in and out of the dig site were supposed to be screened for security purposes Jansen knew that in this instance there would have to be a different explanation and so she permitted the connection to her implant.

Immediately she gasped and sat up straight as her mind was connected to something else and data began to flow. It was obvious that this was not another member of the dig team who was merely attempting to communicate with her secretly, instead it felt to Jansen as if she was connected to a computer that was pouring information into her brain.

"Abort connection." she said out loud when she felt her communication implants start to heat up from the excessive power they were suddenly consuming but she found that she was no longer in control of them. Instead it seemed to her as if she heard a voice.

"You woke me." it said, "Now show me what I have missed." and Jansen screamed out loud.

The scream attracted the attention of nearby team members and three of them came rushing into the office only to find Jansen clawing at her shaved head where the external part of her wireless implant was located as if trying to remove it.

"Grab her!" the first through the doorway yelled as all three rushed towards Jansen and then pinned her to the floor.

"Make it stop!" she screamed at them, "I can't stop it!" and then all of a sudden all three people holding her down released their grip on her and convulsed as Jansen's wireless transmitter implant activated itself and broadcast the same signal she had received.

Capable of travelling 7.8 light years per day it did not take long for the *Warspite* to cover the distance between Verne and the gas giant Friedman and its associated sub system of rings and moons, even at the reduced rate at which it travelled while within the confines of the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -67 3703 star system.

"Sensors, full sweep." Reeves ordered as soon as the cruiser dropped back to sub light speeds, "Active and passive, I want to know who else is out here."

"Reading multiple contacts captain." Goldman announced as the data gathered by all of the *Warspite's* sensors was fed through to her console, "There's an orbital facility around the planet itself and several small to medium craft close by."

"That's the Verne's hydrogen gathering operation." Lucas said, "They gather the hydrogen from the gas giant's atmosphere and ship it back to Verne for use in their fusion reactors."

"At least they aren't stupid enough to try using anti-matter power inside an atmosphere." Knight commented.

"Captain tadar has picked up an approaching ship. It looks like a Verne destroyer." Cortez said.

"I see it." Goldman added, "Range is still seven hundred million kilometres. They're accelerating at one gee."

"So either a normal patrol or they haven't been given permission to dip into their reserves of tachyons or gravitons." Reeves said, "Now what about that ring and the moon it's on?"

"I'm reading a gravity of about point one seven gee and no atmosphere. The gate is right where it's supposed to be according to the radar image taken by our drone." Goldman replied, "So far I've managed to identify eight different ships that were used in its construction but there are undoubtedly more."

"There are no signs of power at all captain." Lucas said.

"That could work for us." Knight said, "If the ring is totally inactive then its self destruct system probably isn't working."

"The mechanism that destroyed the earlier gate did appear related to the fission reactors taken from the Sissusk starships that were used in their construction." Lucas added.

"I still don't want anyone going down there until we're sure that it's safe for them to do so." Reeves said and he activated the intercom, "Commander Bernard, are you monitoring our sensor feed?" he asked.

"Yes captain." Bernard replied from engineering, "It definitely looks like we're dealing with another of those tachyon gates but I need to see more of it to give you a better idea of how it works."

"Prepare a unit of robots commander." Reeves said, "As many as you think you need and we can spare. We'll send them down in a shuttle ahead of any living crew members."

"Yes captain, I'll get right on it." Bernard replied before shutting off the intercom and turning around to where a group of engineers had gathered to look at the sensor scans of the crashed gate, "Okay people we know what we need to do." he told them, "I want these scans studied to locate the best way of getting inside that thing. If there's already a hole in the exterior then we'll have the robots dig down to it. If not then they need to be able to cut through a thin spot. That means we need to find a thin spot as well so get looking while I organise our robots."

When the encrypted communicator activated Doctor Horst was the only person in the room, Conrad and his troops all having turned in for the night while she studied the transmission that had been detected by the Grey Dawn.

"Horst." she said.

"Doctor it's Lieutenant Commander Martins. Have you got anywhere with that transmission data I forwarded to you?"

"Nowhere." Horst replied, "I've never seen anything like this before and not only is there no physical data that I can try and associate any of the data with, there's too little data for me to try picking out any commonly repeated patterns and assigning alphanumeric values to them to see if I can pick out any meaning to what was sent."

"Well don't waste any more time on it doctor." Martins told her, "We've just received a transmission from home. It seems that that signal has aroused a lot of interest there and Commander Hayes has sent us new orders regarding it."

"What happened to making sure that our security hasn't been compromised." Horst asked.

"That's still needs dealing with but this signal now takes priority. Where's Conrad?" Martins responded.

"He and his men are exercising. It's all they seem to do." Horst told him.

"Go and get him. He needs to hear this as well." Martins said and Horst sighed before getting out of her seat and walking to the room where Conrad and his team were located. Two of the soldiers were sparring while two others were lifting weights that had been present in the safe house when they had arrived. This left Conrad and the rest of his team who were arranged in a line doing press ups and Horst frowned when she saw this.

"If you're finished with all this macho crap Captain Martins wants to talk to you." Horst said to Conrad.

"What does he want?" Conrad replied without looking up.

"It's got something to do with that signal. Hayes wants us to look more closely at it." Horst said and Conrad grunted.

"Doesn't really sound like my thing doc." he said as he stopped his exercising and got to his feet, grabbing a nearby water bottle and taking a quick drink before heading towards her, "But if our mission commander calls, I answer."

"If he called for you to take a shower before sitting next to me would you?" Horst said, curling her lip as the perspiring Conrad walked close past her.

Returning to the room where the safe house's computer and communication equipment was located Horst sat back down in front of the communicator while Conrad pulled up another chair. He then deliberately placed this right beside Horst's chair and sat as close to her as possible.

"We're back captain." Horst said, frowning as she looked at Conrad while the smell of his sweat entered her nostrils.

"Good. We've received new orders from Commander Hayes concerning our mission here and this comes right from the top. I'm going to play back her message for you now." Martins said before playing back the message the *Grey Dawn* had just received

"Lieutenant Commander Martins, we've analysed the signal you picked up and we have a match. The encoding is the same as the communications picked up between the Sissusk warships that had been commandeered by an alien AI and it is the opinion of Vale and The Old Man that we're dealing with the same thing here. That means that there has to be the remains of an older civilisation on Verne that was either the source of the AI or another of its victims. There could also be one of their tachyon gates in the system so keep an eye out for that. Your orders and those of Doctor Horst and Conrad and his team are to obtain as much information about this AI as possible. Ideally we want a copy either of the original signal that reached Verne or alternatively the AI itself once it got unpacked from the signal. If obtaining any of this is impossible then do whatever you can to prevent the Commonwealth from obtaining it either. We suspect they were able to obtain at least part of the AI on the Sissusk home world but we don't want then getting even further ahead of us on this. Any physical examples of the technology associated with the AI would be a plus as well. Oh and one other thing, The Old Man has given this assignment to us and the crew of the *High Tide* as well. I expect you to beat them to whatever's left. Hayes out."

"I don't believe this!" Horst snapped, "I wanted to study the technology of those tachyon gates a year ago and that bitch went to her superiors to have me and Stein threatened with criminal charges if I did. Now she expects me to bring her the technology on a plate?"

"Welcome to the military universe doctor." Martins said, "We do what we're ordered even when we were ordered to do something different yesterday. Now the way I see it we have a location for where this signal came from so that's where we should start."

"It came from a different continent." Horst said, "How the hell do you expect us to get there?"

"Actually I don't expect you to go there at all doctor." Martins told her, "But I do want you back aboard the *Grey Dawn* so you can look over anything else we pick up."

"I guess that means the mission is up to us then." Conrad said.

"Correct." Martins replied, "Just get outside the city to where we can pick you up without being spotted."

"What about that Commonwealth cruiser? Won't it see you entering the atmosphere?" Horst asked.

"That Commonwealth cruiser is no longer in orbit around Verne doctor. It accelerated to FTL and headed towards the system's main gas giant along a course that according to my navigator happens to match the vector along which that signal was sent. My guess is that they think there's something to be found at the other end so that means we've got clear skies and I intend to make the most of them."

"What can you tell me about the target area captain?" Conrad asked.

"Mountainous and heavily wooded." Martins replied, "There's nowhere to set the *Grey Dawn* down and making our own landing zone will tell the Verne where you're coming from so you'll have to carry out an aerial insertion."

"What about a pick up afterwards?" Conrad said.

"If you can't find transport at the target site then we'll have to clear a landing zone. Providing you can keep ahead of the Verne that should be safe enough but I'll need you to mark out an area we can clear with our lasers. Think you can manage that?" Martins asked and Conrad smiled.

"Just tell me how big captain. My men can handle anything." he said.

"Is the chancellor in there?" Admiral Gregory said as he got out of his car and walked towards the front doors of the chancellor's official residence. In front of him one of Chancellor Eriksson's personal staff blocked his path, a pair of soldiers in dress uniforms and light exoskeletons standing either side of him with their gauss pistols drawn but pointing down at the ground for now. This limited show of force did not concern the admiral at all, he knew that the building's real security came in the form of an entire company of heavy infantry located in security posts from where they could rapidly deploy to any spot within the building or its grounds. The two soldiers now facing Admiral Gregory were just part of an honour guard that looked less hostile when greeting guests than troops in full powered armour would.

"The chancellor has retired for the evening." the servant said, "She is not to be disturbed unless it is urgent."

"Urgent?" Admiral Gregory yelled and he pointed up at the sky, "There's a damned nuclear capable Commonwealth warship up there and while I'm trying to come up with a strategy, any strategy to defend our nation against it, our Minister of Defence and Security is bypassing me entirely and giving orders to my ships that I'm not allowed to see. Even my own officers can't tell me what's going on because they're having their memories of the orders wiped. Now you get in touch with the chancellor and tell her that I-"

"The chancellor will see you now admiral." the servant interrupted and Admiral Gregory realised that Chancellor Eriksson had probably been watching and listening to every word he had just said thanks to the implants in the servant's skull.

"Thank you." he said as the guards stood aside and the servant then turned around and walked back into the large building where Verne's head of state resided. The two soldiers fell in behind the admiral as he followed the servant and all four men went inside.

The servant led Admiral Gregory past the luxurious halls where state events were held and the few off world dignitaries who visited Verne would be welcomed towards the offices where the chancellor carried out most of her duties and when he was shown into her official office he found her sat behind her desk glaring at him.

"Chancellor." he said in greeting.

"Admiral." she responded, "I understand that you are unhappy about the use of fleet units for covert operations."

"No chancellor. What makes me unhappy is the way that fleet units are being requisitioned for whatever it is that Ministers King and Van Rijn are up to without my knowledge. Can you tell me what is so significant about Friedman and its moons that we now have a destroyer rushing headlong towards a Commonwealth cruiser that carries enough firepower to crack our ship open like an egg and can outpace and out turn it as well." Admiral Gregory said.

"The project is top secret admiral." Chancellor Eriksson told him calmly.

"And I have top secret clearance chancellor. Supposedly the highest level of clearance in our armed forces." the admiral snapped back at her.

"Perhaps so, but Minister Van Rijn has the final say on who has access to this particular project admiral."

"Ah, so it isn't anything to do with the Ministry of Defence and Security then. It is the Ministry of Science and Technology. Well if you expect your chief of fleet operations to act as an errand boy to Minister Van Rijn while my ships are hampered by rules written to conserve resources during peacetime patrols and exercises then you can find a replacement for me chancellor."

"Are you resigning your commission admiral?" Chancellor Eriksson asked in surprise.

"If that's what it takes, yes." Admiral Gregory answered and he and the chancellor stared at one another for a short time, each wondering whether the other would suddenly relent from their stated position.

As it happened it was Chancellor Eriksson that blinked first, not wanting to risk having to explain why the chief of Verne's fleet had seen fit to resign to the nation's legislative assembly and she activated the large video communication screen mounted on the wall of her office.

"Get me Ministers King and Van Rijn and General Marino as well." she said before turning her attention back to the admiral sat opposite her, "Very well admiral I'll tell you what you want to know, General Marino as well. I think it's high time that you both knew what an exciting leap forwards we are about to make."

The screen suddenly divided up into three parts. Two of these showed the two government ministers now in their homes while the third was blank apart from a label that read 'AUDIO CONNECTION ONLY'

"Chancellor," General Marino's voice said, "I'm on my way home, how can I help you?"

"I've got Admiral Gregory in my office with me." the chancellor replied, "He has raised concerns with me about the use of military forces for the special project and I have decided that it is time for the leaders of our armed forces to be included in it."

"Chancellor I think you being premature." Minister Van Rijn said, "We know that the project is likely to have benefits for our military but I see no need to involve them at this stage."

"With respect minister," Admiral Gregory said, the tone of his voice suggesting that he had no respect at all for the minister's position, "the military became involved as soon as orders were given without the

involvement of myself and General Marino.”

“There is also the question of the security breach at the dig site.” Chancellor Eriksson said, “It is clear that the Commonwealth cruiser detected the unauthorised transmission and our security needs to be upgraded.” “I have that in hand already chancellor.” Minister King said, “A dozen of our finest security agents are on their way.”

“That cruiser carries a full company of Commonwealth marines minister.” General Marino pointed out, “They may only be light infantry but they could easily overwhelm a dozen intelligence agents.”

“Which is why I want a company of our own troops deploying there as soon as possible.” Chancellor Eriksson said, “Plus I want a squadron of ships placing in geostationary orbit where they can protect the site from the Commonwealth cruiser.”

Admiral Gregory nodded at this point.

“A frigate and a pair of destroyers should be able to hold it back long enough for us to get the rest of the fleet launched.” he said, “But you still haven't told me what's going on out there among the ferals. What have you found?”

“Perhaps we should let one of the research team explain.” Chancellor Eriksson said.

“Professor Gruber is returning to the dig site.” Minister Van Rijn said, “I ordered him to travel by GEV for extra secrecy.”

“Someone else is actually at the dig site then.” the chancellor responded.

“I'm sure I can get Doctor Jansen to explain things if you are sure about this chancellor.” Minister Van Rijn said.

“I'm sure minister. Establish a link to the dig site and bring Doctor Jansen into this communication.” the chancellor ordered and in his office at home Minister Van Rijn attempted to establish a link to the dig site, “Is there a problem minister?” Chancellor Eriksson asked when she saw Van Rijn frowned.

“There's just some unusual interference chancellor. I'm sure it won't take long to get through.” he answered.

“How convenient.” Admiral Gregory muttered and Chancellor Eriksson glared at him.

“I've got a connection to the site now chancellor. I'll just-” Minister Van Rijn began before he suddenly stopped speaking and began to shudder uncontrollably in his chair.

“Adelmar.” Chancellor Eriksson said when she saw this, “What's happening.”

“He's having a seizure!” King exclaimed right before another communication channel joined with the ones currently connecting all of the parties to the conversation. On the screen in Chancellor Eriksson's office this appeared as another blank section, this one labelled 'DATA CHANNEL' as data began to flow directly from the dig site on the other side of the planet to the offices in Jules Verne City and from there it made its way into the wireless communication implants embedded in the skulls of the participants in the conversation, causing all of them to begin convulsing in the same way as Minister Van Rijn.

“Your man shouldn't be driving this fast Conrad.” Horst said as the van they rode in sped along the highway leading out of the city.

“He knows what he's doing. We've all done the close protect course, that includes advanced driving combined with escape and evasion.”

“But does it cover how to avoid the police pulling us over for speeding?” Horst asked, “We must be doing well over a hundred kilometres per hour.”

“One hundred and eighty five according to the speedometer.” the van's driver said when he heard this, “The posted limit's one sixty.”

“So we're going twenty five over it.” Horst said, staring at Conrad before she noticed a police vehicle parked at the side of the highway as they sped past, “There! That was the police.”

“He's not coming after us.” the driver commented, looking at the police car in his rear view mirror and seeing that it was still parked exactly where it had been when he drove past it.

Conrad looked out of the back of the van to see for himself and he was briefly able to see the stationary vehicle before it disappeared from view.

“That comm unit will pick up the police band.” he said looking at the communication unit built into the van's dashboard, “Let's see if they're talking about us.”

One of the soldiers sat at the front of the van turned on the communication unit and adjusted the frequency setting to one labelled 'POLICE'. However, rather than the communication between police patrols within the range of the device and their control station the channel produced just a rapid stream of pulses.

“It's obviously encrypted.” Horst said.

“Yes and this ought to be able to decrypt it.” Conrad pointed out, “Not much point in being able to listen in if we don't know what's being said.”

“Well unless the communicator is broken that's obviously a data transmission that doesn't contain any audio information.” Horst replied.

“Try another channel.” Conrad said, “A civilian one.” and the soldier nodded. Setting the communication unit to seek out a channel on its own, the soldier allowed it to adjust its frequency until a pair of jovial voices

belonging to the hosts of a late night radio programme began to be heard, "See? It's working fine." Conrad added. However, all of a sudden the voices stopped and there was a brief period of silence before static filled the channel and then the same pattern of pulses that had been heard on the police channel took over this one as well.

"See?" Horst said, mimicking Conrad's comment to her, "It's broken."

Conrad then felt the van start to slow down and he looked at the highway ahead to see the few other vehicles driving along it at this time of night were slowing down and glancing across to the other side he saw that the vehicles moving in the other direction were also decelerating steadily despite there being no reason for them to do so.

"Keep going." he told the driver, "As fast as you can."

"All the lanes are blocked ahead." the driver replied and Conrad looked over to the other side of the highway again.

"Cut across and go round." he said, "Don't bother about being on the wrong side, just get us to the *Grey Dawn* as fast as you can." then he looked by at Horst, "Okay doctor, how much do you know about those implants the Verne have in their heads?"

"They're some of the most advanced cybernetics in known space." Horst replied, "No one else is really doing much research in that area of technology so they've been able to pull ahead of us and the Commonwealth."

"And why isn't anyone else researching the tech?" Conrad asked.

"Because of the security issue. By hacking someone's implants you can control what they do."

"They'? The implants or the person with them?"

"That depends. Most Verne have implants that monitor their nervous system but that takes information from nerves rather than stimulating muscles into action. The only way a person's actions could be affected by hacking would be if you could create a program that could replace the reasoning centres of the brain. But for that you'd need-" Horst explained before she trailed off and her eyes widened, "For that you'd need a highly advanced AI. Just like the one that managed to overthrow the Sissusk Empire."

"And may just be buried on the other side of this planet as well?" Conrad added and Horst nodded.

"We may be too late to stop it." she said, "It could have taken over the entire planet already."

The shuttle had carried twenty of the *Warspite's* robots to the moon's surface along with all the portable scanning, digging and cutting equipment that they would need to gain access to the buried starships that made up the mysterious ring structure. It had been theorised that the rings projected powerful charged tachyons streams similar to the signals used by the Commonwealth for faster than light communication. The difference was that the streams were so massive that they could be used to propel spacecraft at a rate around sixty times faster than the Commonwealth's fastest starships. Quite how the alien civilisation that had developed the gates manage to generate and manipulate tachyons on such a scale remained a mystery however, since the only gates discovered so far had destroyed themselves while being examined. The hope held by the *Warspite's* crew in this instance was that this gate was so old and already damaged that its self destruct mechanism would no longer be functional, allowing them to study it for as long as they needed in order to uncover its secrets. Or at least that was the theory. In practice with a Verne destroyer approaching, even one that lacked the artificial gravity that was considered essential by the Commonwealth in modern warship design meant that the *Warspite* could not simply remain in orbit around the moon indefinitely.

"Captain that destroyer just bounced a lidar pulse off our hull." Cortez reported.

"Any signs of a weapons lock yet?" Reeves asked.

"No sir, I think it was just a ranging pulse for now." Cortez replied.

"They're still more than a hundred million kilometres away." Goldman reported, "They won't even get that pulse for another six minutes."

"Do you want me to adjust our position captain?" Ash asked.

"No thank you commander. That pulse was probably just to let us know that they know we're here. Even without active tadar running they'll have still detected our exit from FTL on their passive sensors. If we move now they'll just pick us up again when they get closer." Reeves said. Then he looked at Cortez, "Petty officer kindly return the favour to the Verne. Tadar, two pulses."

"Reminding them we've got better tech than they do?" Knight commented and Reeves nodded.

"We can make as many tachyons as we want. No point in hiding that fact." he said.

"Captain I'm picking up a tachyon signal from Verne." Cortez announced suddenly.

"Aimed at us?" Reeves replied.

"I don't think so sir." Cortez said.

"I think it's aimed at that destroyer." Goldman added, "Someone on Verne obviously wants to talk to them in a hurry."

"Lieutenant Lucas, any chance you can tell us what's being said?" Knight asked.

"I'm sorry commander, we're on the fringes of the signal and only picking it up intermittently. Even if we were receiving the whole thing I'm not entirely convinced that we'd be able to decrypt it anyway. Verne

transmission encoding is just as good as ours." Lucas replied.

"Well I'm not willing to take any chances." Reeves said, "Bring the ship to action stations. I want all fighters crewed and ready for launch, the same with our drones. I don't intend to start a fight but I will finish whatever the Verne decide to start."

"Captain I have a priority transmission from Verne." the *Meredith Thring's* operations officer said when the tachyon signal reached the destroyer, "It's real time."

"I'm connecting. Activate our tachyon transmitter but keep me advised of our consumption levels. I don't want to drop below ninety-eight percent reserves." the captain responded, activating his wireless transceiver implant to establish a connection to his ship's communication system, "This is Captain Oswald of the *Meredith Thring*, go ahead. Over."

"Captain this is Admiral Gregory. You are ordered to engage the Commonwealth cruiser in the Friedman subsystem."

"Can you confirm that order admiral?" Captain Oswald said, confused at being ordered to engage a clearly superior enemy, "I am to engage the Commonwealth cruiser? Over." and on hearing the order that had been delivered privately the destroyer's bridge crew exchanged nervous glances.

"That is correct captain. Now do your duty."

"I take it that this order has ministerial approval. Over." Oswald said and then he heard a second voice that he recognised immediately even before the woman identified herself to him.

"Captain Oswald this is Chancellor Eriksson. You are to attack and destroy the Commonwealth cruiser. You may use any means at your disposal. Am I clear about that?"

"Yes chancellor. We will begin preparations immediately. Over and out." Oswald replied before breaking the connection to Verne, "Shut down tachyon transmitter lieutenant." he ordered, "What are our tachyon and graviton reserve levels?"

"Still at more than ninety-nine percent on tachyons and full on gravitons captain."

"Good, we have authorisation to use as much of our reserves as required. Navigation plot an FTL jump to Friedman and get Lieutenant Garcia up here, I have a task for him."

"Jump plotted captain, passing data to helm now." the destroyer's navigator reported and Oswald nodded before looking at his operations officer.

"Lieutenant as soon as we drop out of FTL I want you to run a full sweep of that cruiser's computer network. Find me a way in. We can't out gun a heavy cruiser but we can out think them. Helm, you may jump when ready."

"Captain I've got a tachyon build up on the Verne destroyer." Cortez said, "I think they're about to execute an FTL jump."

"Now this is interesting." Knight said, "Do you think we've upset them?"

"Are they still heading towards us?" Reeves asked.

"Yes captain." Goldman answered, "Unless they break off before jumping they could end up less than a hundred thousand kilometres from our current position."

"That's weapons range. They could come out shooting." Thomas pointed out.

"Scramble all fighters and drones." Reeves ordered, "They are not to fire unless we are fired on first but I want them out there just in case."

"Is there any activity from the rest of the Verne fleet?" Knight said but there was no time for a tadar scan to determine what was currently happening around Verne before the *Meredith Thring* acted.

"Verne destroyer is jumping captain. Still on course for us." Cortez announced as the build up of tachyons around the *Meredith Thring* reached a critical level and the destroyer rapidly accelerated to faster than light speed, the reaction-less nature of tachyonic acceleration in the closed system of a starship preventing both the crew and their vessel from being crushed flat by the thousands of gees ordinary Newtonian physics would have suggested they were being exposed to. Almost instantly the Verne destroyer dropped back to sub light speed and just as Goldman had said it was now so close to the *Warspite* that the cruiser's ordinary electromagnetic based sensors could detect it in almost real time and a picture of the destroyer was shown on the bridge's main view screen.

"Captain I'm picking up a radio signal aimed towards us from the destroyer." Goldman said as soon as the Verne warship had completed its FTL jump.

"Are they trying to talk to us?" Knight asked.

"No commander." Goldman answered, "The signal is machine code. Not audio or video."

"They're trying to establish a connection to our network captain." Lucas added.

"Bridge to engineering. Commander Bernard is our network secure?" Reeves said, activating the intercom.

"Perfectly captain." Bernard responded, "The Verne are probing comms arrays, computer ports and our robots as well but our firewalls are keeping them out just like they ought to. Do you want me to try having a go at their network in return?"

"No thank you commander. Just make sure that we remain secure." Reeves replied.

"Captain the Verne ship has stopped probing our network and is moving off. I'm still picking up active lidar from them though." Goldman said.

"Whatever they were trying I doubt they'll just give up like that." Reeves said, "What's the status of our fighters?"

"Ready to launch captain." Goldman replied and Reeves nodded.

"Give the order commander. Scramble." he told her.

"Enemy vessel is deploying fighters and drones captain." a sensor technician aboard the *Meredith Thring* said as fighters shot from the launch tubes at the front of the *Warspite* and attack drones emerged from the launcher at its rear. Meanwhile Captain Oswald stood at the rear of the bridge with his operations officer and Lieutenant Garcia, the commanding officer of the infantry platoon carried aboard the destroyer.

"Prime all weapons. Stand by to fire if they make any hostile moves against us but I don't want to tip our hand yet." Oswald ordered and then he turned his attention back to the screen he and the pair of lieutenants were gathered around. This showed a diagram of the *Warspite* that had been compiled from the lidar scans the *Meredith Thring* had conducted of the Commonwealth cruiser as well as the attempts to access its computer network remotely and the diagram was marked with white dots where network access ports had been detected.

"That's it." the operations officer said, pointing to the only one of the dots to be flashing while the others were all solid.

"You're sure that port is open?" Oswald asked.

"Yes captain. It's on a closed system within the ship but from what we can tell it's mobile so we can still use it to access the main systems providing we can bring it on line."

"If it's not online then how did we detect it?" Garcia asked.

"It appears that the port is designed for remote activation." the operations manager replied, "Even when the device is fully shut down the port itself remains active in a low power mode."

"Then that's where we'll have to target." Oswald said, "Lieutenant Garcia have your men suit up and be ready for immediate deployment. As soon as you're ready we'll make a close pass on that cruiser. That's when you'll need to make your move. Remember, our orders are to destroy that cruiser but I expect that the chancellor will be equally as happy if we can take it back to Verne intact."

Garcia smiled.

"It might still have a few holes in it captain." he said.

"A few will do lieutenant. Just make sure that they're not in anything important." Oswald said and then he looked at the operations officer, "In the meantime I need you to seize control of that port." he told him.

The *Grey Dawn's* thrusters flared as the scout ship came into land on the deserted highway. The vessel landed horizontally, using the thrusters to slow it down more rapidly than just its own inertia and the brakes on its landing gear could manage. At more than a hundred metres long the scout ship needed a considerable length of straight highway to land and take off in this manner and it was fortunate that the Verne had constructed their highways wide and straight, intending them to be capable of handling far more traffic than they currently did as their nation expanded. After the *Grey Dawn* had come to a halt it began to reverse slowly using motors built into its landing gear, maximising the amount of straight highway ahead that could be used to take off again. This had to be done carefully to make sure that the vessel followed the path of the highway properly and its landing gear did not slide off into the grassy terrain either to either side. In theory the *Grey Dawn* could take off vertically but this would require such a large amount of fuel to accomplish that a horizontal take off was preferred.

While the ship was reversing along the highway the van carrying Conrad's team appeared ahead of it, speeding towards the scout ship faster than it was reversing.

"They're here captain." the *Grey Dawn's* navigator said when he saw the approaching vehicle.

"Lower the cargo lift." Martins ordered his operations officer, "As long as we're on the ground we're vulnerable and I don't want to spend a minute longer than necessary down here."

"Yes sir." the officer responded.

In the van carrying Horst, Conrad and his team of soldiers the driver saw the lift descending beneath the *Grey Dawn*.

"Looks like they're opening up the door for us." he said and Conrad looked along the highway ahead of them.

"Drive us right onto the lift." he ordered, "If Martins wanted us to board on foot then he'd have lowered steps instead."

"Yes sir." the driver replied as he began to brake, slowing the van so that he could safely steer it around the scout ship's forward landing gear and then drive onto the lift platform where one of the crew stood waiting wearing an armoured vest and holding a personal defence weapon, making certain that no-one was following the van. The van came screeching to a halt on the lift and the moment it was stationary the crewman used

his radio headset to call for the lift to be raised again. The occupants of the van began to disembark while the lift was still being raised and both Conrad and Horst dashed towards the crewman.

"We need to speak to Captain Martins immediately." Horst said, "We have vital information for him."

"He's on the bridge." the crewman replied, nodding, "He wants to see you as well."

"Good, then let's not keep him waiting." Conrad said and he grabbed hold of Horst by the arm and began to pull her in the direction of the bridge, leaping from the lift platform to the deck of the *Grey Dawn's* hold before it was fully raised and locked in place.

"Let go of me!" Horst snapped, "I don't need your help."

"Just making sure you can keep up doctor." Conrad replied, letting go of her arm.

When the pair reached the bridge the crew were in the process of preparing for take off and despite the ship having its own artificial gravity field all of them were securely strapped into their seats.

"Captain we need to get out of here." Horst exclaimed.

"That's what we're about to do doctor." Martins replied, "We'll be airborne in three minutes and then it's a two hour atmospheric flight to the target zone."

"Captain I'd recommend that we abandon the mission and leave the system immediately." Horst said and Martins turned to glare at her.

"Retreat? Doctor you heard Commander Hayes' orders just like I did. Retreat wasn't mentioned anywhere in them. What can you tell me that would make me change that?"

"Doctor Horst thinks that the alien AI is loose on Verne and is taking control of the population." Conrad said and Martins' eyes widened.

"How is that possible?" he asked.

"All that cybernetic junk in their heads." Conrad said.

"Helm," Martins said, "change of plan. Get us into the air and then back into orbit. Then I want a full report sending via the tachyon relay station to Commander Hayes. I'm not going to be the one who gets the blame for any of this."

A lone member of the *Warspite's* hangar ground crew stood in one of the cruiser's cargo holds, searching through a set of shelves for a case of spare parts for a shuttle when he heard a dull thumping sound from elsewhere in the hold and he looked around for its source.

"Hello?" he called out when he heard the sound again and he moved slowly in the direction it seemed to be coming from. There was no reply to his call but when he heard the sound for a third time the crewman was able to identify the source as a crate about two metres long that lay on the floor. The sound was obviously coming from inside the crate and the crewman groaned, wondering what sort of equipment had been put inside it without first being properly deactivating. The crate was not locked but there were four clasps holding it shut and as he crouched down beside it he reached out to undo these one at a time, "What ever this is it had better be easy to shut down." he said to himself.

The sound ceased while the crewman was in the process of releasing the clasps and as he had completed the process of unsealing the crate he lifted the lid and then pulled back the plastic sheet that wrapped whatever it was that was inside.

"Hello there." the android Kelly said, smiling as she looked up at the surprised crewman and then she suddenly lashed out with a hand, striking him in his throat and he fell backwards gasping for breath as the android unwrapped herself and climbed out of the crate, "I'm really sorry about this." she said, "But I'm afraid I need your clothes if I'm going to be walking around this ship without everyone staring at me for wearing nothing but this hospital gown." and then she brought her foot down on the crewman's throat again and this time the impact was enough to crush his windpipe completely, killing rather than just disorientating him.

Quickly she checked to make sure that there were no other members of the *Warspite's* crew or its robots close enough to have witnessed the killing of the crewman and then she began to remove his uniform, dressing herself in it. The crewman had been more than twenty centimetres taller than Kelly so his uniform was loose on her body and she needed to tighten the belt as much as possible to prevent the trousers from falling down. More of a problem were his boots that, even when stuffed with the dead man's socks could not be made to fit her feet properly and with each step she took a boot shook loosely around her foot, but the disguise was her only option for the time being. She also checked the dead man's pockets, searching for information on what his duties aboard the *Warspite* had been but when she found his identity card she knew that he could not provide her with the access she needed.

"Hangar crew." she said, looking at the half naked corpse by her feet, "What I need is an engineer. You just won't do." and then pulling the dead man's cap over her head and lowering the peak so that it helped cover her face she set off in search of what she needed.

With the *Warspite's* crew at action stations the cruiser's corridors were relatively empty and Kelly was able to make her way through the ship without encountering anyone until she reached the main engineering section where there were dozens of crewmen, both officers and enlisted as well as numerous robots. Keeping her head bowed so that anyone she walked past would see the image of the *Warspite* embroidered on her cap

rather than her face she made her way around the large compartment that was dominated by the four nuclear fusion reactors that were the heavy cruiser's main source of power. Fortunately for the android most of the engineering staff's attention was focused on these reactors and she was able to make her way up a set of steps to a monitoring station where several displays showed various system diagrams relating to the *Warspite*. As the android had reasoned, one of these showed the full power distribution net for the cruiser and just a glance at this monitor was enough for her to record an image of it in her memory. As was to be expected the power distribution system aboard the *Warspite* included various redundancies that were meant to improve the ship's survivability in combat. However, there were still numerous points in the system that if disrupted would cause certain sections of the ship to lose power. This disruption would probably last no more than a minute or two at most before either the system itself or one of the engineering staff was able to effect a repair but if timed properly then a minute would be all that Kelly's new controllers needed. Before she could continue with her assignment Kelly had need of equipment, in particular the a means to get her into a secured power junction box and also the tools necessary to carry out the work she needed to do. Looking around she saw a member of the engineering crew, an enlisted woman wearing a tool harness exiting the engineering compartment and Kelly hurried after the woman.

The technician was making her way towards the front of the cruiser when Kelly caught up with her in the corridor.

"Hey!" she called out to the technician, "Wait a moment I think you forgot something."

"What?" the technician asked as she turned around and then she frowned as she tried to place Kelly's face when she did not recognise her from the engineering crew. Then she noticed the way the uniform Kelly was wearing hung loose, "Who the hell are you?" the technician demanded as she read the name tape sewn to the front of the shirt Kelly had stolen and recognised the name, "What's happened to-"

"Sorry about this." Kelly interrupted as she grabbed the technician by her neck and slammed her into a nearby bulkhead. Then as the technician struggled to get free Kelly clamped her other hand firmly over her mouth to prevent her from crying out as she tightened her grip around the woman's throat. Double checking that they were alone in the corridor, Kelly then applied sideways pressure with the hand gagging the technician and there was a sudden 'snap' as the woman's neck broke.

Knowing that she may not have long before the technician was missed, Kelly picked up the corpse and carried it into the closest compartment. This was filled with filtration equipment that was part of the *Warspite's* water processing system and Kelly set the body down beside one of the large filter housings before she removed the dead technician's tool harness and rummaged through her pockets until she found an electronic key card that would permit access to power distribution boxes and the android smiled.

"Thanks, this is just what I need." she said.

Leaving the body of the technician wedged between two of the filter housings Kelly exited the compartment and found the nearest stairwell. From here she climbed to the level where the *Warspite's* bridge could be located and using the information now held in her memory thanks to the power distribution diagram she quickly located one of the main power feeds to the bridge. This ran through a locked and armoured junction box that Kelly was able to open using the key card of the woman she had just murdered and when she pulled open the door she saw several heavy duty cables as well as a compact monitoring station that showed the voltage and current flow through the cables. This also featured a protruding rod that was hexagonal in shape and Kelly took a wrench from her tool belt and clamped this around the rod before turning it sharply counter clockwise. Instantly the readouts of current and voltage dropped to zero as this route for power to reach the bridge was cut off. The redundancy built into the system meant that there was still power flowing to the bridge from two other sources but thanks to the diagram she had stored in her memory Kelly knew exactly where these could be found as well and she began to make her way towards the next.

"Increased magnetic field from the destroyer captain." one of the *Warspite's* sensor operators announced. "She's coming about." Knight said as the main view screen showed the Verne warship pivoting to face the *Warspite*.

"Putting us directly ahead of her missile tubes." Goldman pointed out and Reeves nodded.

"Stand by for anti-missile fire." he said, "All light turrets to intercept any incoming missiles. Commander Ash can you line us up to use the main guns?"

"Not going for a missile lock captain?" Knight asked.

"We won't have time if they fire from this range." Reeves pointed out, "I don't want to be the first to fire but we can't let them get a clear volley. As soon as they commit to launch we'll hit them with our neutral particle beam cannons."

"The destroyer's accelerating captain. Coming right at us." Cortez said.

"I'm picking up a localised gravity field in the destroyer captain." another sensor operator added.

"They've turned on their artificial gravity." Reeves said, "Commander Thomas, Commander Ash, is your plan to make them burn through their graviton supply ready?"

"The plan was based on us making a fast sub light run from Verne captain." Thomas replied, "But I think I can adapt it."

"Very good commander. Weapons stand by. If they attack we-" Reeves began.

"Captain, the Verne destroyer just went to a seven gee acceleration." Goldman interrupted and then all of a sudden all of the lights in the bridge went out at the same time and every display shut down.

"What the hell?" Knight exclaimed.

"We've lost all power." Goldman said.

"I see that commander. Get it back." Reeves said.

By one of the doorways leading from the bridge one of the two marine guards stationed to protect the bridge felt in his webbing for a chemical light stick and lit it, enabling the rest of the bridge crew to see as they hunted for emergency torches themselves.

"Marine, your radio." Reeves said when he looked at the marine and he got out of his seat and walked towards the guard. The marine disconnected the personal radio that was clipped to his webbing from his headset and handed the radio itself to Reeves who in turn reset its frequency to the same as the *Warspite's* wireless intercom pick up.

"Bridge to engineering, we've lost all power. What's going on?" he transmitted, hoping that whatever had caused the power outage to the bridge was sufficiently localised that the *Warspite's* engineering section would be able to pick up the signal.

"All power readouts are in the green captain." Bernard responded, "It looks like someone just pulled a switch."

"The isolation boxers." Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Go." he told him and then he looked at the second marine guard, "Go with him." he added.

"Yes captain." the marine answered and as Knight and the marine hurried from the bridge Reeves dashed to the nearby emergency arms locker where there were several pistols and personal defence weapons stored.

"Weapons?" Goldman asked.

"Yes lieutenant commander." Reeves replied as he took out a PDW and handed it along with a pair of magazines to Lucas who smiled as she loaded the weapon by fitting its magazine along its upper surface. Then he took out a second PDW for himself and as he loaded it he added, "If someone did deliberately cut off our power then we have someone aboard who's working for the Verne."

While the crew of the *Warspite* were still trying to find out why the bridge had lost all power the *Meredith Thring* was racing towards the Commonwealth cruiser. Even in its current state of helplessness the *Warspite* was not an easy target, there were twelve fighters arrayed in formation near to the cruiser and these were perfectly placed to intercept any missiles launched by the Verne destroyer or perform strafing runs if it attempted to use any of its defensive turrets against the cruiser. However, Captain Oswald had no intention of engaging the *Warspite* in such an obvious manner. Instead the destroyer's path took it right past the much larger cruiser, getting to within one hundred metres of it at one point and at that moment, assisted in their timing by a direct link to the *Meredith Thring's* computer, a full platoon of Verne marines in powered armour leapt across the gap between the two vessels.

Each marine had been issued with a limited supply of gravitons in a singularity jar fitted to their armour's propulsion packs and these allowed them to rapidly change their velocity to match the *Warspite's* before they clamped their boots onto the cruiser's hull.

"Garcia to *Meredith Thring*. Platoon is down and safe." Garcia transmitted, "Heading for entry points now."

Garcia's platoon made their way across the hull of the *Warspite* towards the air lock located just behind the cruiser's ninety-six vertical missile launching tubes that provided the warship with its primary means of attack. The Verne marines made no effort to try and disable these weapons as they passed though, a miscalculation while attempting such a thing could easily result in an explosive chain reaction that could destroy the entire cruiser and kill all of the marines sent to try and seize control of it. With his men already on the hull of the *Warspite*, Garcia knew that its external weapons were now useless against them in any case and so they ignored them all.

The platoon converged around the airlock door, a rectangular opening in the hull that was five metres across and as they waited they saw amber lights positioned at each corner start to flash before the hatch cover lowered slightly and then began to slide sideways, disappearing under the hull around it. This left the marines looking at a hole leading down into the *Warspite* and although there was a ladder running down one side that consisted of indentations in the wall none of them moved yet. Instead the power armoured marines waited as the floor of the air lock below rose up towards them until it was level with the outer hull.

"First two squads onto the lift." Garcia ordered as he stepped onto the lift platform, "Three and four wait here until we send the lift back up for you."

With the first half of his men on the lift it began to descend again, lowering itself into the *Warspite's* hull until it reached the same level as the bottom of the large set of doors that formed the inner part of the dorsal airlock, at which point the hatch above the marines closed again and there was a growing 'hiss' as air was pumped back into it before the inner door finally opened.

The Verne marines immediately found themselves confronted by a woman in a Commonwealth fleet duty uniform, complete with a cap that identified her as a member of the *Warspite's* crew and Garcia and his men raised the weapons built into the forearms of their armour towards her.

"Hey!" Kelly exclaimed as she pulled the cap from her head, "I'm the one who let you in."

Garcia frowned.

"You? We seized control of one of this ship's robots." he said.

"No, you activated my remote programming. I belong to Howard Denton, or at least I did before I was ordered to kill him." Kelly said, "Now I'm not really sure who I belong to."

"The Commonwealth does not permit its robots to kill." Garcia commented.

"Who said I work for the Commonwealth? They had me in a crate in their hold. Now are we just going to stand around here all day while you ask stupid questions or do you want to seize this ship?" Kelly responded.

"Captain the power's been disconnected at the isolation box." Knight reported, using the radio belonging to his marine escort.

"Can you turn it back on?" Reeves asked.

"Negative captain. Whoever did this took the tool they used to shut off the power with them."

"I hear that." Bernard's voice said, the engineer having been listening in on the transmission from engineering, "I'm sending someone up there now. They should be with you in five minutes. Hang on."

"Hanging on is something I don't want to be doing right now commander. I want control of my ship back." Reeves said.

"Yes captain, but there's something odd going on here. My master status board is reporting that number four dorsal airlock is in use." Bernard told him.

"I gave no orders for anyone to carry out an EVA." Reeves said.

"Captain that Verne destroyer will have passed very close to us by now." Goldman pointed out, "What if it's not someone going outside?"

"It's someone coming in." Reeves interrupted and then he raised the radio to his mouth again, "Commander Bernard I need you to sound an intruder alert. Have Major Willis deploy his men immediately."

"Yes captain, I'm right on it." Bernard said and then he switched his intercom to carry out a shipwide broadcast, "Now here this, now here this. All hands intruder alert. Intruder alert. Marine units to deploy immediately."

As Willis emerged from his private cabin into the barracks where most of the enlisted marines slept in bunks he found them already donning body armour and checking sidearms. More powerful weapons than automatic pistols were kept in the nearby armoury but using most of these aboard the *Warspite* ran the risk of significant collateral damage. However, knowing that they were likely to be facing troops wearing powered armour Willis did not want to fully discount the possibility that it may be necessary to inflict some collateral damage on the ship in order to secure it.

"Okay we want shotguns and rifles." he ordered as he led his men to the armoury where the marines on duty were already preparing weapons, "Keep the rifles slung for now but be ready to swap over if you have to. Just try not to put any holes in the hull okay?"

Willis slung a rifle over his back and then beckoned for his command section to follow him in the direction of the bridge. Defending the *Warspite* against a hostile force boarding it was something that his company had

rehearsed time and again and every marine knew exactly what was expected of them. Squads would deploy to protect key areas of the ship such as the bridge, engineering, infirmary, missile launchers and hangars while others would either head for any breaches identified or patrol the ship to hunt down any boarders. Hearing the sound of footsteps around a corner up ahead of them Willis and his marines came to a halt and raised their weapons but rather than a Verne marine it was one of the *Warspite's* engineers who appeared and the man gasped as he found himself staring down the barrels of shotguns and pistols."

"Where are you going?" Willis asked as the marines lowered their weapons.

"Somebody cut the power to the bridge." the engineer replied and he held up his wrench, "I'm going to turn it back on."

"Okay we're heading that way as well. Stick with us." Willis said and the engineer nodded before joining the marines.

There was a stairwell that would take the marines directly to the bridge not far from their current location and they began to hurry up the steps. They had gone just two floors when Willis raised his fist for the team to stop and he peered upwards.

"Anyone else hear that?" he whispered as he heard a heavy metallic clumping sound and then he leant over the edge of the stairs and looked upwards. He could see all the way up the stairwell to the uppermost of the *Warspite's* levels from here and from close to the top he noticed movement, "Identify yourself." he called out, aiming his shotgun upwards. Then he saw a bulky helmeted head appear over the side of the stairs far above. This helmet lacked a transparent faceplate for its wearer to see through, instead providing the Verne marine with a view of the outside world through a system of cameras and other electronic sensory devices mounted on the front of the helmet. Another camera was mounted on the arm that the Verne marine pointed back down towards Willis and also mounted to this arm was something that was undeniably a weapon. Willis leapt backwards moments before there was a flash of light from the arm and the safety rail where he had been standing glowed red hot in the laser beam.

"Holy crap!" he exclaimed before pressing the transmit button of his personal radio, "This is Willis, we've got intruders with directed energy weapons in stairwell 'G'." then he looked at the engineer, "Keep close to the wall, we'll cover you." he told the man before quickly pointing his shotgun up the stairwell and firing a rapid three round burst towards the power armoured figure above him. The burst struck the Verne marine and he pulled back away from the edge of the stairs momentarily before he reappeared and fired his laser weapon again.

"Okay ditch the light stuff." Willis said as he passed his shotgun to the unarmed engineer, "These guys are too heavily armoured for it." and he unslung his assault rifle, chambered a round and continued to climb the stairs.

Above them the engineer and Willis' marines heard the sound of heavily armoured feet as their Verne opponents hurried down the stairs to try and reach the level where the bridge was located ahead of them but the *Warspite's* defenders reached the hatch first, throwing it open only to find a marine pointing his sidearm at them.

"Stand down, we're on your side." Willis said.

"We heard shooting." Knight said from beside the nearby electrical isolation box.

"Yeah, we've got Verne marines coming down the stairs. I've not heard any decompression alarms so I'm guessing that they got in through a dorsal air lock. They're in powered armour so I've cleared the use of rifles." Willis said.

"Just be careful where you point them." Knight replied before he noticed the engineer, "See if you can get the power back on." he said, "We need full control of the ship's systems if we're going to defend it."

"Yes sir." the engineer said, dashing past the marines to the isolation box, "There's no visible damage." he said when he saw the inside of the box, "I should just be able to turn this back on." and he took a wrench from his tool belt.

"Here they come." the marine who had been last out of the stairwell said when he heard the sound of the Verne marines right above them and he slammed the hatch shut.

"Okay take cover and wait for them to show themselves." Willis ordered and his men backed away from the hatch and took whatever cover they could find in the corridor leading to the bridge.

"Okay power's on." the engineer said suddenly as the voltage and current meters rose again as soon as he turned the wrench, "But I could really do with resetting the other two boxes as well."

"Go with him." Knight told the marine that had escorted him from the bridge, "I need to get back to the bridge."

"Okay commander, we'll hold this door." Willis replied and Knight nodded before he ran back down the corridor towards the bridge.

Bursting through the doorway, Knight found that with the power restored the bridge crew were frantically trying to determine exactly what had happened during the time they had been in darkness and Reeves was currently standing by the central console speaking with Lieutenant Commander Shaw who had been able to track the *Meredith Thring* while the *Warspite's* bridge crew could not.

"She made a close pass and then pulled away at high gee." Shaw said, "I've been trying to get instructions from you since then. Do we go after them?"

"Negative on that Archangel." Reeves replied. We seem to have picked up some extra passengers so I'm guessing that their aim is to capture the *Warspite* rather than destroy it. However, once we've dealt with their boarding action I'm sure that destroyer will be back so I want you all on hand then."

"Understood captain, we'll maintain a perimeter around the ship and let you know if we see them again. Archangel out."

Reeves then looked at Knight just as he joined him by the central console

"Good work on getting us power again." he said.

"This is our security situation?" Knight asked, looking at the console and seeing a deck plan of the *Warspite* that highlighted key areas of the ship and the deployment of the crew.

"We're still trying to determine the enemy's numbers and deployment." Reeves said.

"I see you've flagged up the ones in the stairwell." Knight replied, noticing the marker in the stairwell that Willis and his team had used to reach the deck, "Major Willis says they're in powered armour though so I wouldn't count on that to protect you." he added, looking at the PDW that hung by Reeves' side.

"It's better than nothing." Lucas said and as Knight looked around he saw that the intelligence officer also had a similar weapon slung over her shoulder, as did the remaining marine guard while several of the other bridge crew now had pistols holstered on their belts, "We might be able to hit a weak spot."

"Well Willis has told his men to switch to their rifles." Knight said and Reeves looked at him sternly, "I know, any round that doesn't hit a Verne marine is likely to put a hole in part of the ship but I'm sure they'll be careful."

"They're marines." Goldman said, "Since when have marines done careful?"

"Willis to bridge." the marine officer's voice said suddenly over the intercom, "They're here."

There was another 'bang' from the hatchway as the Verne marines in the stairwell attempted to get through. Willis had ordered his men to jam the hatch and a shotgun that was regarded as being of negligible use against the Verne powered armour had been used to wedge the handle in the closed position. However, now the Verne appeared to be attacking the door itself using their powered armour and when the next blow was struck the handle flew off the hatch entirely and the shotgun dropped to the floor. Moments later the hatch was thrown open and the marines in the corridor saw one of their Verne counterparts in full powered armour standing on the other side.

"Open fire!" Willis yelled and almost in unison the marines opened fire with their assault rifles, using semi-automatic fire only to limit the potential for stray rounds to cause damage to the *Warspite*.

Every marine knew that powered armour was a collection of rigid anti-ballistic plates and these had to have joints that would allow the wearer to move. Some versions intended for use solely on the surface of a planet with atmospheric pressure similar to earth used overlapping plates and flexible joints hidden beneath them whereas versions like the one being worn by the Verne marines used a system of joints that maintained a fixed volume inside to keep the internal pressure constant and remove the need for decompressing before putting it on. Although this enabled the wearer to move around even in a vacuum it required them to learn a specific way of moving each limb to avoid the joints locking up. It also exposed the joints themselves and when Willis and his marines opened fire they aimed for these.

With such small areas to aim for, most of the marines' seven millimetre rounds bounced off the Verne powered armour producing sparks and leaving nothing but minor scratches to the paintwork. One round struck one of the helmet mounted cameras and the device shattered under the impact. In response the Verne marine raised the arm that mounted his laser weapon and fired it back at the nearest marine. The beam struck the marine's chest and he cried out in pain as the intense heat burned him despite not penetrating the composite plate in his body armour.

Another marine then fired his rifle repeatedly at the power armoured soldier's arm mounted weapon itself and there was another flash of light as the weapon exploded when the projectile penetrated its outer casing and smashed through the electronics inside. There was a second weapon mounted on the Verne marine's other arm, a large calibre grenade launcher that held three grenades in individual barrels but the soldier inside the armour was unwilling to use this weapon in the confines of a ship he was trying to capture and so he resorted to using the sheer bulk and power of his armour as a weapon instead. Charging down the corridor, the Verne marine reached the already injured marine and brought his armoured gauntlet down on the man's head. Only his anti-ballistic helmet prevented his skull from being shattered but he was still knocked to the floor as his attacker raised his arm to deliver a second blow.

Taking the chance on using automatic fire to deliver as many rounds as possible Willis fired his rifle at the Verne marine again, aiming at his head. Now that he was side on to Willis, the damaged camera mounting was clearly exposed and one of the marine officer's rounds found the hole in the armoured helmet where data from the cable had been carried to its wearer. The bullet passed through this hole, starting to tumble as it clipped the side and then struck the Verne marine just above his ear.

The power armoured trooper came crashing down to the floor but even as he died a second Verne marine was squeezing through the hatchway and another laser beam was fired down the corridor, forcing the *Warspite's* marines to take cover momentarily before they all opened fire again and there were more sparks as their rounds bounced off the power armour's plating.

The Verne marine fired again and another of Willis' men was hit, this time fatally and he fell to the floor beside Willis.

"Back!" Willis yelled and as the Verne marine strode towards them he and his men started to retreat towards the bridge, still firing their rifles at the armoured figure.

"Get down!" a voice behind them yelled and Willis and his men threw themselves to the floor before there was the roar of automatic fire in a confined space. More sparks flew from the Verne marine's armoured suit as the marine guard standing in the hatchway to the bridge fired his PDW on automatic. The pistol calibre rounds had no chance of penetrating the thick composite plates of the powered armour but the marine was relying on the sheer number of bullets he fired to find a weak point and sure enough there was a sudden jet of vapour from the armour's shoulder as a fragment from one of his rounds that had broken up on impact with the armour cut into a pressurised line that was part of the power armour's hydraulic system. This did not disable the armour entirely but it did massively reduce the wearer's ability to move in it and he dropped to one knee as he raised his laser weapon to return fire on the marine guarding the bridge. The guard ducked back as the laser flashed and the beam struck the frame of the hatchway right next to where he had been stood. While the Verne marine was stationary and focused on the marine guard Willis took advantage of the situation to line his rifle up on the power armour's neck joint and he fired a single shot that struck the armour right where the helmet met the main torso plating, lodging in the joint and jamming it in place. A second round hitting close by resulted in a section of the joint breaking free and a hole was opened in the front of the armour.

"Shotgun!" Willis called out, his own such weapon having been the one that had been used to try and jam the stairwell hatch shut. There was a second marine that had been carrying a shotgun, however and at Willis' order he let go of his rifle and pulled the shotgun from his back. The weapon boomed as he fired it at the Verne marine, aiming it towards the hole in the power armour's neck. The spread of pellets meant that a few from each blast passed through the hole and after the second shot the Verne marine fell backwards, his armoured hands reaching for his neck instinctively as he started to bleed, "See if you can crack that armour open." Willis told his men, "Then get him to the infirmary under guard if he survives. You too Jameson." he added, looking at the marine who had been injured by the first Verne trooper. Then he turned and hurried into the bridge.

"You held them back then?" Knight said.

"Good work major." Reeves added.

"We held back two of them." Willis said, "There are bound to be more."

"Yes we've got reports from various locations in the ship." Reeves replied, pointing to the deck plan on the central console display, "Most of them seem to be sticking to the major passageways and lift shafts to get around but it looks like they know where they're heading."

"Whoever let them aboard has probably given them instructions on how to find the locations they need to take to control the ship." Knight added.

"We've got a traitor aboard?" Willis said in alarm.

"Or maybe the Verne managed to smuggle someone aboard earlier on." Thomas commented.

"Captain that powered armour the Verne are using is pretty tough stuff. Even our rifles are having trouble getting through it. I'd like to issue heavier weapons." Willis said.

"Aboard the *Warspite*?" Reeves replied sceptically but the marine officer nodded.

"I'd like to break out our own lasers." he said, "They're designed for knocking out armoured vehicles so they should be able to cut through that armour like paper. Plus they're accurate enough at close range that we won't have to worry much about stray fire. If my men miss they ought to be able to shut off the beam before it can do too much damage or breach the hull."

Reeves thought about this for a moment.

"How many do we have?" he asked, looking first at Willis and then at Goldman.

"Our inventory shows ten of them captain." Goldman told him.

"Where would you deploy them?" Knight said and Willis turned his attention to the deck plan in front of them.

"Two each here on the bridge, at engineering and primary life support. The other four I'll issue in pairs for teams to hunt down the intruders." he explained.

"That sounds reasonable." Reeves said, "But I'd like to see what we can do about making them easier to catch." and he activated the intercom, making use of the speaker system so that the other officers present could be part of the conversation "Bridge to engineering, I need to speak with Commander Bernard."

"Bernard here captain."

"Commander we're going to deploy the marines' lasers against the intruders but I want to limit their job, it will be made easier if we can limit how easily the Verne can move around the ship. So far they're using the larger

corridors and lifts as their primary means of moving from one area to the next.”

“You want me to pull the power to all the elevators?” Bernard asked.

“To start with, yes. But what happens if you drain the main hydraulic system?” Reeves answered.

“Then all of the main bulkhead doors will close and won’t open again.” Bernard said, “Unless some one manually cranks them open but I doubt someone in powered armour would have the manual dexterity to be able to do that easily.”

“Then do it.” Reeves said, “I want to force them into the narrower passageways where they can’t manoeuvre as easily and they’re more vulnerable.”

“I’d also like to break out the heavy machine guns.” Willis added.

“Captain I really don’t recommend that.” Bernard said when he heard this, “It’ll only take a few rounds to go through a bulkhead and we’ve no idea what they’ll hit.”

“I’d only deploy them defensively.” Willis said, “Bridge, engineering and life support. If the Verne get into any of those then we’ll end up inflicting a damned sight more collateral damage than a few holes in ducting trying to take them back.”

“Commander Bernard is there any way we can limit the damage that a heavy machine gun can do?” Reeves asked.

“Of course. We can set up blast blankets and water canisters at the ends of their lines of fire, but those will only take a couple of hits before having holes torn in them.”

“Still better than losing key areas of the ship.” Knight commented and Reeves nodded.

“Very well major you may deploy the heavy machine guns as well.” he said, “But that’s the limit of what we can risk. I’m not having explosives used aboard the ship.”

“Captain I’d like to suggest we try to do something to disrupt their communications.” Goldman said, “I’m picking up a lot of signals from inside the ship that aren’t ours.”

“It’s likely that their commanding officer is receiving real time updates on all of his men.” Lucas added.

“That could be a lot of information for one person to take in at once.” Willis pointed out, “Especially if all their officer has is a HUD inside his helmet.”

“They could be using their implants to feed the data directly into their commander’s brain.” Lucas suggested.

“Cut that off and he won’t know what’s going on.” Willis said.

“Do whatever you can.” Reeves said, “I want my ship back under my control as quickly as possible.”

While the *Warspite*’s bridge crew were organising the internal defence of their vessel Shaw and her fighter pilots were patrolling the space around the cruiser, watching out for any signs of further Verne activity. After the *Meredith Thring* had raced past the *Warspite* and deployed its marine platoon the destroyer had continued around the moon they were orbiting around and disappeared over the horizon. Since then there had been no sign of the Verne warship at all. However, this situation could not last forever.

“I think I’ve got something.” Mori said from behind Shaw.

“The destroyer?” Shaw asked but Mori shook his head.

“No, or at least I don’t think so. The reading’s very slight. I think they’re trying to slip a drone around the moon on silent running.” he said.

“Oh hell.” Shaw hissed as she checked her own sensor readouts, “I see it now. With that thing to provide intermediate guidance they could hurl missiles around the moon at the *Warspite* without us even seeing them.” then she activated her fighter’s communications, “Archangel to *Warspite* I think we have a situation here.” she transmitted.

“Go ahead Archangel.” Goldman’s voice responded.

“We’ve got a contact just above the horizon. If you can get your active radar up again then you should be seeing it coming into view about now.” Shaw said.

“Hold on Archangel, we’re still sorting things out after the power loss.” Goldman said before Mori spoke again.

“*Warspite*’s active radar just lit up.” he said.

“Archangel we’ve got two hostile contacts.” Goldman said, “There’s another closer to the gas giant. The Verne must have sent it around on a wide arc to try and get behind us.”

“I’ve got it.” Mori added.

“*Warspite* do I have permission to engage?” Shaw asked.

“Archangel this is Reeves. You are free to engage the enemy drones but I don’t want you straying too far. According to Lieutenant Lucas intelligence believes that the Verne destroyers carry six drones in total so watch out for more of them. Good hunting. *Warspite* out.” Reeves ordered and Shaw smiled as she switched her communications to the squadron wide setting.

“Okay boys this is it. Jack o’lantern you’re my wingman. Now break and attack.”

The *Warspite*’s twelve fighters accelerated rapidly towards the two Verne drones, splitting into two evenly sized groups so that both of them could be targeted simultaneously. Even running silent the remotely operated craft detected the approaching fighters from their engine flares and they came to life, their own

engines glowing brightly as they too began to move to more favourable positions.

"Two more contacts incoming." Mori said as another pair of Verne drones that had until then remained hidden beyond the moon's horizon came racing into view.

"Okay everyone we've got two more targets coming in. Keep on your current targets and your eyes peeled for the last pair." Shaw broadcast to the squadron.

With no human pilot to be affected by extreme gee forces the drones were able to match the *Warspite's* fighters' acceleration Shaw had to turn sharply to follow the drone closest to the gas giant as it suddenly veered away.

"Oh no you don't." she muttered to herself just as she heard a high pitched tone from her targeting system, "Got you. Missile away."

A single missile dropped from one the fighter's weapon bays and raced ahead of it towards the drone.

Equipped with its own onboard targeting system, there was no need for Shaw to continue to track the drone but she did not want to take the chance on her target managing to evade the missile and return fire while her attention was focused elsewhere. This proved a wise move when there was a flash from the drone as it fired at the rapidly approaching missile. Shaw had seen directed energy weapons used to intercept missiles on many occasions but the effect of the positron beams that the Verne combat drones were armed with was greater than anything she had previously witnessed. The magnetically accelerated subatomic particles of anti-matter reacted violently with the casing of the missile and the mutual annihilation of matter and anti-matter produced an explosion that utterly destroyed the missile before it could strike its target.

"Whoa!" Shaw exclaimed, "Hold on Kaz, I'm going in for a gun shot. Jack o'lantern stick close."

"You're going closer?" Mori replied, "If one of those beams hits us-"

"If one of those things hits us we won't need to worry about it." Shaw interrupted, rolling her fighter to starboard to avoid presenting an easy target to the drone that was now turning to target the Commonwealth fighters as well.

"It's locking on." Mori said as an alarm sounded but before the Verne drone could fire on Shaw's fighter it was forced to abort its attack as another missile headed towards it. The drone turned to intercept this and fired its positron beam again, this time missing the missile narrowly. Shaw took advantage of the drone's temporary distraction and without changing her fighter's direction of movement she suddenly spun it around to point at the drone before squeezing the triggers for her twin gauss cannons. In the short time Shaw held the triggers down her fighter's cannons fired more than twenty magnetically accelerated projectiles towards the drone, aimed slightly ahead of it to take into account its motion and several of these slammed into the side of the drone before it could fire on the missile again. One of the rounds struck the drone's receiver array, cutting it off from instructions from the destroyer that had launched it. This did not take it out of the fight entirely however, the drone's innate programming would make sure that it would still defend itself from attack but the Verne would not be able to issue it with any new orders from now on. This proved to be a mute point though when another of the gauss cannon rounds penetrated the drone's main power plant and the magnetic vessel that held the stored anti-matter fuel was breached. The resulting explosion lit up space around the drone as it was vaporised by the blast and Shaw's visor darkened to protect her eyes.

"That's one down." she said, "Where are the others?"

"I've got all three flying in formation close to the surface." Mori replied and Shaw turned her fighter to give her a better view of the moon below where she saw the other three Verne drones flying in a triangular formation sufficiently far enough apart that if one suffered a similar loss of anti-matter containment to the first drone none of the others would be caught up in its blast. All three drones were firing brief blasts from the positron beam cannons that forced the *Warspite's* fighter squadron to continually evade and limiting their ability to get a weapons lock.

"Avatar." Shaw signalled to another of the pilots in her group, "Can you drop in behind those drones if I can force them to gain altitude?"

"Easy Archangel. I'm heading in now." the pilot known as Avatar responded and then both he and his wingman turned their fighters towards the moon, angling them to fly right over the Verne drones before Shaw fired her gauss cannons again.

Rather than attempting to hit any of the Verne drones from her current range Shaw fired her gauss cannons in just their approximate direction, making sure that the rounds would strike the surface of the moon ahead of them. The impact energy of each round produced a plume of debris from the moon and the three drones recognised this as a hazard and pulled up to try and get out of the path of the debris rather than risk a collision. This manoeuvre brought the three drones into Avatar's field of fire and he unleashed a missile at the lead drone. The drone attempted to turn to shoot down the missile but it could not do so quick enough at the same time as it was attempting to get above the debris and the missile slammed into the drone before detonating. The blast tore apart the drone and sent its anti-matter fuel pod tumbling towards the moon's surface where the entire contents reacted with the surface at once and produced a massive explosion and a pulse of energy that briefly overwhelmed the sensors of the fighters and drones involved in the battle.

"Does anyone have eyes on those other two drones?" Shaw asked as she searched for the remaining

drones among the massive cloud of debris. Before any of the other fighter pilots could answer though, both drones burst out of the cloud, apparently undamaged by the flying debris and they both fired at the closest Commonwealth fighter. The first positron beam clipped the fighter's wing and there was an explosion that tore it off, hurling the fighter sideways. In the vacuum of space the loss of a wing was not immediately fatal but the blast also damaged the fighter's main engines and as the pilot struggled to bring his craft back under control a positron beam from the second drone hit the fighter just behind the cockpit and the entire fighter was ripped apart before the crew got the chance to try and eject.

The two drones then both turned sharply, adopting a course that took them back towards the moon's horizon. Once on this course they spun through one hundred and eighty degrees to face behind them and began to lay down covering fire.

"Don't let them get around the moon." Shaw said, "That destroyer's still out there somewhere and I don't fancy taking it on without the *Warspite* to back us up."

Shaw's targeting computer then indicated a lock and she released another missile towards one of the drones. With the drones now following a straight path she was able to maintain the lock and after a few seconds gap Shaw fired a second missile. She was not alone in this either and another of the fighters launched a missile of its own at the same drone. Reacting to this threat the targeted drone ceased firing towards the fighters and switched to targeting the missiles. Shaw's first missile was closest and so the drone fired on that first, destroying it as easily as Shaw had expected. Then the drone turned to face the missile launched by the other fighter and it too was shot down with a single blast. However, there was insufficient time for the drone to engage Shaw's second missile and there was another massive explosion as the missile struck its target.

The final drone was still firing short blasts from its positron beam cannon but given that it was now facing eleven Commonwealth fighters on its own it was unable to hold all of them back and a pair of fighters swooped down while the drone was distracted by another and unleashed sustained bursts of fire from their gauss cannons simultaneously. The drone rocked violently as the first rounds smashed through the plates used to direct the charged particles produced by its magnetic drive before further rounds destroyed the core processor. Without this the drone could neither follow instructions from the controlling destroyer or carry out any of the automated functions programmed into it and all of its systems shut down, leaving just the magnetic bottle to contain its anti-matter fuel operational as the drone just drifted towards the horizon.

"Okay everyone pull back to the *Warspite*." Shaw ordered, knowing that the drone was on course to crash on the moon's surface where it was likely that the anti-matter fuel pod would be breached, "And keep an eye out for those other two drones. I get the feeling the Verne have held them back but all of this could have been a distraction to get them into a better position to use against us."

12.

Whereas the laser weapons mounted on the Verne marines' power armour was compact enough to be fixed to one arm the weapons now being issued to the *Warspite's* own marines were much larger. Effectively smaller versions of the free electron beam lasers mounted in six of the cruiser's light turrets, these were intended as support weapons to protect marines deployed on the ground from light armoured vehicles and air attack and their bulk reflected their role as a heavy support weapon. The weapons themselves were almost two metres long and fired from a marine's shoulder while being powered from a large backpack mounted battery pack. The weight and bulk of these weapons made them difficult to carry in the confines of the *Warspite's* corridors and to assist their operators in setting up in defensible positions the other members of the fire teams issued with the lasers were provided with armoured shields that could be placed side by side to create a thick barrier from behind which the lasers could be fired while supported on a drop down bipod.

One of the four man fire teams issued with such a weapon was hurrying towards the *Warspite's* engineering section when they heard the familiar sound of rifle fire from up ahead and the team leader brought his men to a halt as he reached for his radio.

"This fire team charlie four to units in corridor echo nine. We're on your six, what's your status?" he transmitted.

"We've got at least six hostiles closing on our position. We can't hold them for long."

"Understood. Fall back and bring them to us. We've got a surprise for them." the team leader transmitted and then he looked at his men, "Okay we set up here. Keep the laser out of sight and make sure we've got a gap for the guys heading our way."

The marines knelt down with the three equipped with shields lining up in front of their laser armed comrade. Placing their shields side by side to form a single barrier, the three marines in front blocked about two thirds of the corridor's width. Each man brought his rifle up to his shoulder and aimed it over his shield as another fire team of marines came running around a corner ahead of them. One of these marines was clearly injured, holding a dressing over the side of his face while another marine helped him along and the other two members of the team followed, firing their weapons around the corner before falling back towards the shield barrier.

"What happened to him?" the team leader asked, looking at the injured man.

"Laser flash. He's not one of my team at all. The Verne nailed the rest of his team and one of my men when we tried to cover their retreat." his opposite number in the other team replied and then he smiled as he saw the marine armed with a laser crouching behind the barrier, "At least now we'll give them a taste of their own medicine." and the first team leader nodded.

"I say we hit them with rifles as they come down the corridor then reveal the laser once they're all out in the open." he said,

"Sounds good to me." the second team leader replied and then he and the other uninjured marines from his team joined the first team in aiming their rifles over the shield barrier they had set up.

The heavy footfalls of the powered armour worn by the Verne marines echoed around the corner as they charged forwards and the first of them came running into view seemingly with no concern at all for what might be waiting for him on the other side.

"Open fire!" the first marine fire team leader yelled and the six rifle armed marines fired their weapons at the bulky armoured figure. Most of the rounds bounced off the thick armour harmlessly but one struck the armour's knee joint and jammed it just as the wearer was about to take another step. This brought the marine down but thanks to the protection of his armour he was not harmed and as he lay on the floor he raised his laser and aimed it at the marines behind the barrier.

"Down!" the second team leader snapped, knowing what was about to happen and the marines ducked behind their shields just as the Verne opened fire. The laser struck the centre shield and a small spot on the other side began to glow as it was heated up but the beam was shut off before managing to burn through as more figures in powered armour followed the first around the corner. With the other members of his team now able to provide him with covering fire the disabled Verne marine set to work trying to pry the bullet from his armour's knee joint while laser blasts flashed over his head towards the shield barrier. None of these could penetrate the thick composite armour of the shields though and so the Verne continued to advance down the corridor.

"Laser!" the first team leader hissed and the laser armed marine raised himself up to aim his weapon over the barrier at the oncoming Verne, lining up the optical sights on the closest.

"Firing." he called out just as he squeezed the firing button and a beam of pale blue light shot down the corridor towards the Verne. The beam struck the closest of the power armoured troopers in the centre of his chest plate and for a moment nothing happened. However, unlike the lightweight lasers carried by the Verne

that were intended for anti-infantry use this weapon was purpose built for engaging armoured targets and the gunner kept the beam in place long enough for it to burn all the way through the Verne marine's armour. The intense heat of the beam then proceeded to burn through the Verne marine himself, roasting his organs and boiling away his blood. This was instantly lethal and the Verne marine collapsed on the spot. The marine gunner with the laser did not shut off his weapon at this point however, instead he simply adjusted the aim sideways slightly and redirected it into a second member of the Verne boarding party. The beam then cut clean through this man's arm, slicing it off just above the elbow and in the process removing his own laser weapon from his arm.

The Verne marine screamed in agony as his limb was severed and acting instinctively he turned aside and clutched at the already cauterised stump of his arm. However, in turning aside the Verne marine exposed the backpack mounted power supply of his armour and the laser beam burned through the armour protecting this as well. Fortunately the Verne's use of anti-matter power sources was limited to spacecraft intended for use purely in the vacuum of space and so their armour instead made use of high density battery packs as a power source. The chemistry of these batteries was highly volatile when exposed to extreme heat such as that of a military laser and as the beam burned into the battery pack it exploded, creating a fireball that not only killed the wearer but also engulfed two more of the Verne troops. With their armour sealed, neither of these were directly affected by the flames but the flames did obscure their sensory systems and both ceased fire while they waited for them to reset.

"Now!" the first team leader yelled from behind the shield barrier as soon as the laser fire from the other side was reduced to a fraction of what it had been and the rifle armed marines lifted their weapons over the barrier and opened fire again, concentrating on the two Verne that were temporarily blind to what was happening around them.

A flash of laser fire from the Verne marine who had just succeeded in clearing his jammed knee joint struck one of the *Warspite's* marines behind the barrier and he fell dead but the others continued firing and under this constant barrage several rounds found weak points in the armour of the two blinded Verne and both fell dead.

Now there were only two of the soldiers in powered armour remaining, including the one still on the floor. Realising that they were outnumbered and outgunned by the *Warspite's* marines they opted to try and retreat. The difficulty in doing this was that while to turn and run was the fastest means of withdrawal, it also meant exposing the more vulnerable rear of their armour to the *Warspite's* marines and so instead after the downed marine was helped back to his feet they began to back away so that they could keep their fronts towards the marines behind the shield barrier and lay down the best suppressive fire they could.

This was insufficient to prevent the *Warspite's* marines from returning fire and the laser weapon they possessed fired again, bringing another Verne crashing to the floor.

Acting in desperation, the final Verne marine then aimed his laser up at the ceiling and fired. The beam cut into the structure of the ceiling and destroyed any illumination panel that it hit, triggering a number of small explosions as the electronics driving them caught fire. The corridor was rapidly plunged into darkness and while the *Warspite's* marines were reaching for whatever other light sources they carried with them the sole Verne marine took advantage of the darkness and turned and ran, escaping around the corner before a chemical light stick was activated and a pale glow filled the corridor. By that time though the only trace remaining of the final Verne marine were the heavy footfalls of his powered armour from around the corner.

A storeroom located near the dorsal airlock that the Verne marines had used to gain entry to the *Warspite* had become Lieutenant Garcia's command post and from here he reviewed the data being sent to him from the armour worn by his men with concern. His initial idea was to send pairs of troopers to attack key areas of the *Warspite* before a defence could be organised. However, the cruiser's marine complement had reacted much quicker than Garcia had anticipated and the pairs of troopers had been forced back or killed by superior numbers of defenders at each location. In response to this he had organised his men into larger groups before having them advance towards their targets and for a time it had appeared that this would work as each of the Commonwealth marine units encountered in the *Warspite's* corridors was forced to retreat. Or at least they had until their tactics took a worrying turn. The sealing off of the cruiser's larger hatchways and shutting down of elevators was only to be expected and Garcia had planned on having to send his men down narrower passageways to bypass these sooner or later. On the other hand he had not counted on the crew of the *Warspite* being as willing to put their own ship at risk as they now seemed.

Lieutenant Garcia was under orders to take the Commonwealth heavy cruiser intact and for this reason his men were relying only on their armour's lasers, no ammunition having been issued for their grenade launchers and he had assumed that the *Warspite's* crew would be under a similar restriction. At first this had appeared to be the case with the Commonwealth marines starting off trying to use just pistols and shotguns against the power armoured Verne before moving on to using their only marginally more effective assault rifles and a few of Garcia's men had fallen victim to these. However, the most recent combat data relayed to Garcia's armour showed that the crew of the *Warspite* were willing to use heavier weapons in defence of

their vessel, despite the increased risk of collateral damage. One of Garcia's teams had been ambushed by a unit of Commonwealth marines using an anti-armour laser weapon that was capable of slicing right through the powered armour his men wore while another of his units had reported engaging Commonwealth marines who had been carrying cases of ammunition for large calibre automatic weapons and Garcia knew that if the weapons needed to fire these powerful rounds could be deployed to the areas his men needed to secure then their superior powered armour would not be enough to protect them.

"Sergeant Cowell." he said, automatically activating his wireless communication implant and the amplifier built into his armour, addressing the leader of one of the the Verne marine squads. At present his ten man unit was split into two smaller units that were attempting to surround a group of the cruiser's crew that they had located so that they could be contained and prevented from acting against the Verne. Garcia's tactical feed indicated that these troops were best placed to assault the *Warspite's* bridge, hopefully getting there before the ship's defenders could deploy any of their heavy firepower to protect it.

"Yes lieutenant?" the sergeant replied.

"Sergeant your squad is closest to the bridge. I need you to break off from your current targets and link up both parts." Garcia said before his implant produced a sudden burst of painful static that disrupted the audio and data feeds from his men and Garcia flinched.

"Say again lieutenant. I didn't-" Cowell began before there was more static as communication between them was disrupted again.

Garcia's armour identified the source of the disruption as a powerful signal being broadcast from somewhere close by. The bit patterns of this matched the format used by the Verne marines for their wireless communications and although the seemingly random outside data stream did not match the encoding of the Verne communication it manifested as noise that was strong enough to drown out legitimate communication signals. The *Warspite's* intercom system was the most likely source of this jamming but simply destroying the nearby transceiver units would not be enough to eliminate the signal, either every transceiver on the ship would have to be destroyed or the signal would have to be cut off at its source. This put Garcia in a difficult position. He could still issue orders to the four marines of his command section but the rest of his platoon were now cut off from him. He trusted his men fully to continue to carry out their existing orders but he could not issue them any new ones while this disruption continued, meaning that the jamming had to be cut off. The problem was that if he took his command section to hunt for this he would be delaying moving on the *Warspite's* bridge and by the time it was possible to order such an assault it would be heavily fortified. There was one other option still open to him though and Garcia turned to face the android Kelly who stood silently in the corner of the room. He disliked the idea of having to rely on the machine that was obviously built and programmed with duplicity in mind as well as the almost unheard of among robots ability to take human life but at this moment in time he saw no alternative.

"I need you to infiltrate engineering." he told her.

"I can't take control of engineering." she replied.

"I don't need you to. Our communications are being jammed by the ship's crew. I need you to find out where this is being done from and disable it." Garcia said, "Can you do that?"

"As long as the panel isn't secured, then yes." Kelly said.

Garcia then looked around and picked up a belt that had been taken from one of the *Warspite's* marines who had been killed by the Verne troops. Opening the holster he removed the pistol from inside it and held it out to Kelly.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked her and she nodded.

"Mark four pistol. Ten millimetre, fires semi-automatic or three round bursts." she said.

"And can you use it?" Garcia added and again the android nodded.

"I've fired the civilian version without the automatic fire option." she answered as she took the pistol and pushed it into a pocket in her stolen uniform.

"Good, now go. Use the pistol as a last resort only. The chances are that if the crew figure out you're not one of them they'll call in marines to destroy you. This might just give you the chance to create an escape rout though." Garcia ordered and as the android headed for the exit from the storeroom he turned to address the marines of his command section, compelled to speak directly with them as he had just done with Kelly while their wireless communications were being overwhelmed by the jamming signal, "Come with me." he told them, "We're going to take the bridge."

"Well? Is it working?" Knight asked when Goldman and Lucas activated the jamming signal they had compiled.

"The signal is being broadcast over our intercom system." Goldman replied.

"Though whether it's doing what we want it to is anyone's guess." Lucas added.

"Hang on, I've got an update." Willis said, raising a hand to his radio earpiece and then he smiled,

"Lieutenant Foster reports that the Verne unit heading for life support control just stopped and it looks like they're trying to set up a defensible position right here." and he pointed to a junction close to a ladder shaft

on the deck plan shown on the central console.

"There's nothing at that junction." Knight said.

"No, but if they've suddenly lost contact with the rest of the boarding party then they won't want to leave that ladder unguarded just in case we're sending a squad through it to surround them." Reeves pointed out. Then he looked at Willis and added, "Tell Foster to have his men just keep those Verne pinned down. There's no need to try and dislodge them from there immediately. I want to find their commanding officer."

"They'll probably have set up a command post somewhere close to the airlock they used to get aboard." Knight said.

"There are several compartments near that airlock that would do." Reeves said, nodding in agreement.

"I've got a team trying to get up there now." Willis added, "Problem's been getting there without running into any Verne in powered armour."

"If they're halting their advance while they try and sort out their communications that ought to help." Knight said.

"Tell your team to try and avoid engaging the enemy while they locate their command post." Reeves told Willis, "Then I think a platoon strength attack to clear them out is in order. Wouldn't you agree major?"

"Yes sir." Willis replied before he reached to activate his radio. However, before he could send the captain's orders on to the unit trying to reach the air lock its leader signalled him.

"Sergeant Matthews to Major Willis."

"Willis here, go ahead Matthews." Willis responded.

"Major we've got activity. Corridor kilo six." Matthews said, "Five heavy targets including one with what looks like enhanced comms gear."

"Hang on, I'm transferring you to the main console." Willis said and then he used the central console to not only divert Matthews' signal from the marine communication net to the main intercom but also to bring up the feed from his helmet mounted camera. From this the *Warspite's* commanding officers could see that Matthews' unit was located behind the Verne marines who were walking along a corridor in single file. In the centre of this group was a figure in powered armour that was fitted with an enhanced antenna array on the backpack where its power supply and major electronics were located.

"That's their officer." Knight said.

"We almost ran right into them." Matthews said, "Fortunately they make so much noise walking that we were able to get out of sight and they walked right past us. Shall we engage?"

"Is your team equipped with a laser?" Reeves asked.

"No captain. Small arms only." Matthews told him.

"How long will it take to get a larger force there?" Reeves asked, looking at Willis.

"Not long. But if the Verne command section is on the move then that probably means their officer has figured out that his communications are being jammed and is on his way to do something about it." the marine officer said, "That means they are most likely heading for engineering or here."

"If they're intent on getting somewhere then they won't want to waste time chasing down our marines."

Reeves said, "Sergeant Matthews you are ordered to engage the enemy and fall back. If they follow you then keep moving. Otherwise regroup and attack again. We need to buy as much time as possible to get heavier firepower here and in engineering."

"Understood captain." Sergeant Matthews said, pulling back through a hatchway before shutting off his radio and turning to his men, "Okay lads we're up. A nice quick hit and fade is what the captain wants. Let's see if we can show these Verne that fancy toys don't make good soldiers."

The marines then raised their rifles and darted through the hatchway into the corridor where their Verne counterparts were just approaching a ladder shaft. The *Warspite's* marines fired their rifles as soon as they had lines of fire to their power armoured opponents and in the confines of the corridor there was no way that they could miss. Numerous rifle rounds bounced off the Verne armour and the soldiers inside turned to face the direction of the attack. As they did so one of the Commonwealth marines' seven millimetre armour piercing rounds found a weak spot in the power armour of the closest Verne at the shoulder and he collapsed, instinctively clutching at the injured spot even though there was the thick layer of armour between his gauntlets and the wound.

"Back!" Matthews snapped and he squad dived out of the way just as the Verne were bringing their arm mounted lasers to bear on them, a flash of light in the corridor indicating that one of the Verne had just returned fire, "Is everyone okay?" Matthews asked and the marines in his squad all indicated that they were.

From the corridor there came the sound of heavy footfalls again, however they were not getting louder as they ought to have if the Verne troops were making their way back down the corridor to deal with the *Warspite's* marines who had just ambushed them. Instead the sound of a hatch opening let Matthews and his men know that the Verne were now going to head down the ladder shaft and Matthews reached for his radio again.

"Matthews to bridge. First engagement successful. Suspect one enemy down but the others are still heading

downwards." he reported, "Just entering shaft seven."

"Copy that Matthews." Willis responded, "We were watching your feed from here. We still need more time though. Can you slow them down some more?"

"I think so major. Climbing down a ladder one at a time is going to make it difficult to bring much firepower to bear on us. Matthews out." Matthews said and then he ejected the partially spent magazine from his weapon and inserted fresh one, "Okay let's go for round two." he said and then leapt back out into the corridor. Only to be instantly struck down by a laser fired by a Verne marine.

Garcia had known that having his men in the ladder shaft made them vulnerable, especially if the *Warspite's* crew were willing to deploy weapons that could inflict significant damage on their own vessel if used carelessly and so he had chosen to take just two of his men with him down the shaft and left the last surviving marine in the corridor at the top of the shaft to protect it.

On the bridge the feed from Matthews' helmet camera showed him fall while the Verne marine remained stationary and fired again as one of Matthews' men attempted to reach out into the corridor to drag the sergeant's body back through the hatch, forcing him back. Another marine then held his rifle through the hatch and fired it on fully automatic, emptying the magazine towards the Verne marine in the knowledge that at least some of the rounds were likely to hit him. Against light or enhanced infantry this would most likely result in the target of the attack seeking cover and giving the Commonwealth marines the chance to get through the hatch and bring more firepower to bear, but even after one of his comrades had been brought down by a lucky shot the Verne marine still had sufficient confidence in his powered armour's protection to remain in place as bullets bounced off him.

When the magazine was empty the marine pulled his rifle back through the hatch and began to reload. While he did this a second marine leant through the hatch, doing his best to present only his armoured head and torso to the Verne in the corridor as he fired aimed shots from his rifle down the corridor. One of these struck one of the Verne's helmet mounted cameras and the power armoured soldier flinched as this caused a glitch in the feed to his implants. Seeing this the marine in the hatchway darted across the corridor to take cover behind a protruding support frame while another marine took his place in the hatchway and both men fired in unison, aiming specifically for the Verne's head. More rounds bounced off the thickly armoured helmet, deflected away from the wearer by its shape, but the *Warspite's* marines' true intention was to target more of the less well protected sensory devices and another of these shattered as it was struck to leave just two more cameras functioning on the helmet. These were still enough to provide the Verne marine with a good picture of where his attackers were located and he raised his laser again, its own targeting camera providing further data.

A third marine then threw himself through the hatchway, diving to the floor of the corridor and firing a burst from his rifle while prone that he aimed towards the raised arm. The laser mounted on the arm flashed as it fired again and the marine behind the support frame recoiled as the beam clipped his armoured shoulder pauldron. The beam was suddenly cut off, however when a rifle round struck the weapon's emitter and it cracked, preventing the beam from focusing properly.

"Move! Now!" the marine who had fired the damaging shot yelled and the rest of the squad burst through the hatchway and began to fire. The Verne backed away as the barrage of rifle rounds struck him, most being deflected by his armour but the suit's diagnostic systems began to report more and more faults as round found vulnerable points. A loss of hydraulic pressure to one leg brought the Verne to his hands and knees as his armour lost the ability to remain standing. Disarmed and immobile the Verne marine knew that he was in a hopeless situation and as he heard more bullets bouncing off his armour he raised his arms above his head in surrender.

The first Verne to exit the ladder shaft reported that the corridor outside was clear and Lieutenant Garcia breathed a sigh of relief. The information provided to him by Kelly had indicated that this was the point at which he and his men would be most vulnerable as they had to squeeze their armour through a relatively small hatchway.

"Our target is forward of here." Garcia told the two marines accompanying him as he followed the first through the hatchway and he pointed in the direction of the *Warspite's* bridge. As soon as the final marine was through the hatchway the three Verne formed a triangular formation with Garcia at the rear and the other two marines side by side in front of him as they marched towards their target.

The *Warspite's* crew offered up no resistance as the Verne advanced, the corridors on this level seemingly deserted. The only obstacle in their path came when they reached the final junction before getting to the bridge where the *Warspite's* crew appeared to have tried to block the corridor with equipment cases. Still behind his two remaining men, Garcia watched as they dragged one of the largest cases out of the way and tossed it aside before they started to walk towards the junction. As they did so Garcia glanced down at the case and saw the writing that was stencilled on its side.

MACHINE GUN, MARK VII. CALIBRE: 14X110MM
FOR USE ON FIXED MOUNTS ONLY.

Garcia's eyes widened as he realised what this meant.

"Get back!" he yelled at his men but it was too late and as they both stepped into the junction there was the roar of heavy machine gun fire from the tripod mounted weapon that had been set up by the marine squad behind the line of armoured shields between the junction and the sealed entrance to the bridge.

The hail of high calibre armour piercing bullets struck the two Verne marines before either could react. The rounds were designed for use at ranges of up to two kilometres and for engaging soft skinned vehicles so at a range of just a few metres their ultra dense tips had no difficulty in piercing even the power armour they wore and both of them fell dead almost instantly. The machine gunner ceased fire as soon as he saw this, under orders to limit the damage he inflicted to the bulkhead opposite him.

Garcia remained still, aiming his laser towards the junction where his men now lay dead. Meanwhile the machine gun team protecting the bridge waited for him to show himself, having heard the warning Garcia had shouted out to his men.

"Report." Willis' voice said over the marines' communication net.

"Major we've got two targets down." the fire team leader reported quietly, his throat mounted microphone picking his words up clearly, "There's still one more staying out of sight though. We heard him trying to warn these two."

"What about the two dead ones? Does either have the upgraded comms of an officer?" Willis asked.

"Negative major. They look as much like regular grunts as you can wearing a hundred and fifty kilos of armour."

"Then the one hiding out of sight is probably their leader." Willis told the team leader, "I'm coming out to take a look."

Seconds later the hatchway behind the machine gun team opened and Willis stepped through, accompanied by another fire team of marines that had been in the bridge as a last line of defence and Willis signalled for them to advance. One of the armoured shields was moved out of the way for the marines to advance along the corridor, moving slowly and quietly to try and avoid giving their movement away. The marines were well aware that if their Verne opponent chose to launch another attack while they were advancing the heavy machine gun team could not fire for fear of hitting them by accident.

Upon reaching the junction the lead marine peered around it and then pulled back suddenly when he saw Garcia's weapon pointing right at him and a laser promptly burned a hole in the wall beyond him.

"He's right around the corner!" the marine exclaimed before he leaned around the corner to fire his rifle at Garcia.

The Verne marine was ready for this though and after the first round had bounced off his chest plate a second laser blast sent his Commonwealth attacker to the floor. Not knowing exactly how many Commonwealth troops he was facing or what weaponry they were armed with Garcia opted to retreat, backing away from the junction and firing his laser again at the first sign of another Commonwealth marine appearing at the corner. The sound of Garcia's armoured footfalls on the deck plating was loud enough to tell the *Warspite's* marines that he was retreating and they attempted to follow, held at bay by his covering fire.

"The enemy commander is on the move." Willis said, activating his radio, "He's alone but I need a team to cut him off in corridor golf seven."

"We'll be there in five minutes major." a voice Willis recognised as belonging to one of the platoon commanders responded.

"Copy that Schmidt. Just watch out for us coming up behind him." Willis replied.

The main indication that something aboard the *Warspite* was amiss in engineering was the heavy machine gun that had been set up in the only hatchway that had been left open. There were several other ways of getting in and out of the section, including two large doors that were big enough to admit forklifts transporting bulky spare parts but Bernard had ordered those welded shut. Just like Reeves in the bridge, one of Bernard's first acts upon hearing that the heavy cruiser had been boarded was to use his access key to open up the emergency arms locker located in engineering and after taking a pistol for himself he had the remaining weapons distributed to members of his engineering team. Since two full squads of marines had arrived to defend engineering there had been no need for these weapons but so far the engineers had not bothered to waste their time in returning them to the locker and so Bernard and some of his personnel were still armed.

The use of heavy weapons aboard the *Warspite* made Bernard nervous, even a warship that was built to withstand attacks by powerful starship mounted weapons had its vulnerabilities and heavy machine guns and anti-vehicle lasers were quite capable of damaging important system if used carelessly. Because of this Bernard found himself continuously looking back towards the hatchway where the most of the marines were deployed. Generally he saw just the marines sat waiting for any signs of approaching Verne, but with the latest reports indicating that the intruders had ceased their advance thanks to the communication jamming signal devised by Goldman and Lucas there seemed to be little chance that they would be called into action at all. However, after seeing the same thing several times in a row Bernard happened to notice that some of

the marines were moving aside to allow someone to enter engineering and he saw a woman in a general duty uniform come through the hatchway. Bernard was about to dismiss this when he realised that standard procedure called for the *Warspite's* crew to remain either at their stations or in their quarters during a boarding action to minimise the chance that the marines defending the ship would accidentally fire on them. Of course some members of the crew would have to move from one section of the ship to another but it was highly unusual for them to travel alone. This fact had obviously occurred to the marines by the door as well and they were quizzing the woman about why she was travelling alone as Bernard moved closer for a better look at her.

"The alert sounded when I was alone on K deck." the woman was explaining, "The Verne broke in not far from where I was and I only escaped by hiding in the missile room until something called them all away." Something about the woman's voice was familiar to Bernard but he could not place her as a member of the *Warspite's* crew while the peak of her cap obscured her facial features. The story was plausible, though why she would have come to engineering now was not obvious and Bernard was about to ask why this was when she happened to look towards him and he finally saw that it was the android Kelly.

"Hold her!" he called out to the marines by the door, "She's a robot!"

The startled marine who had been talking to Kelly was just about to reach out and grab her when she unexpectedly lashed out at him, knocking him backwards over a safety rail in obvious violation of the idea that no robot should ever cause harm to a human being. At the same time she drew the pistol that Garcia had given her and fired a single shot at the marine sat behind the heavy machine gun. The round struck his body armour and was unable to penetrate it but in revealing the fact that she was armed Kelly caused all of the occupants of the engineering section to take cover, aware of how dangerous stray bullets could be in this compartment.

With several armed marines between her and the hatchway she had come through Kelly opted not to try and escape through it, instead running along the walkway that led from it, heading towards the cluster of control consoles in the centre of engineering where she hoped to discover the source of the jamming. Though the crew appeared willing to get out of the android's way the *Warspite's* own robots were not and a pair of the humanoid machines stepped into her path to block her way. Kelly reacted by raising her pistol and shooting one of the more obviously mechanical robots in its head, destroying its primary sensors before being deflected off the casing that contained its primary processor and causing the machine to stagger about blindly before Kelly pushed it out of her way. The second robot grabbed at her arm as she tried to run past it but Kelly fired her pistol again, this time thrusting the muzzle of the weapon into the robot's armpit so that the bullet severed the control lines that enabled it to retain its grip on her and as she felt the pressure on her arm relax she pushed this robot out of her way as well.

"You and you with me." Bernard told a pair of marines close by him, "Whatever she's up to we need to stop her. No rifles though." and then he drew his sidearm as he got to his feet and started to run after Kelly.

As Kelly ran up to the control consoles an engineer stood in front of her wielding a large wrench like a club but she just pointed her pistol at him and smiled.

"Does it make you bullet proof?" she asked rhetorically and the engineer dropped the wrench and backed away from her. Kelly then rushed up to the nearest console and began to search for the source of the jamming. It did not take long to identify the bridge as the source of the signal but there was no way of disabling it from here and with it operating Kelly could not pass on her finding to Lieutenant Garcia. However, the console also told her that the jamming signal was being broadcast throughout the ship using the wireless function of the intercom system and Kelly knew that that was something she could do something about from engineering, depriving the jamming signal of its broadcast medium entirely.

"Step away from the console!" Kelly heard Bernard yell out and as she spun around with her pistol in her hand she saw him advancing towards her flanked by a pair of marines, all three men pointing their own pistols back at her.

"What? Not just going to shoot me?" Kelly asked, "Oh wait, you can't risk hitting this console can you? I suppose that means I can go right on doing what I'm doing."

"Actually no." Bernard replied, "Having to repair that console would be a pain but it wouldn't be catastrophic. I just wanted you looking this way while Crewman Ritter crept up behind you." and at that moment Kelly felt the muzzle of a shotgun be pressed against her spine and Bernard and the two marines threw themselves to the floor. Ritter pulled the trigger of his shotgun and fired a rapid three round burst directly into the android. Although robustly made, Kelly was not designed to withstand gunfire and the effect of the three shotgun rounds was almost as catastrophic as it would have been against a human being. The metal framework that performed the same function as a human spine and ribcage was shattered by the shotgun blasts and the connection between Kelly's primary processor and her legs was promptly severed, causing the android to collapse. The power cells inside Kelly's torso were not directly damaged by the attack, the shotgun pellets passing above them. On the other hand the regulator circuitry that provided the necessary voltages to power all of her systems was totally destroyed and as the last of the locally stored power was drained each aspect of Kelly's functionality began to shut down leaving her lying on the floor like a corpse, the only indication that

she was a machine being the metal components and synthetic fluids to have been blasted out of her torso by the shotgun in place of blood and tissue.

"Pick that up and get it under lock and key." Bernard ordered, "Maybe we can use its memory to figure out what's going on. Then someone check that console and see what thing was up to. If she compromised our systems then we need to know."

The central console continued to be updated as more reports came in from the marines defending the *Warspite*. The Verne boarding party had used their communications to co-ordinate their actions and the loss of this link had caused the vast majority to come to a halt instead of continuing with their own assignments. This was enabling the *Warspite's* marines to surround them easily, taking up positions close by while they waited for troops with heavier weapons to arrive to deal with the intruders one group at a time. Best estimates put the number of Verne marines to have come aboard at forty-five, the standard strength for a Verne platoon. Now though fewer than thirty remained at large with most of the remainder having been killed while three had surrendered following damage to their power armour rendering them incapable of continuing to fight.

The main issue now was the Verne's officer who was still on the move. Given that every one of his soldiers had been transmitting data on their location and status to him right up to the moment when Goldman and Lucas' jamming signal was activated it was likely that he would know where they were all located and thus was the only means by which they could link up their forces.

"He's right up ahead of us." Willis reported as he and his men pursued the Verne officer.

"It looks like he's heading for this unit right here." Reeves said, pointing to a spot on the central console display that indicated a unit of eight Verne marines currently pinned down one deck above the only clear entrance to the engineering section. This represented the largest remaining group of Verne aboard the *Warspite* and several units of the cruiser's own marine contingent were hurrying to reinforce those currently engaging them, "The cut off group won't be in position to stop him before he gets to the stairs. Who's in command down there?"

"Lieutenant Riley." Knight responded and Reeves reached for the intercom.

"Bridge to Lieutenant Riley, you've got another Verne heading to your position now. He'll probably be coming down the stairwell that exits onto corridor golf nine." he said.

"Understood captain, we've got a laser team with us. We'll set up to ambush him right as he-" Riley began.

"No. I don't want that officer killed." Reeves interrupted and many of the bridge crew glanced at him in surprise, including Knight.

"If that officer gets to his men then he'll be able to give them new orders," he pointed out, "and stopping nine power armoured marines is going to be difficult even with lasers and heavy machine guns."

"Yes I realise that commander. But if we can take that officer alive then maybe we can get him to order the rest of his men to stand down before it becomes necessary to kill them all."

"I've never known you worry about the commandment against killing before captain." Knight commented.

"And if he won't have his men surrender then I'll happily order Major Willis to use whatever means are necessary to secure my ship." Reeves replied, "Frankly I'm more concerned about our own marines. Some of them are bound to be killed as well and a surrender will prevent that." then he turned his attention back to Lieutenant Riley, "Lieutenant I want you to try and take the enemy officer alive if possible. Keep your laser team in reserve to prevent him from linking up with that squad but engage with small arms only initially."

"Yes captain. We'll do our best." Riley replied.

"He's at the stairs." Willis suddenly reported, "He's going in."

"Just as you said he would." Knight said to Reeves and the captain smiled.

"That's why I'm the captain." he said, "Major Willis follow him. He's probably heading for G deck where Lieutenant Riley will cut him off but we can't be one hundred percent sure of that. If he does have another destination in mind then your team will have to keep after him."

"Yes captain, we're heading into the stairwell now."

Garcia was able to take several steps out of the stairwell on G deck before the first shot rang out and from the pitch it clear that it was a pistol rather than rifle round.

"Commonwealth marines! Stand down!" Riley shouted from out of sight and Garcia understood that the shot had been meant as just a warning. However, with no enemy in sight he was unwilling to simply surrender and he raised his laser as he advanced slowly in the direction of the shout.

As he advanced a fire team of four marines appeared in front of him. The marines appeared from corridors either side of the one Garcia was walking down simultaneously, holding up shields in front of themselves that they set down to form a barrier behind which they took cover as they pointed rifles towards him. None of the marines fired at Garcia though and he hesitated rather than provoke them into opening fire.

"Stand down." Riley called out again before Willis and his team exited the stairwell behind Garcia.

The Verne officer turned so that the Commonwealth marines were to his left and right rather than having any

of them directly behind him. With Willis and his men beyond Garcia, Riley's section lowered their rifles and ducked behind their shields to give Willis' men a clear line of fire.

"Give it up." Willis called out, "You're surrounded and we've got all the time in the world to pick off your men one group at a time. Tell them to surrender as well and they don't need to die."

Garcia quickly spun through one hundred and eighty degrees so that he could easily aim his laser at Willis rather than towards the shield wall it had been pointing towards but Willis did not flinch.

"Shooting me won't stop anyone else from shooting you." Willis said, "My men aren't quite so dependent on me as yours are on you."

"My men will find a way through your jamming." Garcia said, "Every moment I keep you here gives them the chance to overcome it."

"Then why send that robot into engineering?" Willis asked, "You know, the blonde one that let you in? She's been shut down by the way. Took a few shotgun rounds to the chest from what I heard and she never managed to do anything about the jamming."

After failing to take the bridge, Kelly had been Garcia's final hope of victory. Now he knew that his men were isolated and the *Warspite's* crew would be able to concentrate overwhelming force on each group individually. Seeing no further way out he raised his hands above his head.

"I surrender." he said, "I invoke the rights of a prisoner of war as expressed in the-

"Yeah, yeah, we're not going to execute you on the spot." Willis interrupted, "Now get out of that armour. You're going to order your men to stand down as well."

After having his power armour removed Garcia's wrists were bound and he was escorted to the bridge.

"Well done major." Reeves said before looking at Garcia, "And you are?" he asked.

"Garcia, Emilio. Lieutenant first class. Serial number-

"Your name was enough lieutenant." Reeves interrupted and he held out the handset for the intercom, "Now if you wouldn't mind ordering your men to surrender I've got work to do."

Garcia hesitated, despite having been told previously that this would be required of him.

"Do it." Willis said, "Trust me, the captain's a big believer in that not murdering people that the bible preaches but he'll order me to remove any hostile group from this ship by force if he has to."

With a pair of handcuff ties binding his wrists in front of him Garcia had to take the handset in both hands as he brought it to his face.

"This is Lieutenant Garcia." he said and his words were heard throughout the ship, "Code phrase Blue Wagon. All units stand down and surrender. Your safety has been guaranteed." and then he gave the handset back to Reeves, "It's done. They'll know that it was me and that my order was genuine."

"Excellent. Thank you for ending this easily lieutenant." Reeves replied, "Major Willis the brig is going to be somewhat overcrowded if we try and hold all of the prisoners in there so I want them processed in hold number four instead. Detail enough of your men to keep them secure and I'll have Doctor Thundercloud and someone from engineering sent down to assist you in making sure that the wireless communication implants they have are properly deactivated."

"Yes sir." Willis said and he placed a hand on Garcia's shoulder, "Come on then lieutenant, let's go and see if your men are smart enough to follow your orders."

"So what's our next move?" Knight asked as Garcia was being escorted from the bridge by Willis and a fire team of marines.

"The destroyer that those marines and drones came from is still out there somewhere," Reeves said as he called up a chart showing the space around the *Warspite* on the central console in place of the deck plan, "and I have no intention of letting them get the drop on us again. Lieutenant Commander Goldman, can you tell where that ship is?"

"It's not on any of our sensors at the moment captain but the fact that it was able to control those drones effectively must mean it's close by. No more than half a light second at most."

"There's nowhere that close that we can't see." Thomas said, "It would have to be behind the moon and in that case it wouldn't be able to control the drones at all. No line of sight."

"Shaw's squadron took out four drones. That means there are probably still two more out there." Knight said, "Maybe number five was acting as a relay."

"Commander Goldman, that drone you picked up that appeared to be trying to outflank us. Could it have been a relay craft?" Reeves asked.

"The position is good for bouncing a signal from behind the lunar horizon captain." Goldman replied, "Plus there's enough debris around that gas giant to hide a second drone."

"Which means they'll see us coming if we make a move." Knight said.

"Let them. Commander Knight I think we should take our seats." Reeves said and as he began to walk towards his seat at the rear of the bridge he continued to give out his orders, "Commander Goldman tell Shaw to have her squadron advance five thousand kilometres ahead of us and have our drones form a perimeter at one hundred. Then launch a courier drone back to centaur, fleet command needs to know that

we've been attacked by the Verne. Commander Ash as soon as the courier drone is clear kindly take us around this moon and let's see what's hiding behind it.”

13.

Boucher was woken by a sound that she was grateful to have heard only a few times outside of a controlled environment – gunfire. The sound was not quite the same as she was used to though. The Verne's use of magnetically accelerated projectiles rather than the more traditional chemically propelled ones meant that only the sound of the rounds passing through the sound barrier would be heard, there was no combustion to make any sound at all. Rushing to the window of her hotel room she looked out into the street and saw a pair of police vehicles below. One of these had come off the road and struck a wall. Boucher was shocked to see the occupants of these vehicles had both disembarked and were firing at one another with gauss rifles. Worse was to come however, when a group of civilians charged towards the crashed police vehicle and the two officers who had got out of it suddenly turned their rifles on this crowd, seeming to be firing indiscriminately at them.

"What the hell?" she said to herself and she rushed to the telephone only to find that it was inoperable. Hurriedly she began to dress and was just finishing when there was a sudden knock at her bedroom door.

"Inspector Boucher, it's Smith."

"Smith. Have you seen what's happening out there?" Boucher asked as she opened the door and he hurried into her room.

"You mean cops firing on other cops and civilians for no good reason? Yes, I've seen it. Plus my phone's dead. I can't even raise reception, let alone get a line out." he answered.

Just then there was the sound of more gunfire only this time more distant and this was accompanied by brief flashes of light against the night sky that was indicative of laser weapons being fired as well.

"I don't like this." Boucher said and she looked around for the control to the room's entertainment system she had had to request specifically from the hotel to make up for her lack of wireless implant that could have enabled her to control the system by thought alone. Finding it by the bed she picked it up and turned on the wall mounted video screen.

"The TV's off air as well." Smith said as Boucher cycled through channels only to find one blank screen after another.

"There's got to be something." she said, still cycling through channels.

"Wait, I've got an idea." Smith said, "Run the channel set up, get the TV to auto-tune. If there's anything being broadcast at all that ought to find it."

It took Boucher a few seconds to find the set up menu for the television set but once she told it to scan for channels it began the process of searching through the full range of civilian frequencies. Under normal circumstances the television ought to have counted off hundreds of channels but for a long time it found nothing until coming to the upper end of the frequency range where it found a single broadcast signal.

"Here's something." Boucher said as she called up that channel and the screen was filled with an image of a Verne military officer sat at a desk and facing the camera as he spoke.

"-should be disabled." he was saying at the point where the two law enforcement agents began watching, "Ideally remove power cells as well to prevent any contamination from any other implants that may be affected but that we are not yet aware of. You should then gather supplies for your family and make your way to Fort Herman Kahn located at junction fourteen of Highway Seven south of Jules Verne city. If you have access to weapons then bring these also, we will not question the legality of their possession. Right now we need all the help we can get in securing our position. When travelling remember that anyone you encounter may already have been affected by the corrupted update, even if they are a close friend or relative and they may be hostile. Do not attempt to interact with them, just get here as fast as you can. This is Colonel Dator signing off."

At that point the screen went blank for just a moment before the colonel reappeared and his speech was replayed from the very beginning.

"My name is Colonel Owen Dator, commanding officer of the First Ranger Regiment at Fort Herman Kahn. By now you will probably be aware of mass civil disturbances occurring throughout Verne. We have isolated the cause of this as a faulty update file for all models of wireless implant. We do not know how this file is able to affect our implants or how it came to be introduced into our national networks but we do know that it causes implants to affect higher brain functions, triggering aggression against anyone who has not yet been affected by the corrupted files. Although my regiment as well as other small groups have been able to isolate ourselves from the damage being caused by the update this has spread to large parts of the population, including most of the government, military and law enforcement. None of these organisations can be trusted to provide help and attempting to contact them will only draw attention to yourselves. Instead everyone who has not yet been affected by the corrupt code must take action to quarantine themselves. To begin with your wireless communication implants should be disabled. Ideally remove power cells as well to-"

Boucher turned off the television set at that point and she and Smith looked at one another.

"So how do we get to this army base?" she said and Smith returned to the window to look outside into the street below where he saw the crashed police car with its occupants lay in on the ground next to it.

"Think that police car still works?" he asked.

"Only one way to find out I suppose." Boucher responded.

The two law enforcement agents peered out into the hotel corridor before leaving the room to make sure that there was not a violent mob waiting for them. Seeing no one they hurried from Boucher's room to the nearby lifts and were about to summon one when Boucher grabbed hold of Smith's hand before he could touch the call button.

"Wait." she said, "What if there's someone waiting inside the lift or outside it when we get to the first floor?"

"Good point. We'll have to take the stairs." Smith replied and the pair headed for the emergency stairs instead. Descending to the hotel lobby using the stairs took much longer and was more tiring than using an elevator but since the journey was all downwards it did not wear out Boucher or Smith before they reached the first floor.

Holding the door ajar Smith looked out into the hotel lobby and saw that it was strangely empty. Every other time he had seen the lobby there had been guests moving through it as well as staff on stand by to assist them, but now there was no-one to be seen.

"Coast's clear." he said, "Let's go before someone comes."

Boucher and Smith then ran through the lobby and out into the street, finding it strangely empty as well although they could hear the sounds of screams and what sounded like intermittent gunfire in the distance. Seeing the crashed police car close by they hurried towards it to inspect the damage. Skid marks on the road demonstrated that the driver of the vehicle had attempted to stop before hitting the wall and although the front of the car was badly dented the vehicle was largely intact.

"We should take their weapons." Smith said as he scooped up a gauss rifle that had been left behind by the mob that had finally overrun the police officers, "Whoa this thing is heavy." he added when he felt the weight of the weapon and mentally compared it to the more conventional firearms he had held.

"Do you know how to use one of those?" Boucher asked.

"Not a clue. Besides I'm pretty sure that all Verne's police weapons are keyed to only be usable by law enforcement."

"So what good are they to us?" Boucher asked.

"None. But maybe Colonel Dator and his men can make use of them." Smith answered and Boucher nodded before moving to retrieve the weaponry of the policeman nearest to her.

As she knelt down and reached for the officer's belt buckle the man suddenly opened his eyes and cried out in pain from the gunshot wound to his stomach.

"Crap! He's alive!" Boucher exclaimed and she reached out to put pressure on the hole in the policeman's body armour where blood was pumping out of the wound.

"I'll find a medical kit." Smith said, rushing to the car and looking inside in the certainty that a police vehicle would carry some form of emergency aid kit, "Get that armour off him."

"Who-" the police officer began as Boucher undid the fastenings on his armour.

"Inspector Boucher, Royal Canadian Mounted Police." she replied, "And this is Agent Smith of Interpol." she added as Smith arrived with an emergency medical kit from the police car.

"We need your vehicle to reach Fort Herman Kahn." he said as he tore the officer's shirt to expose the wound and pressed a dressing to it.

"The First Rangers. Not affected." the policeman gasped and Boucher nodded.

"Obviously you heard Colonel Dator's message as well." she said, "So let's get you in the car and see if we can get us all out of here."

"Belt." the policeman said, "Won't work without belt."

"What?" Boucher asked.

"I think he means that the car will only run with someone wearing a police officer's belt in the driver's seat." Smith said, "You get him inside and I'll grab the other belt."

With the injured police officer lying in the back seat and wearing the equipment belt of the dead officer, Smith was able to start the police car's engine and backed it slowly away from the wall. This indicated that the vehicle was still operational despite the lights on one side having been smashed by the impact. Smith then turned the car away from the wall and drove off in the direction indicated by road signs pointing towards Highway 7.

A high speed train transported Gruber towards the coast where a ground effect vehicle would then carry him across the ocean to the planet's secondary continent where he had spent most of his time on Verne. A pair of plain clothed bodyguards from the Ministry of Defence and Security sat close by him on the train, one in the seat opposite while the second was further along the carriage. There were only a handful of other occupants in the carriage at this time of night and they ignored Gruber's presence, despite it being obvious that he was from off world. Instead they sat immersed in the entertainment being offered via the carriage's wireless data

network while Gruber could only sit and look out of the window at the darkened wilderness outside. Gruber was surprised when the train began to decelerate. With few settlements on Verne even after more than a century of human habitation there were not supposed to be any stops between Jules Verne city and the port on the coast so there was no reason for the train to be slowing.

"What's going on?" Gruber said to the bodyguard sat opposite to him.

"I don't know." the man replied and he glanced at the second bodyguard who was now looking out of the window to try and determine why the train had come to an unexpected halt, "Wait here." he added as he got to his feet and started to walk down the aisle in the centre of the carriage. As he neared the door at the end of the aisle one of the passengers got to his feet and blocked his path.

"Your wireless is faulty." the passenger said and the bodyguard frowned.

"I haven't turned it on. Now get out of my way please. I need to see the conductor." he said.

"Contact him remotely." the passenger told him and the bodyguard frowned before trying to squeeze around the. However, the passenger reacted by shoving the bodyguard as more passengers got to their feet to surround him.

Realising that something was very wrong, the bodyguard decided that the time had come to reveal what he was and with a flick of his wrist the body of a laser tube slid from inside his sleeve into his hand while a cable running up his arm led to the low profile contoured battery mounted down his side under his jacket.

"Defence security agent." he said, producing his identity card at the same time, "Step aside or I'll use force." As soon as he did this the second bodyguard got his feet as well and deployed the covert energy weapon concealed in his jacket. He was too slow however, to prevent one of the passengers suddenly producing a knife that they had been using earlier to slice fruit with and thrusting it into his partner's throat. The wound was not instantly lethal though and as he dropped to his knees the mortally wounded bodyguard was still able to turn his laser on his assailant and fire it from point blank range. The beam sliced through the passenger's chest and he too collapsed, dead by the time he hit the floor.

"Professor! This way!" the second bodyguard called out before firing his laser at another of the passengers who had confronted his partner and then Gruber got up and began to run down the aisle towards him. Another passenger got up and reached out to try and grab the professor but his remaining bodyguard fired his laser again and shot the woman down before she could get close enough to touch him, "Hurry professor." the bodyguard said as he bundled Gruber through the door at the other end of the carriage.

Standing in the end section of the carriage it was possible to see into the next one through a window in the door that separated them and through this Gruber and his bodyguard saw the passengers in it all getting to their feet and started to head in their direction.

"Oh this looks bad." the bodyguard said and then he looked at the train's external doors, "Left or right?" he said before simply leaping towards the door he was facing and pulling on the emergency release lever.

"What are you doing?" Gruber said.

"Getting us a way out, now go. I'll be right behind you." the bodyguard said as he pulled open the door and stood aside so that Gruber could jump down onto the tracks outside. Fortunately the train was powered by overhead wires rather than an extra rail at ground level so the two men did not need to worry about being electrocuted as they ran away from the train.

Behind them they heard a sudden shriek coming from the train and both turned to see what was happening, the bodyguard raising his weapon in expectation of seeing a crowd of passengers chasing after them. Instead they both saw that no-one had yet followed them from the train until another door further along opened partially and a small figure squeezed out and fell from the train.

"It's a child." Gruber said when he saw the girl get back to her feet and then start to run away from the train. Then he saw several adults pull the door fully open and jump down after her.

"Hey kid! Over here!" the bodyguard shouted as he fired his laser towards the adult passengers and the girl turned towards them.

"Quickly!" Gruber added, his bodyguard firing again. This seemed to convince the other passengers to keep their distance, throwing themselves to the ground for cover.

The girl was closer now and Gruber saw that she looked to be in her early teens. Although the sides of her head were shaved in the usual Verne style she lacked any form of visible cybernetic implants in her skull. This was not surprising for a child of her age, the implant procedure required the subject to be fully grown or they would suffer pains in their head as their brains and skull expanded around the implants.

"What happened?" Gruber asked her.

"My tablet broke." the girl said, holding up a tablet of Verne manufacture, "I was watching a show from the train network and it was suddenly cut off. I asked my mom what was wrong with it and she went crazy, so did all the other people on the train. My brother, they killed my brother."

"We need to go." the bodyguard said, "I get the feeling those other passengers are going to come after us sooner or later. If not them then someone else."

"Where are we going? What's happening?" the girl said as she started to follow the two men.

"It must be something to do with the implants. The wireless communication ones." Gruber told her, "You and I

don't have them and my guard has his turned off for security reasons. Somehow someone has found a way to affect people's behaviour through them and I've got a terrible feeling that I know where this all started."

Shaw's fighter was the first to see the *Meredith Thring* appear around the lunar horizon as her squadron advanced ahead of the *Warspite*, the destroyer appearing almost lifeless as it did its best to remain undetected by the Commonwealth heavy cruiser.

"*Warspite* this is Archangel, enemy destroyer dead ahead. Going for missile lock." Shaw transmitted and on the bridge of the *Warspite* Reeves smiled.

"Lieutenant Lucas, how many defensive turrets does that destroyer have?" he asked.

"The profile we recorded suggests two positron beam turrets captain." Lucas answered.

"Weapons," Reeves said out loud, "I want a three missile spread ready to launch when Lieutenant Commander Shaw indicates a lock."

"Getting the lock signal now captain." Goldman reported.

"Fire." Reeves ordered and three of the missile doors located along the *Warspite's* dorsal hull opened before a heavy missile burst from each and then arced ahead of the cruiser and began to fly around the moon.

"Where are we going?" the girl asked as she continued to follow Gruber and his bodyguard across the open countryside. They had left the train tracks far behind by now and there were no signs of human settlement at all, only various species of alien grass as far as the eye could see in the starlight.

"Yes, where are we going?" Gruber added, "Remember I don't know much about your world."

"There's a highway in this direction I think." the bodyguard replied.

"Perhaps we can use that to get us a map." Gruber suggested and he pointed to the tablet that the young girl was still carrying with her.

"But it stopped getting a signal on the train." she said.

"Perhaps because it was patched in to the train's wireless network." the bodyguard said, "If everyone with an active wireless implant was driven crazy then maybe the network was how it spread."

"Maybe it will still pick global positioning data. Give me the tablet." Gruber said, holding out his hand and the girl handed the device to him.

"Well? Is there a GPS signal?" the bodyguard asked.

"Yes and a map that shows we're heading for a road. Highway Seven." Gruber answered then he frowned,

"This thing's also picking up another signal, looks like a video broadcast."

"Out here? There aren't any broadcast stations this far out of the city." the bodyguard said.

"Well all I can say is that someone's broadcasting something. Look." Gruber said and he activated the tablet's video playback feature.

"My name is Colonel Owen Dator, commanding officer of the First Ranger Regiment at Fort Herman Kahn."

"Captain I have multiple targets coming around the horizon." one of the *Meredith Thring's* bridge crew reported as the Commonwealth fighters started to appear, "They're locking on."

"Those fighters aren't much of a threat to us." Oswald's first officer commented.

"They're probably desperate." Oswald replied, "If our marines have done their job properly then that cruiser could be in our hands by now. Those fighters have nowhere to go. Arm turrets and stand by for intercept fire."

"Captain I've got three more targets accelerating towards us at thirty plus gees. They're missiles." the sensor technician called out.

"That cruiser's still active!" Oswald exclaimed, "Weapons ignore those fighters, take out those missiles. Helm, immediate evasive action."

The *Meredith Thring's* magnetic ion drive came to life suddenly, pushing streams of charged particles away from the vessel's stern and moving it forwards as well as veering away from the moon it was orbiting. The three missiles launched by the *Warspite*, now following their own on board tracking systems rather than relying on the relayed data from Shaw's fighter squadron immediately turned to follow and in response the Verne destroyer's two defensive turrets opened fire on them. The twin beams of anti-matter particles rapidly despatched two of the missiles, triggering large explosions in the process from the combination of anti-matter annihilation and the triggering of the explosive warheads they carried. The third missile passed unharmed between these blasts, still turning to follow the Verne destroyer. One of the *Meredith Thring's* turrets fired again but the combination of the missile's manoeuvring and the destroyer's own evasive action caused the beam to miss by more than a hundred metres. The missile's sensor detected the proximity of its target and armed its warhead in anticipation of impact, but before it could strike the destroyer another beam of anti-matter lashed out from one of its defensive turrets and hit the missile's nose cone. The missile then suffered the same fate as the previous two, the reaction of the anti-matter in the beam and the matter of the missile's structure caused a massive explosion that in turn triggered the warhead and the nearby *Meredith Thring* was pelted with molten shrapnel that continued along the original path of the missile.

"Damage report." Oswald exclaimed when alarms began to sound in the bridge.

"Minimal." the flight operations officer responded, "We've got a breach in the outer hull but no loss in internal pressure. The energy pulse caused a minor glitch in sensors but they've recovered now and two of our compression manoeuvring thrusters have been disabled."

"Contact!" the sensor technician yelled as the main viewscreen showed the *Warspite* itself coming around the moon, the heavy cruiser's drones still forming a screen around the vessel.

"Enemy destroyer dead ahead captain." Cortez said.

"Weapons lock achieved." one of the missile gunners added.

"Mister Ash line us up to use the main guns if you would." Reeves said, "All turrets commence fire but watch for enemy missiles."

"Captain the Verne missiles are likely to use anti-matter warheads." Lucas said, "We'll need to intercept them as far from us as possible."

"Incoming." Goldman announced as four of the missile tubes set into the front of the Verne destroyer opened and the weapons they covered burst out, swinging around towards the *Warspite*.

The *Warspite* mounted a total of ten light turrets for close in defence as well as to bolster the cruiser's short ranged firepower and when the *Meredith Thring* launched its first volley of missiles the gunners turned their attention away from the destroyer and towards these instead. Of most use here were the eight free-electron beam lasers, their strikes at the speed of light being far more accurate than the gauss cannons whose projectiles took a much longer period of time to travel the thousands of kilometres from the *Warspite* to the incoming Verne missiles. Able to fire multiple turrets at each missile the *Warspite* made short work of the approaching weapons, the last of them being destroyed before making it half way to the cruiser. Lucas' warning turned out to be correct though and when three of the missiles were detonated by the defensive fire they produced large explosions. The final missile was hit in its propulsion system and rather than triggering the warhead this caused it to cease accelerating or turning towards the *Warspite* and instead it began to simply coast through space, getting ever further away from the engagement zone and was ignored by the combatants.

At the same time as the *Warspite's* light turrets were engaging the Verne missiles its two dorsally mounted medium X-ray laser turrets turned to track the *Meredith Thring* itself and these fired together. One of the turrets struck the destroyer's prow where its missile launchers and magazines were located. Had the ship been armed with missiles tipped with conventional explosive warheads this could have been a catastrophic hit, detonating all of the remaining warheads in a chain reaction that would have torn off the entire front section of the ship. However, as a basic safety precaution the anti-matter for the missile warhead was not loaded until the missiles were to be fired and so despite a number of the *Meredith Thring's* missiles being destroyed inside their launching tubes and magazines there was no massive secondary blast to cripple the destroyer.

More serious was the hit from the second X-ray laser, however. This hit the *Meredith Thring* amidships, burning a hole right the way through the ship. This sliced through several of the destroyer's main internal supporting struts that kept the ship from collapsing under the thrust of its own engines and sirens began to sound throughout the destroyer as the stress on its remaining superstructure increased, threatening to break the ship in half before the power to its engines was reduced.

"Captain we can't take another hit like that." the *Meredith Thring's* flight operations officer said, "Two decks are totally de-pressurised and there's a ruptured gas line that we're losing pressure from for the rest of the life support system. I'm picking up increased levels of radioactivity on decks either side of the damaged section, we're going to have to evacuate them as quickly as possible. In addition our frame is cracked wide open. We're going to have to dry dock before we can manage more than about two gees of acceleration without snapping in half."

"Order the evacuation. Have everyone from the affected decks checked out for signs of radiation poisoning. Can we return fire?" Captain Oswald asked.

"Yes captain." the chief gunner answered, "Both turrets are functional and we still have eight missile launchers operational with more than forty rounds left."

"Give them a full salvo. Eight rounds, maximum yield. Turrets, target those fighters and drones. I don't want them getting in close enough to hit us again."

As the *Warspite's* fighter squadron veered away from the *Meredith Thring* to avoid the fire from its turrets another eight missiles emerged from the destroyer's launchers, spreading out to avoid a single premature detonation from destroying all of them at once.

"All turrets defensive fire." Reeves ordered when he saw this and the gunners for the two X-ray laser turrets turned their weapons away from the Verne destroyer as they endeavoured to protect the *Warspite*.

"The enemy ship's entering the fire arc for our main guns now captain." Knight said, looking at the display in front of him.

“Easy when they stop turning.” Ash commented, the sudden drop in acceleration of the *Meredith Thring* had been key to his being able to keep the Verne vessel in the *Warspite's* main firing arc.

Reeves nodded.

“Main guns fire.” he ordered.

The two massive neutral particle beam cannons mounted either side of the *Warspite's* hull fired in unison, their powerful beams striking out towards the Verne ship. Able to burn through multiple layers of armour with ease, the beams from these weapons struck the *Meredith Thring* towards the stern, right where the cone shaped magnetic drive plates began and several of these glowed brightly as they melted. A quick blast from the destroyer's manoeuvring thrusters took the ship out of the line of fire but the *Warspite* was far more manoeuvrable than the damaged destroyer and Ash simply turned the ship to keep the *Meredith Thring* in the firing arc for the heavy cruiser's main guns.

The effect of this was to slice all the way through the *Meredith Thring's* magnetic drive and the destroyer was promptly split in two, both halves starting to tumble away from one another.

“Drives are gone!” the *Meredith Thring's* flight operations officer yelled over the sound of alarms as it seemed that every warning light on every bridge control console lit up. The destroyer had lost all main propulsion and was now restricted to the limited manoeuvring possible with blasts of gas from compression thrusters. The anti-matter fuel needed for weapons as well as propulsion was stored within the drive section and without this the ship was effectively disarmed. Its missiles could inflict some damage from the force of their impact but this was nothing compared to the effectiveness of an anti-matter explosion and was unlikely to inflict serious damage on a ship as well protected as the *Warspite*.

This left the *Meredith Thring* almost completely defenceless. Although the destroyer could still use its missiles to intercept any missiles fired at it by the *Warspite*, the heavy cruiser could instead opt to bombard the smaller vessel with its turrets or fire its main guns again and burn away one section after another until there was nothing left. Captain Oswald knew this and he made the decision to give the only order that made any sense at all.

“This is the captain.” he said, setting the intercom to broadcast his words throughout what remained of his vessel, “All hands abandon ship. I repeat, all hands abandon ship.”

“Heat bloom from the enemy vessel captain.” Goldman said.

“Another missile?” Knight asked.

“No commander, looks like an escape pod.” Goldman answered before the *Warspite's* sensors picked up a second escape pod being jettisoned, followed swiftly by two more.

“They're abandoning ship.” Reeves said, “Get me Commander Shaw.”

“Yes captain, putting you through now.” Goldman replied.

“Archangel this is Warspite.” Reeves said.

“Reading you Warspite, are you seeing what I'm seeing? It looks like the Verne have had enough.” Shaw responded and Reeves nodded.

“Yes commander we see it. I want you to move in closer to check out those escape pods. We're going to launch search and rescue craft but I want to be certain that it's not a trap. The Verne could have rigged those pods with explosives.” he told her.

“Understood Warspite, we're heading in now. Archangel out.” Shaw said before switching her communications to broadcast to her squadron, “Okay everyone we're going in to check out those escape pods before the Warspite takes them aboard. I want visual confirmation that each one is manned before it's flagged for collection.” she told the other pilots and then she accelerated her fighter towards the nearest of the *Meredith Thring's* escape pods.

Despite their obsession with using the most advanced technology possible, the Verne had included simple viewports in the design of their escape pods and when Shaw brought her fighter to a stop beside the first one she came to this enabled her to see inside it where the interior was illuminated sufficiently to reveal the presence of a number of Verne naval personnel. Some of these looked up from their seats when they in turn saw the fighter hovering outside.

“Looks like we've got survivors here Kaz.” Shaw said, “Let them know help's on the way.”

“I'm configuring the visual beacon. Anything else you want me to add?” Mori asked.

“No, we'll leave the complicated explanations to the marines.” Shaw answered and Mori nodded.

“Okay, transmitting now.” Mori said and then a powerful spotlight mounted under the fighter's nose began to pulse, sending a crude signal to the occupants of the escape pod that told them to stand by for rescue. Being told that they were about to be taken aboard the warship that just minutes earlier their own vessel had been attempting to destroy did not excite the Verne inside the escape pods but one of them raised a hand to acknowledge the signal.

“Right then,” Shaw said, “They understand what's happening, let's go and spread some more good news.”

INTERLUDE.

Hayes was woken by the sound of her telephone ringing and she groaned, annoyed at the disruption to her sleep. Reaching out to the table beside her bed she looked at the phone's display and saw that it was Vale calling her. Had it been anyone else she probably would have diverted the call to her answering system but she knew that Vale would only disturb her at this hour with something important and so she lifted the phone to her face.

"Enrico do you know what time it is?" she said as she answered it.

"I'm sorry commander but I need to speak with you. It's important. Can I come in?" Vale replied.

"Come in? Enrico where are you?" Hayes said.

"Outside your building." Vale told her and only then did Hayes realise that the security light in front of her apartment building was active. If she did not let Vale in soon then the building's security system would flag his presence to the local police and the last thing she needed was to have to explain to low level law enforcement who had nowhere near enough security clearance to know what either of them did for a living that he was not a prowler or burglar.

"Okay I'll buzz you in." Hayes said and then she hung up the phone and got out of bed, grabbing a robe to put on over her nightdress before making her way from the bedroom into her apartment's lounge where she could unlock the building's front door remotely. She then made her way to the front door and waited by it until the camera monitoring the hallway outside showed Vale rushing up to the door.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you so late." Vale said when Hayes opened the door as he was just about to ring the bell.

"Just get inside Enrico." she replied, "Before the nousey old cow across the hall realises you're here and starts trying to spy on us." and when she glanced towards another apartment door Vale also turned to look and noticed that the door was ajar, at which point Hayes grabbed Vale and pulled him into her apartment.

"It's the middle of the night. What's your neighbour doing up-" Vale began before Hayes interrupted him.

"Probably woken up by the security light coming on." she said, "Now you've already said that your visit here is important so how about you tell what it's all about?"

"Of course commander." Vale said as he turned on the tablet he was holding, "Lieutenant Commander Martins sent us a signal via the relay station."

"Just give me a summary." Hayes said when he tried to hand her the tablet and she sat down, pulling her robe to make sure it covered her legs fully, "Does he have a copy of that AI in his possession already?"

"No, in fact it appears that the situation on Verne with regards to the AI has got worse."

"Got worse? How could it have got worse? Have the Verne deployed reinforcements to protect it or have they gone and blown it up?"

"It's been released." Vale said and Hayes' jaw dropped.

"It's loose. On a human world." she said and Vale nodded.

"It's in the early stages right now but Doctor Horst believes that it is spreading among the population via the cybernetic implants the Verne use for wireless communication." he explained.

"Wait, it's infecting people now?" Hayes said.

"Those with particular cybernetic modifications, yes. Or at least that's what Doctor Horst believes. She's suggesting that a sufficiently powerful AI could dominate a individual personality enough to control their behaviour. Lieutenant Commander Martins is requesting further instructions." Vale told her.

"What do you mean, further instructions?" Hayes asked.

"Well since the AI is now active I think he is reluctant to risk his ship and crew by-"

"Refusing an order that's come down from the Old Man?" Hayes interrupted, "Because that's the biggest risk I can see here. Tell him that he has his orders and he'd better hope that while he's been sat around waiting to have them repeated to him that Commander Jessop's team haven't beaten him to the AI."

"Of course. I'll send a reply immediately." Vale said and he started to head back towards the apartment door.

"Enrico wait." Hayes said and he turned back towards her.

"Yes commander?" he asked.

"If that AI is active then what are the chances that it could infect the *Grey Dawn*?" Hayes replied and Vale considered this for a few moments.

"The evidence of what happened in the Sissusk Empire would suggest that the AI needs to be interfaced with local technology before it is activated. So since Verne computer architecture and operating systems are all proprietary systems unique to their nation the AI shouldn't be able to jump across to any of our systems. The *Grey Dawn* should be safe enough."

"Should." Hayes said, "You aren't certain?"

"I can't be one hundred percent certain commander. I don't know exactly what the Sissusk did when they started to make use of the technology offered to them and I don't know how the Verne were able to activate it either. The Sissusk spent months integrating the alien technology with their own but we don't have any

evidence of the Verne activating anything until just a few hours ago. We don't even know exactly what it was that they turned on."

Hayes sighed.

"We better run this by the Old Man. If there's even the slightest chance of unleashing that AI here we need him to sign off on any action Martins takes." she said getting up and walking towards her desk. Vale followed and when Hayes sat down in front of her computer he stood behind her while she turned on the computer and called up the encrypted video communication software so that she could contact the Old Man. She expected the call to take some time to connect and that it would be answered by one of the Old Man's staff but to her surprise the Old Man's image appeared on her monitor almost as soon as she had selected his identity from her list of contacts. More surprising was that he was obviously in his office and was fully dressed.

"Ah Jennifer, I was expecting your call." he said.

"Really?" Hayes replied, confused, "I was worried I'd be disturbing you at home at this time."

"Oh I had something to keep me occupied here." the Old Man said and his image pointed towards her, "You may want to check your appearance though." Hayes glanced down and saw that her robe was not fully closed and she frowned as she tightened it while the Old Man continued to speak to her, "I've just been speaking with Commander Jessop. It appears that the crew of the *High Tide* are unable to lift off while a revolution of sorts is taking place on Verne. I see that you have received a report from Lieutenant Commander Martins aboard the *Grey Dawn* as well. I take it that you wish to discuss the contents of this?"

"Yes sir. Doctor Horst thinks that-

"I know what Doctor Horst thinks Jennifer, I've read the report from Lieutenant Commander Martins myself. I assume that you are concerned about the possibility that the active AI could spread to here?"

"I am."

"Well I don't think that there is any danger. The Commonwealth recovered Sissusk computer drives containing a copy of the original signal as well as fragments of the active AI. That was a year ago and so far there is no indication that the Commonwealth is about to be overrun by it. Just make sure that your people don't plug anything into their ship's network and they should be just fine."

"Yes sir." Hayes said and she reached to shut down the communication program.

"Oh and Jennifer." the Old Man added suddenly.

"Yes sir?" Hayes asked.

"Sleep well Jennifer." the Old Man said and he smiled at her as he shut down the link from his office.

14.

The *Warspite* carried a pair of workpods, compact single pilot vehicles fitted with large grasping claws as well as other heavy duty tools useful for carrying out repairs in zero gravity and the vacuum of space and these were used to manoeuvre the Verne escape pods into the cruiser's rear hangar. Then once the hangar was pressurised the escape pods were opened one at a time to permit the occupants to disembark. They were met by a combination of marines including both of the *Warspite's* dog handlers to check them for weapons, medical staff and engineers who evaluated any injuries and made sure that their cybernetic implants were all disabled to prevent their use in any escape attempt. The Verne were in little mood to put up any resistance to being captured, however. A large number of the *Meredith Thring's* crew had suffered injuries during the brief battle and each of them needed to have their wounds examined individually.

"Only send the worst cases to the infirmary." Thundercloud told a pair of his medical staff, "I've seen some serious radiation burns from our X-ray lasers so make sure that they get treated but anything that can be treated here should be."

"Doctor." a voice said from behind Thundercloud and he turned to see a pair of marines escorting a member of the *Meredith Thring's* crew towards him. The prisoner was clearly an officer and Thundercloud noticed that his uniform included a badge of a six pointed star that included a depiction of a single snake coiled around a staff. The Star of Life as it was commonly known was the near universal motif for medical personnel among not only humans but also many Brekken since their contact with humanity. Thundercloud also wore the design as part of his uniform and he guessed that he was looking at his opposite number from the *Meredith Thring*. One of the man's eyes was clearly artificial and had been deactivated along with the rest of his implants.

"This man says he's the MO from the Verne ship." one of the marines said.

"My name is Doctor Chan." the Verne added.

"Excellent. Then you can help with the triage of your crew." Thundercloud said and then he looked at the marines and added, "The doctor will need a guard of course but he should remain here until we're cleared out all the cases that need serious treatment. I'll speak to the captain about having him brought to the infirmary as well."

"Your engineers have been shutting down all of our implants." Doctor Chan said, "I cannot access the medical logs of any of the injured unless--"

"Your implants have been shut down for a good reason." Thundercloud interrupted, "Now if you're not up to the job of determining treatments without looking everything up on a computer drive in your head then I can have you sent to the hold with all the other prisoners. Otherwise I suggest you go and take a look at your people over there. I think at least one has a broken arm."

Doctor Chan scowled, obviously not used to having his competence questioned.

"We'll get him to the hold." the marine said.

"No wait." Doctor Chan said before the marine guards could remove him from the hangar, "I can work without my implants. It will just be harder, that's all."

"Then get to it doctor. Just let my people know what supplies you need but remember that I'll be double checking everything you ask for."

As the marines were leading Doctor Chan away another strode towards Doctor Thundercloud.

"Doctor I think you ought to come and take a look at this." he said.

"Is someone badly hurt?" Thundercloud asked.

"No sir but I think this is someone you need to see yourself. The captain will probably want to see him as well afterwards."

"Why? Who is he?"

"He says his name is Captain Oswald and he was the commanding officer of the destroyer *Meredith Thring*." the marine answered.

"Captain I'm picking up strange readings from Verne." Cortez reported.

"Can you do better than that petty officer? What exactly is strange?" Reeves asked.

"Our passive EM detectors are picking up rapid energy spikes in orbit around the planet. They look like weapons fire." Cortez answered.

"Who could they be shooting at?" Knight said, "We're well out of range."

"This is weird." Goldman said as she studied the sensor readings herself, "It looks like the Verne fleet is fighting itself. There are ships pulling away from their space dock and being fired on."

"Where are they headed?" Reeves said.

"Just away from the space dock, I'd say that each ship is following a different course." Goldman said.

"Captain," Lucas added as she studied the same sensor readings that Goldman was looking at, "I'd say that

there are a mix of ships involved. Mostly smaller vessels such as gunships, corvettes and cutters but there are two capital ships trying to get away as well. A frigate and a destroyer. In total I'd say it was about a fifth of the Verne fleet."

"That's too many for a simple mutiny or hijacking." Knight said, "The last time that many ships were stolen in one go was the outbreak of the Genex War when they stole the fleet they used against us."

"Captain there's something else." Goldman said, "The planet's gone almost entirely dark in EM emissions. It's like almost every radio transmitter on the surface was turned off all at once."

"Can you find anything?" Reeves said and Goldman double checked her console.

"There is one signal powerful enough to reach here captain. It's not encrypted and it seems to be repeating on a loop." she said.

"Let's take a look then." Reeves ordered and Goldman nodded, bringing up the signal the *Warspite* was receiving on the bridge's main view screen and the image of Colonel Dator sat at his desk appeared on it.

"My name is Colonel Owen Dator, commanding officer of the First Ranger Regiment at Fort Herman Kahn. By now you will probably be aware of mass civil disturbances occurring throughout Verne. We have isolated the cause of this as a faulty update file for all models of wireless implant. We do not know how this file is able to affect our implants or how it came to be introduced into our national networks but we do know that it causes implants to affect higher brain functions, triggering aggression against anyone who has not yet been affected by the corrupted files."

"Pause it there." Reeves said and as the recording stopped he looked at Knight, "Sound familiar?" he asked and Knight nodded.

"Like an alien AI system infiltrating all the technology it's exposed to." Knight replied, "Exactly what happened to the Sissusk but on a smaller scale."

"Captain, do you think that this could have triggered the Verne attack on us?" Thomas suggested.

"It's very likely commander." Reeves said, "But there's someone who can tell us for certain down in the hold. Commander Knight, Lieutenant Lucas with me. We'll need a copy of that signal as well. Goldman, the bridge is yours. Tell Major Willis that I want that Verne captain brought to my quarters in ten minutes and if any further Verne ships turn up give them one warning to back off and then open fire if they don't."

"Take a seat." Reeves told Knight and Lucas when they reached his quarters and they all sat down at his desk, "Now let's take a look at this whole message." he added and Lucas held out the tablet she carried so that all three of them could see the screen before starting to play back the message from Colonel Dator. This time Reeves let it play all the way through before Lucas stopped it and he leaned back in his chair.

"So not only have the Verne found something related to the signal that destroyed the Sissusk, they've also managed to let it loose among their population." Knight said.

"Pretty much my thoughts as well Doug." Reeves commented and then he looked at Lucas, "Lieutenant do you have anything to add?"

"Not really captain. As far as I know study of the computer drives we recovered from the Epsilon Pavonis system has been slow." she replied.

"Figures." Knight said, "How do you study it without connecting it to another computer and risking the AI spreading itself and adapting to our technology?"

"Something that will be a lot easier for it if it successfully takes over the Verne." Reeves said, "They may have separated their development from ours but the underlying tech is still the same."

"Captain, we need to remove the Verne's FTL capability. All of it." Lucas said, "That way at least we can keep the AI bottled up in this system and jam any light speed communication."

"That means taking out a lot of ships." Knight pointed out and Reeves nodded in agreement.

"Not to mention their tachyon satellite system and their tachyon stockpiles." he added.

"Yes captain. I doubt we could manage that alone, we'd have to request aide from the battle group at Centaur." Lucas replied.

"Most likely the entire thing." Knight said, "There's no way that Admiral Mitchell is going to bring the entire fleet here without running it by fleet command first."

"She could at least set up a blockade. She has that authority." Lucas said, "Colonel Dator's transmission is proof that Verne has been compromised."

Then there came a knock at the door of Reeves' cabin.

"Come in." Reeves called out and the door opened to reveal Major Willis.

"We have Captain Oswald for you sir." he said as he entered the room, followed by Captain Oswald and another pair of armed marines as escort."

"Excellent. Major you can remain but I want your men to wait outside, it's a bit too crowded in here." Reeves said.

"Yes sir." Willis replied and when he nodded at his men they both exited the room again, closing the door behind them.

"Captain Oswald." Reeves said, "You and your men are being well treated I take it?"

"We are captain." Oswald responded, "Though I should warn you that I have no intention of betraying my country so if you expect me to—"

"I'm guessing that the order to attack my ship came as a surprise to you." Reeves interrupted, "You'd just been ordered to take a look at what we were up to out here when all of a sudden those orders changed and you were told to attack."

"I can't confirm or deny any orders I received." Oswald said.

"Of course you can't captain. However, are you familiar with a Colonel Dator?" Reeves asked.

"The name rings a bell. But I don't know every one of our military commanders." Oswald answered.

"Lieutenant, show our guest the colonel's message." Reeves said and Lucas held out her tablet for Oswald before replaying the broadcast from Colonel Dator for him.

"I don't believe it." Oswald said as the message finished, "This has to be fake."

"We picked it up a few minutes ago." Knight said, "At about the same time we picked up signs that your ships are starting to shoot at one another."

"Whatever is affecting your people is probably propagating only as fast as EM signals will travel." Lucas said, "That's why your crew weren't affected. All the way out here the update hadn't had time to reach you before we deactivated your wireless implants."

Oswald looked at Reeves.

"If you're expecting me to help you take military action against my own government then it'll take more than a recording that you could have created yourselves using communications you intercepted." he said.

"I would expect nothing less captain." Reeves replied, "What if I give you access to our tachyon communications? As we told you, your ships were firing on one another. That means that some of them weren't affected by the update and they could still be active. Bring them to us and maybe we can protect them."

"And then what?" Oswald said.

"While in orbit around Verne we picked up a transmission aimed here. That's why we left orbit." Reeves said, "Now that signal matches the format used by an invasive alien AI system we've encountered before. We suspect that it's active on your planet and we intend to eradicate it. That means travelling back to Verne and destroying the source of that transmission. In all likelihood the AI is centred there. Isn't that right Lieutenant Lucas?"

"It is the most logical location." Lucas agreed.

"If we act fast enough then the affected Verne won't be able to deploy any surface defences." Willis commented, "My company could easily deploy to the target zone under those circumstances."

"There's still the matter of the Verne fleet in orbit. We don't know many of them have been affected by this AI." Knight pointed out.

"Which is something we need to discover." Reeves said and he looked Oswald, "Well captain, do I have your co-operation?" he asked.

"I'll send a signal to our other ships." he said, "At the very least I'll be able to inform them of what's happened here."

"Just remember that if you try passing them intelligence about us we'll cut you off." Knight warned him.

"Lieutenant Commander Thomas we need a course that will take us back to Verne, a distance of two light seconds should suffice." Reeves ordered as he, Knight and Lucas returned to the bridge, accompanied by Willis, Oswald and the two marine guards just in case the Verne captain was being less than honest about his intentions, "Oh and try to keep us away from any of the Verne vessels' current locations. Lieutenant Commander Goldman recall our fighters and drones as quickly as possible. Petty Officer Cortez we'll need an active tadar scan to pinpoint the Verne ships. Feed the scan results directly to Commander Thomas."

"Yes captain." Cortez responded as she brought the *Warspite's* active faster than light sensors on line."

"I see them." Thomas said, looking at his console's display. This now showed the disposition of the Verne fleet in real time and there were clearly fewer active vessels than were shown in the results of the sensor scans that were limited to light speed. One of the destroyers similar to the *Meredith Thring* was now drifting lifelessly away from the planet, most of its drive section blasted away, while several debris clouds large enough to have come from smaller ships could be seen steadily losing altitude as they made their way towards Verne's atmosphere. Meanwhile the remaining ships continued to trade fire with one another.

"The fleet." Oswald exclaimed when he saw this .

"It would be nice if we knew if any of them could be said to be on our side." Thomas commented from the helm.

"For the moment assume that all will react badly to our sudden reappearance." Reeves said, "Hopefully we'll find some allies among them but that can't be guaranteed."

"The Verne ships and orbital facilities are concentrated in an equatorial orbit captain." Thomas said, "A jump that brings us over the northern polar region ought to keep us clear enough of the fighting and give us a good line of sight."

Reeves nodded.

"Make your calculations Commander Thomas. Provide the data to Commander Ash so that we can make our jump as soon as our fighters and drones are rearmed and refuelled." Reeves said. Then he looked at Lucas, "Lieutenant, do you have that latest update ready?"

"Yes captain." she replied, "Though it will take some time for a drone to reach Centaur with it."

"I understand that lieutenant. However, until we've gained access to the Verne tachyon satellite system it's the only choice we have. We'll launch the drone right before we jump."

"Ready for atmospheric insertion now captain." the *Grey Dawn's* helmsman announced.

"What's the nearest Verne ship to us?" Martins asked, glancing at the nearby sensor technician.

"There's a corvette sixteen thousand kilometres from our current position. There are also several gunships in close proximity to it. They are firing at one another."

"Very well. Weapons stand by just in case they decide to target us. Helm, take us in." Martins ordered and as the *Grey Dawn* began to reorientate to enter Verne's atmosphere he activated the intercom, "Stand by for atmospheric insertion. Drop will take place at twenty thousand metres."

The *Grey Dawn* began to descend slowly from its orbital position and it entered the uppermost layer of Verne's atmosphere while still over the ocean. This was the point at which the ship was most vulnerable, there was no hiding the scout ship's presence while its hull was heating up to thousands of degrees from friction against the air flowing across it. Fortunately for the ship and its crew although almost the entire Verne fleet was deployed none of them seemed interested in one small vessel suddenly entering the atmosphere on a seemingly innocent heading. Rather than have the *Grey Dawn* head directly for the area where Conrad and his team would be deployed Martins had ordered that the ship's heading should give the impression that it would come down somewhere far from either the Verne nation or their base of operations on the secondary continent that was the *Grey Dawn's* ultimate target.

"Now at eighty kilometres." the helmsman announced, "We're in the atmosphere."

"Adjust heading towards drop zone." Martins ordered, "What's the status on the Verne ship?"

"I've got a cutter moving towards us. We have attracted some attention." the sensor technician replied.

"That's probably not a threat to us." Martins said, "I doubt that AI is stupid enough to try firing at us with an anti-matter based weapon while we're in the atmosphere and I doubt a cutter has any surface bombardment weapons. Let me know as soon as any atmosphere-capable ships start to take an interest in us."

"Sixty kilometres altitude." the helmsman said, "Four minutes to drop zone."

"Four minutes." Martins announced over the intercom and in the *Grey Dawn's* ventral air lock Conrad and his men all reacted by replacing the oxygen masks connected to the *Grey Dawn's* internal supply that they had been using in the pre-breathing required prior to their high altitude jump with personal oxygen masks that covered their entire faces, pulling insulating hoods up over their heads and then donning lightweight helmets. The soldiers formed a line along the edge of the large hatch set into the floor of the air lock and all reached up to steady themselves on the bright yellow hand rail fixed to the ceiling above them.

"Three minutes." Martins' voice announced soon after and Conrad and his men continued to stand silently in the air lock, "Two minutes."

"Switch on internal oxygen." Conrad ordered and his men all activated their oxygen masks, closing off their feeds from the air around them and switching to the supplies provided by the oxygen bottles strapped to the sides of their back packs. These provided only a limited supply of breathable gas but it was more than enough to get them from a jump altitude to the ground several times over.

"Sixty seconds." Martins announced and at that moment the hatch in the air lock floor rumbled open and the compartment was filled with the sound of air rushing past beneath the scout ship.

At an altitude of twenty kilometres it was impossible for the soldiers in the air lock to make out any details on the ground below as they flew over it at a rate of hundreds of kilometres per hour but that did not stop them from looking anyway.

"Ten seconds." Martins said, "Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One."

"Go! Go! Go!" Conrad yelled as he hurled himself out through the open hatch below him. Behind him his men followed in sequence, each man waiting two seconds after the last to also make the jump and soon the entire squad was plummeting towards the ground. Above them the *Grey Dawn* released a pair of countermeasures that burst open to release strips of carbon fibre and flares designed to disrupt radar and thermal detectors.

The effect of these would not prevent an observer using such technologies to search the sky from seeing that the *Grey Dawn* had dropped something but they would help concealing the exact numbers and locations of Conrad's men, shielding them against being fired on as they descended towards the ground.

Inside their oxygen masks Conrad and his men watched the data being projected onto the insides of their faceplates right in front of their eyes. This told them not only what their current altitude was but also whether they were drifting away from their assigned landing zone. When this happened they adjusted the position of their limbs so that they would steer themselves back into the correct area.

The soldiers continued in their free fall for most of the way to the ground and they were at an altitude of less

than a kilometre before they deployed their parachutes. The parachutes were designed to be steerable and the soldiers guided themselves towards gaps in the trees covering the ground below them. The tree cover was so dense in this region that even when the parachutists managed to land themselves in clearings their parachutes tended to fall into the trees where they became entangled.

"Forget them." Conrad ordered when he saw two of his men trying to clear their parachutes from trees so that they could be hidden, "The chutes are clean and we need to get going."

"Movement!" another soldier called out suddenly and there was the sound of a single shot as he fired his rifle into the trees. There was a brief cry from the direction the soldier had just fired in and then he fired a second shot as Conrad was running towards him with his own rifle now unslung from his parachute harness and ready to use.

"What did you see?" he asked the soldier who had just fired.

"Two targets. Human I think." the soldier replied.

"What do you mean 'you think'?" Conrad asked.

"They looked to have two arms and legs but they moved in an odd way." the soldier answered and Conrad nodded.

"Perhaps one of the locals. Lead the way." he said and then he waved his men forwards, "Advance with us. Let's see what we've got here."

The soldiers moved cautiously into the forest, watching not only around them but also above just in case there was danger lurking up in the trees themselves.

"Here's the first one." the soldier who had fired into the forest said as he came across a body. As he had described it, it had two arms and two legs in the same arrangement as a human being and its face was laid out in a similar manner. However, the individual who had been shot had obviously undergone severe genetic and surgical modification to change them into the creature that Conrad and his men found themselves looking at now. Most obvious was the layer of dark fur that covered all of the body that was visible while the fingernails had grown longer and curved to resemble claws. Human facial features were all still present but had also been changed, with the nostrils becoming wider to improve the sense of smell and the canine teeth having been extended to about double the length of the adjacent incisors.

"Ferals." Conrad said, looking around for any further signs of movement, "If we've got two here then there'll be more of them pretty close by. Probably close enough to have heard gunfire."

"This one's the same sir." one of Conrad's men said as he walked over to where the second body lay and found that it too had been modified to take on the appearance of a wild animal. This modification was what set the groups of humans known as ferals apart from other anti-technology groups. Whereas others would simply abandon modern technology in favour of more basic forms, ferals had their own bodies modified in the belief that this would allow them to live more in tune with nature. Often these modifications were carried out at a genetic level and would be carried on to further generations. The problem for those wishing to follow such a lifestyle was that the required surgery was not available in any Commonwealth nation and so they were instead forced to seek out nations such as Verne, where the same scientific developments that the ferals wished to abandon were allowed to advance with far fewer restrictions.

"Everyone keep an eye out for more." Conrad ordered, "Remember to check the trees for any more arboreal types and bodies of water for gill breathers."

"What do we do if we encounter any?" one of his men asked.

"Shoot to kill." Conrad replied. Then he checked the navigational device strapped to his wrist to confirm which direction their target lay in and started to move.

Driving along Highway Seven, all of the traffic that Boucher and Smith encountered was travelling the same way as they were. The injured policeman had lost consciousness and the car was quiet as neither of the other two law enforcement agents spoke as they continued towards the military base that they hoped would offer them sanctuary from whatever disaster had befallen Verne. That was until Smith spotted a small group of people standing at the side of the highway waving their arms, apparently trying to flag down a passing vehicle. None of the other drivers seemed willing to take the risk on pulling over, however Smith noticed that one of the group of three people appeared to be a child too young to have the implants that would make her vulnerable to whatever was taking control of the Verne. Then he realised that he knew one of the two men standing with her.

"It's Gruber." he said, pointing and Boucher looked at the group as well.

"Pull over." she said and when Smith pulled the police car over to the side of the highway she opened the door and got out, "Professor Gruber!" she called out, waving back at him.

"Inspector Boucher." Gruber responded as he, his bodyguard and the girl rushed towards the car, "I never expected to see you here. What are you doing in a police car?"

"We acquired it after hearing the transmission telling us about the corruption to the Verne implants. How did you get here?"

"I was on a train. My bodyguard here was isolated from wireless networks and this young lady lacks any

implants." Gruber said while he and the others were getting into the police car. The bodyguard got into the vacant front passenger seat while Gruber and the girl squeezed into the back with Boucher and the unconscious policeman, "Is he okay?" Gruber asked when he saw the policeman.

"I think he'll be fine if we can get him to a proper medical facility." Boucher replied, "He and his partner were attacked by a mob."

"Sounds like what happened to us on the train." the bodyguard said, "We've been walking across country since we heard Colonel Dator's message."

"I didn't think anyone was going to stop for us." the young girl added.

"It's still more than twenty kilometres to Fort Herman Kahn." the bodyguard commented, "That was going to be a long walk."

"You know where it is?" Smith asked, "All we knew was that it's somewhere along this highway."

"We managed to get a map." Gruber commented before there was a roaring sound from overhead as a pair of atmospheric fighter craft flew over the highway, heading towards the military base that the police car's occupants were heading for.

"I don't like the look of that." Smith commented moments before each of the fighter craft unleashed a pair of missiles, one from under each wing. The missiles vanished over the horizon before there were the flashes of detonations.

"Has the base been destroyed?" the girl asked in fear, worried that there was nowhere left for them to take sanctuary. However, moments later there were more flashes from over the horizon as a pair of missiles flew back over it and the fighter craft veered off, ejecting countermeasures as they sought to escape. One of the missiles turned to track the cloud of chaff before ploughing into the ground several hundred metres from the highway and exploding harmlessly but the second retained its lock on one of the fighter craft and exploded close enough to it that one of its wings was torn off completely and the pilot was forced to eject as his craft spiralled out of control before exploding as it crashed into the ground.

The surviving fighter craft continued its turn until it was facing directly away from the base it had just attacked and flew off, leaving the ejected pilot to be recovered later as its own pilot sought to escape before another surface to air missile could be launched.

"I'd say that that means the base is still intact." the bodyguard said and then he looked at Smith, "Put your foot down." he added.

"I'd rather not cause an accident if I can help it." Smith replied but the bodyguard just grinned.

"This is a cop car. Use the damn siren." he said.

15.

The *Warspite* dropped to sub light speed above Verne's northern polar region. As intended this placed the cruiser out of the main engagement zone above the equator but gave it a clear view of the ships and orbital facilities involved in the fighting. The two forces appeared to have adopted radically different fighting styles with the larger group employing all of the weapons at its disposal while the smaller one appeared to have adopted a much more defensive posture, firing only a handful of volleys at the opposing warships while concentrating on evading the incoming fire and shooting down missiles heading towards them.

"Captain Oswald I hope you've figured out what you're going to say because now's your time." Reeves said and Oswald lifted a communication handset to his mouth, being used to using his own wireless communication implant to interface with his ship he paused for a moment to make sure he had turned it on properly before he spoke.

"This is Captain Oswald of the *Meredith Thring* aboard the Commonwealth heavy cruiser *Warspite*. My ship was destroyed after I was ordered to attack this vessel and the survivors have been brought aboard. I now suspect that the order to attack was given by members of the government under the influence of the corruption being spread over our wireless networks. The crew of the *Warspite* believe that they know the cause of this corruption and are willing to help put a stop to it. I ask all ships that have not yet succumbed to rendezvous with the *Warspite* beyond the moon Clarke. If you have reserves of gravitons then use these to get there as quickly as you can, the *Warspite* can replenish stocks of these from its own generation capacity. This is Captain Oswald signing off."

"Captain we've got incoming. Multiple missiles from three different ships." Goldman announced.

"It was to be expected I suppose." Knight said, "All turrets, defensive fire."

"Helm are we ready to move to Clarke?" Reeves asked.

"Ready whenever you give the order captain." Ash answered.

"Go." Reeves said and Ash brought the *Warspite's* main engines to full power, accelerating towards the largest of Verne's moons. The missiles launched against the cruiser turned to follow but as the *Warspite* flew past them its turrets unleashed a barrage of defensive fire that intercepted all of them before they could get close enough to pose a risk.

At the same time as the *Warspite* sped towards Clarke the Verne ships that had appeared to be avoiding firing on the other side as much as possible also turned away from their own planet and towards the moon, following the Commonwealth cruiser towards it. The largest of these, a frigate and a destroyer both had adequate stocks of gravitons to be able to nullify the effects of extreme acceleration on their crews and used these to keep pace with the *Warspite*. Some of the smaller vessels also had enough gravitons to keep up but there were more ships that did not and these formed an irregularly spaced line as they hurried to escape as quickly as they could without incapacitating their crews.

"*Warspite* this is the *Daniel Bell*, the corvette *Karel Capek* is following you. This ship has been affected by the corrupt update. Recommend you destroy it before it can attack."

"I've got a transponders for both ships captain. Both are corvettes." Lucas said and then she nodded, "I'm picking up transmissions that match the profile of the alien AI from the *Karel Capek*. Range seventy-five thousand kilometres."

"X-ray lasers, acquire and engage." Reeves ordered and the *Warspite's* two medium turrets turned to track the AI controlled corvette that was attempting to blend in with the vessels following the heavy cruiser. The two turrets fired one after the other and the beams from both struck the one hundred and eighty metre long corvette. The *Warspite's* X-ray lasers were designed to be able to deal with vessels the size of frigates or destroyers and the smaller corvette stood little chance of surviving two direct hits. The beams from both burned all the way through the corvette in moments and there was a brilliant flash of light as it exploded from the inside, leaving just a cloud of tiny debris hurtling through space in its place.

"Lieutenant I want you to examine the emissions from every ship following us." Reeves told Lucas, "Any that show signs of being under control of the AI are to be destroyed without warning."

"What about the crews aboard those vessels Captain Reeves?" Oswald asked, "The *Karel Capek* had more than eighty people aboard it and you just ordered them all killed."

"And we have almost nine hundred aboard this ship to think about captain." Knight said.

"Captain I've got something interesting here." Cortez said suddenly and Reeves looked towards her."

"What's that petty officer?" he asked.

"There's another ship in orbit around Verne that looks like it's trying to stay away from the fighting and is staying dark." Cortez told him.

"Sounds like a sensible thing to do to me." Thomas commented.

"A civilian ship?" Knight suggested.

"No sir, I don't think so. I'm picking up a handful of civilian ships but they're all heading away from Verne as

fast as they can. This one's staying close and it's not far from the source of that signal." Cortez said, "It was just passing behind the horizon when we caught it."

"Lieutenant Lucas, see what you can make of it." Reeves said, turning towards his intelligence officer and she called up the sensor data on her console.

"Captain I think you ought to see this." she said rapidly and she sent a copy of the data to both Reeves' and Knight's consoles along with a second sensor profile that had been recorded approximately a year earlier in the Epsilon Pavonis system where the Sissusk home world was located.

"That's that ship that was following us through Sissusk space." Knight said when he saw this.

"Is it the exact same vessel lieutenant?" Reeves asked, "Or just another of the same class?"

"I'm sorry captain, I can't tell for certain. Our scan of the ship in Sissusk space was only a partial one from long range and whatever this one is it's keeping its emissions to a minimum. We've got a silhouette and from the looks of the thermal signature of its hull I think it recently entered the atmosphere for some reason but that's about it for now." Lucas answered.

"For some reason?" Reeves said, "Lieutenant, would you say that the terrain around the signal source is suitable for an insertion via parachute?"

"I don't think it's ideal captain." Lucas replied, "It's densely wooded and uneven but I suppose if you didn't mind leaving your chute tangled up in the trees then it could be doable. Major Willis would know more about it than I do." then an alarm from her console made Lucas look back down at it, "Captain I'm picking up more signals that match the profile of the AI. Looks like a pair of gunships trying to sneak through. Passing their positions to weapons control."

"Targets acquired." one of the *Warspite's* gunners reported, "Firing."

Little more than well armed shuttles, the two gunships could not stand up to the firepower of even the *Warspite's* lightest defensive turrets and both ships exploded one after another as the heavy cruiser's free electron beam lasers sliced through their hulls.

"Any more lieutenant?" Knight asked and Lucas shook her head.

"I don't think so commander." she replied.

"We're picking up signals from all of the other Verne ships heading our way," Goldman added, "so they aren't hiding their identities by running silent."

"How many ships?" Reeves asked.

"Sixteen, no wait, seventeen." Goldman said, "Looks like we've got two capital ships, a frigate and a destroyer. Then there are four corvettes, a monitor and a cutter and nine gunships."

"And the status of the rest of the Verne fleet?" Knight said.

"Their capital ships look largely intact, I'm only reading one destroyer wrecked but there are a number of smaller ships that have been disabled or destroyed." Goldman said.

"So both their cruisers are functional and under the control of the alien AI." Reeves said, "That's going to make things more difficult. Commander Ash take us behind the moon. Goldman I want a drone deployed to keep an eye on what that fleet is up to while we determine exactly what resources we have at our disposal. Captain Oswald would you mind talking to the commanding officer of each of those ships and finding out what they can offer and what they need from us?"

"Captain?" the voice of the *Grey Dawn's* first officer said over the intercom as Martins lay in his bunk trying to get some rest while the ship waited to hear from the shore party.

"Yes?" Martins asked, reaching out to activate the intercom panel beside his bunk.

"Captain we may have a problem." Martins' first officer told him, "The Commonwealth cruiser arrived back in orbit. It didn't stay long, just long enough to broadcast a call to any ships not affected by the AI and then it headed out towards one of Verne's moons with them right behind. Now everything seems quiet."

"So they didn't give any indication of having seen us then?" Martins said.

"That's just it captain, they entered a polar orbit and carried out an active scan. We were just heading over the horizon relative to them at the time but our sensors indicate that they did bounce a radar pulse off our hull. They'll have seen us alright."

"I'm on my way to the bridge now." Martins said before shutting off the intercom and leaping out of his bunk. He rushed to the *Grey Dawn's* bridge, squeezing past other crew members in the corridors on his way there. As soon as he took his seat Martins looked at his console.

"Show me exactly where we were when they scanned us." he said and a diagram appeared that showed the relative positions of the *Grey Dawn* and *Warspite* when the latter had carried out its active sensor scan, "Damn." he hissed as he saw that the *Grey Dawn* would have been caught fully within the radar pulse. Had the curvature of the planet below offered enough cover then the Commonwealth cruiser would have been unable to capture a complete image of the scout ship. However, the scan had been conducted just seconds before the *Grey Dawn* moved beyond the horizon and the ship had been in full view. Even with its systems operating on minimum power, the *Grey Dawn* would have been detected and to make matters worse Martins knew that this was not the first time such a thing had happened. His ship had been detected by the very

same Commonwealth cruiser in the Epsilon Pavonis system and all it would take would be a comparison of the two scan results to show that it was the *Grey Dawn* at both locations, or at least two ships of the same class which would point towards a single origin. The lack of strong energy pulses from the Commonwealth vessel's sensors suggested that they had not attempted to lock onto the *Grey Dawn*, but that was a small mercy compared to having been detected at all.

"Captain the fact that the enemy vessel chose to break orbit rather than coming after us it suggested that we're not what they're interested in right now. They haven't even sent a single drone our way for a closer look" Martins' first officer said.

"Maybe not, but now they have proof we were here. Even Doctor Horst's tampering with records wasn't this obvious." Martins replied, "What's the *High Tide*'s current situation?"

"Unknown. The last we heard from them the spaceport was completely shut down because of fighting." his first officer answered.

"Can you get me Captain O'Neil?" Martins asked.

"We'll have to bounce signals off Verne satellites and the Commonwealth cruiser might pick them up." his first officer said.

"I realise that. But even if that cruiser can pick our transmission out from all the rest around Verne they won't be able to break our encryption any time soon." Martins replied.

"I've got a connection captain." the *Grey Dawn*'s flight operations officer said, "Captain O'Neil on the line for you."

"O'Neil, it's Martins." Martins said.

"What do you want?" O'Neil responded abruptly.

"What's your current situation?" Martins asked.

"Precarious. The fighting was brief and everything's gone quiet now. We're still seeing the odd patrol though and if we try and take off we're bound to attract attention."

"That might not be an issue any more. That Commonwealth cruiser pulled one of the factions away and now the other is just licking its wounds. Take off now and you should be able to make orbit and rendezvous with us. Frankly we may need your help." Martins said.

"Again? What is it now?" O'Neil asked and Martins could not help but picture the *High Tide*'s commanding officer smiling as he said it.

"We've been made by the Commonwealth cruiser. They bounced a radar pulse off us when they were in orbit and sooner or later they're going to realise what we are. I have a team in the target area right now so I can't break orbit and abandon them but your hold is large enough to fit the *Grey Dawn* inside." Martins explained.

"Ah, so you need us as a hiding place." O'Neil said, "Well okay, we'll be on our way in a few minutes. *High Tide* out."

Martins sighed when the channel went dead.

"Something wrong captain?" his first officer asked him.

"I just know that O'Neil's going to use this to claim some of the credit for whatever Conrad and his team manage to recover from the planet." Martins answered, "That means I have to explain to Commander Hayes why she's sharing the glory with Jessop and I'm not relishing that."

A signpost at a highway exit pointed to Fort Herman Kahn and almost as soon as Smith turned down it he was forced to slow down for the traffic he found queueing in front of the police car.

"What's going on?" Gruber asked when he saw the line of vehicles ahead of them.

"Roadblock." his bodyguard told him, leaning out of the car window to look further down the road and he saw flashing yellow lights where a barrier had been set up to stop traffic. In the light cast by these he saw several Verne soldiers standing with their weapons aimed at the vehicles on the road. These troops were not clad in the full powered armour of heavy infantry, instead they were clearly an enhanced infantry unit that made use of a lighter unarmoured exoskeleton that enabled them to move faster and carry heavier loads than an ordinary human. To the Verne armed forces with their particular heavy types of small arms these were extremely useful.

"We could do with getting to that base as soon as possible." Boucher said, checking the pulse of the unconscious policeman, "I don't know how much longer he's going to last."

"Try the siren." the bodyguard said and Smith looked at the dashboard, wondering where the manual control for the police car's siren was located or if it even had one, "Here." the bodyguard added, reaching out and flicking a switch that triggered the flashing red and blue lights that were mounted on the vehicle's roof as well as the siren attached to them, "I was a cop before I transferred to the Ministry of Defence and Security."

The bodyguard turned off the lights and siren after just a few seconds and when he looked along the road again he saw a team of soldiers bounding towards them, using their exoskeletons to cover the distance in as little time as possible before coming to a rapid halt in front of the police car and pointing gauss rifles towards it. The sight of these weapons caused the young girl in the back to gasp and she tried to duck down out of sight.

"Agent Conner. Ministry of Defence and Security." Gruber's bodyguard said as he produced an identity card and handed it to the closest soldier. The card was equipped with an electronic data chip that could be used to verify Cole's identity but in the wake of the alien AI spreading across Verne the soldiers' implants that would have allowed them to read this had been shut down and all they had to rely on was the picture and basic information printed on the card.

The soldier bent down to be able to see inside the car, shining the light mounted on his helmet in through the window and he quickly saw that three of the adults in the car were clearly not Verne.

"Who are the rest of you?" he asked.

"Agent Smith, Interpol."

"Inspector Boucher, Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

"Professor Michael Gruber."

"Professor Gruber works for the Ministry of Science and Technology." Conner added, "My partner and I were assigned to protect him on the way back to his assignment."

"And where's your partner now?" the soldier said.

"Dead." Conner told him, "Killed by a mob of people affected by whatever's taking down our implants."

"Trooper," Gruber said suddenly, leaning forwards in his seat, "I need to speak to your commanding officer as quickly as possible. I think I might know what is going on here."

"Plus this guy needs to get to a doctor quick." Boucher said, pointing to the policeman beside her.

The soldier looked at his comrade and nodded, prompting the second trooper to activate his radio. This was not done via his wireless communication implant however, instead he had a relatively bulky handset connected to his radio that he lifted to his mouth as he passed details of the police car and its occupants to the base ahead.

"Okay you're cleared." he said when the response came through his headphones, "Just go around this lot and use the emergency lights to signal the troops at the barrier."

"Thanks." Smith said and he pulled out of the line of traffic onto the opposite side of the road before accelerating down it with the blue and red lights on top of the police car flashing.

The soldiers manning the barricade that had been erected across the road moved part of this aside when they saw the lights, permitting the police car and its passengers to pass straight through. As they did so they saw that the soldiers were inspecting every vehicle that came to the barricade and speaking with all of the occupants to make sure that no-one affected by the alien AI managed to get as far as Fort Herman Kahn's perimeter fence.

Another unit of soldiers was on duty at the gate itself and they waved the police car through, directing it to a parking area just inside the perimeter fence where an ambulance and medical team were already waiting. In addition to this an officer came hurrying up to the car as Smith brought it to a halt.

"I'm Lieutenant Mallery," the woman announced, "if you'd like to come with me I'll take you to Colonel Dator. The medics will take your casualty and the girl."

"Take me where?" the girl asked, nervously as the occupants of the car began to get out.

"To get something to eat and drink." Mallery replied.

"Go with them, you'll be fine." Boucher told the girl. Then she and the others from the car followed Mallery the short distance to the base's main command centre. Along the way they saw emergency shelters being erected by both soldiers and civilians as the base was configured to house the refugees drawn there by Colonel Dator's message.

With her implants offline, Mallery had to knock on the door to the building she took the group to and moments later a guard stationed just inside opened it to let them in. Upon entering the group found themselves in a building that was a hive of activity as not only the base's own personnel but also other members of the military and civilian government who had been able to avoid having their implants corrupted and then made it to Fort Herman Kahn rushed around as they tried to determine how far the AI corruption was spreading and what resources they had at their disposal to try and combat it.

"The colonel's expecting you." the soldier sat behind a desk positioned right outside a door that was labelled 'Colonel Dator – Base CO' said as Mallery approached him and she knocked on the door.

"Come in." a voice said from the other side and Mallery opened the door to go inside.

"The group from off world is here colonel." she said as the group from the police car entered behind her.

Inside the office they found Colonel Dator himself along with two other officers, one wearing an army uniform very similar to the colonel's and the other in fleet colours. The three men were studying a map on a large wall mounted video screen that showed the nation of Verne in its entirety.

"Ah, excellent." he said, "Which of you is Gruber?"

"I am." Gruber replied, "Michael Gruber, professor of archaeology."

"An archaeologist?" the other army officer said when he heard this, "What can an archaeologist tell us? There was no human settlement on Verne before us."

"Not human, no." Gruber said, "But there was something here a long time ago. Your feral friends found it. They didn't care about the technology it offered but they knew you would and so they offered it to your

government in exchange for certain goods and services they did need.”

“Such as?” the fleet officer asked.

“How should I know? I was just brought in to teach your people how to excavate an archaeological dig site properly.” Gruber answered, “All I know is what we found.”

“Which is what exactly?” Dator said and Gruber glanced at his bodyguard.

“I’m guessing that my non-disclosure agreement doesn’t apply any more so I may as well I suppose. This planet was once home to an advanced alien civilisation. It wasn’t their home world, the remains we found are far too concentrated for that, this was just a colony. But it was a well developed colony with heavy industry present and that’s what your government was interested in. They wanted the technology the aliens possessed and it looked like they were going to get exactly what they wanted. Before I left the dig we’d uncovered what looked like a manufacturing facility that produced particle inductors.”

“Being able to recreate that would solve a major weakness in our military capability.” the fleet officer said, “Especially if the ability to generate gravitons was gained as well.”

“Not to mention the economic boost.” the second army officer added, “We’d no longer have to import any of them.”

“When I left everything was inactive and I didn’t give any permission to start activating anything but the timing is too convenient.” Gruber continued, “We never found out what drove the aliens away from Verne but I’m starting to suspect that whatever is corrupting your implants is it.”

“So we may have a source of our dilemma.” Dator said, “However, with the majority of the fleet and army now under hostile control striking at it is not going to be easy. Not unless we can get some outside help.” and then he looked at Boucher and Smith, “I understand that you arrived on the Commonwealth cruiser that is currently in our system.” he said.

“That’s right colonel,” Boucher answered, “and frankly I’d like to be able to get back aboard it as quickly as possible.”

“We have only a limited idea of what is going on in space,” Dator said, “but not long ago we did pick up a radio broadcast made by a Captain Oswald.”

“The captain of the *Warspite* isn’t called Oswald.” Smith pointed out.

“No, Oswald was the captain of the Verne destroyer *Meredith Thring*. He was ordered to attack the Commonwealth cruiser.” Dator said.

“A suicide mission.” the fleet officer added, “A destroyer against a heavy cruiser? Captain Oswald would have needed to catch the Commonwealth crew asleep to have stood any chance.”

“Which he obviously didn’t.” Oswald continued, “The Commonwealth cruiser crippled our vessel. Fortunately it then took the survivors aboard rather than abandoning them in space. It would also appear that the corruption had not had chance to spread as far as the *Meredith Thring* and when the Commonwealth vessel returned here Captain Oswald broadcast a message offering protection to any of our ships that were still free.”

“Did any take up the offer?” Smith asked.

“We don’t know.” Dator said, “I’m hoping that you can help us find out. We may not have any deep space tracking equipment here but we do have powerful communication equipment that can send a signal to anywhere in the system.”

“Tachyon based?” Gruber asked hopefully but Dator shook his head.

“No, radio and laser only but if that Commonwealth cruiser is still nearby then we should be able to get you in touch with it and you can get it to provide us with the support we need.” he said.

“Colonel, Interpol isn’t in the habit of involving itself in military matters.” Smith said, “I hope you realise that I can’t order Captain Reeves to do anything.”

“Yes I understand that. But I’m hoping that if he knows what we do then he’ll be willing to help.” Dator replied.

“His ship did offer protection to our surviving units after all.” the fleet officer commented.

“I’ll do it.” Boucher said, “At least I’ll tell Captain Reeves that you want to talk to him.”

“Thank you.” Dator said and he got to his feet. Now if you’ll come with me I’ll show you where you can transmit from.”

16.

"Captain I think you ought to hear this." Goldman said as Reeves, Knight and Oswald stood around the central console and took stock of the small fleet now gathered behind the moon Clarke. Goldman had been contacting each of the Verne ships in turn to find out their status and uploading that data into the *Warspite's* computer so that resources could be properly assigned.

"What is it commander?" Reeves asked.

"I've got the captain of the *Marshal McLuhan* on the line." Goldman said and Reeves glanced at Oswald.

"It's a monitor." the Verne captain said.

"He says that his crew have a prisoner sir." Goldman added.

"You mean someone affect by the AI?" Knight said.

"I believe so sir. One of their crew." Goldman replied.

"Put him through." Reeves said and then when he saw that the communication speaker at the central console was active he added, "This is Captain Reeves of the Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite*."

"Lieutenant Trainor, commanding officer of the *Marshal McLuhan*." a voice responded, "Captain we have something here that could well be important."

"Yes, I understand you have a prisoner." Reeves said.

"That's right captain. One of my crewmen started behaving oddly after connecting to an external communications network. He was caught trying to upload data to our computer system so we detained him while my engineer took our network off line while he tried to determine how successful he'd been. That's how we managed to escape the corrupted update. I'm sure you'll agree that this presents us with the opportunity to study what we're up against but our facilities are limited so I'd like to suggest that we transfer him to your ship."

"Captain we've never had the opportunity to study the actions of the alien AI in an controlled environment." Lucas pointed out.

"Plus unless we're going to leave the inhabitants of this planet quarantined here for the rest of their lives we need to find a way of undoing the damage." Knight added.

"See to the transfer commander." Reeves replied, "Liaise with Commander Bernard and Doctor Thundercloud. They'll both need to take a look at how this AI operates."

"Yes captain." Knight replied, nodding before he left the bridge.

"Lieutenant Trainor," Reeves said, returning to the conversation with the Verne officer, "my first officer is organising things at our end. Is your ship equipped with a shuttle?"

"A small one captain, just enough room for four people including the pilot." Trainor told him.

"In that case we'll send one of ours and a marine detachment over to collect him as soon as we're ready." Reeves said.

"Agreed captain." Trainor said and then he closed the channel.

"Captain I've got another transmission coming in asking for you specifically." one of the *Warspite's* communication technicians said.

"How many of the local commanders know who you are?" Thomas commented.

"Actually it's Inspector Boucher." the communication technician said, "She's calling from the surface of Verne and the signal is being relayed by our drone."

"Put her through." Reeves said and the technician nodded.

"Captain Reeves?" Boucher's voice asked.

"Yes inspector, where are you?" Reeves responded.

"A Verne military base called Fort Herman Kahn. Agent Smith is with me as well." Boucher answered, "When things started to go crazy here we saw a broadcast from a Colonel Dator."

"We picked up the same message inspector. Is your position secure?"

"For now at least, though I saw a couple of aircraft attempting a missile strike. Look captain, I've got Colonel Dator here and he wants to speak with you." Boucher said.

"Of course, put him on." Reeves said.

"Captain Reeves, I'm Colonel Dator." the colonel said.

"Hello colonel, how are things down there?" Reeves asked him.

"Right now we've not seen much in the way of attempts to take our position. As Inspector Boucher told you there have been some limited air attacks but our defences are holding for now. I've got my people doing everything they can to fortify our position but if we come under serious attack I don't see us being able to hold out for more than a few hours. I've got one regiment of enhanced infantry plus some light infantry units that are being put together from the refugees arriving here. The problem with them is that most have only civilian arms and nothing in the way of armour. Plus we're trying to defend a fixed position in the face of an enemy that has orbital supremacy at the moment. They could drop projectiles on us from space and there's

not a thing we could do to stop them.” Dator explained.

“Colonel from what we know of what’s corrupting your systems I don’t think that you need to worry about an orbital bombardment. We believe it’s an alien artificial intelligence that we’ve encountered before. Then it was interested in gathering slaves so I’d expect the forces under its control to use methods of attack that would preserve as many of your people as captives as possible. Flattening your base from orbit would be counter productive.” Reeves said.

“I’m not sure whether or not I should be reassured by that captain.” Dator said, “Though you’re the second person I’ve spoken to today that’s said this corruption has an alien origin.”

“Really? Who was the first?” Reeves asked, wondering who on Verne would be able to recognise the AI as being alien in origin.

“I have an archaeologist here called Professor Gruber. He claims that my government hired him to oversee the excavation of alien ruins in the territory controlled by the ferals who inhabit-”

“Excuse me colonel,” Reeves interrupted, “but would this be Professor Michael Gruber?”

“Yes. Do you know him?”

“Not really. But I and some of my crew met him at a dinner given by your Ministry of Defence and Security. We considered it odd that your government would have need of man of his qualifications. What information has he been able to give you about his activities on Verne?” Reeves said.

“He is the leader of a scientific team that has been excavating the remains of an alien settlement. He believes that it was just a colony but that it possessed a high level of technical development. That’s what the government wanted.” Dator answered.

“I’d like to speak with Professor Gruber in person. If we’re going to get this situation under control then we’re probably going to have to send a force into these ruins and they’ll need all the information on the layout they can get. Plus I need to arrange to evacuate Inspector Boucher and Agent Smith. They’re citizens of a Commonwealth member nation and my mission here is to protect them.” Reeves said.

“I don’t have any space capable craft here captain and even if I did I don’t see a shuttle getting by the ships in orbit.”

“Yes, I understand colonel. We’re working on organising the ships here with us into a proper force. As soon as we’re done we’ll move to secure an orbital position from where we can relieve you and support an assault on the ruins. In the meantime it would help if we had some detailed information on Verne’s surface and orbital defences. It won’t do us any good to secure space only to be shot down from the ground.”

Dator hesitated. What Reeves was asking him to do, handing over the details of Verne’s defences, technically amounted to treason and could see him not only stripped of his commission but also imprisoned for the rest of his life. On the other hand, Dator thought to himself, the *Warspite* and its crew were currently doing more to try and protect Verne and its people than the government he had sworn to serve.

“I’ll see what I can find for you captain. But some of our defence systems are mobile. I can’t give you the exact deployment of those.”

“Whatever you have is better than nothing colonel. While you’re working on that one of your ships that escaped has managed to detain someone affected by this AI system. My medical and engineering staff will be looking into how we may be able to undo the damage. *Warspite* out.”

As soon as the light above the hatch leading to the *Warspite*’s aft hangar indicated that it was fully pressurised Knight reached out to open it before he, Bernard, Thundercloud and Doctor Chan rushed through to meet the marine fire team now unloading the prisoner brought aboard from the *Marshal McLuhan*. A full squad of eight marines had been sent to handle the transfer and now four of them were carrying the prisoner on a stretcher that he had been strapped to while the other four kept watch on him. For now at least the man was motionless and initially Thundercloud suspected that he had been sedated to keep him under control. However, as he got closer he saw that the man still conscious and staring straight upwards.

Following behind the *Warspite*’s marines came a man in a Verne uniform who had come from the *Marshal McLuhan* as well and Thundercloud spoke to him as he leant over the prisoner and looked into his eyes.

“How long has he been like this?” Thundercloud asked.

“Since just after he was placed in restraints.” the Verne crewman replied, “He resisted being arrested violently and made some effort to escape being confined but it’s as if he just gave up as soon as he realised he wasn’t going anywhere.”

“Are his implants still functioning?” Doctor Chan asked.

“We disabled his wireless communication implant but the rest are still functioning.”

“Probably a good idea.” Bernard commented, “We don’t what effect having them all shut down suddenly will have.”

“So how do you want to start doctor?” Knight asked.

“We get him to the infirmary.” Thundercloud answered, “Normally I’d want to do an MRI to study his brain activity. But with all these implants in his body that’s out of the question. The magnetic field would rip them all out.”

"We normally use the implants themselves for medical diagnosis but in the absence of that we make do with ultrasound tissue scans and high resolution passive EM scans to detect nerve activity." Chan said and Thundercloud nodded.

"Yes, fortunately the *Warspite's* infirmary is designed to treat any possible patient or injury. We have that equipment as well even if we don't have much call to use it." he said and then he looked at the leader of the marine squad, "Let's get this man to the infirmary at once." he ordered.

The marines carried the catatonic prisoner to the *Warspite's* infirmary, placing him on a bed in an isolation room as indicated by Doctor Thundercloud.

"Nurse." he called out as he hurried through the infirmary, "We'll need a portable ultrasound unit and an EM scanner."

While the equipment Thundercloud had requested was being brought into the isolation room he and Doctor Chan began to examine the prisoner more closely while the other officers and marines present gave him room to work.

"His left eye is artificial." Chan said when he saw the way the prisoner reacted to having a light shone into his eyes. The right eye turned away from the light whereas the left remained stationary, "May I look closer?"

"Be my guest. I've not much experience with prosthetic eyes." Thundercloud replied. Then he glanced over his shoulder and looked at Bernard, "Perhaps you ought to take a look at this." he said.

"Of course." Bernard said, stepping forwards and watching as Chan gently pressed his finger against the prisoner's left eye.

"Doesn't that hurt him?" Knight asked.

"No." Chan answered, "As part of the procedure for replacing an eye with a device of this type the nerves behind the eyeball are removed as well. It is necessary to be able to press down on the prosthetic in order to release it." and then there was a soft 'click' and the prisoner's artificial eye popped up out of the socket, causing the *Warspite's* officers to flinch. On the other hand Chan smiled as he slid the device out entirely, leaving behind it an empty mounting that took the place of the eye socket itself, "This is high quality." Chan said as he looked at the cybernetic eye in his hand, "Most such things aren't designed to look real. It's not considered that important to our society."

"Doctor here is the equipment you asked for." a member of Thundercloud's staff said as scanning equipment was wheeled into the isolation room and pushed towards the bed where the prisoner lay.

"Ah, excellent. Maybe now we can see what's going on inside this man's head." Thundercloud said as the scanning equipment was activated and he reached out for the wand attached to the ultrasound scanner and a tube of lubricating fluid, "We'll need to release his restraints." he said.

"Are you sure that's wise doctor?" Knight asked, "We were told he was violent before being restrained.

"I need to get at the back of his head as well as the sides." Thundercloud said and Knight nodded and looked at the marines.

"I can't sedate him if I want to monitor his brain activity. Hold him steady." he ordered.

The marines took hold of the prisoner, pinning his arms and legs to the stretcher as the straps holding him down were undone. The moment the last of these was released the prisoner let out a sudden scream and began to try and break free of the marines' grasp. However, against four marines he was unable to escape.

"Someone help me with his head." Chan said, reaching out grab hold of the man's head and Bernard jumped forwards to join him.

With the prisoner now held perfectly still Thundercloud squeezed out some of the lubricant onto the exposed skin at the back and sides of his head before pressing the scanning wand against his left temple. As Thundercloud slowly moved the wand around the prisoner's head the scanner began to construct a three dimensional model of it, marking out the skull, soft tissue and metallic implants in bright contrasting colours.

"Impressive." Bernard commented when he glanced at the display, "I can see wiring going deep into the brain."

"Deeper than anything we'd attempt." Thundercloud added.

"We've had more than a century to perfect the techniques required for full mind and machine interface."

Doctor Chan said, smiling proudly.

"And a fat lot of good it's done you." one of the marines holding the prisoner muttered and the Verne doctor scowled at him.

"Okay now let's take a look at his brain activity." Thundercloud said, returning the ultrasound wand to the scanner and then transferring the results of the scan to the infirmary's main computer.

Unlike the ultrasound scanner that was an active sensor system, the second medical scanner was a passive device and Thundercloud fixed several self adhesive patches to the prisoner's head before connecting the sensor elements to these and starting the scan process. With this depending entirely on sensors now in positions that were fixed in relation to one another there was no need to keep the prisoner's head still and Bernard and Chan let go and stepped back to look at the scanner's display as the data began to flow into it. Each sensor element told the scanner the strength and direction of each electromagnetic impulse that it detected and by comparing all of these individual data streams the scanner was able to build up a picture of

the activity within the prisoner's brain while filtering out all external interference.

"What are we seeing here?" Knight asked.

Whereas the ultrasound scanner had produced a single three dimensional image of the prisoner's head the EM scanner created multiple images to illustrate the heat and electrical activity within different parts of his brain.

"There's a lot of activity in the motor centres of the brain." Chan said and Bernard glanced back at the struggling prisoner.

"You don't say." he said.

"Not much else though." Thundercloud added, "For someone who is very much wide awake there appears to be minimal brain activity."

"The implants are heating up though." Bernard pointed out, "Is that normal?"

"No." Chan replied, shaking his head, "By necessity the implants we use are designed for very low power operation. The technology is capable of far more than it's used for of course but to avoid damaging the surrounding brain tissue they are not pushed to anywhere near their limits. I'd say these are operating at their full processing speed and capacity."

"So the extra current being drawn is causing the abnormal heating effect." Bernard said and Chan nodded.

"So if the implants are what is causing this behaviour, what happens if we just shut them all down?" Knight asked.

"Is the memory in the implants non-volatile?" Bernard added, looking at Chan and the Verne doctor nodded again.

"Yes. They have to be battery powered and if the battery runs down or develops a fault the implants need to retain their configuration." he explained.

"In that case just rebooting them won't clear the corruption." Bernard said, "In fact I don't see a way of reactivating them at all, even to try and clear the problem. Either the implants need to be removed or we need a method of purging them while they are still active."

"We should also be wary of shutting down any particular implant while it is communicating with any of the biological parts of the subject's brain." Chan added, "If the subject's own biological brain cannot take over the affected functions he could go into cardiac arrest."

"The subject?" Thundercloud commented, "Just in case you've forgotten we are talking about a person here. One of your own people in fact and given that he is a prisoner of war he has certain rights. One of which is not to be used as a mere subject to be experimented on."

"This is treatment doctor. Not experimentation." Chan said.

"An untested treatment on a man who is unable to give his consent." Thundercloud said sternly, "As chief medical officer aboard this ship I cannot permit it."

"Doctor Thundercloud is right." Knight said, "Unless this man's condition changes and emergency medical intervention is needed to save his life we can't just go around interfering with his brain. Fortunately there is someone who can give us the permission we need."

"His commanding officer." Bernard said.

"Exactly. Captain Reeves as well. Providing both are in agreement that it is in the best interests of the prisoner to try and shut down his implants then we can proceed. Doctor Thundercloud, I expect that the captain will want a full report from you on the likelihood of success and the risks involved. Will that be sufficient for you?" Knight said.

"Yes, if his own captain is agreement as well then I'll allow the treatment. Though I'm not sure how I'm supposed to assess the risks." Thundercloud said.

"Just do your best doctor." knight told him.

The control tower remained silent as the *High Tide* lifted off from the surface of Verne. Lacking the lifting surfaces smaller atmosphere-capable craft possessed the freighter used its manoeuvring engines to rise up vertically until it was high enough above the ground that its helmsman could bring the main acceleration drive on line and the vessel began to rapidly gain altitude.

"Are there any challenges or signs of pursuit?" O'Neil asked.

"Negative captain." his flight operations officer replied, "They don't appear interested in us at all."

"And why should they be?" O'Neil said, "As far as they're concerned we're just an ordinary transport that doesn't even have true FTL."

"We'll reach orbit in two minutes captain." the helmsman reported.

"How long to rendezvous with the *Grey Dawn*?" O'Neil said.

"At full burn we can be there in another two minutes." the helmsman said.

"No, full burn will show that we're in a hurry to get there. Put us into an orbit that will connect with the *Grey Dawn's* while we're in Verne's shadow when viewed by those warships."

"Captain we're being scanned. Active lidar and tadar." the operations officer said suddenly.

"Source?" O'Neil asked.

"There's a Verne corvette moving to head us off. We can still make low orbit before interception."

"That's good enough. The only reason to use active radar at this short range is to look for an active particle inductor and we don't have one. Hopefully when they see this they'll give up and leave us alone for the time being."

"Captain they've stopped scanning us and are breaking off." the operations officer announced moments later and O'Neil smiled.

"Just as I thought they would." he said, "Mind you it would be interesting to know exactly why they wanted to see if we had a particle inductor. Now how long until our orbit connects with the *Grey Dawn*?"

"Twenty minutes captain. We'll be over the horizon from the Verne warships in sixteen." the helmsman said.

"Very good. Someone let the hold know to expect to take on cargo during flight." O'Neil responded, smiling at the thought of Martins having to take orders from him while the *Grey Dawn* was docked inside the *High Tide*'s cargo hold.

17.

Lucas stood between Reeves, Thomas and Shaw at the central console as they planned the best way of approaching Verne, Captain Oswald standing opposite them to offer what advice he could. The drone positioned to be able to see over the lunar horizon not only permitted communication with the surface, it also provided the crew of the *Warspite* with sensor data regarding the deployment of the subverted Verne fleet in near real time. In an obvious effort to protect not only the nation of Verne but also the location of the alien ruins that were the source of the AI on the planet the fleet had spread itself out into a line that stretched from above the city of Jules Verne to above the source of the signal that had alerted the *Warspite* to the existence of the AI in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -67° 3703 system. The line was anchored at each end by one of Verne's two light cruisers with the space between them being filled with the remaining frigate and destroyers from where they could protect the entire route between Verne and the signal source. The smaller ships of the fleet, now numbering eight corvettes, six cutters and a pair of monitors in addition to just over twenty gunships were gathered around the space station that served as the fleet's headquarters where they were ready to rush to support any part of the main defensive line that came under attack while still being able to return to the station to refuel should they need to.

"Striking at the end of the line looks like the most logical strategy." Reeves said and Thomas nodded.

"If we can time our attack to when the moon we're using for cover is about to pass over the horizon from them then we can keep ourselves sheltered from all but the nearest light cruiser can fire on us."

"From what we've seen those light cruisers don't come close to being a match for us." Lucas added, "Though they do have a number of defensive turrets so I'd recommend using our main guns and X-ray lasers to take out the first and save our missiles for the destroyers. That station and the smaller ships still concern me though." and she looked at Oswald, "What's your impression of your people's willingness to fire on their own ships captain?" she asked, "That first engagement we witnessed suggested that they were somewhat hesitant."

"No-one wants to be Cain and kill his brother." Reeves added, recalling the Biblical story of the first murder that he had learned of from his father.

"Myths aside I've managed to speak to several of the commanding officers captain and I think you can count on them to fight now that they understand what is happening." Oswald replied.

"Perhaps we should just come out and give them the option of sitting this out." Shaw suggested, "If they don't think they can fire on their own ships then have them tell us that ahead of time."

"I'd rather go into battle with a smaller force we can count on than a larger one where half the ships don't do what I'm expecting them to." Thomas said in agreement.

"How do you think they'll take that Captain Oswald?" Reeves asked, "Will they be glad of the choice or take offence at us suggesting they won't fight?"

"I don't think they'll take offence captain. At least not if I ask them." Oswald said.

"And what about your own crew?" Thomas said, "We've got almost a hundred of your men down in our hold. That's enough to crew some of those other ships if their existing crews aren't up to it."

"We were trying to kill one another just a few hours ago." Shaw commented, "Even if we did save your live afterwards."

Oswald nodded.

"My crew will fight." he said, "That AI sent us on a suicide mission. They want payback. The marines I'm not so sure about, it was my idea to try boarding your ship."

"We shouldn't need marines in this engagement anyway." Reeves said.

"Captain there's activity from the enemy fleet." Goldman announced suddenly and Reeves looked down at the central console.

"Show me." he said and he saw one of the Verne corvettes breaking formation from around the space dock as it headed towards another contact, "What's going on there?"

"It looks like that freighter's trying to escape." Shaw said.

"The Verne corvette has just lit up its active sensors captain." Cortez reported, "Lidar and tadar."

"Tadar?" Oswald commented, "They're using up their tachyon supplies on a freighter that's right in front of them?"

"They must be searching for an active particle inductor." Lucas said, "The interaction of the charged tachyons would-"

"Why would they be interested in a particle inductor?" Oswald interrupted.

"The last time we encountered this AI it used ships with particle inductors to construct large scale tachyon transit devices." Reeves said, "In fact we think that there's a crashed example of one on that moon we were orbiting when you were ordered to attack us. We left a team of robots there trying to unearth it."

"No particle inductor, no use in building the gate. That at least makes your ships useless to them in that

regard." Thomas added.

"Commercial ships that come here tend not to have particle inductors either captain." Oswald said. "The reports I've seen indicate that many shipping companies are concerned about us seizing their vessel to gain control of them."

"Denton would have been sitting on a fortune from his if he'd made it here without being gassed." Shaw said and Oswald frowned.

"I don't get it." he said.

"The industrialist Howard Denton was coming here before he was murdered." Reeves said.

"Captain that freighter looks familiar." Lucas said and she hurried back to her own console and called up an earlier sensor record, "Yes, it's the same ship that was carrying tachyons and gravitons when it arrived."

"Did you ever get a positive ID on that ship lieutenant?" Reeves asked.

"No captain. Its transponder identifies it as the *High Tide* but I've not been able to narrow down a port of registry."

"The corvette is returning to station captain." Cortez said.

"That much is obvious petty officer." Reeves replied as he watched the corvette turn and reverse its heading while the freighter continued up into space.

"Freighter has stopped accelerating." Cortez said.

"Now that is interesting." Reeves said, "I can understand why the crew of that ship would risk being shot down to try and get away from Verne but I would have expected them to try and get further away than a low orbit. Is there anything else around there that might be relevant?"

"Captain that's about the same orbital altitude as that mysterious scout ship that's been following us around." Goldman said and Reeves looked at her.

"Does the freighter's course intersect with the scout?" he asked.

"If neither changes course at all then they should come within a hundred kilometres of one another captain." Goldman answered, "But they'll be in eclipse behind Verne when it happens so we won't be able to see how they react to one another."

"If that scout's running dark still then it could drift right by a freighter without being seen." Thomas said.

"Launch another drone and have it run silent." Reeves ordered, "Send it in a high arc so it can get past the Verne ships and take a look over the other side of the planet then report back on what it sees."

"Programming course data into drone now captain." Goldman said, "Launch in two minutes." and Reeves nodded.

Just then Knight returned to the bridge along with Doctor Thundercloud.

"Ah gentlemen, you have something to report?" Reeves asked.

"Kind of." Knight replied, "We've hit a bit of a stumbling block and we need your help in getting around it."

"What do you need?" Reeves asked.

"We want to try shutting down the implants of the prisoner brought aboard from the *Marshal McLuhan* to see what effect that has on the AI." Knight said, "The problem is that that could be said to violate treaties regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. By any measure he's not in any state to give his consent and we can't be totally sure of the effects on the prisoner."

"The worst case scenario according to Doctor Chan of the *Meredith Thring* is that he could go into cardiac arrest." Thundercloud added.

"So you want me to give you the go ahead to spare you from being prosecuted as war criminals? You know the phrase 'I was only following orders' is not considered a viable defence?" Reeves said.

"I need your authorisation to contact the captain of the *Marshal McLuhan* captain." Thundercloud said, "As the prisoner's commanding officer he can give us permission to act without an immediate threat to life."

"If this works then we could have a means of breaking the AI's hold over the Verne." Knight said.

"I take it that you've got as far as you can by simply examining the prisoner?" Reeves asked.

"I have." Thundercloud said, "The scans suggest that the prisoner's brain activity is being driven by his implants. The hope is that if these are shut off then his own persona will regain control."

"In that case I'm willing to permit the procedure to go ahead on this ship providing you can secure permission from Lieutenant Trainor of the *Marshall McLuhan*. Carry on doctor." Reeves said.

"Okay this is it." Conrad said softly as he peered through his binoculars at the antenna array hidden among the trees several hundred metres ahead of him. The structure of the array did not even reach as far as the treetops and would have been invisible from the air or in space, "I need a line to the *Grey Dawn*." and he reached out his hand for the handset of the bulky radio set one of his men was carrying, "*Grey Dawn* this is Conrad, do you read me?"

"We read you." Martins' voice responded.

"Is Doctor Horst there?" Conrad asked.

"Right here." Horst replied.

"Doctor we've found what I think is the antenna array that sent that signal." Conrad said, "I've attached my

camera feed to this transmission so you can take a look at it.”

“Excellent Mister Conrad, I see it now. Can you get closer?”

“Just a minute doctor. I'm moving in.” Conrad said and he and his men began to creep forwards, their weapons pointing towards the area of the array just in case it was guarded. Finding no guards or security measures of any form Conrad walked right up to the edge of the antenna array and turned his head so that footage of every part of it could be relayed up to the orbiting *Grey Dawn*.

“It's not tarnished at all.” Horst commented when she saw the footage, “That's not possible if that array has been exposed to the elements for thousands of years. Something must have protected it.”

“The ground looks disturbed around the base.” Conrad said, crouching down and looking at where the nearest of the antennas in the array emerged from the ground. Here it looked as if the ground had been pushed aside to permit the antenna to rise up from a storage silo hidden beneath it.

“Look around.” Horst told him, “I need you to see whether there are any signs of a data interface. Something the Verne have installed to enable them to patch into the array.”

“What are you thinking doctor?” Martins asked as Conrad had his men start to search the area of the array for what Horst had just described.

“I'm thinking that if the Verne patched into this array on the surface then bringing back whatever device they used to do the conversion from their data format to the alien one would give us what we need. Assuming that the device has enough storage capacity of course. Anything less than a full hard drive and I wouldn't expect it to contain enough data for us to go off.”

“There's nothing here doctor.” Conrad reported as his men finished the task of inspecting each of the antennas, “There's not even any indication that whoever built these things plugged anything in here.”

“Then the mechanism must have been located entirely underground.” Horst said.

“We'll check the area.” Conrad said, looking around, “There must have been a doorway around here somewhere to let whoever made this thing come out and fix it if anything jammed or broke.”

“Captain I've got the *High Tide* on approach.” the *Grey Dawn's* sensor technician announced and Martins nodded.

“Understood.” he told Conrad, “Be advised that we're about to carry out docking manoeuvres with the *High Tide*. That Commonwealth cruiser spotted us and though they have bigger things on their plate than us right now we're going to use the freighter as cover for when they aren't so busy.”

The prisoner had been secured face down to the surgical bed, his head held steady to provide the easiest access to his implants and the same scanning equipment that had been used to observe his brain activity had been wheeled in but not connected to him. There were however, more basic devices intended to monitor his breathing and heart rate just in case the deactivation of his implants caused either of these to become disrupted or cease entirely. If this did happen then a full set of resuscitation and life support equipment was also on hand and Doctors Thundercloud and Chan stood ready to intervene. The procedure to shut down the implants was to be carried out by Commander Bernard and as the last of the equipment was being set up he was studying a diagram of the implants' power cell on a tablet.

“Your men did this dozens of times on the crew of the *Meredith Thring*.” Chan said.

“Perhaps. But those were properly functioning implants in people who could communicate their condition.” Bernard replied. Then he smiled and as he put down the tablet next to his tool kit he added, “Besides, I don't normally wear a dress to work.” and then he glanced down at the surgical gown he was wearing.

“We're all set.” Thundercloud said, “Let's get on with this.”

“Okay.” Bernard said as he picked up a tiny screwdriver, “The power cell is spring loaded inside its housing so it'll pop right out as soon as the cover is released. I'm going to hold it down until I'm ready.” Bernard then placed a finger over the power cell cover at the same time as he inserted the screwdriver into the single screw that held the cover closed, “Here goes.” he said and he began to twist the screwdriver.

“Heart rate is increasing.” Doctor Chan said as the monitors connected to the prisoner showed his heart starting to beat faster.

“The AI knows what we're trying to do.” Bernard said, pausing his work.

“Good.” Thundercloud said, “It's worried. Carry on commander.” and Bernard continued twisting the screwdriver until the entire screw came free and he was able to lift it out before dropping it onto the same tray that held his tools.

“Okay here goes.” Bernard said and he lifted his finger away from the cover, allowing it to spring open as the power cell beneath it pushed outwards. Bernard then grasped the end of the power cell as well and quickly pulled it free.

The prisoner let out a sudden gasp and his body shook for a moment before becoming still once again and Bernard looked at the two doctors.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Breathing and heart rate are down.” Chan said.

“I think he's lost consciousness.” Thundercloud said and he bent down to look beneath the surgical bed

where he could see the prisoner's face and as expected the man's eyes were now closed, "Quick, let's get that scanning equipment over here and find out what's going on inside his head."
The ultrasound scanner was brought forwards first and Thundercloud moved the wand over the unconscious prisoner's head.

"All of the implants appear intact." Chan said as he studied the image created by the scan, "The forced shutdown has not caused any physical damage to them."

"Good." Thundercloud replied, "Now let's see what his brain is doing." and while he returned the ultrasound wand to its cradle Doctor Chan was already placing adhesive pads for the EM sensors on the prisoner's head.

"So what's the story doctor?" Bernard asked when the scanner was activated.

"He's unconscious." Thundercloud answered and Bernard frowned.

"I'm an engineer, not a doctor but I can see that." he said.

"I mean that all these readings are normal for a person who is unconscious. As far as I can tell no damage has been inflicted on his brain by being under the control of the AI." Thundercloud explained. Then he looked at Chan and added, "Though given your experience I'll defer to you for your opinion on whether this is how the brain of someone who has had these sorts of implants ought to look."

"For someone asleep or unconscious there is nothing unusual here." Chan said, "The ultimate test will be what happens when he wakes up of course."

"If he wakes up." Thundercloud pointed out, "Do you think it's safe to administer a stimulant and try to kick start the process?"

"A low dose perhaps. Administered by IV line rather than injected in one go." Chan said.

"Okay then, let's get him back into the isolation room and set up the IV." Thundercloud replied.

Watched closely by the marine guards, the prisoner was moved back into the isolation room he had first been examined in and strapped to the bed just in case he remained violent when he woke up. While this was done a bag containing a stimulant intended to be delivered into a patient via an intravenous line was set up beside his bed and connected to his arm just above the elbow.

"So how long will this take to work?" Bernard asked when Thundercloud came walking out of the isolation room.

"I don't know." Thundercloud admitted, "I don't fully understand what we're dealing with here. It could be minutes or perhaps there's damage that we can't detect and he'll never wake up."

"Doctor I think you should get in here." a marine suddenly called out from inside the isolation room.

"Or possibly he could wake up right now." Thundercloud said to Bernard and the pair of them rushed into the isolation room where they found Doctor Chan adjusting the bed to lift the prisoner up into a sitting position while the marines stood with their pistols drawn but still pointing towards the floor.

"Your stimulant looks to have done its job doctor." Chan said as Thundercloud joined him by the prisoner.

"Can you tell me your name?" Thundercloud asked as he shone a light into the prisoner's one eye and watched as it reacted normally to the light.

"Heinrich Bader. What happened? Where am I?" the man said and then he tried to move his arms only to find them secured at the wrists to his bed.

"Don't worry crewman. You're aboard a Commonwealth cruiser and contrary to what you may have been told they are quite friendly." Chan said, glancing at Thundercloud, "What's the last thing you remember before waking up here?"

"I was heading back to my ship in space dock. The *Marshal McLuhan*. I logged onto the station network to check my messages and then-" the man said before he stopped suddenly and frowned, "Then I don't remember anything. What's going on? Why am I tied down?"

Chan stepped back from the bed and looked directly at Bader.

"You fell victim to a piece of malicious software that has spread to the majority of our population crewman." he said, "Under its influence you attempted to sabotage your ship."

"Fortunately your crew mates were able to prevent you from damaging your ship or spreading the program to anyone else and brought you to us." Thundercloud added.

"I don't remember any of that." Bader said and Thundercloud and Chan looked at one another.

"The program must be either placing the victim into a state of deep sleep or somehow preventing memories from forming." Chan said.

"The deep sleep idea may explain why he blacked out as soon as we shut down his implants." Thundercloud replied, "Though at least now we know that simply doing that will cause victims to return to normal."

"Yes but the problem now is how do we shut down the implants of more than fifty million people?" Chan asked.

"I may be able to help there." Bernard said, raising his hand, "Tell me Doctor Chan, how well shielded are the electronics of these implants?"

"With the *Leonardo DaVinci* and *Marshal McLuhan* co-ordinating the firing of their main guns with ours we

should be able to cripple that light cruiser pretty quickly.” Knight said as he reviewed the capabilities of the Verne ships that would be joining in the attack on their former comrades, picking out the frigate and monitor that represented the bulk of the force's direct fire capability. When consulted all of the Verne commanding officers had pledged their vessels to the attack, eager to try and take back their home world. This still left the *Warspite* and its allies outnumbered by the AI controlled ships orbiting Verne but the Commonwealth heavy cruiser carried significantly greater firepower than any of the opposing vessels and the hope was the odds could be further evened by focusing the ship's firepower on one of the enemy's most powerful ships and overwhelming it before it could return fire.

“We'll need to get a lock on those destroyers on the near side of the frigate in the centre before we take out the light cruiser.” Reeves said, “As soon as the cruiser goes down I want to be able to launch three missiles at each. Then we hit the frigate with our guns and switch back to missiles for the rest of the destroyers before going back to guns again to finish off the final light cruiser. That just leaves us with their smaller vessels and the space station to deal with.”

“Do you really think that my nation's force will be so easily overcome Captain Reeves?” Oswald asked.

“Probably not, no.” Reeves replied, “We probably won't destroy all of the ships in the main line with just one pass and those smaller craft could be something of a wild card in all of this. I'm counting on your destroyer *Nicola Tesla* and your smaller ships to hold them off long enough for us to make it along the main line.”

“We'll need to watch for fire from the surface as well.” Lucas pointed out, “The information Colonel Dator has provided to me suggests that Verne has significantly more anti-satellite missiles than our intelligence reports suggested. Most of them are air launched so they might not be loaded onto suitable bombers but the surface launched weapons are probably being deployed now. If we had more atmosphere capable attack craft I'd suggest they be sent to engage these but eleven fighters are likely to be overwhelmed.”

“I'm more worried about the number of drones we're facing outside the atmosphere.” Shaw responded. As the leader of the *Warspite's* fighter squadron she was considered a key part of the planning stage for the assault, “We've seen those things go up like nukes when they're hit.”

“Our lighter guns should focus on them when we emerge.” Knight said and Reeves nodded before noticing Bernard and Thundercloud entering the bridge.

“Doctor, how did the operation go?” he asked.

“A complete success it would seem captain.” Thundercloud replied as he and Bernard joined the other officers around the central console, “Doctor Chan is still with the patient but as far as we can tell he's completely free of the AI's control now that we've shut down his implants.”

“Turning them back on is likely to reactivate the AI though.” Bernard added and Thundercloud nodded in agreement.

“Yes, they'll have to be removed to make sure that it's purged permanently.” he said.

“We need to communicate this to Colonel Dator at once.” Oswald said, “If his men can shut down the implants of other Verne then-”

“There are too many.” Lucas interrupted, “The colonel has fewer than five thousand able bodied people under his command. Even if every one of them managed to shut down the implants of ten other people he'd still only have about a thousandth of your population on his side.”

“We may have an alternative method.” Bernard said as he and Thundercloud exchanged glances, “I think there's a way of shutting down the implants of every single Verne simultaneously.”

“Go on commander.” Reeves said.

“By their nature the implants are physically small,” Bernard began, “and this means that there is very little room for electrical shielding. A sufficiently strong electromagnetic pulse should overload and burn them out. There is sufficient wiring connected to them that they'll act as strong conductors provided the pulse is powerful enough.”

“Whoa.” Thomas said, suddenly looking up from his console when he heard this, “We've only got one way of generating an EMP big enough to cover an entire country.”

“Yes I understand what I'm asking for.” Bernard replied.

“You're asking me to launch an all out nuclear strike on an inhabited planet commander.” Reeves said and all around him the bridge crew turned in his direction.

“Yes captain, but we'll be detonating the warheads in the thermosphere. That's far too high for there to be any physical damage to the surface and the fallout will be negligible.” Bernard said.

“Captain there will be fatalities.” Thundercloud added, “Our patient in the infirmary lost consciousness when his implants were shut down and it's safe to assume that the same will happen to anyone else freed from AI control. That's going to lead to injuries, some of which will be fatal.”

“I doubt that it will be one hundred percent effective either captain.” Lucas added, “The Verne have shelters just like anyone else. Some of them will be protected from the pulse.”

“Yes but we should be able to get enough that Colonel Dator's people will be able to deal with them on their own.” Bernard replied.

“How many warheads are we talking about?” Reeves asked and Bernard and Thundercloud looked at one

another again.

"Obviously we need to be able to cover the whole of the country with a powerful enough pulse to over voltage the Verne implants all at once-" Bernard began.

"Just give me a number commander." Reeves interrupted as the rest of the bridge crew remained silent.

"We'd need MIRV missiles." Bernard told him, "Forty-eight warheads in total."

"Forty-eight five hundred kilotonne warheads?" Knight said, "Captain, Admiral Mitchell went berserk when you used a single fifty megatonne warhead in space just to cover our retreat from that Ticik dreadnought."

"None of this will affect the crews of the enemy ships either captain." Lucas pointed out, "They're far enough above the atmosphere that whatever part of the pulse comes back towards us won't be enough to get through their hull."

"We're going to have to shoot down their fleet before we launch the missile strike anyway. Or at least distract enough of it that they don't just shoot down our missiles in flight." Shaw said.

"Not to mention that once we start hurling nukes around that AI might decide to respond in kind." Ash pointed out.

"Captain Oswald, do any of your ships carry missiles with yields on the scale of nuclear warheads?" Knight asked and Oswald shook his head.

"No, not normally. There is a small stockpile of high yield capable anti-matter warheads kept aboard our space dock. None of our surface based weapons use anti-matter of course, the risk of an accident is too great. We have a small number of nuclear warheads of our own for our surface based missiles, but all of these are regarded as weapons to be held in reserve. Unlike the Commonwealth we don't have a policy of maintaining a first strike capability." he replied.

"Get me Colonel Dator." Reeves said, "He needs to hear this."

"Putting you through now captain." Goldman said and after a short pause the voice of Colonel Dator was heard.

"Captain Reeves," he said, "I hope this call is to tell me that you're ready to begin your offensive. We've been joined by a company of heavy infantry that was on an exercise and isolated from the spread of the AI long enough to receive our warning. They managed to get to us but had to fight their way through a unit of troops that looked to be part of a larger force massing to attack us. Those new troops are a major boost to our fighting strength but they aren't enough to make us invulnerable."

"It's a mix of good news and bad I'm afraid colonel." Reeves replied, "We do have a plan to engage the fleet units orbiting your world and we think we have the means to disable the AI system that is controlling your people but there's a catch."

"Captain if it means liberating my country then we'll find a way to make it work." Dator said.

"Your implants are vulnerable to EMP effects. We need to generate a sufficiently powerful one to disable every implant in your country colonel and we can only do that by detonating multiple nuclear weapons above it. Forty-eight warheads in total, detonated in the thermosphere." Reeves said and when only silence followed for longer than the delay due to the distance radio signals had to travel to get from the *Warspite* to the surface of Verne and back again Reeves began to wonder whether anything had prevented his transmission from reaching the surface, "Colonel did you hear what I-"

"I heard you captain." Dator interrupted, "I just never imagined taking part in a nuclear attack on my own country."

"Trust me colonel, you're not the only one." Oswald commented.

"I can't possibly order this strike without consulting my superiors and I'll need to be able to assure them that you as the effective Verne head of state are in agreement. Even then they may not give me permission. In which case we'll have to find another way to disable all of the affected people's implants." Reeves said.

"Captain if there were any other way then I'm sure that one of us would have thought of it by now." Dator said, "Tell your superiors that I approve of this."

"I will. But if I send this message via a drone then it'll take several days to get a response. Can you release your tachyon satellites to us? Our tachyon transmitter doesn't have the range to reach Gamma Pavonis directly but they do." Reeves said.

"Yes, we have the access codes for them here. I'll have them sent to you as soon as we're done. How long do you think it will take to get a response?"

"I don't see us getting permission to carry out the strike in anything less than five hours colonel." Reeves said, "Admiral Mitchell is unlikely to want to give permission personally so she'll relay the request to the fleet base at Delta Pavonis who will probably pass it on to fleet command at Sol. That's more than two hours for a tachyon transmission in total and even if they decide to give permission right away it'll take the same amount of time for the reply to get back to us."

"Five hours. I suppose that gives us chance to prepare." Dator said.

"Don't hesitate to let us know if the AI sends its forces against you though colonel." Reeves said, "The EMP will be useless against the orbiting fleet units so we'll still have to engage them directly. We can come early if you need support. We may not be able to launch our missiles but our gauss cannons can stop an armoured

division in its tracks.”

“Thank you captain. As part of our preparations for your strike we'll be taking most of our communications off line but I'll keep a channel available for an emergency. Fort Herman Kahn signing off.” Dator said and then the transmission was brought to an end.

“I think we've got our plan. Commander Knight, please make sure that all of the Verne ships are made aware of it and let me know when have access to the Verne tachyon satellites. You have the bridge.” Reeves said.

“Where will you be captain?” Knight responded.

“In my cabin, trying to figure out the best way to ask for permission to use our nuclear arsenal against Verne.” Reeves told him.

"This is it." one of Conrad's men told him, pointing to what he had found as a result of the search for an entry point into the underground complex they knew had to be close by. Conrad had hoped that his men would be able to locate a serviceable hatchway that they would be able to open, even if by force and use to get inside. However, instead the closest his men had found was an indentation in the ground where dirt was packed solid in what looked like it had once been a crevice in the mountainside. In the thousands of years since the subterranean outpost was abandoned this crevice had filled with dirt that had been compacted and almost totally buried what lay within it. Now all that was visible was a corroded metal bar bent so that it connected to the rock at each end to give it the appearance of a single handhold that would once have been part of a ladder leading down the crevice.

Drawing his combat knife, Conrad crouched down and began to scrape at the dirt.

"We've no idea how deep this goes." he said, "Digging it out by hand could take days."

"Yes sir. But what about using explosives?"

"And give away our position? No, I don't think so." Conrad said as he got back to his feet and sheathed his knife again. Then he looked around and held out his hand to the soldier carrying the unit's long range radio set. Knowing what was expected of him the soldier passed Conrad the handset, "Conrad calling *Grey Dawn*." he said into the handset but there was just static in response and so he tried something different instead, "Conrad to *High Tide*." he said, remembering that the *Grey Dawn* was rendezvousing with the freighter.

"This is *High Tide*." a voice unknown to Conrad responded.

"I need to speak to Captain Martins." Conrad said.

"Lieutenant Commander Martins is aboard his ship and we haven't been able to hook up a communication umbilical yet." the voice told him and Conrad noticed the use of Martins' proper rank rather than using the convention of referring to any commanding officer of a starship as 'captain'.

"Then send someone to get him. I need to speak with him." Conrad said.

"That could take a few minutes."

"I'll be waiting." Conrad said, frowning and he abruptly shut off the radio transmitter and turned to his men, "Okay this is what I've got planned." he told them, "This entrance is no use to us at all so we're going to have to find another and rather than waste time crawling all over this mountain looking for another doorway that well end up being just as buried as this one I'm proposing we just hit the same entrance that the Verne are using."

Just then there was the roar of engines from overhead and Conrad and his men instinctively raised their weapons as they looked skywards and saw a pair of transport aircraft fly over them. These came to a halt before descending towards the ground and disappearing behind the trees around the soldiers.

"Military transports." one of Conrad's men said and Conrad nodded in agreement.

"We better start moving." he said, passing the radio handset back to the soldier carrying the radio, "If the Verne are shipping in reinforcements then we need to get inside the complex before any more of them can get here."

The soldiers began to follow in the same direction they had seen the two transports fly in, alert for the possible presence of Verne soldiers in the area as well as further ferals. They had only been walking for a few minutes when the soldier carrying the radio set held out the handset.

"Sir, it's Captain Martins for you." he said.

"Conrad here." Conrad said into the handset after accepting it.

"Conrad, what's your situation?" Martins asked.

"We located an entrance but it was blocked. Right now I'm leading my men towards the Verne surface installation, they must have some way of getting underground from there. Can you scan the area from your position? I'd appreciate some more up to date intelligence on the site. We've just seen a pair of transports arriving so I'm guessing that the Verne are reinforcing the area."

"Negative on the scan." Martins said after a brief pause while he spoke with the bridge crew of the *High Tide*, "We're keeping over the horizon from your location to keep out of the way of the Verne fleet. If that AI finds out we're piggy backing our communications on the Verne weather satellites then we'll lose contact with you as well. We need to keep communication to a minimum to avoid that."

"Understood captain. If all goes well you won't hear from us again until we're ready for a pick up. Conrad out." Conrad said before tossing the handset back to the radio operator and then he smiled, "Okay men it looks like we're on our own. Time to show the Verne what real warriors can do."

Reeves was sat at his desk reading when there was a knock at his cabin door.

"Come in." he said, looking up as the door opened and Lucas entered the room.

"Sorry to disturb you captain." she said.

"That's alright, I was just taking the opportunity to find a little inspiration." Reeves said and it was then that Lucas noticed the book he was reading was the copy of The Bible he kept on his shelf.

"Praying for another miracle like at Liberty captain?" she asked and Reeves smiled.

"We won there didn't we?" he said, "Now sit down and tell me what brings you here."

"Yes captain. I've been speaking with Commander Bernard about how the Verne marines managed to get aboard the *Warspite*." Lucas said as she sat down and placed her tablet on the table between them.

"That robot let them onboard didn't it?" Reeves said and Lucas nodded.

"Yes captain. According to Captain Oswald it was activated remotely from their ship and ordered to open an airlock for them. This means that it was capable of receiving instructions from a considerable distance and according to Commander Bernard's initial inspection it possessed a transmitter of significant power to match. It's just radio of course so it can't send or receive messages over interstellar distances but the technical ability it displayed in helping the Verne boarding party suggests that it could have set up a relay system that could connect it to an FTL communication system." she explained, "Captain I think that Howard Denton could have been an innocent victim of whoever is behind all of this."

"You're saying that this robot was going around behind his back and using his company's computers to gain access to the Canadian government systems?" Reeves said.

"A form of technological honey trap if you will captain. Whoever provided Denton with the robot wanted access to his company's computer system. They gave him a beautiful woman that would agree to whatever he demanded of her without complaint so that it could hack into the Canadian Ministry of Defence. Then when the Canadian government discovered the unauthorised access and traced the hacking back to him the robot was ordered to kill him to block the investigation. Which it did by sabotaging the life support aboard his ship to suffocate him."

"If we hadn't picked up that ship when it dropped out of FTL it would have drifted for centuries." Reeves commented.

"Yes, the odds of anyone happening to stumble across it would be astronomical." Lucas said.

"You're the second person to have brought up that thing to me lieutenant." Reeves told her, "Inspector Boucher was interested to find out what happened to it as well. Her interest was in examining its memory to see what Denton was up here on Verne though. It seems that he used the robot to access networks the way the Verne do with their implants. According to the inspector the evidence suggests Denton obtained that robot while he was here on Verne at some point but its exact origin remains a mystery."

"That could be significant captain. I think that whoever is operating that scout ship that's been following us around and the freighter as well provided that robot to Howard Denton. That's why they're here now, to try and stop us finding out the extent of their operation on Verne."

"Why send two ships?" Reeves said.

"Although we've not been able to measure the top speed of either ship it's reasonable to believe that the freighter is not capable of moving as quickly as the scout. Therefore, for them to get here at the same time suggests that they left their home port, wherever that it, at different times. I think the freighter came here as part of their normal activity whereas the scout came to remove any evidence connecting them to Howard Denton."

"Their normal activity? That suggests that whoever is behind this is up to more here than just using the planet as a means of communicating with and manipulating Howard Denton. They could be using the planet as a staging ground for widespread infiltration of the Commonwealth." Reeves said and Lucas nodded.

"My thoughts exactly captain and this could have been going on for more than a century, ever since Verne was first settled. Captain I think that every single point of contact between Verne and the Commonwealth is going to have to be checked out. Who knows how many more of those robots were given out?"

All of a sudden a klaxon began to sound, indicating that the *Warspite* was coming to action stations and Reeves reached for the intercom.

"Bridge, this is the captain. What's going on?" he said.

"We've just received a message from Colonel Dator captain." Goldman replied, "He says that one of the surveillance drones they've been using to monitor the forces massing nearby have shown that they're starting to move. Fort Herman Kahn is under attack."

"Lucas is here with me." Reeves said, "We're on our way to the bridge now." and he put the intercom down and looked at Lucas, "Looks like we won't be able to wait for a reply from Admiral Mitchell. Colonel Dator needs our help now."

Hurrying to the bridge, Reeves and Lucas found the rest of the *Warspite's* command crew already at their stations.

"Status." Reeves said as the two officers came through the doorway.

"All ships in formation and ready to follow our lead captain." Goldman reported as Reeves and Lucas took their seats.

"Course laid in to take us to an orbital position over Fort Herman Kahn." Ash added.

"Where would that put us in relation to the enemy fleet?" Reeves asked.

"The base is some distance away from the capital. We won't have reached the enemy line yet." Thomas reported.

"Very well, Commander Ash take us in. Commander Goldman launch drones and get our pilots to their fighters. Instruct the rest of our fleet to follow us in. We'll carry out our existing plan but add in an orbital fire mission on our approach. I want targeting data passed directly to gauss cannon crews. All weapons are to fire as targets come to bear." Reeves ordered.

"Confirmed captain. Taking us in now." Ash said, twisting the hand grips he held in his hands to send the *Warspite* forwards.

The *Warspite* was quite capable of accelerating around the moon Clarke and entering orbit around Verne in a matter of seconds but to avoid forcing the Verne vessels accompanying the Commonwealth cruiser to use up their limited stores of gravitons that could prove vital later or fall behind Ash kept the *Warspite's* acceleration to a relatively sedate two gees. This was still enough to bring the ship over the lunar horizon before its fighter pilots had even got to their craft and only the cruiser's drones formed a perimeter around it to try and keep the enemy drones at bay.

"I'm picking up active lidar from the enemy vessels captain." Goldman announced, "They're locking on."

"How long until Verne orbit?" Reeves asked.

"About three minutes." Ash answered and Reeves nodded.

"Very well. Place light turrets in defensive mode and begin targeting those destroyers with our missiles. Main guns and X-ray laser turrets are to target the closest light cruiser and fire at will." he said.

"Incoming." one of the sensor operators exclaimed and Reeves looked at the display in front of him to see a tactical diagram showing both of the forces involved in the battle that had now formally started with the launch of a way of missiles towards the *Warspite* and its allied ships.

As soon as the missiles were detected by the *Warspite's* sensors its gun crews began to target them, as did the gunners aboard the allied Verne ships and a mixed barrage of free electron beam lasers and positron beams leapt across space to intercept the rapidly closing missiles.

While the original plan had called for the *Warspite* and its allied ships to emerge from behind the moon when its position would have allowed them to approach the line of AI controlled ships end on, being forced to move early meant that they were approaching the line from an angle and most of the AI controlled ships were able to target them. In turn this massively increased the number of missiles

"They're getting too close." Knight said, "Push our drones forwards to create a screen."

"What's the status of our fighters?" Reeves added.

"Launching now captain." Goldman replied just as the first of the *Warspite's* fighters shot from the launching tubes in the cruiser's prow.

"We'll be in firing position in ninety seconds captain." Ash announced.

"Gauss cannons stand by." Reeves said and he looked at Lucas, "What sort of targets do we have down there?" he asked her.

"It looks like a full armoured division captain." she replied, "Typical Verne fighting vehicles. Mainly battlefield walkers so they're slow and there are weak points at the leg joints. Any near hit ought to cause enough damage to disable them."

"No aircraft?" Knight added.

"No commander. Ground units only." Lucas told him and Knight smiled as he turned towards Reeves.

"Like shooting ducks in a barrel." he said, "We'll wipe them out."

"We've got Verne drones closing on our position." Goldman announced.

"The missiles are closer." Reeves said as he watched the swarm of drones gathering behind the remaining missiles, "Have the lighter Verne ships target the drones while our capital ships keep on the missiles."

"One minute to orbital firing position." Ash said.

"Increase acceleration to six gees." Reeves said, "Goldman, tell our allies to maintain two gees, we'll swing back and rejoin them after we've completed our bombing run."

"Increasing to six gees." Ash said, pushing more power into the *Warspite's* engines and Reeves watched the range to Verne decrease even faster than it had been.

"Targets acquired." one of the cruiser's gauss cannon gunners said, "Firing now."

Both of the *Warspite's* ventrally mounted gauss cannons fired together, launching rapid bursts of magnetically accelerated projectiles towards the surface of the planet below. These projectiles were inert, lacking any sort of explosive warhead and relied on their own momentum to inflict damage as they smashed into their targets. Against targets in space this generally resulted in holes being punched through the hulls of enemy starships but their usefulness really came into play when directed against targets on the ground where the relatively poor accuracy of a projectile caused by the difficulty in predicting where a starship would be by the time the two met did not matter. There was no need for the projectiles to aimed precisely at any of the armoured combat vehicles now marching towards Fort Herman Kahn, although a direct hit would utterly demolish any armoured vehicle in existence, instead the projectiles were aimed where the vehicle formation were at their most dense.

Like any object entering a planet's atmosphere the gauss cannon rounds were heated to thousands of degrees as they descended by the friction between them and the air surrounding them. This turned the practically invisible seventy-five millimetre rounds into glowing fireballs that streaked across the sky above Fort Herman Kahn, triggering cheers from the soldiers who knew exactly what was about to happen as the flames passed over the horizon before striking the ground among the AI controlled armoured division. The impacts produced sounds like thunder as the rounds buried themselves deep in the ground and the burning air spread around the point of impact and enveloped the nearby vehicles. The damage was not limited to the flames, however and the energy lost as the projectiles were slowed by the increased resistance of the ground hurled debris high into the air from all around the point of impact. The miniature earth quakes created by this were enough to also pick up some of the now burned out armoured vehicles and hurl them aside. Meanwhile the debris thrown into the air fell back down on other armoured vehicles in the surrounding area. While many pieces of this debris simply bounced off the armour of the vehicles whether tracked, wheeled or walkers. Many more were heavy enough or moving fast enough to either punch through their hulls as if they themselves were projectiles fired from a cannon or simply so heavy that they crushed whatever they landed on top of.

By the time the gauss cannon rounds struck the ground the *Warspite* had already turned away from Verne and was racing to rejoin the allied Verne warships that along with the Commonwealth cruiser's fighters and drones were holding off the AI controlled fleet. The cruiser's aft facing external cameras remained trained on the area where the projectiles had landed. The drawback was that the debris thrown into the air had created a massive cloud several kilometres across that concealed the ground beneath it from visual, radar and thermal sensors.

"Can you give us a damage assessment?" Knight asked and he glanced at Lucas.

"Not precisely sir." she answered, "The rounds obviously reached the ground but that's all I can tell you for certain."

"What about probabilities?" Reeves said as he too studied the target area on his console.

"Based on the speed at which the division's forward elements were moving they ought to have come out of the cloud by now." Lucas said, "They could have come to a halt to deliberately remain under the cover of the cloud."

"Unlikely." Knight said before Lucas could finish, "All that debris will foul mechanisms. They'll want to get out as quickly as possible."

"Or they've been at least badly damaged enough that they can't continue." Lucas went on, "There are still a handful of enemy vehicles that weren't caught up in the bombardment but apart from that I think we will have taken out at least eighty percent of the division."

"Goldman, would you inform Colonel Dator that most of his problems have been solved? We'll swing back for a second pass if it's needed but right now we're turning our attention to the enemy fleet." Reeves said and Goldman nodded.

"Captain the enemy cruiser is in range of our main guns and dead centre of our firing arc." a gunner suddenly announced and Reeves and Knight both looked towards him.

"The captain gave his orders." Knight said, "Open fire."

The AI controlled light cruiser closest to the *Warspite* had turned to bring its own main guns to bear on the Commonwealth vessel but its weapons lacked the range and hitting power of the neutral particle beam cannons that stretched for half the length of the *Warspite's* hull so they remained out of effective range as the *Warspite* opened fire. The twin energy beams both struck the light cruiser head on and as the anti-matter already stored inside its forward armaments broke free the Verne vessel's entire forward section exploded. Though severe, the damage inflicted by this explosion was not enough to take the light cruiser out of the fight entirely, even if it did destroy the ship's own main guns. Instead the cruiser began to turn so that its turrets could target the *Warspite* without having to try and aim through the flames at the front of the ship. However, as the *Warspite* came into range of the light cruiser so the light cruiser also came into range of the *Warspite's* two dorsally mounted twin X-ray laser turrets and the two ships fired at one another simultaneously. A beam from the light cruiser's sole medium turret struck the *Warspite's* starboard wing about half way along the resulting blast produced a brief ball of flame as it ripped open several of the fuel tanks there and the compressed hydrogen used to feed the *Warspite's* fusion reactors stored inside them was suddenly lost to the vacuum of space.

Simultaneously with this the four beams from the *Warspite's* X-ray lasers all struck the light cruiser roughly half way along its length. The combined power of these energy beams burned right through the ship's superstructure and along the way they ignited the propellant of several stored missiles. Had these been armed the escaping antimatter would have annihilated the entire ship but with only the propellant to burn the damage caused by the secondary detonation merely blew a large hole in the cruiser's ventral hull.

"Picking up heat blooms from the Verne reserve force." Cortez said, looking up from her console when she saw the lighter ships positioned close to the orbiting space station begin to move.

"What about our own support ships?" Reeves asked.

"They're breaking off to intercept now captain." Goldman told him.

"Main guns recharged." the gunner for the neutral particle beam cannons announced, "Firing."

The damage inflicted by the *Warspite's* initial strikes prevented the Verne light cruiser from making any sudden manoeuvres, to do so would risk tearing what remained of the ship apart from the stress and so aiming the *Warspite's* heavy guns at it was easy, resulting in two more hits that burned through the drive section at the rear of the ship.

It was not this that finished off the light cruiser, however. Instead this fell to the Verne frigate *Leonardo da Vinci*. Flying along side the *Warspite* this ship fired its primary positron beam cannon just after the larger heavy cruiser fired its main guns for the second time. The beam of anti-matter hit the light cruiser amidships in an attack designed to strike the location of the ship's main computer core and bridge. The explosion created by the hit tore apart the light cruiser's innards, destroying both vital locations in one fell swoop and the burning remains of the vessel began to tumble and break up.

"I'm not picking up any more activity from that ship. Target destroyed captain." Goldman announced.

"What's the status of our missile locks on the destroyers?" Knight asked now that the destruction of the light cruiser left the *Warspite* and the two accompanying Verne capital ships facing the line of AI controlled destroyers.

"Firing solutions plotted to both of them sir." a gunner replied.

"Four missiles per target." Reeves said, "Launch now."

The *Warspite* was not alone in firing its missiles at the pair of AI controlled destroyers ahead of the cruiser.

The *Nikola Tesla* also unleashed a volley of medium yield missiles, firing two at each of its sister ships.

These were smaller and less powerful weapons than the heavy missiles fired by the *Warspite* but they presented an additional threat to the two destroyers that they had to respond to with their defensive turrets.

The lighter Verne missiles moved slightly faster than the Commonwealth ones and the two targeted destroyers focused their defensive fire on these, rapidly shooting down one and then bringing down two of the remaining three soon after. With just one of the medium missiles remaining the destroyers now split their fire to try and intercept the *Warspite's* heavy missiles but with eight of them now moving rapidly at the destroyers it seemed likely that most would reach their targets before being shot down. That was until the frigate *Alvin Toffler* that had escorted the *Warspite* to Verne upon its arrival in the system moved out of formation and its turrets swung around to fire on the missiles as well. Designed specifically to engage multiple small targets with direct fire, the frigate shot down half of the missiles before two of those left struck the closest destroyer in rapid succession.

Designed to inflict significant damage on ships larger than the *Warspite* itself, the two missiles' shaped charge warheads ripped massive holes right through the relatively small destroyer and while these were just a few metres across at their point of impact, by the time the blast of molten metal emerged from the opposite side of the ship's hull the holes they created resulted in most of the hull along that side being ripped open. With atmosphere and debris venting into space the destroyer began to spin, the few remaining crewmen unable to do anything to halt the motion of their dying vessel.

"Where are the escape pods?" Thomas said when he saw this and noticed that none of the *Alvin Toffler's* crew appeared to be abandoning ship.

"I'm not picking up any signs of an evacuation." Goldman responded.

"It must be the AI." Knight said, "It doesn't see the point in saving the crew now their ship is dead."

"Captain we just lost the other missiles. Ours and the Verne's." Cortez called out, "That frigate just shot them all down."

"All guns target that frigate. Missiles stand by for another volley as soon as it's out of the picture." Reeves ordered.

It was the *Alvin Toffler* that fired first. However, rather than the *Warspite*, it targeted the *Nikola Tesla* with its main gun and the positron beam hit the other frigate, gouging a large split along its side and blowing off two of its turrets. In response the *Warspite* turned its available turrets towards the *Alvin Toffler*. With missiles still closing on the cruiser its free electron beam lasers were still being used to defend against them and this limited the *Warspite's* immediate ability to attack to its two gauss cannons and X-ray laser turrets. One of the powerful X-ray lasers struck the frigate first, hitting its main gun and destroying the weapon before it could be used to inflict any further damage. However, it was the next hit that caused the most catastrophic damage. A short burst fired from one of the *Warspite's* gauss cannons struck the frigate's drive section, punching several holes in it as the projectiles smashed their way through the ship. One of these passed through the magnetic field surrounding the frigate's anti-matter fuel tank and in an instant the matter of the projectile itself reacted with the fuel to create a massive explosion that consumed the entire ship in a flash.

"What the hell?" Goldman exclaimed, seeing the explosion as a massive burst of heat and radiation on her console.

"Their anti-matter tank must have been hit." Lucas said, "That's the only thing that would cause an explosion that big."

"Did anything else get caught up in that?" Knight asked.

"Just a few enemy drones." Goldman answered, quickly regaining her composure, "Our fighters were well clear."

"Missiles! Fire!" Reeves snapped and another four missiles burst from the launchers mounted along the *Warspite's* dorsal hull.

The nearby Verne destroyer did its best to intercept these but without the *Alvin Toffler* to provide additional covering fire it was unable to shoot them all down before one slammed into the destroyer's prow and blew away all of its own missile launchers. Stripped of its primary armament the destroyer was now of little consequence but rather than attempt to withdraw the ship began to accelerate, its engines being pushed far harder than was normal for a Verne starship.

"Captain they're heading right for us. Five gees. Now six. Seven." Goldman said.

"They're going to ram." Knight said, "Evasive action."

"Hang on." Ash said as he turned the *Warspite* aside, breaking formation with the two Verne ships accompanying them and pushing more power into the cruiser's engines in an attempt to outrun the destroyer.

"Look, the *Warspite*." Mori said when he saw the *Warspite* start to take evasive action while the burning Verne destroyer accelerated towards it. The cruiser was firing at the destroyer but the sudden manoeuvres Ash was making made targeting with turrets difficult while the main guns and missiles could not get a lock at all.

"I see it." Shaw responded, "This is Archangel to squadron, follow me in. We need to slow down that destroyer."

Breaking off from the drones they had been engaging, the fighters of Shaw's squadron raced towards the destroyer. Individually the weapons of a fighter posed little threat to a three hundred metre long destroyer but combined Shaw hoped that they could do something to slow it down and give the *Warspite* the chance to make use of its far more powerful weaponry.

"I'm picking up massive magnetic interference from the drive section at the back." Mori cautioned Shaw as she flew their fighter at the destroyer.

"Okay, I'll do my best to keep clear of it before our systems get scrambled but that's where we need to hit the damned thing." she replied.

Then there was a flash as the destroyer fired one of its two defensive turrets and one of Shaw's squadron was hit, the fighter exploding before the crew had the chance to eject.

"Damn." Shaw hissed, "Let's see how you like it." and she squeezed the trigger of her fighter's twin gauss cannons.

The projectiles fired by the fighter's weapons were much smaller than those fired by the *Warspite's* own gauss cannon turrets and they lacked the penetrating power necessary to inflict the same sort of damage as had been inflicted on the *Alvin Toffler* in a single shot but they could still damage the outer sections of the drive and as the rest of Shaw's squadron opened fire as well Mori saw the magnetic field being generated by the drive start to fluctuate.

"Keep hitting it on this side." he said, "They're losing port side thrust."

"Commonwealth fighters this is the *Nikola Tesla*. Withdraw, we are about to engage."

Shaw glanced at her console and saw the Verne destroyer allied to the *Warspite* now turning to get the best shot with its forward missile tubes and she activated her fighter's communications to address her squadron.

"You heard them." she broadcast, "Let's get out of here and leave this to them."

The *Warspite's* fighters then turned and accelerated away from the damaged destroyer at the same time as the *Nikola Tesla* launched its missiles, sending a pair of them racing towards the AI controlled ship. At the last moment the AI controlled destroyer's defensive turrets fired but they failed to hit either of them and both warheads exploded next to the destroyer's already damaged drive, tearing apart the charged plates used to direct the flow of ions that propelled the ship through space and also tearing open the anti-matter fuel tank. The contents of this spilled out behind the now drifting destroyer, reacting with the debris left in its wake from its own drives to produce a series of explosions that lit up the space behind the ship. As well as removing the ship's ability to change its speed or facing, the loss of the fuel tank also cut off the supply of positrons needed for the operation of its turrets and the destroyer was reduced to drifting through space helpless and unable to take part in the battle any further.

"Captain the other enemy cruiser is heading for us." Goldman said and looking at his console Reeves saw that the last Verne light cruiser turning towards the *Warspite* while the two remaining destroyers took up positions either side of the larger ship then in perfect unison the three AI controlled warships unleashed a full volley of missiles.

"Incoming!" Cortez exclaimed.

"All turrets to forward defensive fire." Reeves ordered, "X-ray lasers too. Goldman what's the status of our drones?"

"Still engaging theirs captain." Goldman replied.

"Then reel them back in. Send Lieutenant Commander Shaw's fighters to keep back their drones and bring

ours here to provide us with a screen." Reeves said.

"Captain I've got a lock on those destroyers." one of the *Warspite's* missile operators announced.

"What about the cruiser?" Knight asked.

"Almost there." the second missile operator replied, "Got it. Firing solution plotted and locked."

"Then return fire." Reeves ordered, "Two missiles per target to see how they react. Commander Ash how long until you get us a clear line of fire to any of those ships?"

"Bringing us around now captain. There's a lot of debris but I should be able to give you a shot in ten seconds or so." Ash responded and Reeves nodded.

"Fire main guns as soon as targets come to bear." he said.

The six missiles fired from the *Warspite's* launchers spread out as they approached their own specific targets. The AI controlled vessels responded by firing at them with their turrets, the light cruiser acting to protect the two destroyers as well as itself and the space between the two forces became a mass of missiles and energy beams as they continued to close with one another. The same debris that limited the *Warspite's* line of fire to the enemy ships also provided cover for both sets of missiles as they raced towards their targets, weaving around the remains of the other AI controlled ships as turrets on both sides attempted to track them.

"Are our missiles getting through?" Knight said, "I can't keep track through that lot."

"Neither can I." Reeves added and he looked at Goldman, "Commander how many of our missiles are still running?"

"Four, no wait three." she told him, "That cruiser's got plenty of guns available."

"Enemy cruiser dead ahead and in the open." Ash called out suddenly.

"Firing." a gunner added as he fired the *Warspite's* main guns again and the twin energy beam shot across space, passing between the larger pieces of debris that could have blocked or refracted their path. The beams hit the light cruiser about a third of the way along its hull and one of them blasted away a light positron beam turret just as it was in the process of firing.

The sudden failure of the containment system for its antimatter charge released the stored positrons in an uncontrolled fashion and there was an explosion as they reacted with the hull immediately around the turret and what would have been a five metre hull burned through the hull and interior bulkheads became a twenty metre tear that triggered de-pressurisation alarms on several decks aboard the light cruiser.

It was not just the AI controlled vessels that suffered damage however, as a missile aimed at the *Warspite* was able to evade the anti-missile fire long enough to reach the Commonwealth heavy cruiser. The missile approached from beneath the *Warspite's* hull and was less than a hundred metres away before one of the ventral gauss cannons put a round into its warhead. The energy wave from the explosion this caused slammed into the *Warspite* and the entire cruiser shuddered.

"Damage report!" Knight snapped.

"The hull's breached." Goldman said, "Emergency bulkheads have dropped but the breach has affected our fighter launch tubes. We can recover our squadron but we can't launch them through the tubes. They'll have to just use the hangar doors like our shuttles. We've also lost one of the gauss cannons."

"What about the main guns?" Reeves asked, concerned about losing one of their most powerful ship to ship weapons while engaged in battle.

"Main guns reading functional captain." the gunner responsible for them replied, "I've got one of those destroyers in my sights again."

"Then open fire." Knight ordered.

"Firing." the gunner responded and the *Warspite's* main guns fired again. The attack caught the AI controlled destroyer in the midst of a turn and just clipped the very rear of the ship, cleaving off a section of its magnetic ion drive. Although this severely limited the vessel's ability to manoeuvre it did nothing to limit its striking power and it unleashed a second volley of missiles just before one of the *Warspite's* own missiles struck the destroyer and blew a massive hole where the ship's main magazine was located and there was another explosion that sent flames rushing out into space as the fuel held aboard the missiles exploded. The destroyer's final volley of missiles wound their way through the debris, being picked off one by one until only a single one remained and by pure chance this struck another missile just as it was being launched by the *Nikola Tesla*. Exploding so close to the destroyer, the blast sent shrapnel into the front of the ship where some of it ripped through one of its missile launching tubes and triggered an explosion from another missile that was in the process of being loaded. Fortunately for the crew of the *Nikola Tesla* this missile had yet to have anti-matter loaded into its warhead but the blast was still sufficient to spread down several decks and reached the destroyer's main life support system before internal bulkheads could be closed to prevent it.

"Captain the *Nikola Tesla* is reporting total life support failure." one of the *Warspite's* communication technicians announced, "They've got fires onboard and they're abandoning ship."

"Have the *Leonardo Da Vinci* break off to assist them." Reeves said, "Helm I want full acceleration. Take us right down their throats. All weapons fire at will."

"Going full burn." Ash said and the *Warspite's* engines glowed brightly as the heavy cruiser accelerated

rapidly. Ash kept the heavy cruiser pointing towards the AI controlled capital ships and when the remaining operational destroyer crossed the line of sight for the *Warspite's* main guns they fired again. The beams struck the destroyer midway along its hull and both burned right the way through, cutting the ship in half from the stress. This left just the light cruiser facing the *Warspite* and the two cruisers swung around to face directly at one another.

Ash had the *Warspite* accelerate even further and a barrage of positron beams narrowly missed the accelerating heavy cruiser. Ash was unable to line up the *Warspite's* main guns on the light cruiser as he flew towards it but he was able to roll the ship to place the AI controlled vessel above the *Warspite* in relative terms and as the two ships passed by one another all eight of the *Warspite's* dorsal turrets fired straight up and free electron beam lasers and X-ray lasers raked along the entire length of the light cruiser. The damage this inflicted was colossal, the hull on every deck was breached and internal explosions were triggered throughout the entire ship. No longer structurally sound, the light cruiser simply broke apart under this stress and became another expanding field of debris to add to that already littering the orbital space around Verne.

"I don't like the look of that." Conrad said as he tilted his head back to look at the flashes of light in the sky above. The sun was setting at this point and this made the weapons fire and explosions in space easily visible.

"I wonder who's winning." one of his men commented as he too looked up right at the moment a piece of debris shot across the sky like a meteor before breaking up with a massive 'boom'.

"Like it matters to me." Conrad replied, "They can wipe one another out for I care."

"Contact!" another of Conrad's men hissed and he dropped into a kneeling position and looked through the sight of his rifle to where he could see a bulky armoured figure through the undergrowth.

"Verne heavy infantry." Conrad commented as he looked through his own rifle sight and saw two more figures in powered armour join the first. These were then joined by several other Verne in what looked like civilian clothing and carrying crates between them. These crates all bore military markings and even though he could not make out the exact wording of the labels Conrad instantly realised that they contained small arms of some kind. Any questions about why the Verne would be bringing crates of military weapons out into the jungle were answered when there was more movement in the undergrowth and a group of ferals appeared. The appearance of these individuals varied, depending on the number of genes they or their ancestors had had altered by the Verne before leaving advanced civilisation behind in favour living what they saw as a more 'natural' lifestyle. Around half of the ferals were armed themselves but the weapons they carried were a far cry from the modern small arms Conrad's men or the Verne possessed. Their weapons were simple single shot breech loading rifles and the ferals carrying them wore bandoliers of additional ammunition over their shoulders.

Watched by the soldiers in powered armour the Verne civilians set down the crates they carried and opened them to reveal the weapons that they contained. Then they began to distribute these to the ferals as they gathered around.

"Now this is interesting." Conrad said softly, "Ferals arming themselves with modern military weaponry. Doesn't exactly fit well with the whole being at one with nature nonsense."

"Do you think it has anything to do with those two ferals we killed?" one of his men asked.

"Possibly. Which could make our task here more difficult. If the Verne know that we're about then they'll be increasing security. Come on, let's get a move on before their defences get too strong."

Conrad and his men began to move again, heading towards the location of the Verne camp while circling around the Verne and their feral allies. Now that they knew there were Verne ground forces in the area the soldiers were extra alert, listening for the telltale sounds of heavy or enhanced infantry moving through wooded terrain. The exoskeletons and full powered armour these units wore made stealthy movement almost impossible in such surroundings and Conrad's men expected to be able to hear an approaching enemy before they saw it. However, the first sounds they heard of Verne activity came not from their soldiers but from the workers and robots at the camp itself. Designed to be a research post rather than a fortress, the Verne were in the process of turning it into the latter. The heavy equipment used to clear the undergrowth for the original prefabricated structures was now being used to expand the cleared area of jungle and create a kill zone. Using his rifle's optical sight to study the area more closely Conrad saw that there were several technicians in the process of running electrical cabling from one of the smaller structures towards a vehicle that had a dispenser for razor wire mounted on the back of it and it was clear that part of the process of fortification would include the deployment of an electrified fence. Though the trenches, barriers, sensors and kill zone would make the facility difficult for an infantry force to assault once it was completed

"Looks like we're just in time." Conrad told his men, "Another couple of hours and they'll have that fence up and running." Then he pointed towards the ground where trees had just been ripped out of the ground but had yet to be cleared away. The discarded tree trunks made the already uneven ground even more cluttered and in this clutter Conrad saw an opportunity, "That's our way in." he told his men, "We'll circle around and then crawl between what's left of those trees. That should get us right up to the main building and my guess is that we'll find a way to reach whatever they've found in there."

With all of the AI controlled capital ships now out of action the *Warspite* swung around to face the lighter warships surrounding the space station that was the headquarters of the Verne fleet. The space station's weapons were entirely defensive in nature and consisted of numerous light turrets intended to protect the facility from missiles and attack craft. While the *Warspite*, *Leonardo Da Vinci* and *Nikola Tesla* had been fighting the enemy capital ships the smaller vessels to have escaped the clutches of the alien AI program had been holding back their opposite numbers in the AI controlled fleet. The battle plan had not called for them to do anything other than keep these ships from engaging their own side's three capital ships and so they had been able to put more effort into defending themselves than if they were expected to destroy their

opponents. The AI controlled vessels stayed close to the space station where its weapons could provide them with extra protection from missiles or the few drones carried by the Verne ships that had escaped being corrupted. The vast majority of the weapons carried by these smaller ships were no heavier than those installed on the space station and this meant that their effective range was similarly short. Taking advantage of this the Verne light warship force held back, positioning themselves just beyond the effective range of the space station's defences. This put the two opposing forces of light warships at the extreme limit of the range of most of their weapons and the fire between them was sporadic. This did not mean that either side had escaped losses, however and the wreckage of several ships from both sides was tumbling through space as the *Warspite* moved to join its allies. Another squadron of AI controlled drones rushed to try and head off the heavy cruiser and the *Warspite's* turrets turned to fire on them.

"Looks like they're trying to keep the *Warspite* away from their station." Shaw said.

"I've got two more squadrons of drones forming up to follow." Mori responded, checking the display in front of him.

"Okay, the *Warspite* and her drones can handle that first squadron." Shaw said, broadcasting to the entire squadron, "Form up on me and we'll see what we can do about the second wave."

The ten fighters arranged themselves into a V shaped formation as they sped towards the swarm of drones. These tiny craft opened fire in unison, unleashing a wave of missiles. Rather than take evasive action or attempt to shoot down the missiles the drones accelerated, trying to get close enough on fire on the *Warspite* before the missiles hit them. The missiles accelerated faster than they did, however and they turned to follow the drones. The result of this was that the missiles slammed into the rear of the drones they had locked onto and almost half of them were destroyed in rapid succession as their engines exploded. Behind the missiles came the *Warspite's* fighter squadron, now opening fire with their gauss cannons. It was only as the rounds from these were tearing through the drones that the machines finally acted to defend themselves. Spinning to face the opposite direction while retaining their direction of travel the drones took aim with their positron beam cannons.

"Break!" Shaw snapped and the fighters split into pairs, each pair moving in a separate direction as the beams of antimatter passed through the space where the fighters had just been, "Okay we hit them by pairs. Sweep in and evade. Everyone else see what you can pick off while the drones are occupied. I'm going in first."

Shaw turned her fighter as sharply as its engines would allow and accompanied by her wingman she flew her fighter right at the drones. The rapid manoeuvre prompted the drones to turn their attention towards the fighters heading right for them. Shaw and her wingman were flying in an evasive pattern even before the drones opened fire but this was not enough to protect them fully and the fighter flown by Shaw's wingman was hit, its wing being ripped right off by the blast.

"I'm hit!" he signalled, struggling to bring his fighter back under control.

"Get out of here." Shaw responded, "I can finish this run on my own."

"Copy that Archangel." her wingman said, his fighter abruptly turning away from the drones and accelerating. The nearest of the drones turned to follow the fleeing fighter and Shaw took advantage of this to fire a rapid burst of gauss cannon rounds into the side of the machine.

At the same time as Shaw was firing on this one drone the rest of her squadron also opened fire with a mix of cannons and missiles. Unprepared for this sudden assault, the drones were unable to defend themselves and the consequences were dramatic. Eight of the drones, almost half of the remaining force were instantly destroyed or crippled and spinning out of control and this triggered another sudden change in their behaviour. Rather than focusing on just Shaw's fighter as she raced between them the drones turned to face outwards from the centre of their formation, attempting to engage as many of the other Commonwealth fighters as they could manage with their forward firing positron beams at once. This did prevent the fighters from unleashing another volley of fire as they swiftly began to take evasive action but by turning her fighter so it was travelling sideways, Shaw was able to strafe another two of the drones from behind with one sustained burst from her cannons.

"Okay I'm clear." she broadcast as she accelerated away from the remaining drones, "I want Hopper and Killjoy to move in as they're about to make a pass through what's left. Then when the drones turn for them Rocketman and Diamond are to make their run from the other side."

"Copy that Archangel, we're on our way in." the pilot known as Hopper responded and he and his wingman banked towards the drones, firing brief bursts of gauss cannon fire to attract the machines' attention. Two of the drones promptly broke from their formation, heading to intercept the fighters when both pilots rolled their craft out of the way and the second pair of attack craft raced forwards instead, firing missiles at the now exposed drones before veering towards the hole in the formation that their departure had created. Racing between the other drones, these fighters fired their cannons from point blank range and more of the drones exploded, shut down and began to drift or spun out of control. One of the drones, its anti-matter fuel tank struck by a projectile exploded violently and although the blast was not large enough to damage any of the few remaining drones it did force both Commonwealth fighters to break off their run prematurely, weaving

between other drones as they sought avoid being caught up in the explosion themselves.

Watching this Shaw was about to select the next pair of fighters to make their run on the drones when a shadow passed above her fighter and she looked up to see the *Warspite* rushing past her, appearing to be upside down from her point of view. This alignment enabled the heavy cruiser to target the remaining drones with its entire dorsal armament and its turrets opened fire, picking off the machines in rapid succession on its way to join the Verne light warships holding back their AI controlled counterparts.

"*Warspite* to Archangel," Goldman transmitted, "keep close to the *Warspite*. The captain wants extra close protection while the *Leonardo Da Vinci* is carrying out S and R operations."

"Copy that *Warspite*, we're heading in now." Shaw responded as her squadron turned back towards the cruiser.

The lighter Verne warships allied to the *Warspite* created a hole in the centre of their formation to allow the Commonwealth heavy cruiser to take up a central position while they continued to exchange fire with the AI controlled ships at the limit of their range. The arrival of the *Warspite* changed this situation radically, however and as the heavy cruiser took its place in the formation Ash lined the ship up on the two AI controlled monitors that mounted the heaviest weapons available to them. The *Warspite's* main guns fired on one of the monitors while the other was targeted with X-ray lasers. The powerful neutral particle beams struck their target and the compact vessel vanished in a flash of light as they burned right through its superstructure. Meanwhile the multiple beams of X-rays struck the second AI controlled monitor, slicing it into several sections that spun away from one another.

"Targets destroyed captain." Goldman announced as she saw this.

"That's the last of their heavy firepower gone." Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Target the rest of their fleet." he ordered, "Goldman, can you get precise targeting data for the space station's defensive batteries?"

"I should be able to captain. It's just a matter of picking out the combination of thermal hotspots from the increased power they need and the magnetic fields of their anti-matter feeds." Goldman answered.

"Do it." Reeves said, "Weapons I want those batteries targeted with our remaining gauss cannon."

"Looking to take the station intact captain?" Knight asked.

"There are thousands of people aboard that station and I'd rather not have to kill them all when we've got the choice of just taking out its weapons. Without those turrets that station's pretty helpless. It's manoeuvring thrusters can't move it fast enough to be able to ram anyone." Reeves explained.

"I've got locks on the turret positions captain." Goldman announced, "Passing the data to fire control now."

"Good." Reeves said, "As soon as we've taken out those turrets I want our entire fleet to move forwards and engage the enemy ships."

"Priority targets captain?" Ash asked.

"Just take us towards the centre of their formation commander. Weapons are to focus on the corvettes and cutters. We'll leave the gunships to our allies to begin with." Reeves said.

"Captain I have a firing pattern programmed, gauss cannon ready." one of the gauss cannon gunners announced.

"Commence fire." Reeves said and the gunner started the preprogrammed bombardment, the remaining gauss cannon turret turning to face its first target, firing a single projectile at it and then turning to face the next before repeating the process automatically without any input from the gunner. The speed of the sequence of aiming firing and moving on was so rapid that more than a dozen rounds had been fired before the first one even reached its target. Unable to move out of the way of the fast moving projectiles, firing at the space station with the gauss cannon was similar to firing at a ground target and all of the shots found their marks perfectly. Given the range between the space station and the ships led by the *Warspite* the turrets were not active and as such they did not have any anti-matter stored inside them when the gauss cannon rounds smashed through their armoured casings and so there were no violent explosions to demonstrate that the weapons had been taken out of action. Only the sudden disappearance of the magnetic fields used to provide stable firing chambers for the turrets told the crew of the *Warspite* that their shots were having the desired effect.

"Firing sequence complete captain." the gunner announced when the last projectile was launched and Knight looked towards Goldman.

"So how well did we do?" he said.

Goldman did not respond immediately, instead watching her console as she waited for the last of the projectiles to cross the gap of thousands of kilometres between the *Warspite* and the Verne space station but she smiled when she saw the final impact.

"All turrets destroyed commander." she said, "The space station's been disarmed."

"Commander Ash take us in." Reeves ordered, "Commander Goldman tell the rest of the fleet to follow us and target those gunships."

Ash kept the *Warspite's* acceleration limited to one gee as it started to move so that the nearby Verne ships could keep up with the cruiser without causing their crews any discomfort and initially this meant that only a

handful of the fleet's weapons were in range of their AI controlled opponents. This changed however, when the AI sent its gunships forwards to try and get them close enough to use their weapons effectively. The AI lacked the same concern for the crews of its ships as those aboard the *Warspite* had for their allies and the gunships accelerated more rapidly. Mounting weapons of similar size and firepower to those of a fighter, a gunship had to get very close to its target in order to be able to fire at it with any real chance of success and the light turrets carried by the *Warspite* and its allied ships were able to open fire on the gunships before they could respond in kind.

The other AI controlled vessels did not remain idle while their gunship contingent was being destroyed, however. Instead their formation broke apart as each ship flew off in a different direction within a single plane, forming an expanding circle of ships.

"Captain I'm picking up increasing tachyon levels in those ships." Cortez said.

"They're making a run for it." Knight said, "There's no way we can intercept them all before they get to FTL."

"That's why they sacrificed their gunships." Lucas added, "They don't have FTL drives."

"They were a distraction." Knight agreed.

"Captain I don't think they've got specific destinations in mind." Thomas said as he compared the headings of the AI controlled ships with his star charts, "This is just a getting away from us jump."

"After which they can regroup and come back to try and take us by surprise," Reeves said, "Weapons I want one missile per ship. Fire at will."

The *Warspite's* missile operators acted as quickly as they could to lock the ship's targeting sensors onto the AI controlled ships, launching their weapons as soon as they achieved this and one after another the missiles burst from their launchers and sped towards their targets. With the AI controlled ships focused on flying away from the *Warspite*, the missiles were approaching from behind them where the emissions from their own drives made targeting them with their own defensive weapons more difficult.

The first missile to reach its target was aimed at a corvette, striking the ship in its drive section. Intended for attacking spacecraft many times bigger than the corvette, the warhead tore the entire ship apart with the blast being magnified as the magnetic field around its anti-matter fuel tank failed and the fuel reacted with the wreckage around it. Another missile hit a scout ship and it was similarly torn apart but by this time the remaining AI controlled ships had deployed sufficient tachyons to be able to accelerate to faster than light speed and in a short period of time they vanished in flashes of light, leaving the *Warspite's* missiles behind.

"Can we track them?" Reeves asked.

"I've got them all on radar captain." Cortez replied, "They all just dropped right back to sub light speed five light minutes away. I'm picking up more tachyons pulses coming from them as well."

"Communications? Or are they getting ready to go to FTL again?" Knight said.

"The readings aren't strong enough to be preparation for going back to FTL." Cortez said.

"They're co-ordinating their next move." Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Captain the Verne are asking what our next move is going to be." Goldman added.

"Tell them we're staying put for now." Reeves told her, "We launched our attack to secure orbital space around Verne and protect Colonel Dator's position. We've done just that so now we stay here and keep it secure while we wait to hear from Admiral Mitchell."

Conrad and his men crawled on their stomachs between the felled tree trunks surrounding the Verne research camp. The soldiers in powered armour had been deployed further out from the camp but any of the workers or robots could raise the alarm if Conrad's team were seen and so they advanced cautiously. The tree trunks and roots that his men were using for cover did not reach all the way to the primary structure, leaving a distance of about twenty metres that would have to be covered in the open and when he reached the edge of this area Conrad paused and looked around.

He had led his men around the side of the structure towards what looked to be a secondary entrance or emergency exit far from the main entrance near the path leading to the landing area.

"English, go check that door." Conrad ordered one of his men and the soldier quickly got to his feet and darted forwards while the rest of the team kept watch for any Verne workers or robots.

The soldier came to a sudden halt beside the door and dropped into a crouching position before reaching for the control panel that operated the door mechanism. The door was not locked and it slid open instantly, at which point the soldier crouched beside it leapt to his feet again and leant around the door frame to point his weapon inside the building. Seeing nothing but an empty corridor he took one hand off his rifle and waved the rest of the team forwards.

"Okay let's move." Conrad said, checking to make sure that none of the Verne, their robots or their feral allies were close by. Moving in pairs the rest of the team then ran towards the door and took up a position just inside the structure to cover all approaches until only Conrad remained by the fallen trees. Taking one last look around he too ran for the building and through the open doorway, at which point English also jumped through the doorway and closed it behind him.

"Clear." he hissed and Conrad nodded as he took a look around their surroundings. Unfortunately there were

no signs on any of the walls to suggest which way they ought to go to reach their target or even what the exact nature of their target might be. Conrad knew the alien artificial intelligence would have to be contained in some sort of computerised equipment but whether this would be of Verne manufacture or an alien artefact he did not know.

"Okay, we're going to have to conduct a general search." he told his men and he began to move forwards cautiously.

Conrad wanted to find either a command and control centre or a means of descending to the alien complex that had to exist below ground judging by the antenna array and buried access ladder his team had come across. However, with no clues about where they should head he could only lead his men through the corridors of the structure at random. This continued until they heard the sound of someone working just around the corner ahead of them and Conrad held up his hand for the team to come to a stop as he crept right up to the corner and took a tiny electronic camera from his webbing. This featured a head mounted on a flexible neck that was about half a metre long when he unrolled it. Bending the head to a right angle he slowly pushed this around the corner so he could see what lay on the other side and saw a single Verne technician working by an open access panel. The technician was facing away from the corner and Conrad withdrew the camera before he could turn around and possibly notice it.

"Back." Conrad whispered as he returned the camera to his webbing and he was just unslinging his rifle again when he and his team heard the sound of heavy footsteps coming from around the corner of a junction the unit had just come past.

"Robots. Two of them heading this way." the soldier at the rear of the unit said after glancing around the corner.

"I'll take care of this." Conrad whispered and rather than unslinging his rifle he drew his knife and looked around the corner towards the technician. Seeing that the man was still facing in the opposite direction Conrad darted around the corner and ran towards the technician as quickly as he could. Reaching the man before he could turn around, Conrad reached around to clamp a hand over his mouth at the same time as he plunged his knife into the back of the man's neck at the base of his skull. The point of his attack was chosen carefully to ensure that the technician would die as quickly as possible and be unable to send out any warnings using his wireless transmitter implant. This seemed to have the desired effect and the technician collapsed in a heap at Conrad's feet as he let go of the man's corpse and he beckoned his men to follow him as he ran down the corridor, trying to put as much distance as possible between his team and the body before it was discovered.

When Dator and Gruber stepped out of Dator's command centre Gruber looked at the Verne soldiers busily preparing an assortment of ground vehicles for use and frowned.

"What are they doing?" he asked, "If that Commonwealth ship launches its nuclear weapons then won't the EMP disable all of these vehicles."

"Don't worry professor." Dator replied, "The wiring of these vehicles is too short to be susceptible to a nuclear EMP." and then he tapped the side of his head, "Believe it or not there is a greater length of wire in here to act as an antenna than there is in two or three of those vehicles." then at the sound of an approaching aircraft he looked up and smiled, "Ah, I think your ride is here professor." and Gruber also looked up as a Commonwealth marine dropship escorted by a pair of fighters descended over the base and circled above it. When a Verne ground controller rushed to the side of a landing pad and began to wave a pair of illuminated batons the pilot of the dropship brought his craft in lower and deployed its landing gear before setting down. The sound of the engines then lessened but did not cease completely as the pilot reduced the power to them but left them running for a rapid departure as the ramp at the rear of the craft opened and Willis came rushing down it wearing full body armour and carrying his rifle. Willis paused at the base of the ramp and turned towards Dator and Gruber as they hurried towards him.

"Colonel Dator? Major Benjamin Willis, Commonwealth Marine Corps." he said, saluting the Verne officer. "It's a pleasure to meet you major." Dator said, returning the salute, "I take that the space around Verne is secure?"

"Well that alien computer virus that's controlling most of your country keeps having your people send up the odd missile but there's not been anything we couldn't shoot down yet. Professor Gruber I've already met at your Ministry of Defence. Are you ready to leave professor?" Willis said, looking at Gruber and the archaeologist nodded.

"I am and might I add what a sight for sore eyes you are major." he said.

"Where are Inspector Boucher and Agent Smith?" Willis then asked, looking around, "My orders are to take them back to the *Warspite* as well."

"They're on their way." Dator said, "Can you tell me how long it will be until you launch your missile strike? My forces are almost ready to make their move. There are several deep bunkers around Verne that the EMP is unlikely to affect and we need to be able send men to them all."

"I'm sorry colonel, I don't know. When I left the *Warspite* we were still waiting to hear back from fleet

command with permission to launch the strike at all." Willis told him.

"Is there a back up plan?" Gruber asked, "I mean if the Commonwealth won't let your captain use his nuclear weapons what then?"

Willis looked around before turning back towards Dator and Gruber.

"We've not got the firepower to invade an entire nation where almost the entire population will fight to the death." he said, "If there is a plan B then it's probably going to involve loading everyone here into the ships that haven't been infected and getting you all out of here. Trust me, we're good at that."

"I hope it won't come to that major." Dator said, "I don't want to be remembered for abandoning my homeland to an enemy."

"Yeah, I don't like the idea of running away either." Willis agreed before he noticed Boucher and Smith running towards the landing pad, "Ah, here are my other passengers" and then he waved at them, "Inspector Boucher! Agent Smith!" he called out and the pair waved back at him.

"Major Willis, it's a relief to see you at last. This is not what I expected when my superiors told me I'd be coming to Verne." Boucher said when they joined him at the base of the dropship's rear ramp.

"We better get onboard." Willis told his charges and he looked up into the sky where the pair of fighters were still circling, "Those fighters will engage any other aircraft that try to get in our way but the sooner we get going the less likely we are to have any trouble."

"Then there's no time like the present is there?" Smith said as he hurried up the ramp, followed first by Boucher and then Gruber. Meanwhile Willis turned to face Colonel Dator again.

"We'll let you know as soon as we have any more information about the missile strike colonel." he said.

"Very good major." Dator said as Willis then backed up the ramp and the Verne officer retreated away from the dropship as its ramp lifted shut again and the noise from its engines began to increase.

Watching the dropship gain altitude, Dator saw the two fighter escorts stop circling his base and follow the dropships skywards before all three disappeared from view and Dator went back inside his headquarters.

In orbit above Verne the *Warspite* and the Verne gunships were positioned above the country itself while the other remaining Verne vessels led by the *Leonardo Da Vinci* had taken up a position above the source of the alien signal. The dropship and its escort headed directly for the *Warspite*, being directed towards its rear hangar and as soon as this was pressurised Willis walked down the dropship's ramp with his helmet tucked under his arm.

"Major Willis sir." a member of the hangar ground crew said as she approached the dropship.

"Yes crewman?" he responded.

"Captain Reeves wants to see all the senior staff in the main briefing room as soon as possible. Professor Gruber as well." the woman told him.

"Hear that professor? Sounds like the captain's got news." Willis said, looking over his shoulder as Gruber exited the dropship behind him, "Follow me."

Without spending time to remove his armour or return his rifle to the *Warspite*'s armoury Willis led Gruber to the *Warspite*'s main briefing room where rows of seats were lined up in front of a podium and a large wall mounted display screen. Reeves was not present when Willis and Gruber entered the room but Thomas got out of his seat to reach for the intercom while Knight went to greet the men.

"Professor Gruber." he said, holding out his hand, "A pleasure to meet you. I'm Commander Douglas Knight, executive officer of the *Warspite*."

"Thank you for getting me off that planet commander." Gruber replied as he shook Knight's hand.

"The captain's on his way." Thomas announced.

"Then we should take our seats." Knight said, "Professor you may want to sit up at the front."

Gruber nodded before Knight showed him to the front row of seats in the briefing room and they were both just sitting down as Reeves entered the room.

"Thanks you for all assembling here." he said, "I wanted to speak to you all at the same time."

"It was Miss Scarlet in the library with the lead pipe." Shaw muttered and both Willis and Lucas smiled.

"In all seriousness I have just received a communication from Centaur," Reeves said as he stood at the podium and activated the computer terminal built into it. Using this he then logged into his messaging system and accessed the most recent message that it contained, "and I think all of you need to see it so you know that what we do from here on has full authorisation." Reeves then tapped the play button on the podium's console and the video file he had received from Admiral Mitchell began to play back on the large screen behind him

"Captain Reeves," Mitchell began, "I really can't understate just how much fuss your message is causing here. Frankly I'm not sure what's worse, the fact that this alien computer virus is loose on a human planet or that your solution to the problem is to launch a nuclear attack on the planet. Anyway to cut to the chase, considering the seriousness of the situation fleet command and the Commonwealth's defence oversight committee have decided to grant you the authorisation to make use of the nuclear weapons that your ship is armed with. The limitation placed on this is that you are only allowed to employ them for the purposes of

creating a nuclear electromagnetic pulse using high altitude air bursts. Any direct strike on the surface or against targets in space must be carried out using conventional weapons only. I can't be clearer than that. Intelligence indicates that there are not enough FTL capable ships at Verne for the AI to try spreading itself out by any means other than direct radio transmission so if your plan to disable the affected Verne fails then we will instead deploy a number of ships to broadcast a jamming signal to block this. The Verne need to know that the Commonwealth has no plans to invade their world even to counter this AI. Even if we were going to send extra ships it would take four days for them to reach you. On the other hand if you can get any of the unaffected Verne away from their planet then Commonwealth nations will provide them with asylum until they can relocate themselves to another world. You have permission to withdraw the *Warspite* at any time you want, however I have had a request for you to try and obtain any new data on this alien AI you can. I'm told that Nexus is keen to find out as much as possible about it and I know our intelligence people are as well but the safety of your ship and crew come first. Good luck on this one captain, this is Admiral Mitchell signing off." and at that point the image of the admiral on the screen was replaced with the emblem of the Commonwealth fleet.

"So there you have it." Reeves said, "We're proceeding with the plan."

"How soon do we launch captain?" Goldman asked.

"As soon as all the preparations can be made for all parts of the operation." Reeves answered and he looked at Gruber, "For that we'll require your assistance professor."

"Mine?" Gruber responded.

"Yes. As I understand things this artificial intelligence was discovered by the research team you led on Verne's secondary continent." Reeves said.

"That is correct captain. It was the ferals that found evidence of prior habitation on the planet and the Verne sent a scientific team to investigate. They soon realised that while they could examine whatever technological items they discovered there they could not organise an efficient program of excavation so they hired me." Gruber explained.

"So what exactly is down there professor?" Lucas asked.

"The ruins of an alien outpost about seven to eight thousand years old. I don't believe that this was their home world, there is no other evidence of habitation but the settlement here may have been developed enough for the aliens to have transferred some of their advanced industry here. Right before I left the dig site we had just discovered a cache of what appeared to be alien built particle inductors. Prior to that the Verne had examined some lesser devices and determined a means for them to interface their own computers with the alien technology. My guess is that one of my team was too impatient to wait for me to return and used the interface device to connect themselves to the computer system in the suspected particle inductor manufacturing plant." Gruber replied.

"I take it that this outpost you were studying is underground?" Bernard asked and Gruber nodded.

"Indeed it is. The ferals just discovered part of the ventilation system and the Verne sank a shaft down next to that sixty metres before they hit the upper level of the outpost. A number of areas have collapsed from neglect, frankly it's a miracle that the entire thing hasn't fallen in on itself after all this time but there are still many areas intact."

"Sixty metres is too deep for any EMP to reach them." Bernard pointed out.

"Not to mention how the ferals will react to us detonating a nuke over their heads." Ash added.

"I don't see a bunch of people who want to live in the trees causing us much trouble." Willis said.

"Nevertheless we don't have permission to fire a nuclear weapon at their territory as well." Reeves said, "So that limits us to a more conventional means of attack. Professor do you know of any easy way of destroying that outpost?"

"Destroy it? I've spent years trying to excavate it. Isn't there some way you can make it safe?"

"Firing a few gauss cannon rounds right down that shaft your Verne friends dug ought to make a fair portion of it a lot safer." Shaw commented.

"How far does the outpost stretch for professor?" Knight said.

"So far the excavation has uncovered structures spread over six square kilometres but my team has conducted scans through the collapsed sections that suggest it stretches for several times that. Picture a complete city built underground. It really is amazing you know. I think that the civilisation that built it was entirely subterranean in nature."

"Operating that deep down must need a controlled environment." Bernard said, "Light, clean air, heat, pumps to stop it flooding."

"It does. All that was installed by the Verne and there is a unit of robots to maintain the system as well as expand it as new areas of the outpost are opened up." Gruber said.

"What about power for all of that?" Bernard responded.

"Why fusion generators of course." Gruber said.

"But are they on the surface or have they been sent underground as well?" Bernard asked.

"They are underground. The Verne saw it as a precaution against anything happening to the link to the

surface. If that was cut then the research team underground could survive long enough to be rescued.”

Gruber answered and Bernard smiled as he turned back to Reeves.

“There you have it captain. We blow the reactors. Or more specifically we blow the fuel for the reactors. All that hydrogen will make quite a bang.” he said.

“Basically an improvised thermobaric bomb.” Willis said.

“Exactly. Just the sort of thing to clear out an underground complex. Combine that with a gauss cannon strike to collapse whatever’s left of shafts to the surface as well as any part of the complex that’s above ground and I think we’ll be able to say that the problem will be buried for good.”

“What sort of security can we expect?” Willis said.

“There was very little when I was last there. It just wasn’t needed.” Gruber said.

“Well we can’t rely on that still being the case professor.” Reeves said and he looked at Lucas, “Lieutenant I want you to liaise with the *Leonardo Da Vinci*. Get them to examine the target area from orbit and send the data they gather to you. Major Willis?”

“Yes captain?”

“Major I want you to work with Professor Gruber. You need to build up the best possible model of the layout of that outpost, including any alternative ways in and out. Your primary focus is to be getting to the fusion reactor fuel but also consider the possibility of recovering any computer drives that may be present.” Reeves told him and Willis nodded.

“Yes captain.” he said.

“And Doctor Thundercloud I want you to speak with our patient.” Reeves added.

“The Verne who was affected by the AI?” Thundercloud replied.

“Yes him. I understand that the implants used by the Verne feature non-volatile memory.”

“Yes they do. Their doctor said it was a precaution against unexpected power loss.” Thundercloud said.

“That means that the memory cores of the implants in your patient’s head could still contain fragments of data relating to the AI. I want you to ask his permission to remove them. That way even if we can’t recover anything else from the outpost we’ll still have something to hand over to the admiral.” Reeves said and Thundercloud nodded.

“They’ll have to come out sooner or later anyway.” he said, “It may as well be sooner.”

“Very well. In that case unless anyone else has anything they want to say I think we’re done here.” Reeves said, “Lieutenant Commander Goldman would you kindly inform our Verne allies that we’re going to be using our nuclear arsenal against their country?”

INTERLUDE.

"Commander!" Vale yelled out just as Hayes was getting into an elevator and she reached out her hand to hold the door before it could close fully.

"What is it Enrico?" she asked as he ground to a halt just outside the elevator, "I was about to leave."

"Commander I need to talk to you alone." Vale said and he glanced at the other two people in the elevator. Both of them were research staff such as himself though he was not familiar with either of them personally.

"Get out." Hayes said without turning away from Vale. Then when neither of the other two individuals in the elevator moved she glared at them, "I said get out!" she yelled and the pair flinched before darting out of the elevator while Hayes reached out and dragged Vale inside it before closing the door, "Okay what's so important you come running after me Enrico?" she asked.

"I just saw a report from one of our intelligence assets in the Commonwealth." Vale said, "The Commonwealth has authorised a nuclear attack on Verne."

Hayes' eyes widened.

"They wouldn't dare." she hissed but Vale nodded.

"They've done it commander." he said, "Admiral Mitchell sent a request to their fleet command and fleet command passed the request on to their security committee where our informant got the information."

Hayes pressed the button to open the elevator door again and when it opened she pulled Vale out with her, hurrying past the pair she had just ordered out of the elevator moments earlier.

"It's all yours." she said as she and Vale passed them.

Making her way back to her office Hayes sat at her desk.

"The Old Man needs to know about this." she said as she activated the communicator built into her desk, placing a call to her superior.

"Hello Jennifer." the Old Man's voice said when he answered, "I take it that Mister Vale has just informed you of the Commonwealth's decision to launch a nuclear strike against Verne."

"So you already know about that?" Hayes asked.

"Of course I know Jennifer. A report as important as that doesn't get distributed to individuals such as yourself or Mister Vale before everyone at my level has already seen it."

"So doesn't it bother you that Verne is about to be turned into a big pile of radioactive rubble?" Hayes asked.

"Calm down Jennifer. The Commonwealth is obviously aware of the alien AI on Verne and are taking steps to prevent it from spreading." the Old Man said,.

"By nuking it?" Hayes said.

"Somehow I think that there is more to this than meets the eye Jennifer. Think about this for a moment. The Commonwealth has a single heavy cruiser in the CPD sixty-six thirty-seven oh-three system and if that ship is going to attack Verne then it is first going to have to deal with their entire fleet. Now we both know that Commonwealth warships are superior to Verne ones and their crews significantly more experienced in combat but not enough that one cruiser can take out their entire fleet. Not to mention the Verne's surface defences. Even if that fleet has been fractured by the alien AI I doubt that either side would want their home planet being bombed to cinders from space. Don't you agree?"

"Then why is the Commonwealth ordering a nuclear attack?" Hayes said.

"They aren't." the Old Man said, "Look carefully at the chain of events Jennifer."

"He's right." Vale commented, "Admiral Mitchell went to her superiors and they went to the committee. That means the request to use nuclear weapons came from the captain of the Commonwealth ship himself."

"Which means he and his crew have probably found some weakness in the way the AI is affecting the planet that the use of one or more nuclear weapons can exploit. Perhaps a central control station buried deep underground that a nuclear ground burst would destroy."

"The dig site." Hayes said.

"Precisely. The dig site." the Old Man replied, "You may want to consider warning your team that the Commonwealth intends to use its strategic deterrent. Now unless there is anything else you need to discuss urgently my granddaughter is expecting me for dinner." and then he ended the call.

"How quickly can we get a message to Martins?" Hayes asked, looking up at Vale.

"Two and a half hours." Vale answered, "But given how long it's taken for this information to get to me—"

"The Commonwealth could already be bombing Verne." Hayes interrupted.

20.

"Elevators. This could be it." Conrad said as he pulled his head back around the corner and looked at his men, "The way is clear but someone could come out of one of those elevators at any moment so let's stay alert." and then he stepped around the corner. With his rifle pointing towards the cluster of elevators ahead of him he advanced along the corridor, ready just in case any of them opened suddenly.

Conrad's team reached the elevators without incident and Conrad himself stepped into the only one of them that was already open and took a look at the control panel, smiling when he saw that it only went down. Another of his men stepped into the elevator but Conrad stopped him before he could get more than a single step inside.

"No, we're not taking the elevator." he said, "Too risky if someone's waiting for us at the bottom of the shaft."

"Looks like there's an emergency ladder over here." another of Conrad's men said.

"Let me see." Conrad replied and he walked over to the door his subordinate had found that was labelled 'For Emergency Use.' Sure enough the door opened into a shaft that contained a ladder that led downwards in parallel with the elevator shafts and it appeared that the ladder shaft doubled as a maintenance access shaft for these, the elevator shafts visible on the other side of narrow platforms that separated the ladder from them.

"Okay this is our route down." Conrad said, "We move individually, each one of us climbing down to the next one of these platforms that's free to provide cover until we reach the bottom. Then all of us exit the shaft at once. I'll go first."

Conrad then stepped into the shaft, slinging his rifle before taking hold of the first rung of the ladder and starting to descend to the next level down. As soon as he reached this he stepped off the ladder and onto the platform that divided the ladder shaft from the elevators and unslung his rifle again. There was no actual exit from the shaft at this point, the level existing purely as a way of dividing up the shaft into sections that were easier to maintain than a single continuous run. As soon as he was aiming his rifle down the shaft the next of Conrad's men followed him down, climbing past Conrad until he reached the next level below him and it was then that he stepped onto the platform there before the next soldier began his descent.

The team continued in this manner until the first of them reached the bottom of the shaft and aimed his rifle at the exit, at which point all the soldiers above him began to descend the ladder to join him.

"Stand by on that door." Conrad told the soldier closest to the door control panel as he unslung his rifle and brought it up to his shoulder and the man hovered his hand over the switch to open the door and when Conrad nodded he slammed his hand down on it.

The door slid open immediately and Conrad charged out of the shaft to find a group of Verne researchers in the process of building a barricade around the access to the elevators and ladder shaft. This was obviously meant to act as some last line of defence but the weapons that would be used to protect it had yet to be issued and Conrad did not intend to wait for the Verne to be able to arm themselves. Firing a short burst from his rifle, Conrad sent one of the Verne tumbling over the partially built barricade while his men followed him out of the shaft and also began firing.

Surprisingly, rather than attempt to flee or seek cover the Verne working on the barricade turned towards the attacking soldiers and charged towards them. Some held tools in their hands that they pressed into service as improvised weapons while others simply sought to attack Conrad's men with their bare hands. Whether armed or not their assaults were futile against Conrad and his men. All of the soldiers wore body armour that resisted the impacts and slashes of the crude weapons while the muscular build of the team was more than a match for those Verne who attempted to wrestle their own weapons away from them and the battle was over almost as soon as it had begun.

"Anyone hurt?" Conrad asked, looking around at his men while they stood over the bodies of the Verne.

"Just a minor flesh wound." one of his men replied, indicating where blood was seeping through a hole in the sleeve of his combat jacket, "The guy had a nail gun. Good job those things can't be aimed very well."

"Apply a dressing." Conrad told him as he turned to take his first proper look at where the ladder shaft had brought them. The inside of the operations centre looked very similar to the structure on the surface though the air was somewhat cooler this deep underground, "We need to find a way to whatever it is the Verne are excavating down here."

The first door that the soldiers tried along the corridor on the other side of the unfinished barricade led to an unoccupied meeting room where the entire opposite wall was a window that looked out into the cavern where the Verne were excavating the alien outpost and Conrad beckoned for his men to follow him inside. Making his way across the room he picked up one of the metal framed chairs around the table and hurled it at the glass with enough force to send it crashing right through the window and scattering glass across the cavern floor on the other side.

"Out we go." he told his men.

"What about the Verne?" one of them responded.

"We aren't here to take prisoners and if those guys by the elevators are anything to go by I don't think anyone down here is going to want to talk to us." Conrad replied, "So your orders are to shoot first and shoot to kill."

"This is everything the Verne ships have sent us." Lucas told Willis when they gathered in her quarters to plan an attack on the dig site

"Looking at these images it's obvious that the AI is taking steps to protect itself." Willis said as he studied the images taken by the Verne ships on the tablet she had handed him as she passed a second tablet to Gruber. "Do you think your soldiers can beat these reinforcements?" Gruber asked.

"Easily." Willis answered and Gruber frowned.

"But their powered armour-" he began before the marine officer interrupted him.

"Won't count for much if we don't engage them directly." he said, "Look, they're preparing a kill zone around your camp here so we can just flatten most of that from orbit with a single gauss cannon round now that we've cleared out their ships. Any survivors we can target with air launched support missiles directed by my men on the ground. The problem is going to be getting to our targets underground."

"I promise you Major Willis, the map I have given you is accurate. You have the location of the reactor fuel supplies and the particle inductor manufacturing facility that is the most likely source of this alien computer program."

"Perhaps, but you can't tell me what defences there are between these two places and the shaft leading to the surface. Given the area this outpost supposedly covers there could be an entire brigade of heavy infantry down there. I doubt the Verne could have lifted that many there in the time they've had without us seeing them but we should plan on there being at least a company sized force to deal with."

"Given how defending a fixed position renders most of the advantages of enhanced infantry useless it'll probably be heavy infantry against your light." Lucas said and Willis nodded in agreement.

"My men will need to load up with every general purpose machine gun and grenade launcher we've got in the armoury." he said.

"Grenades? Won't that risk a cave in?" Gruber asked.

"Not using shaped charge rounds professor." Willis told him, "We couldn't use them aboard the *Warspite* but down on the surface, or even under it, the gloves can come off. It's all going to be about weight of fire against targets in powered armour. Belt fed weapons can put out enough rounds to find a weak spot at a joint or such and a HEAP round will make a fist sized entry wound and a dinner plate sized exit one. But there's no need to worry about an explosion bringing the roof down on us. Not until we blow the reactor fuel anyway."

"What about ammunition?" Lucas said, "Sustained automatic firing is going to go through the standard marine load out pretty quickly."

"This is only a short duration raid." Willis said, "My men can limit their other equipment and load up with extra ammo. Plus a few robots to haul extra belts and magazines should do the trick. We still need to find a way of rigging the reactor fuel to blow while still being able to get back out of the facility without worrying about whatever we leave behind being disarmed though. It'll take far too long to guarantee that there aren't any Verne left down there. Normally I'd have an anti-tamper trigger fitted but that would just risk the charge going off before we're clear."

"Are you thinking multiple devices?" Lucas said.

"Yeah, cutting charges should do the trick and applying one to each fuel tank should provide enough redundancy to make sure at least one lasts long enough to go off." Willis replied.

"So you can do this?" Gruber said.

"Maybe." Willis answered, "But seeing how much effort the Verne are putting into fortifying the site I'd be surprised if they aren't fortifying the cavern as well. If I was in their position I'd be rigging up ambush points around all the key locations. They have to know just how vulnerable the reactor and computers are and they know the routes from the elevators to them both."

"A shame the Verne never decided to install a surveillance system in the caverns." Gruber said, shaking his head, "We could have used that to see what was ahead."

Lucas suddenly noticed that Willis was smiling.

"What?" she said.

"We've got a bunch of suits of Verne powered armour in storage that we took from their boarding party." he said and Lucas smiled back at him.

"You're suggesting that we put some of your men in a suit so they can act as scouts for you?" she asked.

"Not quite. Unfortunately none of my men are rated for operating powered armour." Willis told her and Lucas frowned.

"So what? Surely you can't be thinking of using a robot."

"Of course not. A robot would need constant orders that we may not be able to deliver." Willis said.

"So you'll be sending one of the Verne marines in ahead of you?" Gruber said.

"That's risky." Lucas said, "If they're discovered there's the chance that the AI could corrupt them. But I don't see what else we can do if no-one aboard the *Warspite* is trained to operate powered armour."

"That's not quite true." Willis said and he reached for the intercom, "Bridge this is Willis." he said into it, "Is Lieutenant Commander Ash there?"

"Ash?" Lucas said in surprise, "How does a helmsman know how to operate powered armour?"

"He wasn't always a helmsman." Willis reminded her, "He was a fighter pilot until he had his accident. He spent several months learning to walk again during which time—"

"During which time he was fitted with a medical exoskeleton." Lucas interrupted.

"Exactly," Willis said, "and as a consequence he knows how to operate exoskeletons, including those with armour plating all over them."

Conrad's team ran down what had been an underground street thousands of years earlier but that now was just an area of open ground between several ruined structures that had rubble piled up at regular intervals. Marks in the dust that remained on the road suggested that the Verne had used some sort of wheeled vehicles in the cavern but there had been no signs of these since Conrad and his men arrived. There were also few signs of any of the Verne themselves, suggesting that most of the research team was now being pressed into service as labourers for the fortification work on the surface.

The clearest sign of the Verne presence in the cavern were the cables strung up between structures that provided the power needed for the lighting that had been installed and Conrad's team used these to assist in their navigation. The thickest cables were those that came directly from the operations centre where the fusion reactors were located and as they spread throughout the cavern the cables became progressively thinner as the current they were required to carry decreased. However, not every spur in the cable network led to cables of equal thickness emerging from them and Conrad looked closely at the direction in which the thickest cables went.

"There." he said, pointing out a thick cable that ran into a large hole that had been drilled directly into the cavern wall rather than into any of the surrounding structures, "Does that look like there's something in there that the Verne think needs a lot more power than just a few lights?"

"You think that's where the computers are?" one of his men asked and Conrad nodded.

"I can't think of anything else they'd want the juice for." he said, "English, Letterman, move in and take a closer look. We'll cover you from out here."

The two soldiers darted across the road towards a hole in the cavern wall where the power cable entered it. The hole was large enough for an adult to pass through and there was light shining from the other side of it that proved the Verne considered the structure worth studying closely. Pausing either side of this, one of them peered through the hole into the darkness on the other side before both leapt through together.

It was at this point that a robotic sentry system concealed within what looked like an ordinary packing crate opened fire. Fitted with a machine gun that operated on gauss technology and guided by a thermal sensor, the weapon picked up the body heat of the intruders through the material of the crate and used a single sustained burst to attack them. The two soldiers Conrad had sent ahead came close to being cut in half by the automated weapon system and in response some of Conrad's men out in the street fired their weapons through the hole.

"Cease fire!" Conrad yelled, "Wait for a target."

The unit did not have to wait long for the sentry to reveal itself to them. Now that it was active the machine locked onto the soldiers' body heat and drove forwards on its tracked mount, barging through what remained of the crate it had been hidden inside. The robot made its way to the hole in the wall and turned its weapon mounting to face outside before firing the machine gun again.

"Down!" Conrad snapped as magnetically accelerated projectiles flew past his head and he threw himself to the ground before returning fire at the sentry.

Around him his men followed suit, firing their rifles at the robot but without any noticeable effect, as a combat unit the machine had been fitted with armour plating to protect its vital systems from small arms fire and the rounds produced sparks as they bounced off. One of Conrad's men loaded a grenade round into the launcher mounted beneath his rifle's barrel.

"Don't." Conrad told him, "No explosives until we can be certain about what that thing is protecting. I don't think Commander Hayes will be very happy if we blow up what she wants us to recover. We've got to draw that thing out here where we can deal with it." Conrad then reached into his webbing and produced a flare. Striking the end of this against the cavern floor to ignite it he hurled the burning flare towards the robot sentry. Around him his men copied this and there was soon a cluster of brightly burning flares obscuring the thermal signatures of them from the robot sentry. The robot's programming was advanced enough to enable the machine to recognise that the heat signatures that were dominating its sensor readings were a form of countermeasure rather than human soldiers. In response to this the robot turned its chassis on the spot so that it faced through the hole in the wall before driving out into the street.

"Quick, get round the side." Conrad ordered the soldier armed with the grenade launcher while he fired his

own rifle at the advancing robot to keep its attention. The rest of Conrad's men copied this, firing on semi-automatic to conserve their ammunition while convincing the robot that the primary threat remained directly ahead of it. Meanwhile the grenade launcher armed soldier had reached a position where the structure behind the robot was no longer in his direct line of fire and he ground to a halt as he aimed the weapon at the advancing machine. The rifle kicked as the grenade launcher mounted beneath it was fired and the explosive projectile flew towards the sentry in an arc before striking the machine at the point where its weapon mounting met its chassis and exploded on impact. The soldier had selected a shaped charge round to deal with the armoured robot and the direction blast ripped the gauss machine gun from its mounting, disarming it. In addition to this the jet of molten metal travelled downwards into the machine's innards, shattering and melting its control circuitry before the battery pack was hit by the jet and the sudden increase in temperature was sufficient to cause the entire robot to burst into flames as the battery caught fire burst open to spill its burning contents throughout what was left of the machine.

"Come on." Conrad told his men as he got back to his feet, "We need to find out what that thing was protecting." and he rushed towards the hole in the wall that the robot had emerged through.

The soldiers came to a halt just outside the hole as Conrad looked through to see if there were any further defences inside. He could clearly see the ruined crate that the sentry had been concealed inside but there were no indications that any further machines were present. Cautiously he stepped through the hole, keeping his rifle at his shoulder ready for use in an instant should there be any further defences but nothing happened.

"Bag them up." he said as he stepped over the bodies of English and Letterman, "We can't leave them behind."

Despite a power cable having been run into the chamber there were no lights in it and Conrad could see only what the beam of the flash light fitted to his rifle illuminated.

"Are these particle inductors?" one of Conrad's men asked when he stepped through the hole and turned on his own flash light.

"That's what they look like to me." Conrad answered, nodding as he directed his flash light at the rows of particle inductors himself, "Lots of them. No wonder the Verne considered this worth protecting."

"I think there's more through there. Look." another of his men commented, pointing to the far side of the chamber where the power cable they had followed went through a doorway.

"Okay let's check it out." Conrad said and his unit began to make their way between the rows of particle inductors towards the doorway. As they drew closer they began to hear a soft humming sound from the room on the other side. There was also a faint glow coming through the doorway though it was obvious that the room had not been fitted with lighting either, so the most reasonable explanation was that the room contained some form of electronic equipment that was producing the light.

Conrad peered through the doorway first and his eyes widened when he saw what was on the other side. As expected the power cable was being used to operate some sort of electronic equipment centred around three drum shaped devices with lights mounted near the tops that were producing the glow Conrad and his men had seen from the chamber outside. However, it was not the electronic equipment that startled Conrad, instead it was what was lined up beside the three devices. Here a row of folding metal chairs had been set up and in each of them sat a Verne who was secured in place with tape. Each of these Verne was slumped forwards in their chair and this made it possible to see that physical connections had been made from some of their exposed implants to the three devices behind them. Pointing his rifle directly at the nearest of these people, the flash light beam revealed that the connection had been made crudely and the back of the man's head was covered in blood that had dripped down onto the floor as well.

"What the hell is this?" Conrad said, stepping through the doorway while keeping his rifle trained on the man taped to the chair nearest to him.

"Do you think they even know we're here?" the next soldier through the doorway asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Conrad replied. Then he looked at the devices the Verne were hooked up to, "But I think that those are what the doc wants."

Walking to the closest of the devices Conrad saw that it was connected to two of the seated Verne. This close he could see that the bundle of wires making the connection linked to several of the Verne's implants. It was obvious that the devices could not be moved while the Verne were still connected to them. Although there were numerous wires connected to the back of the Verne's head these all ran to a single connector port on the device and, lacking any indication of the proper procedure for separating the Verne from the device he simply reached out and unplugged the single connector from the device.

The link to the device broken, the Verne suddenly sat up straight and screamed before beginning to cough up blood. Startled by this unexpected outburst Conrad's men all aimed their rifles at the Verne before Conrad himself signalled for them to lower their weapons. Slowly, the man turned his head towards Conrad and looked up at him.

"You destroyed the guardian." he said softly, "It knows. They're coming."

"I don't like the sound of that." one of Conrad's men said, "Who do you suppose 'they' are?"

"Probably the soldiers the Verne shipped in." Conrad replied.

"And what do we do about these guys?" another of the soldiers asked.

The Verne then groaned.

"Kill me." he said as more blood began to leak from his nostrils and Conrad shrugged. Slinging his rifle over his shoulder he reached out and grabbed the Verne man's head, placing one hand on either side of his skull before twisting his head sharply.

"If that's what you want." Conrad said and this produced a sudden 'crack' as the Verne's neck broke. Then when Conrad released his grip the Verne slumped forwards lifelessly and he looked at his men, "Deal with the others." he told them, "I'm going to figure out how we can move these things." and he slapped the nearest of the alien computer cores.

Standing in the cargo hold Willis and Lucas watched Ash inspecting a suit of Verne powered armour. Behind them stood Lieutenant Garcia who had been brought here to advise on how the machine operated.

"So can you do it?" Willis asked and Ash stared at him

"What, pilot this tin can? Of course." he replied, "Using all the gadgets built into it may be a different matter though." and he looked at Garcia, "How much depends on your implants?" he asked.

"Nothing requires them but the control is more efficient with them." he said, "You can activate communications and select between the rounds loaded into the grenade launcher using voice command. Firing the weapons requires you to clench your fists like this." and he held up his fist, clenching it to demonstrate the movement required to fire the power armour's weapons, "There are motion sensors within the gauntlets that pick up on the motion while your hand is empty. Obviously you clench the right hand to fire the laser on your right arm and the left to fire the grenade launcher on that side."

"We'll need to get some grenades from the Verne ships." Willis said, "Lieutenant Garcia, do you have shaped charge rounds?"

"Of course. We use them for attacking light vehicles and targets in powered armour such as this."

"Pretty much the same as us then." Willis said, nodding.

"The suit will need configuring for him." Garcia pointed out, "That will take a properly set up computer terminal to accomplish but there'll be one of those aboard the *Leonardo Da Vinci*. They'll have the grenades you want as well."

"How long will all that take?" Willis said.

"About two or three hours plus however long it takes to get the equipment here." Garcia told him.

"That's enough time for me to get my men ready to go and prep the dropships." Willis responded, turning to look at Lucas, "Would you mind telling the captain we need to borrow his helmsman for a surface assault?"

"Oh sure, I get the hard part." Lucas replied, frowning.

The alien computer cores rested in their mountings under their own weight but the cabling that connected them to the outpost's data network required specific tools to disconnect. Lacking these Conrad and his men simply ripped the cables out of one of the devices and watched as the lights on its surface went out.

"Right, let's see how much this thing weighs." Conrad said and he and one of his men then took hold of the computer between them and slowly lifted it free of its mountings and set it down on the floor.

"That's damned heavy sir." the other soldier said and Conrad nodded in agreement.

"Four of us could carry it but we'll only be able to take one with us." he said.

"What about the others sir?" the other soldier asked and Conrad looked at the other two computer cores.

"We blow them." he said, taking a grenade from his webbing. Then he looked at another of his men, "I want to blow this entire place as well. I want to cause enough damage that whatever it is that's controlling the Verne won't know for certain that we were able to get away with one of their computers."

"The reactor fuel will make a bang big enough to burn everything. One small charge ought to be enough to trigger it." the soldier replied and Conrad nodded again.

"Then we've got a plan. Grab that computer and get going. I'm going to deal with the others." he said.

The bridge was fully manned as Reeves took a key that was fixed to his belt by a length of chain from his pocket and held it up to Knight. In turn Knight took an identical key from his own pocket and the two officers inserted them into the consoles in front of them. As soon as they turned their keys a klaxon sounded across the bridge and one of the missile gunners spoke.

"Captain, the launch controls for missile tubes eighty-one through ninety-six are now live." he said.

"You have the targeting information for the missiles?" Reeves asked and the gunner nodded.

"Yes sir. Missiles eighty-one through eighty-six have warhead release and individual aim points programmed in. High altitude detonation is set for all warheads." he said.

"On my command you are to launch missiles eighty-one through eighty-six." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain. Ready to fire." the gunner said.

"Launch." Reeves said and the gunner pressed the button to which the six nuclear tipped missiles had been

slaved, triggering the launch sequence of all six simultaneously.

The six missiles burst out of their launchers and angled towards the planet below, each missile taking a slightly different path that saw them spread apart. The nose cones of each missile split open before reaching the uppermost reaches of Verne's atmosphere and from inside each missile eight independent warheads emerged, spreading themselves out so that their blasts would blanket the entire nation below.

"Captain I've got surface launches." Cortez announced.

"Confirmed." Goldman added, "Thermal flares and radar and lidar tracks of fast moving objects gaining altitude. Forty-eight in total."

"One for each of our warheads." Knight commented and Reeves nodded in agreement.

"Probably surface to air anti-ballistic missiles intending to intercept them." he said.

"Yes captain." Lucas added, "The profiles match what we know about Verne missile defences and the launch site tally with the information Colonel Dator provided."

"Will they reach our nukes before they explode?" Thomas asked and Lucas shook her head.

"No. If we were going for an ordinary air burst then they'd have plenty of time to intercept but it'll take four and a half minutes for the Verne missiles to reach the thermosphere. Our warheads are already entering it."

"Detonation in ten seconds." the gunner who had fired the missiles announced, "Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One."

21.

Colonel Dator had been warned about the timing of the missile launch and despite the warheads being set to detonate far above the surface he had ordered everyone at the base to take cover. Dator himself was in the command centre standing beside the large strategic planning console. Under normal circumstances the officers that would gather around this would use their implants to interact with the display but on this occasion the colonel and his subordinates were having to get used to using tablets as control interfaces. The console had shown more AI controlled forces gathering to surround Fort Herman Kahn. There were few heavily armoured units among this new wave of forces so far but Dator had felt sure that they would be coming as well. However, now that the *Warspite* had launched its missiles he hoped that the impending assault would never happen.

"Picking up launches from surface defence batteries." a technician announced.

"Likelihood of intercept?" Dator asked.

"None assuming the information provided to us by the Commonwealth crew is correct sir." the technician replied.

"Commonwealth warheads entering the atmosphere now colonel." Dator's immediate subordinate said looking up from the planning console that now also showed the path of the missiles as well as their projected points of detonation.

"Everyone get ready." Dator announced, "Prepare for nuclear detonation."

The command centre crew began to hurriedly shut down their equipment, limiting the damage that an electromagnetic pulse could have if anything went wrong with the warheads' pre-programmed detonation altitude or the shielding built into their own systems. This shut down most of the tracking systems being used to feed data to the command staff and Dator and his subordinate instead had to rely on projections shown on the tablets that they kept running.

"Here it comes." Dator's immediate subordinate said as the countdown approached zero.

The tablets' timings were exact and as soon as the timer read zero there was a brilliant flash of light in the sky outside. This was invisible from inside the windowless command centre but outside the entire sky was lit up and seconds later everyone on the base, no matter how thick the shelter they had sought was heard a massive clap of thunder.

Away from Fort Herman Kahn, where the warning about the impending missile strike was limited to the time between the Verne tracking system detecting the missiles and their exploding high up in the atmosphere the AI controlled Verne had little opportunity to try and reach shelter. The tracking system had not predicted the use of the nuclear weapons to create an EMP large enough to affect the entire country and so the Verne response had been based on the assumption that the warheads would be used to create nuclear airbursts several hundred metres above the ground instead, supposedly giving their defences plenty of time to intercept them. These factors combined meant that neither AI controlled Verne personnel or equipment was prepared for what happened when the warheads exploded.

Exploding so high up in the atmosphere meant that very few people happened to be looking directly towards the blasts when they occurred, sparing the population from mass blinding due to destruction of the optic nerve. However, the long lengths of fine wires on which the Verne's neurological cybernetic implants depended for conducting power and data around their brains acted as antennas for the powerful magnetic fields created by the explosions and this induced sudden uncontrolled spikes of current to pass between different implants, the size limitations of which prevented the inclusion of current and voltage suppressing protection components. These uncontrolled surges of power destroyed the sensitive electronic devices on which the implants depended for their functionality and in a moment every exposed Verne found themselves freed of the control of the alien AI as their implants shut down.

Just as had happened to Crewman Bader when his implants had been shut down in the *Warspite's* infirmary the affected Verne lapsed into unconsciousness. It was at this point that the unavoidable fatalities occurred. Some Verne fell from significant heights while vehicles being operated manually suddenly went out of control and crashed as their drivers blacked out. This affected both ground and air vehicles with trucks running off roads and aircraft plummeting to the ground and exploding on impact.

Meanwhile in the command centre at Fort Herman Kahn, Colonel Dator waited until he could be reasonably sure that all of the *Warspite's* nuclear warheads had detonated.

"Systems on." he ordered, "I want to know what's going on out there now!"

From space it had appeared for a few moments as if the whole of the nation of Verne had been consumed in brilliant white light when the nuclear warheads exploded and triggered the electromagnetic pulse. Some of the energy of this pulse travelled up into space where it temporarily blinded the ships orbiting overhead. Fortunately for them the heavy shielding used to protect their crews from the dangers of space also kept out

the pulse and the starships remained unaffected.

"Detonations confirmed captain." Goldman said, "All missiles detonated within fifty metres of their target points."

"How much of the country was affected by the EMP? Did we get full coverage?" Knight asked.

"Yes commander. According to my readings the strength of the pulse will have been enough to disrupt the implants of every Verne not in a shielded structure.

"Captain we're picking up explosions on the surface." Cortez added.

"Most look like aircraft crashes." Goldman said, "But some are probably surface collisions as well. I can't give you any numbers about casualties though."

"That's alright commander. I think we can leave Colonel Dator to deal with them" Reeves said, "Helm adjust our orbit so we are over the second target zone. Sensors pass targeting data to weapons for an orbital strike. Commander Goldman warn our marines to prepare to drop."

Turning rapidly in space the *Warspite* moved around the planet, leaving the smaller Verne ships to watch over their homeland while joining up with the frigate *Leonardo da Vinci* above the dig site.

"Captain it looks like we've got two platoons of heavy infantry moving towards the target. One is coming from the south east and the other from the west." Goldman said.

"Can we target them from orbit?" Reeves asked.

"I've got a lock on their position captain." a gunner answered, "If we fire on that location they won't have chance to get out of the area of effect before the rounds hit."

"How many rounds will it take?" Knight said.

"Two. Four to be sure. That'll be two round per platoon." the gunner replied.

"Open fire, two round per target." Reeves ordered and the gunner nodded before firing the *Warspite's* remaining gauss cannon. The ventrally mounted turret fired its four rounds in under two seconds, with two pairs of projectiles spreading out as they raced towards the two platoons of AI controlled Verne troops. The clap of thunder from above them warned the soldiers about the approaching projectiles but they knew that they had no chance of avoiding them and instead threw themselves to the ground, seeking to gain what cover they could in the hope that the gauss cannon rounds would be sufficiently off target that they would only be on the outskirts of the area of effect where their armour would be enough to protect them. However, the targeting was precise and both projectiles from each pair landed among the Verne troops. The shock wave created by the impact was enough to hurl the ground around the exact point of impact, as well as the Verne troops on top of it up into the air and several hundred metres away from it. The Verne power armour was enough to protect the wearers from the sudden change in pressure caused by the shock wave but even the thick composite armour plating was insufficient to protect them from the cloud of debris that battered against them as they flew through the air. Of two full platoons only half a dozen of the Verne troops survived long enough to hit the ground and all of these were killed by the force of the impact, their armour split wide open when they hit the ground.

"Rounds on target captain." the gunner reported.

"How long until we can get an accurate damage assessment?" Knight asked.

"Not for at least fifteen minutes." Goldman responded, "There's too much debris in the air."

"By that time any surviving Verne will have moved on." Reeves said, "Major Willis and his men will just have to deal with the survivors on the ground. Tell them to launch."

"Yes captain." Goldman said before activating the intercom, "Bridge to hangar. Scramble. Scramble. Scramble."

Carrying a platoon of Commonwealth marines each, four dropships shot from the *Warspite's* rear hangar while in the absence of their dedicated launch tubes a pair of fighters emerged from the forward hangar at the same time. These tiny craft turned sharply and began to follow a course similar to the trajectory of the gauss cannon rounds launched previously. However, unlike the steep atmospheric entry path that the projectiles took the dropships and their escorts took a much shallower path to avoid burning as they entered the planet's atmosphere.

"Looks like we're in the clear." Mori told Shaw in the lead fighter as soon as the disruption to communications and sensors caused by atmospheric entry cleared and he was able to search the skies around them, "I'm not reading any hostile craft or ground fire."

"Thanks Kaz." Shaw replied before activating the fighter's communications, "*Warspite* this is Archangel, we're in the clear. No signs of hostile activity. Heading towards the landing zone now."

"Copy that Archangel, we've nothing on our scopes either." Goldman responded.

The area struck by the *Warspite's* brief bombardment was still clouded by smoke and dust that rose up hundreds of metres into the air and the dropships and fighters banked around this as they flew towards the Verne dig site. Not knowing the full extent of the defences present there, the dropships did not make directly for the dig site. Instead they hovered just above the trees a little over five kilometres from the site and their passengers slid down lines to the ground. At this distance it was hoped that any defence at the dig site small enough to have avoided detection from space would be out of range of vulnerable hovering dropships. In the

dropship that carried Willis' company command section Willis himself turned to Ash in his powered armour. "Ready?" he asked.

"I think so." Ash answered, getting to his feet and walking to the open hatchway at the rear of the dropship. Instead of sliding down a line like the marines, Ash's armoured suit was connected to a cargo winch by a pair of marines and then lowered the ground where another marine who had already made his drop unhooked the cable, "Okay I'm on the ground." Ash reported.

"Great, I'm on my way down now." Willis replied and the marine officer slid down his line, landing just over a metre in front of Ash. Unhooking himself from his drop line Willis then looked around and produced a compact tablet on which he called up a map of the area, "Right we're here." he said, holding out the map so that Ash could see it, "We need to head east to get to the dig site. I want you to hang back with my section until we get there. Then you can head down into the caverns to see what the AI has got waiting for us."

Ash looked up into the sky as the dropships started to pull away and circle.

"But those guys will be sticking close. Right?" he asked.

"Oh don't worry about them." Willis told him, "We can call in their missiles from ten kilometres away if we need them. Which hopefully we won't. Now let's get moving, I don't like hanging around where anyone could have seen us drop."

"Did you feel that?" one of Conrad's men said as the cavern shook slightly and Conrad nodded.

"Orbital bombardment." he said, "Not close and not very big either."

"So who's doing the shooting?" another of his men said.

"The Commonwealth probably. Which they'll only be doing if they're about to send in troops." Conrad replied, "So let's hurry this up. We need to avoid their marines at all costs."

"The exit's just up ahead." another of his men said, pointing towards the Verne operations centre where not only the way out of the cavern was located but also the fusion reactors that powered the facility. It was easy for Conrad's men to identify which part of the prefabricated structure housed the power plant from the thick cables that emerged at that point and they followed the wall to locate the closest entrance to that point. This was just a few metres from the entry point of the power cable cluster and immediately upon passing through this doorway Conrad and his unit found themselves in a short corridor that had a door to the side that was clearly labelled 'REACTOR ROOM – ENTRY RESTRICTED'.

"Either side." Conrad said softly and he and his men took up positions either side of the door, ready to storm the reactor room as soon as he gave the order. Reaching for the door handle one of Conrad's men nodded when he turned it and found the door unlocked, "Go!" Conrad snapped when he saw this and the soldier flung open the door before leaping back to allow the rest of the unit to charge through with their rifles held ready.

"Clear!" the first of them through the doorway shouted when he saw the deserted reactor room.

"Where are the fuel tanks?" Conrad asked when he entered the room behind this soldier.

"Over here sir." the soldier who had suggested using an explosive device to ignite the fuel supply as he also entered the room, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and taking a preprepared explosive charge from his webbing. The soldier then darted towards the exposed fuel tanks and began to inspect them closely, searching for the best place to locate the charge so that when it went off it would ignite as much of the stored hydrogen fuel as possible in one go, thus triggering a chain reaction that would consume all of the stored fuel and create a fireball large enough to destroy everything in the cavern system, "This ought to do it." he said, pressing the malleable explosive against the side of one of the tanks of compressed hydrogen gas.

"What about triggering?" Conrad asked while he watched the charge being set.

"I can't say for certain how long it will take us to get clear of the blast area so a timer fuse isn't going to be a safe option but then again I don't think that our RF gear will penetrate all the rock above us." the soldier setting the charge answered, "Perhaps the *Grey Dawn* could send a signal strong enough to-"

"No." Conrad interrupted, "That would require the ship to position itself right above us and there's a Commonwealth cruiser up there still. Captain Martins will never agree to that."

"Then we'll have to use a relay. We can rig some of our radios to repeat a signal we send them and drop them at the bottom and top of the access shaft." the soldier said.

"That still leaves the chance that someone will find the charge and disarm it." another of the unit pointed out.

"I don't think that's going to be much of a risk." Conrad said, "The only people we've seen down here were the ones trying to fortify the entrance and we dealt with them. Anyone else will have to come down the access shaft so we'll disable that on our way out. A couple of grenades ought to do the trick quite nicely."

"What the hell was that?" O'Neil exclaimed when the *High Tide's* sensors picked up the massive energy bursts caused by the multiple detonation of the *Warspite's* nuclear weapons from the far side of the planet.

"A large scale energy burst, probably nuclear in origin that's reflecting off the upper atmosphere captain." the ship's sensor technician responded and O'Neil glared at him for answering the question that had been intended to be rhetorical.

Meanwhile behind O'Neil, Martins looked towards Horst.

"Care to offer an opinion doctor?" he asked.

"That sort of energy can only have come from multiple detonations in the thermosphere." she responded.

"That's too high up to do any damage." O'Neil commented.

"Yes but it would create a powerful EMP." Horst pointed out, "In fact without knowing exactly I'd say that the combined EMP would have covered the entire country of Verne." Horst said.

"But what good would that do?" O'Neil said, "Surely the Verne would protect their major systems against an attack like that."

"Yes they would." Horst said, "The worst a nuclear EMP can do is knock out power and civilian communications for a while. Most modern electronics are protected well enough to withstand one." then she paused.

"What's wrong doctor?" Martins said.

"Maybe the Commonwealth cruiser wasn't targeting the Verne systems. Maybe it was targeting the Verne themselves." Horst replied and O'Neil frowned.

"An EMP can't effect human beings doctor." he said sternly.

"No but it can affect the electronics the Verne implant in their brains. Captain O'Neil do you have any information on Verne implant technology?" Horst said.

"Some but not much. We just maintain a line of communication with the planet, all operations are conducted from the safe houses." the captain answered.

"Give her what you've got." Martins said, "Doctor, what are you thinking?"

"That perhaps the Commonwealth thinks it can purge the AI from the Verne by disabling their implants using an EMP. To interface complex electronics with the human brain is going to take some very delicate work and depending on exactly which parts of the brain you want to connect to you're going to need some pretty long bits of wire to get around the other important parts of the brain without damaging them. All of that's going to make for a pretty good antenna for the EMP. If the implants themselves are protected against sudden spikes then every Verne not inside a shielded bunker has probably just had their head fried."

"What effect would that have?" Martins asked and Horst shrugged.

"I don't know. That's not my field of expertise. But I'm willing to bet that if the AI is hiding inside Verne implants then blowing them up with an EMP will get rid of it. I doubt that it can exist in the biological parts of the brain as well. The Commonwealth may just have driven the AI from the nation of Verne entirely."

"Captain the AI ships are moving." Cortez announced.

"Looks like our little missile strike has their attention." Knight said.

"The AI is probably worried that we'll bombard the dig site itself." Reeves replied.

"Looks like they're heading right for us captain. Accelerating at two gees." Goldman said.

"Not using FTL though." Thomas added.

"They may not have enough tachyons to get back to FTL." Knight suggested.

"Which can only work to our advantage." Reeves said, "Helm turn us towards the enemy. Commander

Thomas I want a jump plotting that will bring us to within one light second of the enemy on their flank.

Weapons I want to give them a full broadside as soon as we drop out of FTL. With any luck we can take out half of them before they even have chance to turn their weapons towards us."

"Course plotted captain. This should bring us out about half a light second with the enemy to our port side." Thomas announced.

"Very good commander. Helm execute FTL when ready." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain, engaging FTL drive now." the helmsman responded. There was a short delay as the shell of tachyons needed for the *Warspite* to travel faster than light built up around the cruiser before it reached the critical point and the helmsman fired the ship's engines, sending it speeding towards the AI controlled vessels before it rapidly dropped back to sub light speed.

"Enemy vessels to port." Cortez called out.

"Open fire." Reeves ordered and the turrets that had already been turned to face to port began to fire.

As planned the AI controlled ships had not been able to predict where the *Warspite* would appear and they were caught with all of their own weapons facing directly forwards, ready to fire on the Commonwealth cruiser and its allies when they got within range of the ships in orbit around Verne. Now though the *Warspite's* turrets cut into the AI controlled ships, the X-ray lasers blasting two of the more powerful corvettes apart with their first volleys while the lighter free electron beam laser turrets raked across the hulls of the others. Only the remaining gauss cannon turret held its fire, the range being too great to accurately target vessels under power. The effect of this was devastating and half of the AI controlled vessels either exploded or were reduced to nothing but burning wrecks in a matter of seconds before they could even react.

Mounting only lighter weapons that could not harm the heavily armoured *Warspite* at extreme range, the remaining AI controlled ships ceased their acceleration towards Verne and instead turned towards the Commonwealth cruiser while it too began to turn in their direction. However, before the AI controlled vessels

could close to a more effective range the *Leonardo Da Vinci* suddenly dropped out of FTL behind them, repeating the *Warspite's* tactic of bombarding the lighter enemy ships from an unexpected direction. Making sudden turns that required using their stored gravitons to avoid crushing their crews, the AI controlled vessels turned to face the *Leonardo Da Vinci* and accelerated towards the Verne frigate. Accelerating straight at the larger warship the AI controlled vessels fired together and although they were much smaller than the frigate they could more than match its firepower by acting together. In addition to their beam weapons, the ships armed with missiles launched these at the frigate. Too small in number and yield, these represented little threat to a vessel specifically designed to protect against missile and attack craft attacks but it did compel the crew of the frigate to divert the fire from the ship's turrets to shoot them down. This left just the frigate's main gun to target the rapidly approaching ships. Behind the AI controlled ships the *Warspite* continued to close with them, accelerating faster than they could manage thanks to its artificial gravity field. However, now that the *Leonardo Da Vinci* was located right behind the weaving enemy ships targeting them now carried the risk of hitting the frigate and the *Warspite's* rate of fire slowed.

"The *Leonardo Da Vinci* is taking a pounding captain." Goldman said.

"Plus they're in our line of fire. That AI knew what it was doing sending its ships against the Verne first." Knight added.

"Helm take us under those ships and increase acceleration. Adjust our attitude so they'll be ahead of us as we pass beneath. All beam weapons fire when the *Leonardo Da Vinci* is out of our line of fire." Reeves ordered.

Tilting the nose of the *Warspite* downwards, the helmsman sent the cruiser speeding at an angle to the AI control ships' direction of travel. The cruiser's dorsal mounted turrets continued to fire at the enemy vessels whenever their gunners saw an opportunity to do so without risking hitting their allies. Just as the *Warspite* was about to pass beneath the formation of AI controlled ships the helmsman fired its engines to lift its nose enough that it was pointed almost perpendicular to its direction of travel. At the same time the gunners pointed all their turrets straight ahead so that right as the *Warspite* was moving past the AI controlled vessels all of its direct fire weapons, including the powerful main guns were pointing in their direction.

The barrage of fire from these weapons tore through the formation of AI controlled ships, reducing most of what remained of them to molten debris tumbling towards the *Leonardo Da Vinci*. Only a single cutter survived the *Warspite's* onslaught and as the heavy cruiser moved away this now found itself rushing headlong towards a frigate four times its size. Cutters were designed to use drones as their primary means of attack and with all of these having already been destroyed in orbit around Verne the cutter was now limited to its single defensive turret whereas the frigate mounted several of these weapons. Firing its sole turret, the cutter turned aside but the crew of the *Leonardo Da Vinci* was prepared for this and the frigate's own turrets targeted the front of the cutter. The beams of subatomic antimatter struck the smaller vessel right on target and the ship's own momentum carried it onwards, the positron beams raking long its entire length until it exploded in a blinding flash of light.

"Captain there are no further enemy vessels registering on our sensors." Goldman announced.

"What about the *Leonardo Da Vinci*? What's their status?" Knight asked.

"Damaged. It looks like their hull is breached and they're venting atmosphere." Goldman answered.

"Ask if they need assistance." Reeves ordered, "We'll stay here while they make repairs."

"What about our troops on the surface captain?" Lucas asked.

"Lieutenant I think Major Willis is perfectly capable of asking for help if he needs it." Knight responded.

The first indication that the *Warspite's* marine company had been detected came when a single projectile struck a tree and produced a shower of splinters.

"Down!" Willis yelled as there was the sound of more gunfire from within the forest coming from multiple directions. The sounds produced by the weapons being fired at the marines was different to that produced by ordinary firearms, consisting of sharp cracks as projectiles broke the sound barrier without the sound of propellant igniting and there were no accompanying muzzle flashes. This told Willis that they were under fire from weapons utilising magnetic acceleration, "Gauss weapons." he said, "These are Verne alright. Does anyone have eyes on our targets?" then he fired a rapid burst from his rifle in the direction of some of the incoming gunfire. The other marines followed suit even in the lack of visible targets and there was the sustained rattle of a machine gun from one of marine fire teams. It was then that the marines got their first confirmation of hitting a target as one of the shots fired into the undergrowth resulted in a high pitched howl and Willis frowned.

"What was that?" Ash asked as he crouched beside Willis, "From in here it didn't sound human."

"No, it didn't out here either." Willis replied, "More like an animal. Look commander, can you try and circle around whoever it is that firing at us? Maybe dressed like that you can get a better look at them for us."

"Okay I'll give it a go." Ash said, getting back to his feet and retreating away from the command section while keeping as low as he could in the bulky powered armour.

Using the continuing sound of gunfire as a guide Ash moved cautiously through the forest with the intention

of getting behind the unseen enemy force to get a better idea of their nature and their strength. As a precaution he held up his right arm, his hand ready to clench and fire the laser built into that arm at a moment's notice. The short period of time that Ash had had available to him to be briefed on operating the armour and its systems meant that some of its features, including the thermal imaging sensors that would have proved useful at this time, remained a mystery to him and he could rely only on the armour's ordinary visual detection capabilities. This still allowed Ash to notice when a figure armed with a gauss rifle and a bandolier of ammunition slung across its chest stepped out of the undergrowth ahead of him though and he turned his weapon towards it. Though humanoid the fur that covered the figure's body as well as the animalistic facial features identified it as one of the ferals who inhabited the continent rather than a Verne soldier. This combination of a feral armed with an advanced military weapon seemed odd to ash, who knew that ferals tended to shun such things.

Upon seeing ash in the powered armour the feral lowered his weapon and smiled, revealing two rows of sharpened fangs.

"The Commonwealth killers are right over there." he said, pointing towards the marine company, "We will take our revenge for the murders they committed."

"Tell your people to cease fire and withdraw." Ash said, lowering his weapon and standing up straight in response to this.

"I don't understand." the feral said, "We were promised revenge in exchange for our support."

reaching for the controls fitted to the arm of the armour he wore Ash switched his armour's communications from an external address mode to the built in radio that had been adjusted to the Commonwealth marine communication channel, "Ash to Willis, can you hear me?"

"Right here commander. Do you have eyes on the Verne?" Willis responded.

"They aren't Verne major. It looks like the Verne have armed the local ferals with advanced weapons and from the sounds of it we're being blamed for killing some of them."

"So tell them we didn't do it." Willis said.

"I'll give it a go." Ash said before switching the armour's communications back to the mode that would allow him to speak directly with the feral standing in front of him.

"The Commonwealth troops have only just arrived." he said, "Until now they have not encountered your people."

"We heard the gunfire and found the bullet casings near the bodies." the feral replied and inside his armour Ash's eyes widened. Neither the Verne nor the ferals would use firearms that required bullet casings that could be mistaken for anything used by the Commonwealth. On the other hand it was possible that whoever it was that operated the vessel that had been following the *Warspite* could. However, that would have to mean that not only were they keeping track of the Commonwealth cruiser, they had also deployed a team to the surface before the *Warspite's* marines got there and there was no telling how much of a head start they would have over the marines.

"There are other forces at work." Ash said, "The Verne controlling their facility are under the influence of an corrupt alien artificial intelligence and there may be agents of another party at large. They killed your friends. You must cease your attack before more of your people are killed."

"Alien?" the feral said, "Where did this come from?"

"From the archaeological dig the Verne have been working at here. We have come to shut it down permanently."

"We?" the feral said and his heavily altered face gave the appearance of frowning, "You are with them?"

"I am." Ash said, realising his mistake but hoping that he could still manage to talk the feral around. This hope was dashed when the feral raised his rifle again, however and Ash swung his armoured arm as quickly as he could, sending the gauss rifle flying from the feral's grip.

Disarmed, the feral turned and started to run.

"Over here!" he shouted, "The Verne are turning on us!"

"Oh crap." Ash said when another pair of ferals armed with gauss rifles appeared from out of the forest and took aim at him. There was a sharp 'crack' as the first of them opened fire but his lack of experience with firearms showed and the magnetically accelerated projectile flew past Ash's head. In response Ash raised his arm and pointed it towards the feral before clenching his fist as he had been instructed to fire the laser weapon built into the armour. The beam from this burned through one of the ferals at his shoulder and he let out a barely human sounding howl as he dropped his rifle and fell to the ground. Ash was turning his arm towards the second armed feral when this individual along with the one who had spoken with Ash grabbed hold of their injured comrade and began to drag him away. Seeing this ash opted not to fire and instead switched on his armour's radio again, "That didn't go according to plan major." he transmitted, "The ferals aren't buying my explanation. Plus it seems that there's someone else out here. Those deaths we're being blamed for seem to have been done with weapons like ours. The ferals found the casings."

"Damn. It would be nice to get a look at those casings though, I'm guessing you think that this other group comes from that ship that's been tailing us, right? Having some bullet casings to examine could give us a

clue about where they come from." Willis said.

"So what do we do about these ferals now?" Ash asked.

"There don't seem to be too many of them. We could fight our way through them but the only reason I can think of for anyone else to be down here is to try and get to the dig site ahead of us. That puts us on a clock so we need to get them to fall back quickly. What's your position?"

"I'm about sixty metres to the north of you."

"Good. Stay put. I'm calling in air support. Willis out." Willis told him and then he adjusted his radio to communicate with Shaw, "Archangel this is Major Willis requesting close air support." he said and Shaw looked out of her cockpit at the forest below.

"Copy that major. Be advised that I have no visual contact." she said.

"Understood Archangel, I'm activating a beacon now. Your target is a line starting seventy metres east north east of my position and extending one hundred metres directly south. Just one pass for now." Willis told her.

"I've got the beacon. Passing it to you now." Mori added from behind Shaw and she nodded.

"Confirmed major. Stand by and have your boys duck. This is going to be a close one." Shaw said before connecting to her wingman, "Jack O'lantern, follow me in." she said and before the other pilot could respond Shaw put her fighter into a steep dive, flying it straight at the target point she had been directed towards and arming the fighter's twin gauss cannons.

At one hundred metres altitude Shaw opened fire, keeping her fingers around the triggers as she pulled back on the flight controls to lift her fighter's nose. This had the effect of shifting the impact point of gauss cannon along the line requested by Willis and on the ground beneath her fighter Shaw saw trees, undergrowth and the ground itself torn up by the fast moving projectiles. There was some return fire from the ground as Shaw continued her run, with small arms fire bouncing off the fighter's armoured hull but this was insufficient to worry Shaw. Ceasing fire when she reached the end of the indicated line Shaw pulled her fighter up, looking in a mirror mounted at the side of her cockpit to try and gauge the effect of her strafing run.

"Run complete major." Shaw transmitted, "Do you need another?"

Willis had requested the strafing run to strike between his marines and the ferals, hoping that the sudden appearance of air power would cause the ferals to rethink how advisable it was keep on fighting the Commonwealth troops. The impacts of the gauss cannon rounds had created a cloud of dust and debris that obscured the two sides from one another and there was a brief cessation of fire while they waited for this to clear.

"Hold your fire." Willis ordered as his men waited, "I want to see if there's anyone still out there."

As the cloud began to disperse Willis took a set of binoculars from his webbing and used them to search the jungle, focusing on the locations that looked to provide the best cover for attacking his men. He saw nothing in any of these locations but his attention was caught by movement in the forest further away and zooming on on this location he was just in time to see a trio of arboreal ferals disappearing up a tree as they made their escape.

"Willis to Ash." Willis transmitted, "Do you see any signs of the enemy from your location?"

"Hang on major, my ears are still ringing from that strafing run." Ash replied and Willis smiled.

"Welcome to my world." he said.

"I've got no contact from here. I think the ferals have been sensible enough to withdraw." Ash added.

"Good. Then hopefully we'll be clear all the way to the target. Get back here and we'll carry on." Willis told him, "With any luck we may still get to the target first."

22.

Climbing back up the ladder shaft to the part of the Verne structure located on the surface was carried out in a more hurried manner than descending it had been and each of Conrad's team climbed up it without stopping to provide cover for the rest of the unit. Conrad himself was first out of the shaft and just as he began to look around he spotted a Verne technician armed with a pistol.

"Contact!" he snapped before firing a rapid burst from his rifle that sent the technician falling backwards. Another armed technician appeared as Conrad's men were following him from the shaft and he shot this individual in the chest as well, "More workers." he said in disgust, "Where are their warriors?"

Behind him his men dragged the bulky computer core and the bodies of their fallen comrades out of the ladder shaft while he continued to provide cover for them.

"All clear." the last soldier out of the shaft announced and Conrad glanced back over his shoulder.

"Do it." he ordered.

Taking a grenade from his webbing, the other soldier pulled out the pin and tossed the explosive back into the shaft. The timer running down as the grenade fell, it detonated about two thirds of the way down the shaft and when the soldier looked down to evaluate the damage caused by the grenade he saw that the blast had torn a section of the ladder away from the wall. Then he took a radio that another member of the unit handed him and concealed this just inside the shaft before moving on to the two nearby elevators, disabling each of these with bursts of rifle fire directed into their control mechanisms.

"Elevators disabled. Radio relay in place." he reported.

"Then let's get out of here. With any luck we'll catch whoever the Commonwealth are sending in the blast."

Conrad said and he began to advance along the corridor leading back towards the doorway his unit had used to gain entrance to the Verne structure.

As soon as Conrad stepped outside he saw the effects of the *Warspite's* orbital bombardment with smoke still billowing into the air in two different directions while fires caused by the heat of the falling projectiles still burned. He saw several Verne as well as their robots still working on constructing the fortifications around the structure but no signs of any troops and he took the opportunity to shoot another Verne who was driving a lightweight mechanical digger directly towards him before it could present a danger to his men.

"Radio." Conrad said, holding out his hand towards the soldier carrying the unit's main transmitter and the other man passed him the handset, "Conrad calling Captain Martins. Do you read me?" he transmitted.

"This is Martins. Go ahead."

"Captain Martins we have acquired an alien computer core as instructed. In addition we have rigged the facility to blow on command. The Commonwealth won't be getting anything from this place but we need a pick up."

"Understood Conrad. We're on our way. But the Commonwealth just launched a nuclear strike on Verne so you may have company before we can get there. I recommend you get as far from the target as you can."

"Understood captain, we're on our way now." Conrad said before tossing the handset back towards the soldier carrying the radio, "Time to move." he told his men, "If anything moves then shoot it."

In orbit around Verne the doors to the *High Tide's* cargo bay opened and the *Grey Dawn* slid out slowly using its manoeuvring thrusters to avoid damaging the freighter.

"*High Tide* to *Grey Dawn*, it looks like the Commonwealth cruiser is still holding position about four and a half light minutes away. I suggest you try running silent and entering the atmosphere over the horizon from it."

O'Neil reported and on the bridge of his own ship Martins snarled.

"Thank you captain." he responded, "My own sensors are working just fine." then he looked at his helmsman, "Take us down. I want to pick up our people from the surface and be out of here as quickly as possible. No messing around with hiding from that cruiser." he ordered.

"Yes captain." the helmsman replied.

"Will that work?" Horst asked as the *Grey Dawn* began to turn away from the freighter it had just emerged from, "Commonwealth sensors are-

"Four and a half light minutes away doctor." Martins interrupted, "I doubt they've seen us on radar and by the time they pick up the heat of our re-entry we'll be rendezvousing with Conrad and his troops."

"That still leaves those Verne ships above the target area." Horst pointed out.

"None of which can effectively engage targets in an atmosphere thanks to their obsession with anti-matter based weapons." Martins pointed out.

The *Grey Dawn* sudden sped away from the *High Tide*, heading straight for Verne and entering its atmosphere. The scout ship descended through the atmosphere rapidly before levelling out and, still travelling at more than three times the speed of sound it sped towards the location of the underground alien outpost.

The first to spot the approaching scout ship were the fighters circling above Willis and his marine company and Mori gasped when he saw it appear on the radar.

"Contact! Light vessel at seven o'clock." he exclaimed, looking over his shoulder and Shaw did the same.

"Where the hell did that come from?" she snapped, "Hang on, let's get a better look. Jack o'lantern stay with the dropships."

"Copy that Archangel." Shaw's wingman responded as Shaw turned her fighter as sharply as she could to take it towards the approaching *Grey Dawn* and accelerated, pushing it through the sound barrier as well.

"Kaz are you recording all this?" Shaw asked as the fighter closed on the scout ship at a combined speed of more than five times that of sound.

"All of it. Radar, IR, gun cameras." Mori replied, "It must be that ship that's been following us around."

"Yeah and this is the best look we've had at it yet. So we better not screw this up." Shaw said.

Aboard the *Grey Dawn* the bridge crew monitored the approach of the Commonwealth fighter.

"Range now under a hundred kilometres captain." the sensors operator reported.

"Get me a weapons lock. We'll shoot it down." Martins said.

"One fighter against us?" Horst commented, "Surely they can't-"

"They can put holes in us that could make atmospheric flight difficult. Never mind the fact that if they get lucky they could put a round right through where you're sitting."

The *Grey Dawn's* attempt to lock its sensors onto Shaw's fighter did not go unnoticed and Mori warned Shaw as soon as his own sensors detected the change in output from the scout ship.

"They're targeting us." he said and Shaw nodded.

"So let's return the favour." she said, "Arming missiles."

Lining up on the *Grey Dawn* through her head's up display Shaw selected a pair of missiles from her fighter's weapons bays and when she pressed the trigger both dropped from their mountings simultaneously, their engines igniting and sending them towards the scout ship at high speed.

"Incoming!" the *Grey Dawn's* sensor technician exclaimed, "I've got two missiles closing."

"Forget the fighter. Shoot down those missiles." Martins ordered and without speaking his gunner turned his turret towards the missiles and began to fire rapid pulses of energy blasts towards them. These quickly knocked one of the missiles out of the sky before the second exploded just off the *Grey Dawn's* wing tip.

Though the damage from this was minor, inside the atmosphere the sudden change in the scout ship's aerodynamic properties made the vessel shudder.

"Never mind a lock." Martins told his gunner, "Just bring that fighter down."

"Yes captain." the gunner replied and he turned the turret back towards the fighter that was now banking away from the *Grey Dawn* and began to fire again.

One of the blasts of laser energy struck Shaw's fighter in one of its four primary engines and the cockpit was filled with alarms as the fighter shook and began to trail smoke.

"We've lost engine four." Mori said.

"I know that Kaz. It's all I can do to keep us in the air." Shaw responded before a second laser blast tore away the entire port wing assembly and the fighter began to tumble, "Eject!" Shaw snapped, reaching for the ejection handle mounted above her head. The force of the fighter's spin prevented Shaw from reaching this and it was only when Mori was able to grab hold of the handle from behind her that he was able to pull it and explosive bolts blasted the cockpit canopy from its mounting and the air rushed over the two crew. Moments later the seats that the pilots were sat in were blown out of the fighter and Shaw and Mori flew into the air just moments before another laser blast destroyed what was left of it.

"The crew have ejected." the *Grey Dawn's* gunner reported.

"Ignore them." Martins replied, "We've a rendezvous to keep. Have we got a fix on Conrad?"

"Yes sir, I'm reading their beacon dead ahead. Range sixty four kilometres." the sensor operator said.

"We can be there in four minutes." the helmsman added.

"That's about the same time as that cruiser is going to find out about us." Horst pointed out and Martins nodded in agreement.

"It's cutting it close but it'll have to do." he said before addressing the helmsman again, "Take us down."

On the ground Conrad looked up as the *Grey Dawn* slowed. In the absence of a clear landing area and runway the scout ship was forced to hover at above treetop height while a large hatchway opened in the underside of its hull and a line was lowered to Conrad's men on the ground. This was connected to the alien computer drive that had been retrieved from the underground outpost so that it could be winched up into the ship. This was followed by the bodies of the soldiers killed during the mission so that no evidence would be left behind that could identify them. Only once all of this was aboard were rope ladders lowered from the hatchway so that Conrad and his surviving troops could ascend into the ship as well.

"Where's the captain?" Conrad asked the crewman that helped him from the ladder.

"On the bridge." he replied and Conrad pushed past him, striding from the scout ship's lower hold and making his way to the bridge while still wearing his armour and carrying his rifle.

"Ah Conrad, congratulations on-" Martins began, turning his chair as Conrad entered the bridge. "Never mind congratulations." Conrad interrupted, "Do you have a fix on the Commonwealth's landing party?"

"Not on them exactly, but we are tracking their dropships." Martins responded, "It looks like they've landed a full company of marines."

"Well if we can hang around here until their troops reach the Verne base we can take them out." Conrad said and he held out the wireless trigger for the explosive charge that had been set in the outpost's reactor room, "Just send a signal on the same frequency this is set to and you'll blow the reactor system."

"We can't afford to wait here any longer than absolutely necessary." Martins replied, "By now that Commonwealth cruiser will be hearing about us being here and it will take just one quick hop at FTL to get them back into orbit. So trigger that bomb and let's get out of here."

"I think someone just climbed aboard and they winched something up before that." Willis said, studying the hovering scout ship.

"Did you see where Shaw and Mori landed?" Ash asked as Willis lowered the binoculars.

"No. I'm certain I saw chutes but I couldn't make out where they came down from here. Once that ship leaves maybe we can send some of the dropships over there to conduct an aerial search but for now all we can do is hope they made it down safely." Willis replied.

"So we're carrying on with the mission then?" Ash said and Willis nodded.

"We don't have a choice. That AI needs to be destroyed." he said and all of a sudden there was the sound of a massive explosion.

The main bridge viewscreen aboard the *Grey Dawn* showed the effects of the detonation clearly. When the flames from the exploding hydrogen fuel filled the underground cavern network they found every crack and weak point in the collapsed sections, blowing them wide open. This produced multiple blasts of flame that erupted from the previously sealed shafts all across the hillside and set fire to the vegetation around them. More prominent though was the effect of the explosion on the surface structures at the Verne dig site. The flames rushed up the access shaft and swept through the surface structure in the same way as they filled the cavern below. When these flames reached the surface generator section they burned through the seals on the fuel tanks for these generators and there was a second massive explosion that blew the main surface structure apart and consumed all of the surrounding area where the remaining Verne and their robots were still working to try and fortify the facility.

"Helm, get us out of here." Martins ordered and the helmsman fired the scout ship's main engines, sending it racing up into the sky as the Verne facility continued to burn furiously.

"Captain the *High Tide* is trying to communicate with us." the ship's communications officer said and Martins frowned.

"What the hell does O'Neill want now?" he said to himself before adding, "Okay put him through."

"Martins this is O'Neil. We're picking up a build up of tachyons from that Commonwealth cruiser. They must have spotted what you're up to. We're getting out of here and I suggest you do the same." O'Neil said.

"We're already on our way out." Martins said, looking at the viewscreen that now showed the sky darkening as the *Grey Dawn* headed into space.

All of a sudden there was a flash of light as the *Warspite* scattered the shell of tachyons that enabled it to travel faster than light just over a light second from the planet.

"Evasive action." Martins ordered, "Navigation I want an emergency jump to get us a light year away from here before we head for home."

"What about the *High Tide*?" Horst asked.

"They're on their own." Martins replied, "Right now we've got to look out for ourselves."

The *Warspite* had dropped to sub light speed in a position from where it had a direct line of sight to both the *High Tide* as it orbited Verne and also the *Grey Dawn* as it rushed to escape.

"The dig site has been totally destroyed captain. Major Willis reports his men were outside the blast area though and we've got the scout and the freighter on sensors." Goldman reported.

"Weapons I don't want either of those ships to escape. Fire at will." Reeves ordered.

Already under power and possessing an artificial gravity field that protected its occupants from the forces of acceleration, the *Grey Dawn* as able to turn sharply as it left the atmosphere of Verne and avoid fire from two of the cruiser's ventrally mounted free-electron beam laser turrets. On the other hand the *High Tide* was merely orbiting the planet with its main drives operating on minimum power. The bulky freighter did have singularity jars to supply an artificial gravity field but its was not capable of rapid acceleration like the much small scout ship was. This meant it could not move out of the way quickly enough to evade the first beam from the *Warspite*'s X-ray lasers and this burned through one of the freighter's drive units, further reducing its manoeuvrability.

"I'm picking up build ups of tachyons from both vessels captain." Cortez announced.
"Target their engines and fire at will." Reeves ordered, "I want to be able to put boarding parties aboard both vessels."
"It will take time to get our marines back from the surface captain." Knight said and Reeves nodded.
"Commander Goldman instruct Major Willis to have both platoons picked up by their dropships. With any luck we'll still be able to get them aboard those ships before the crews can destroy everything of use to us."
One of the *Warspite's* free electron beam lasers was able to land a blow on the *Grey Dawn* but this narrowly missed striking one of the scout's main propulsion units and the ship continued to accelerate away.
"Their tachyon levels are approaching critical captain." Cortez said before the view screen on which images of both the *Grey Dawn* and *High Tide* were shown side by side showed the *Grey Dawn* consumed by a sudden flash of light as it suddenly accelerated to faster than light speed.
"Helm, take us towards the freighter." Reeves ordered now that the *Warspite* did not have to try and prevent two different ships from escaping and the helmsman steered the cruiser towards the one remaining target.

"The *Grey Dawn* is gone and the enemy cruiser is turning right for us captain." the *High Tide's* sensor operator reported.

"Damn you Martins!" O'Neill hissed, "Helm, what's the status of our FTL?"

"Ready to jump in twenty seconds captain." the helmsman answered before a shot from one of the *Warspite's* X-ray lasers hit the aft of the freighter and the entire vessel shook as a fuel tank exploded.

"Damage report!" O'Neil yelled over the sound of alarms.

"Fuel tank number seven is gone. It was only half full but the blast was enough to take out our tachyon storage jars. Captain we've got enough imaginary mass left for one jump at maximum speed but that will use up ninety percent of our remaining stores." a crewman responded.

"Navigation adjust our course. We need to drop out of FTL within communication range of a relay station or outpost so we can call for help."

"Working on it now captain." the navigator said. Then the *High Tide* shook again as another shot from the *Warspite*, this one from one of the lighter free-electron beam lasers hit the freighter.

"That one hit our ionisation system captain." the same crewmen who had given the last damage report exclaimed, "We've not lost any imaginary mass but we're not adding it as rapidly."

"Now forty seconds until we can make FTL captain." the helmsman added.

"Keep going." O'Neil ordered, "Do whatever it takes to get us into FTL."

Another shot from the *Warspite* hit the *High Tide* and a control panel on the bridge burst into flames, prompting one of the command crew to leap from his seat, grab hold of a fire extinguisher and turn it on the flames.

"Captain I've lost flight control." the helmsman said, finding himself unable to keep the *High Tide* under control.

"The enemy vessel is attempting to make contact captain." the communication officer said, "They're identifying themselves as the *Warspite* and ordering us to surrender."

"Ignore them. Tell engineering to get us control of this ship again. Then have weapons issued to the crew. If the Commonwealth does try and board us we need to hold them back long enough for us to get into FTL."

Having ignored the *Warspite's* attempt at communication the *High Tide* was hit again and this time the display screens in the bridge flickered. Then when they became active again the information that had been shown on them was replaced by a simple message.

EMERGENCY PROTOCOL ACTIVATED.

"Emergency protocol activated." the computer said at the same time as this appeared.

"Captain what is that?" one of the bridge crew asked as O'Neil's eyes widened.

"No!" the *High Tide's* captain cried out as he leapt to his feet and looked towards the ceiling as humans often did when addressing computers that had no obvious location within a room, "There's still time. We can still escape."

"Purging all classified computer data files." the computer announced and monitors flickered once more, this time turning black when the flickering stopped as the programs used to control them were wiped from the computer.

"Computer purge achieved. Adjusting life support. Increasing O-two levels to forty percent and opening all internal bulkheads." the computer announced.

"Captain we've got fires in the aft decks. If the computer opens the doors and turns up the oxygen content we'll all burn." the navigator said.

"That's the point." O'Neill said, "There will be nothing for the Commonwealth to recover. Our lives don't count."

"Dropships are thirty seconds from the target captain." Goldman said.

"Say another thirty to override airlock seals or blow the hatch and they'll be inside in a minute." Knight

commented.

"Let's just hope it's enough." Reeves said.

"Captain something strange is going on over there." one of the sensor technicians said suddenly, "Their electrical systems are all shutting down.

"I'm picking up a massive tachyon scattering from them as well captain." Cortez added, "They just lost FTL entirely."

"I'd say good but this is all looking too odd." Reeves said, "Commander Goldman tell our dropships to break off."

"Break off captain?" Goldman said, confused.

"Just do it now commander. Get them out of there." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain." Goldman replied before passing the order onto the pilots of the two dropships speeding towards the *High Tide*.

"Massive thermal spike from target." another sensor operator said, "Looks like an internal explosion."

Moments later several of the freighter's hatches were blown outwards and jets of flame erupted into space before the oxygen from inside the *High Tide* fuelling them was exhausted and they were extinguished in an instant.

"Thermal levels still rising. It looks like their main reactor is set to overload." the sensor operator added.

"Position of dropships?" Knight asked.

"They've turned around but I can't guarantee whether or not they are clear yet." Goldman replied.

"Can we tell how long before the reactor overloads?" Reeves asked.

"Probably not long captain." Goldman answered as she checked her console, "If we got readings like these from one of our ships then I'd say that it was just a matter of seconds."

The expected explosion came, just as Goldman had suggested, mere seconds after she finished her sentence. Primarily powered by a fusion reactor, the *High Tide* exploded like a small nuclear device when the levels of heat and pressure inside the reactor grew too great to be contained any longer. The resulting explosion vaporised the stricken freighter, leaving no debris larger than a few millimetres across to be examined later. Far enough from the explosion to avoid being consumed, the two dropships were peppered with tiny pieces of debris that did no significant damage to either of the fleeing craft and Reeves breathed a sigh of relief when he saw them heading safely back towards the *Warspite*.

"Captain I've run the escape vector of that scout through our navigational database." Thomas said and both Reeves and Knight looked at him, "They were heading further out into the Fringe Worlds and there are no systems along that vector for more than two hundred light years."

"That would take them right out beyond anything we know about." Knight said and Reeves nodded in agreement.

"Yes, it must have been a security jump to stop us from getting a positive bearing on their home base." he said before turning towards the helmsman, "Helm as soon as our dropships are back aboard take us back into Verne orbit. We'll pick up our people from the surface and see if Colonel Dator needs any help with his mopping up operation."

Admiral Tihana Mitchell was sat at her desk when Reeves was shown into her office.

"Ah Captain Reeves, do take a seat." she told him.

"Thank you admiral." he replied as he sat down.

"I have to say that your recent actions are proving to be somewhat controversial captain. We've done our best to present the facts about what happened at Verne but there have been protests accusing us of using weapons of mass destruction against a civilian target in nations from here right back to Earth and out the other side of human space." Admiral Mitchell said, "But tell me about what you found at Verne. Were you able to recover any further information about this alien artificial intelligence that supposedly threatens us all?"

"Not really admiral. Other than it is able to adapt to a wider variety of technologies than we previously knew about. The gateway that had been present was too badly damaged for us to get anything from a physical analysis in the short term." Reeves responded.

"Ah yes, the ability to control people using cybernetic implants. Kind of makes you glad we don't consider users of cerebral augmentation technologies as suitable for service doesn't it? And what about the reason you were sent there in the first place? Did that Canadian detective find what she was looking for?"

"In part. We did discover that it was probably the robot that was the genuine source of the infiltration into the Canadian government systems rather than Howard Denton himself. Unfortunately the same EMP that erased the alien AI also removed any evidence of where the robot came from. Then when the Verne were able to hack into the robot's operating code we were forced to destroy it. The remains are being shipped back to Canada for them to take a look at but Commander Bernard thinks that its memory will be too badly damaged for anyone to find out who made it."

"So you have nothing new to add then?"

"I wouldn't quite say that admiral." Reeves said, reaching into his pocket and he took out a memory stick,

"Before her fighter was shot down my squadron leader managed to get a close look at the ship that's been following us around and every detail from the scans is held on this device. It also has everything the *Warspite* managed to record about not only the scout but the freighter as well before the scout managed to escape to FTL and the freighter blew up."

"So we have a complete profile on the ships?" Mitchell asked as she reached out to take the memory stick from Reeves and he smiled.

"Everything down to the serial numbers painted on the sides." he replied, "There is enough information here that with it we can expand our search from hunting for just one ship to tracing the technology used to manufacture it and the freighter. Rather than having to wait for that ship to reappear, assuming it ever does, we can track them using any ship they've made."

"Excellent work captain." Admiral Mitchell said, "You and your crew may have just achieved the breakthrough we've been looking for."

EPILOGUE.

Hayes and Vale were waiting aboard the large orbital station as the *Grey Dawn* slowly manoeuvred into a position where large robotic clamps could be extended to complete the process of lining one of the scout ship's air locks up with a docking port and pull the two together to complete the process of docking. Watching this through a large viewport, from which numerous similar vessels could also be seen Hayes smiled.

"Come on Enrico." she said to Vale, "Let's go and see what Martins has brought for us. With Alex's little spies running around the Commonwealth trying to stir up trouble about the use of nukes to generate an EMP I need something good to put me ahead of him and quickly."

The pair hurried from their location to the docking ports where they arrived just in time to see the hatch leading to the *Grey Dawn* slide open. Martins was the first to emerge from the scout ship, followed by Doctor Horst and behind them came Conrad with a pair of his men carrying the alien computer core between them

"They have the core." Vale said.

"As promised." Martins replied.

"There were more of them but this was the only one we could get out of there with the Commonwealth breathing down our necks." Conrad added.

"That doesn't matter." Vale said as he walked up to the computer core and began to inspect its exterior,

"Even this is more than we had before."

"Just thinking of what we could learn from this is staggering." Horst commented, "This is an entirely alien piece of technology. We'll need to assemble an entire research team to study it."

"And what about your primary mission on Verne?" Hayes asked.

"If you're worried about the Commonwealth tracking that robot back here then you needn't worry any more."

Horst told her, "Any irregularities left by my tampering with the computer networks will be put down to damage from the EMP the Commonwealth triggered. Now about the study of this computer core."

"The core will be studied by top people." a voice called out from behind Hayes and when the group looked towards its source they saw The Old Man approaching with his granddaughter and several armoured soldiers carrying rifles.

"Sir, we were just about to-" Hayes began before The Old Man interrupted her.

"Hand that device over to my men?" he said, smiling at Hayes and his soldiers moved towards the core, prompting Conrad and his men to move their hands towards their sidearms. At this point all of the troops who had accompanied The Old Man halted and raised their rifles, "Now, now Jennifer." The Old Man said, "Let's not have any unpleasantness. You have your own project to be getting on with, a project I might add that has yet to show any significant results. My people have the resources we need to conduct a proper investigation of this device. Now turn it over commander."

"Are you just going to-" Conrad said and Hayes glared at him.

"Let them take it." she said, interrupting him.

"Very good choice Commander." The Old Man said, smiling, "Of course I'll be sure to keep you up to date with anything we find. After all, it's only because of you that we have this."

"Thank you sir." Hayes said as the computer core was being carried away by two of The Old Man's troops while the rest of his security detail watched her team closely.

"Grandfather, do you really intend to share the results of the study with her?" The Old Man's granddaughter asked when they were out of earshot of Hayes and her team and The Old Man smiled.

"My dear," he began, "by the time we have obtained any significant information from this device we may already have dealt with Jennifer Hayes permanently."