

WARSPITE: LOST EMPIRE

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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Six months after the Sissusk attack on Liberty the Commonwealth has been unable to establish contact with their alien neighbours. A task force of ships led by the *Warspite* is ordered into Sissusk space to find out why only for them to find a bigger mystery there that could herald a much greater threat to the Commonwealth than the Sissusk pose...

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1.

Kriss'ss'ras, twelfth Emperor of the Sissusk Empire stood just within the window of his throne room and looked out into the palace grounds. His personal director of security often cautioned him against standing in such an exposed position but the Emperor routinely ignored the advice. After all the palace was in the heart of the Sissusk Empire on their home world of Sissar, protected by more than a company of its finest troops within the grounds and with more than ten divisions of troops in the surrounding areas. Even if a political subversive or rebellious slave decided to make an attempt on the Emperor's life they would never overcome odds like that even if they managed to obtain a weapon capable of penetrating the armoured glass he looked through.

Approximately one hundred and fifty local years earlier, about three centuries as humans measured time, the palace had been the administrative centre of the Fedrun regime on the Sissusk home world. That had been before Kriss'ss'ras's own ancestor, the first Emperor, had led the revolt that overthrew the empire of the Fedrun and the alien invaders instead became the slaves of the Sissusk. One of the Fedrun was visible from the Emperor's position, tending to the palace gardens. Even with the availability of slaves from other species across the empire the Emperor used Fedrun slaves exclusively. Slaves drawn from the Sissusks' former oppressor species were considered a significant status symbol within the Empire and most wealthy families made use of at least one.

The sound of his personal guards moving behind him made the Emperor turn to face the main entrance to the throne room and he saw another Fedrun slave enter.

"Your majesty," the slave said as he bowed his head and spread his arms apart in an imitation of the traditional gesture of subservience among the Sissusk. The configuration of the Sissusks' bodies, with their head extended forwards on a long neck and balanced by an even longer tail to the rear meant that when they performed the action they were presenting their spine in such a way that another Sissusk could easily strike at it with their teeth. The more vertical anatomy of the Fedrun did not allow for this as easily but it would take only a word or gesture from the Emperor to have the slave put to death. The Fedrun and Sissusk were also physically incapable of pronouncing one another's languages and so the Fedrun spoke in his native tongue while a collar around his neck translated his words into the Sissusk language.

"Speak." the Emperor commanded and the same collar that had translated the Fedrun's words now translated the Emperor's response.

"I bring news of the attack on the human colony." the Fedrun told him and Kriss'ss'ras emitted a low growl. The Sissusk had known about the existence of humanity for many years, ever since a group of them stumbled into Sissusk space while attempting to set up a colony far from their own space. Being too weak to resist the empire's forces the humans had been enslaved and added to the Empire's workforce. Now there were groups of them on a handful of worlds across the Empire, though not here on Sissar itself where the climate was too warm for them to work as efficiently as other species could. From these original human slaves the Sissusk had learned about human society and the so-called Commonwealth that many of its competing nations were members of. The humans captured by the Sissusk had fled the Commonwealth following a major war after which they had feared would lead to it becoming a more centralised empire rather than an alliance of sovereign states. Scouting missions by the Sissusk had indicated that these fears had been unfounded and the Commonwealth never replaced its members' governments with a centralised one of its own. However, there were still humans who suspected that this was a possibility and sought to establish their own colonies beyond the reach of the Commonwealth and it was one of these independent worlds that the Sissusk had planned to attack. The Emperor's military and labour advisers had told him that the world known to the humans as Liberty offered them tens of thousands of workers who would be of immense value as the war between the Sissusk and their mysterious Ticik neighbours continued to go badly for the Sissusk. Since the Commonwealth was believed to be unaware of even the existence of the Sissusk they would have no way of predicting the attack and even if they should happen to discover it the fact that Liberty was not part of the Commonwealth would mean that its powerful forces would not act to protect it.

However, the mere fact that a Fedrun slave had been sent to deliver news of the attack to the Emperor meant that something had gone wrong. If it had been successful then the Sissusk leaders responsible for its planning would have come themselves to take credit and bask in the Emperor's gratitude. Now that somehow the attack had failed they hoped to have the slave bear the brunt of the Emperor's anger instead.

"Let me guess." the Emperor said, "It failed. Somehow the undefended colony was able to resist the squadron of ships and thousands of troops sent to take it."

"Majesty the-" the Fedrun began but the Emperor did not allow him to finish.

"I do not want to hear it." he said, "At least not from you, slave. Go back to the fools who thought they could escape by sending you in their place and tell them that I command them all to appear in person to explain their failure."

"Yes majesty." the Fedrun replied before backing away from the Emperor and departing from the throne

room.

The Emperor then looked at the most senior of his personal guards present.

"I will also need more guards." he said, "I expect that I may have work for them."

Shortly after this five Sissusk arrived at the palace to make their excuses to Kriss'ss'ras. War Leaders Isk'sa'kass and Saa'as'ik had masterminded the invasion of the human colony while Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar had provided the ships to transport and protect the invasion force. Meanwhile Minister Kur'ik'ka had assessed how taking the colony could benefit the Sissusk Empire and Minister Siss'ss'ish had studied the technology that the humans appeared to possess to try and determine both the strength of the colony's defences and also to investigate whether there was likely to be any technology at the colony that the invading troops should try to take intact. Obviously at least one of these individuals had missed something and as a result the empire had lost three capital ships, numerous transports, several squadrons of fighters and thousands of ground troops at a time when they were desperately needed.

All five of the Sissusk lowered their heads to near floor level while looking up at the Emperor with their arms outstretched in a submissive pose. All knew that their lives now depended on convincing the Emperor that they worth more to him alive than dead.

"So which of you will go first?" Kriss'ss'ras asked, "Who will tell me how the undefended planet you convinced me we had to attack was able to defend itself against our forces?"

"Majesty, it was not our fault." War Leader Isk'sa'kass replied, glancing in the direction of his fellow war leader.

"That is true majesty." Saa'as'ik added, "The invasion force had overwhelming numbers and strength. The attack failed only because of the intervention of a human spacecraft that our own ships failed to protect our troops against. The human ship was able to bombard our landing zones. It destroyed our landing craft, the operational command centre and the artillery supporting our troops."

"So it is a failure of the fleet?" the Emperor asked, "After all it was determined that the human world had no ships that could challenge our own. How would you explain that fleet leader?"

"The human vessel was not from the colony majesty. It was a large Commonwealth vessel, possibly the same one that attacked our colony at Issil. They must have gained knowledge of our plans from that attack and moved to defend their world."

"Their world? I was assured that this human empire, the Commonwealth as they call it, would not protect worlds that were not part of it." the Emperor said, "Now you are telling me that we stand on the verge of war with the humans because you failed to predict this intervention?"

"Majesty I-" the fleet leader began.

"Silence!" the Emperor hissed, "I was told that this attack could not fail. That we would gain tens of thousands of new workers as well as all the equipment that our troops could recover from the human world. But now the actions of this one human ship have cost us four of our own capital ships plus two more critically damaged at Issil, as well as all of the troops assigned to the assault."

"Majesty, many of the troops still live." Saa'as'ik responded, "The humans took many of them prisoner. Perhaps we can negotiate-"

The Emperor waved his hand and from behind the five crouching Sissusk one of his guards leapt forwards with a blade in his hand that he plunged through the neck of the war leader as he spoke. Saa'as'ik collapsed to the floor with blood pumping from the wound where the guard's blade had sliced through his spine.

"I will not negotiate!" the Emperor yelled at the other four Sissusk, "I will not appear weak by begging for the lives of soldiers who failed in their duty. Perhaps if they had fought harder the troops on Liberty could have taken the human settlements and used the inhabitants as a shield against attack from orbit. The humans can kill them all for all I care." then he looked at Minister Kur'ik'ka, "Now what can you tell me about the strength of the humans' empire?"

"Very little majesty." the minister replied nervously, concerned that not having the information that the Emperor wanted would mark him out for death next, "The humans have spread out to cover a volume of space larger than we have but they lack the unified society that we possess. Not all of them will fight if we go to war. We know nothing of their fleet strength though your majesty."

"And what of their technology?" the Emperor asked, turning his head towards Siss'ss'ish.

"The humans developed their own technology majesty. This means that they understand it all fully and have no gaps as we do. They are in a position to improve their position while in some areas we struggle to keep even what we have."

"I agree majesty." Isk'sa'kass said, "If we are going to defeat them we must do so quickly."

"And see my empire overrun by the Ticik?" the Emperor responded, "I have seen the reports from the front war leader. The Ticik have now secured their positions in Suus, Sarsar and Shillis. My father listened to his advisers when they told him that in order to defeat the Ticik he had to attack them quickly and look where that has brought us."

"Majesty, there may be a way to improve our technological position." Siss'ss'ish said and he lifted his head from the floor, prompting the nearest guard to take a step forwards. But before the guard could strike the

Emperor raised his hand for him to stop.

“Speak. But remember your place.”

“Of course majesty. If you recall we have the transmission we picked up from deep space. The information within that-” Siss'ss'ish began.

“This again?” Minister Kur'ik'ka interrupted, “Majesty if we use the information contained within the message then we risk making ourselves vulnerable to the species that sent it.”

“A species that is thousands of light years away.” Siss'ss'ish responded, “Majesty, we have carried out a basic examination of the contents of the message and from that we can tell that it holds a great deal of information regarding industrial automation. It may also offer the key to the construction of the powered exoskeletons and armour that the Fedrun armies made use of but that we have never been able to reproduce. We could both solve our labour difficulties and increase the effectiveness of our forces in one go.”

“Knowledge of personal mechanised armour would go a long way to redress the balance between our forces and the machine armies of the Ticik majesty.” Isk'sa'kass added, “Our fleet barely holds out against their ships and our ground forces must often fight alone.”

“How long would it take to make use of the data contained within the transmission Minister Siss'ss'ish?” the Emperor asked and the minister hesitated, realising that his suggestion had resulted in the Emperor's attention being focused entirely on him at a time when scapegoats for the failure of the attack on the human colony were being sought.

“Our scientists and engineers believe that the information is presented in a manner designed to make implementing the technologies described as easy as possible.” Siss'ss'ish responded.

“How long?” the Emperor asked again.

“Within twenty days we could be making the first upgrades to our production facilities majesty.” Siss'ss'ish replied, “Each stage of integration will become faster and easier as our technology aligns more with that presented to us in the message.”

“Majesty this is foolishness.” Kur'ik'ka said, “To make such radical changes so fast and without the proper-” Emperor Kriss'ss'ras hissed loudly and lunged towards the minister, not even bothering to order his guards to kill Kur'ik'ka, instead plunging his own fangs into the back of the minister's throat and biting down hard. The minister howled in pain and thrashed his limbs around instinctively but the submissive pose he had adopted made it impossible for him to effectively fight the Emperor off. Even if this had have been possible, to lay a hand on the Emperor would have meant his death at the hands of the Emperor's personal guards who stood ready to intervene should they be required. But no action was necessary from the guards as a sudden 'crunch' that heralded the breaking of the minister's spine brought his struggles to an end and he joined War Leader Saa'as'ik in falling dead at the Emperor's feet.

“You are dismissed.” the Emperor said as he straightened up, “I expect to be kept informed of progress.”

INTERLUDE

Enrico Vale arrived at the building in which he worked and made his way directly to the elevator that would take him up to the floor where his superior's office was located. He was alone in the lift as the doors began to slide closed but just as they were about to meet one another a hand was thrust between them and they were pushed apart to reveal a man who stepped into the elevator with Vale.

"Mister Vale." he said, looking at the lift control panel, "Ah, heading up to see Commander Hayes I see. Not surprising." and then without pressing another of the buttons he stood beside Vale and faced forwards.

"Yes Commander Kane." Vale replied as the elevator began to accelerate upwards.

"Keeping you busy is she?" Kane added.

Vale was reasonably familiar with Kane. The commander worked in the office directly opposite his own superior, Hayes and the two officers were known to be rivals, pursuing similar goals through radically different means.

Before Vale could think of an excuse to avoid answering any of Kane's questions the elevator came to a halt and the door opened to reveal the reception area of the floor where Hayes and Kane worked.

"You know if you ever feel like you need a change you can always come and work for me Mister Vale." Kane called out, calmly strolling out of the elevator while Vale hurried through the reception area and headed directly for Hayes' office and entering without knocking first.

Sat behind her desk reading from a computer screen Hayes looked up at Vale.

"In a hurry this morning Enrico?" she asked.

"I met Commander Kane in the elevator." he replied.

"Ah. I suppose he was keen to discuss our work." Hayes said, leaning back in her chair as Vale walked across the office and sat down on the other side of her desk.

"I believe that was his intent, yes. I wouldn't have told him anything anyway."

"Of course you wouldn't. That's why I hired you Enrico. As well as being the best at what you do you are so wonderfully discrete about it. Now tell me what you know."

"The Sissusk still haven't responded to any of the Commonwealth's attempts to communicate with them."

Vale said and he held his computer tablet out towards Hayes who took the device and looked at the screen.

"Okay, I see multiple tachyon transmissions aimed straight at CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one. Plus a dozen messenger drones. There's no way that all of those just got lost."

"No commander." Vale responded, "We haven't been able to get close enough to the system to tell whether or not the Sissusk just shot down the drones but there's no doubt that they know the Commonwealth wants to talk. They can understand the messages as well. With all the equipment that the Commonwealth captured from them they've been able to put together systems for communicating using Sissusk standards. They just aren't listening to anything the Commonwealth has to say. Given the state of their ongoing war with the Ticik I estimate a ninety percent chance that they hope to isolate themselves from the Commonwealth while focusing on their more immediate threat."

"So they won't be going to war with the Commonwealth any time soon." Hayes commented, "Where do we stand with the Ticik?"

"They remain as much of an unknown quantity as ever commander. They are continuing to press their war with the Sissusk but we've seen no indication of them sending any ships towards Commonwealth territory. It's most likely that they don't see the Commonwealth as a threat given that every encounter between them so far has resulted in a Commonwealth withdrawal."

"So that's another war that won't be starting any time soon." Hayes said.

"There's another matter that has arisen." Vale said and Hayes sighed.

"Go on." she said.

"Our asset in Canada is no longer available."

"What do you mean 'no longer available'?" Hayes asked leaning forwards in her chair, "That asset had guaranteed access to the Canadian government network."

"Yes but after we engineered a Canadian vessel to encounter the Ticik the Commonwealth and the Canadians themselves started investigating what that ship was doing in the Phi Two Pavonis to begin with. I don't know how far their investigation got, but I can be sure that our asset is no longer in place. It's just vanished."

"Then find it." Hayes said sternly, "It has to be somewhere. In the mean time I want to speak to Lieutenant Commander Martins. Even if the Sissusk don't want to talk to them, the Commonwealth is going to keep trying to contact them and I would like to be in a position to know how the Sissusk are planning to react before the Commonwealth does."

2.

Lieutenant Commander Denise Goldman answered the front door when the bell rang and the younger officer standing on her doorstep smiled at her. Goldman and Lieutenant Jessica Lucas served together on the Commonwealth heavy cruiser *Warspite*, Goldman as its flight operations officer and Lucas as its intelligence analyst.

"Ready?" Lucas asked.

"Not quite, come on in Jessica." Goldman replied, stepping aside to allow the lieutenant to enter.

"Major Willis is waiting in the car." Lucas commented as she stepped inside Goldman's home and she smiled when she saw Goldman's husband sat eating his breakfast while their young son watched an animation on a wall mounted screen.

"It's just Lieutenant Lucas to pick me up David." Goldman told her husband.

"Okay, you need a hand?" he responded as she picked up a small suitcase.

"I'm fine." she told him.

"But you will ask about the transfer, right?" he asked and Goldman frowned briefly.

"Not yet David."

"We discussed this Denise."

"And when the time comes I will."

"A transfer? You're leaving the *Warspite*?" Lucas commented.

"When her tour ends in three months." David said.

"Maybe. Just for a while." Goldman said, walking over to her son and kissing him on the top of his head,

"Mommy's leaving now Simon. I love you."

"Okay bye." the young boy responded without taking his eyes off the screen and Goldman sighed.

"No respect from my son or my husband." she muttered as she headed for the front door, "Come on lieutenant, we don't want to be late." she added.

"What's this about you leaving?" Lucas asked while they walked towards her car, a compact vehicle that was parked by the kerb. The back of this vehicle had a pair of large kit bags loaded in it that almost completely obscured the large man in a marine's uniform sat between them.

"Hi Ben, can you hang onto this?" Goldman said, opening the back door and passing her case to Willis.

"Sure." he said, pulling the case onto his lap while Goldman got into the front passenger seat.

"Come on, why are you leaving?" Lucas asked again as she got into the other side of the car.

"Leaving? You're leaving?" Willis commented from behind them, "What for?"

Goldman sighed.

"I'm pregnant." she said, "About a month in. So when my tour ends David wants me off the ship. I told him he's being paranoid about things but he's convinced that a pregnant woman shouldn't be aboard a spaceship."

"That's ridiculous. You get more rads on a sunny day than you do inside the *Warspite*." Willis said.

"I know. But David won't listen." Goldman said.

"It would just be for a few months though, right?" Lucas asked as she started to drive off.

"Maybe. David also wants me to ask for a surface posting so that I'll be around all the time after the baby's born."

"Where else would you be?" Lucas said, "The *Warspite*'s based here at Centaur. It's not going anywhere."

"You've said a lot about what your husband wants. What about you commander?" Willis added before Goldman could reply to Lucas.

"I'm the second officer of a heavy cruiser. What percentage of people get to say that?" Goldman said, "If either the captain or the XO move on I could be first officer. Maybe even captain my own ship one day. But if I take a surface posting-" and then she trailed off.

"The fleet will pass you over for someone who stayed in space." Lucas commented and Goldman nodded.

"So tell him to get-" Willis began.

"I'm not swearing at my husband." Goldman interrupted.

"I was going to suggest a nanny." Willis replied, "If he can't cope with two kids while you're on duty then it's the obvious answer. In fact why not a robot? I'm sure that between a lieutenant commander's salary and a dentist's you ought to be able to afford one."

"Can we just forget about this for now?" Goldman said.

"Sure." Willis replied.

The Commonwealth air base that the three officers were heading for was not far from Goldman's home and it took just a few minutes for Lucas to get them there. However, when they turned the final corner they found their path blocked by a crowd of people standing in the road waving placards denouncing the Commonwealth and its military. Some also demanded the release of the thousands of Sissusk prisoners being held elsewhere on the planet Centaur. Many of the protestors were masked and the majority of the

placards and banners were being waved by these individuals. The mob's attention was focused on the base's main gate and none of the protestors had noticed the car just yet. Instead all of them were yelling at the base guards who were not visible from the car.

"This could be ugly. Best stop here while we figure out what's going on lieutenant." Willis suggested, "I don't suppose either of you ladies is armed?"

"I keep my sidearm aboard the *Warspite*." Goldman replied, "David keeps a shotgun at home."

"What about you lieutenant?" Willis asked, looking at Lucas.

"Mine's aboard the ship as well." she answered, "My landlord won't let me keep a gun in my apartment."

"Seriously? I'd find somewhere else to live if I were you." Willis said.

"I'm working on it believe me." Lucas replied.

"What about you?" Goldman asked.

"Right here." Willis answered, "I just wanted to know I'd have back up if things get hairy." and he produced a standard issue automatic pistol from his bag that he proceeded to load.

"Do you think they will?" Lucas asked.

"That depends on whether they notice us or not." Willis said and now that he had loaded his sidearm he took out his phone and scrolled through the list of contacts until he found the number for the base's guard house and activated its speaker function as he began the call.

"Guard house." a voice said.

"This is Major Willis, marines. I'm just beyond that crowd outside the gates with two fleet officers. Can you tell us what's going on?"

"The crowd arrived about ten minutes ago sir. They've been making a lot of noise but so far they've not made any attempts to breach the perimeter. The police have been notified and we've got a heavy mob and dogs ready in case they rush the gate. If you want to stay on the line I can have troops ready to back you up if necessary."

"Thanks, I'll do that." Willis replied. Then he noticed a pair of people walking past the car and halt, "Uh-oh." he added and he handed his phone to Goldman.

Outside the car the two people called out to the crowd, alerting them to the presence of the three officers in the car and part of the crowd broke away and started to head straight for them. As quickly as he could Willis slid across the back seat, moving his bag out of the way and got out of the car, keeping his pistol out of sight behind the door.

"Care to get out of the road so we can get to work?" he ask before one of the protestors suddenly swung his sign down at Lucas' car and struck it. They he swung the sign towards Willis himself, using it like a club. But the two metre long pole on which the sign was mounted made a poor weapon and the swing was half-hearted, allowing Willis to catch hold of it and grip it tightly.

"Let go of him fascist!" a woman screamed as she rushed up to Willis and barged into him but he responded by producing the pistol in his other hand and slamming the butt into her masked face. Though it was not possible to see the exact results of this there was a sudden 'crunch' and she staggered backwards screaming as she held her face in both hands. Then Willis pointed the pistol straight at the protestor holding the sign and smiled.

"Let go and back off." he said calmly.

Just then the air was filled with the sound of sirens and blue lights flashed from the far side of the crowd as the police arrived to restore order. Leaping from their vehicles, the police opened fire on the crowd immediately using a mix of rubber slugs and electrical stun rounds fired from shotguns while more of their number equipped with shields and batons formed up into groups that advanced towards the crowd.

The reaction to this from the protestors was panic and, dropping their signs they started to flee past the car. Meanwhile the single protestor still staring down the muzzle of Willis' pistol remained where he was.

"Last chance." Willis said and the protestor let go of the sign and ran off with the rest of the protestors while the riot police gave chase.

"Are you okay?" one of the riot squad asked when they reached the car and Willis nodded.

"Yeah. But thanks. I don't normally like to shoot people before lunch so you guys got here just in time." he replied, "Can we go?"

"Sure, we'll take care of all this." the police officer answered with a nod and Willis got back into the car with the sign.

"What are you doing with that thing?" Goldman asked as he struggled to get the sign to fit inside the car before finally settling on opening a window and poking it out.

"It's a trophy." he said.

"Look what they did to my car." Lucas said, looking at where the sign had struck her vehicle and the bodywork was now scratched and dented.

"Yeah, I noticed." Willis said, "Just get us onto the base."

Lucas sighed and then drove towards the gate. All three officers presented their identity cards and were waved through before Willis pointed.

"Head that way." he said.

"The parking lot's the other way." Lucas commented.

"Yes but the motor pool is over there." Willis replied.

Lucas shrugged and drove towards the base motor pool where rows of military vehicles varying from lightweight utility vehicles to main battle tanks were lined up while mechanics worked to keep them running and as she brought her car to a halt one of the mechanics approached it.

"Corporal," Willis said as he got out of the car, "those idiots outside the gate messed up this lady's car. Any chance your lot can do something about it?"

The mechanic looked at the damage and smiled.

"How long do you have?"

"We're about to head off on a week's patrol." Willis told him and the mechanic nodded.

"Easy, we'll get it hammered out and resprayed by then. Just leave us the keys." he said.

"Lieutenant." Willis said, looking into the car and Lucas smiled, turning off the engine before handing the keys over to the mechanic.

"Come on then, we've got a shuttle to catch." Willis added.

3.

The Essex-class heavy cruiser *Warspite* was docked at the vast frame-like space station that orbited Centaur. The vessel was one of the most powerful Commonwealth vessels in the system and was considered key to its defences. Until just a few months earlier the most significant threat had been perceived as being the cluster of systems known as the Caliphate. The Caliphate was inhabited by fanatics who had established their own interstellar empire separate from the Commonwealth in the Fringe Worlds, a region of space approximately thirty to sixty light years from earth. Only partially charted and featuring scattered settlements, the Fringe Worlds were a haven for such extreme groups as well as anyone else who wanted to escape civilisation. Though theoretically a threat, the Caliphate's military was no match for the defences at Centaur and the Commonwealth vessels stationed there were believed to be capable of overrunning the entire Caliphate in a matter of days. However, all that had changed a little over six months earlier when a Canadian vessel operating in a system beyond even the Fringe Worlds had become the first human vessel to encounter a spacecraft made by another sentient species. Humanity had encountered other sentient life before, but until the seemingly chance encounter in the Phi Two Pavonis system they had encountered nothing that came close to humanity's level of technological development. Now though questions were being asked about how many other species could exist close to the region of space occupied by humanity. Especially given the worrying fact that the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence program appeared to have been the victim of sabotage, explaining why signals from either the Ticik or Sissusk had never been detected beforehand.

The result of these unexpected encounters was that the Commonwealth was suddenly faced with new potential threats from beyond its borders far more powerful than a handful of systems that lagged significantly behind the Commonwealth in technology and numbers. However, the Commonwealth could take comfort in the fact that the civilisations they had unexpectedly encountered were located far beyond its territory. Even the most remote human settlements known were approximately sixty light years from earth while neither the Sissusk or Ticik were known to have any permanent presence less than ninety light years from earth and this gave the Commonwealth the opportunity to gain advance warning of an invasion from either species. Part of this strategy of anticipating any attack was to patrol the Fringe Worlds more heavily than had previously been the case and it was for one of these patrols that the *Warspite* was now preparing. Captain Reeves, commanding officer of the *Warspite* stepped aside to allow a crewman and a pair of humanoid robots to get past him with a large equipment container.

"Sorry captain." the crewman said, knowing that convention was for the superior officer to have the right of way. However, Reeves generally overlooked this when it meant allowing the crew to get their work done more quickly.

"That's fine crewman. I don't want to slow you down." he replied, "Do you know where Commander Bernard is?"

"Checking the drives sir. He says that replacement unit isn't working properly."

"Thanks." Reeves said, nodding and when the crewman and the robots had gone past he continued on his way towards the *Warspite*'s engineering section. Preparing for a patrol, especially one that would take the ship beyond Commonwealth territory meant checking that every system aboard the *Warspite* was functioning as it should and so the engineering section was a hive of activity with both human and automaton crew members at work doing this. Focused entirely on their work, the robots did not react to Reeves as he passed by them but the human crew members all acknowledged him and got out of his way as he made his way to where the *Warspite* had been fitted with a new drive unit. This had been made necessary by a missile hit during a battle with the Ticik dreadnought encountered in the Phi Two Pavonis system and the ship's chief engineer, Commander Bernard, had been complaining that the new unit was not up to the proper specification.

"Commander." Reeves called out when he saw Bernard below him, watching as two crewmen removed and examined control circuits from the drive.

"Captain." Bernard replied, looking up at the walkway Reeves was stood on, "I'll be right up." Reeves waited as Bernard climbed the ladder leading up to him before the engineer stood before him and smiled, "So what brings you all the way down here captain?"

"Just checking how preparations are going." Reeves replied.

"Which you could have done using the intercom. That works fine." Bernard said and Reeves smiled as well.

"Okay I admit it, I'm trying to keep out of the way. My inbox is still filled with requests to meet with me to discuss our encounters with the Ticik and the Sissusk as well as asking about the Fedrun slaves we rescued. They're mainly from various governments all wanting to poke their noses in but I'm getting them from journalists as well."

"I don't suppose anyone's offering you any information are they?" Bernard asked.

"About that sloop we captured you mean?" Reeves asked in return and Bernard nodded.

"That ship is unique captain. Since the light cruiser we boarded was scuttled that sloop is the only example of a starship built by a species with a technology developed entirely independently of our own. Even the Genex used ships they stole from us. It has to be properly studied." he said.

"There are the fighters we captured at Liberty." Reeves pointed out.

"Forget the fighters. Most of the Sissusk pilots ejected in the upper atmosphere anyway to destroy their ships as they surrendered. In any case their fighters are pretty much like ours. Short ranged and featuring only a limited variation of technology. The sloop is far more than that but no-one will tell me what's being done with it."

"And as far as I know it's being studied by some of the Commonwealth's top engineers. You just don't want to share it with anyone else."

"Can you blame me? Commander Shaw's just the same." Bernard answered, referencing Lieutenant Commander Shaw, also known by her call sign of 'Archangel', the leader of the *Warspite's* fighter squadron. After the capture of the small Sissusk craft she and her navigator had been the ones to learn to fly it while Bernard and his men determined how it worked.

"No I can't. But that ship's been sent back to earth and I doubt that it will ever leave the Core Worlds again. As you say it offers us an important insight into the Sissusks' technology and no-one wants anything to happen to it." Reeves said and then he looked that drive unit Bernard's men were removing pieces from, "So how close are we to being able to launch?"

"Oh we could go in ten minutes if you want. But I'd really like at least another hour to try and balance this engine properly. It's producing the right output but its taking more power than it ought to. Not much, but it's noticeable."

Just then a member of the engineering crew appeared in the doorway behind Reeves.

"Excuse me captain but there's a call for you." she said.

"Perhaps coming down here wasn't quite the escape you were hoping for." Bernard commented and Reeves frowned before following the woman back through the doorway to where an intercom handset rested on a console.

"Reeves." he said.

"Captain," Goldman's voice said, "there's a courier coming in with a VIP passenger to see you personally." Reeves sighed.

"Nothing's on the schedule. Has Admiral Mitchell approved this?"

"Apparently so sir. It was the controllers aboard the *Jericho* that told me the shuttle was on its way."

"Any word on why it's so important?" Reeves asked, "I mean who is it anyway?"

"Err, I don't have an exact ID on the passenger captain."

"So tell me what you do know commander."

"They're Brekken sir." Goldman said and Reeves' eyes widened.

The Brekken were the only other sentient species that humanity had had current contact with prior to their more recent encounters in the Phi Two Pavonis system. At a mediaeval level of technological development when first encountered by humanity around fifty years earlier, the Brekken had since advanced with human help to an industrial level and though they were not Commonwealth members many of their nations were allied to it in exchange for further help in developing their technology. Lacking any spacecraft of their own the Brekken were forced to rely on human ships for transport on the rare occasions on which they left their home world and though every human in the Commonwealth knew about them and had seen pictures of them, relatively few humans ever met a Brekken in person. Given that Brekka itself was located in the Lambda Aurigae system in the Auriga Sector on the far side of Commonwealth space, Reeves was extremely surprised to find that some of them had ventured as far as Gamma Pavonis.

"What's the ETA?"

"About ten minutes captain."

"Have them escorted to my quarters, I'll meet with them there." Reeves replied, "Oh and make sure that the galley knows to have some food suitable for them available." Reeves then put the intercom handset back on its mount before heading back to his quarters as quickly as he could.

Despite being eight hundred metres long the *Warspite* was not especially spacious inside and so Reeves' quarters doubled as a private office, making it suitable for meeting with a guest. Knowing that the shuttle bearing the Brekken visitor would arrive soon Reeves changed from his blue service fatigues into his formal uniform and he was just tying his tie when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in." he called out, turning around as the door opened to reveal Major Willis.

"General Harran of the Marelta Army sir." he said before the general himself stepped into Reeves' quarters as well. Willis towered over the Brekken general who stood around one and a half metres tall. The species was considerably shorter and stockier than humans, a by-product of their home world having a noticeably higher gravity than earth's. Though they had a similar bipedal physiology to humans Brekken were covered from head to toe in fur that tended from ginger to dark brown. In the case of General Harran his fur was starting to turn grey with age, however. Similar to earth's marsupials, they appeared to be an upright version

of wombat. Humanity's influence on the Brekken species was obvious just by looking at the general and the two other officers still standing just outside the door to Reeves' quarters. Though all three wore uniforms tailored to fit their bodies the cut was remarkably similar to human military uniforms rather than being derived from the traditional clothing of their own species.

"General." Reeves said, "Sorry for not being ready." and he hurriedly fastened his tunic.

"No need to apologise captain." the general replied in a deep voice, "My coming to your ship was a last minute change. When will the admiral be joining us?"

"I wasn't aware that she was." Reeves replied, surprised that he was only finding out that Admiral Mitchell could be visiting his vessel now.

"Then perhaps we should begin without her." Harran said and he turned to his two subordinates, "You are dismissed." he told them.

"Major Willis, perhaps you could take them to the officer's mess or show them around the ship." Reeves said.

"Yes captain." Willis replied. Then looking at the two Brekken officers he added, "If you'd like to come with me." and he left the room, closing the door behind him.

"How was your trip general?" Reeves asked as both he and Harran sat down.

"Long. Especially given the size of a courier compared to your vessel." Harran responded.

"I'll bet. So what brings you all the way out here to Centaur?"

"Word of your exploits has reached us on Brekka captain. We know that humans are not the only species to be travelling the stars and this concerns many of us." Harran told him.

"I doubt that the Sissusk or Ticik will make it as far as Brekka any time soon if that's what you're worried about." Reeves said, "Besides, there are Commonwealth ships in your system to defend your world."

"Indeed. But we are wondering what will happen if the Commonwealth goes to war with either of them.

Though your war with the Genex was over decades before our two species met we have heard about how much of a strain that conflict placed on your forces. Our primary concern is that you will be forced to withdraw the ships protecting Brekka to protect your own worlds instead."

"You're worried that there could be other potentially hostile species closer to your world?"

"That is one concern yes. As you know we have no spacecraft of our own and the planetary defence system orbiting our world is controlled entirely by your people. We have no armoured fighting vehicles and little in the way of artillery that could threaten such things. Our air forces are limited to a handful of lighter than air craft that would be no match for any of the craft your people have operated for centuries. So far all of our planning for such an event is based on the idea of open surrender to an invader while small reserve forces are concealed to wage a more secret war of ambush and sabotage." General Harran said, "But that is the least of our concerns for now. What worries my people more is the possibility of attack by other humans, criminals with weapons primitive by your standards but more than a match for anything we may have. Remember that the group you call the Reich is located relatively near to our world in the terms of your ability to cross space. Worst of all there is the talk of war between the Brekken nations."

"You think it would come to that?" Reeves said, surprised and Harran nodded.

"The Brekken are no more united than humanity is. We have alliances and pacts but we also have enemies. Surely you know that not all of our nations are allied to your Commonwealth. Some still openly persist with the older ways of slavery and oppression that you demanded we abandon as the price of your friendship. You may not have shared your knowledge with them but they have spies and they are advancing as well. We also suspect that some of the nations that present themselves as friends to you are in fact just hoping to gain access to more of your technology before returning to those practices. With you gone they could do just that without fear of reprisals from your forces. Trust me captain, I know how strong an incentive the fear of bombardment from space can be."

Reeves smiled.

"You were there weren't you?" he asked, "When the Commonwealth first made itself known to the Brekken."

"I was a child captain. The son of a farmer and when the news came that an invasion fleet had been sighted by fishermen out at sea we were all gathered together by our lords within their fortress for our own safety. But then we saw the fleet, thousands of ships as far as the eye could see as it sailed over the horizon with every one flying the flag of our enemies and in that fleet we saw only death or slavery. Some threw themselves from the walls there and then to end their own lives rather than risk being taken. Others stood ready to die fighting while more still prayed for some miracle to save us. I doubt that any of those who prayed quite expected such a literal answer to their prayers but what happened when your vessels bombarded that fleet was a terrible sight. Every projectile trailed fire behind it and impacts smashed ships apart as if they were models made of twigs. The residual heat of the rounds boiled the sea and soon all we could see was a mist covering the ocean. Mind you, that was not the end of it. Many thousands of our enemy's troops survived to reach the beach and we knew that they still outnumbered us greatly. But then your people revealed themselves, a tiny force compared to our enemies but so much more powerful. A single company dropped from orbit onto that beach, troops in powered armour and armed with machine guns and grenade launchers against an army in boiled leather armed with swords, spears and bows." the general explained.

Then he smiled, "Now thanks to you we have come as far in fifty years as you tell us you came in five hundred."

"So why come all the way out here general? It seems to me that you'd be better of heading to earth and speaking to representatives of the Commonwealth to get guarantees about your planet's protection." Reeves said.

"That is a job for ambassadors, not soldiers captain. My job is to observe the Commonwealth's response to the threat of the Sissusk and Ticik and for that I need to be where the forces that would meet such a threat are based."

"Centaur." Reeves said and Harran nodded, "Aside from the garrison that now exists out at Liberty just in case the Sissusk try to attack there again. Well I can assure you that the threat is being taken seriously general. Patrols of the Fringe Worlds have been stepped up, in fact we'll be heading out on another soon."

"I have been instructed to establish an office here to liaise with your forces. An ambassador will follow later. In the mean time has there been any indication of another impending attack captain?"

"Not yet no. Though perhaps you'd prefer a fuller report from my intelligence officer. She knows far more about this than I do." Reeves said and he reached for the intercom handset mounted on the wall beside him, "Lieutenant Lucas, could you report to my quarters. I have a guest that needs a full briefing on the current situation regarding the Sissusk and Ticik."

"Understood sir. I'm on my way." Lucas replied and Reeves put the handset back on its mounting.

Lucas arrived shortly after clutching a tablet computer and when she entered Reeves' quarters she suddenly halted and stared at Harran, not expecting an alien to be present.

"Lieutenant Lucas meet General Harran of the Brekken nation of Marellia. He has been sent here to monitor our response to the new threats against us." Reeves told her, "Now perhaps you can update us both."

"Of course captain." Lucas replied, activating her tablet and reading from it, "The engagement at Liberty in the Delta Pavonis system resulted in our taking almost ten thousand Sissusk prisoners. Plus some human collaborators they'd brought along with them. These have all been relocated here to Centaur for interrogation. On the diplomatic front the Commonwealth has attempted direct communication with the Sissusk by aiming tachyon transmissions at their array orbiting CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one but there has been no response to any of these yet. In addition messenger drones have been sent to the system to attempt contact via radio but the result has been the same. The drones were programmed to return after a preset time so that their sensors could be examined for intelligence but so far none have returned. Intelligence believes that the Sissusk have shot them all down."

"Basically we haven't heard a thing from them in six months." Reeves said, looking at General Harran.

"They do not even want to negotiate for the return of their own troops or confirm that they are being well treated?" the general responded.

"No general." Lucas replied, "It was hoped that the POWs could be used as leverage to secure the release of humans we understand are being held as slaves within the Sissusk Empire. But the Sissusk don't appear to care about them."

"And what of the Ticik?" Harran asked.

"The Ticik are still a mystery to us." Lucas said, "The Fedrun we have been able to debrief are the only source of information we have about them. According to them the Ticik have a biological caste system consisting of a leadership caste, a scientific caste, warriors and workers."

"Interesting." Harran commented, "Isn't that the same as-"

"The Genex?" Reeves interrupted, nodding, "Yes it is."

"We have confirmed that the Ticik are not the Genex." Lucas added, "The Fedrun first encountered the Ticik before the Sissusk overthrew them. That was three hundred years ago. There's no way that the Genex could have got out that far so early to establish a colony that escaped the war."

"So you know what they aren't, what about what they are lieutenant?" Harran asked.

"All we know is that they defend their territory enthusiastically general. We suspect that they may have an outpost somewhere close to Phi Two Pavonis where we first encountered them but we can't be certain about that. The Fedrun inform us that the Ticik will attack anything that they consider to be intruding on their territory and if they perceive it to be a significant threat will act to remove that threat. Their war with the Sissusk began when the Sissusk attempted to colonise a planet that was already claimed by the Ticik and rather than just withdrawing they attempted to make a fight of it. That was just over ten years ago and the Ticik have been pushing them back ever since."

"Your fought with the Ticik." Harran pointed out, looking at Reeves, "Twice."

"Yes, but the Canadians withdrew without firing a shot and we fell back after it became obvious that the *Warspite* couldn't match their dreadnought. The Fedrun think that means they either don't see us as a threat or they haven't been able to track us back here yet. Otherwise they'd have already hit us." Lucas answered. Just then the intercom sounded and Reeves picked it up.

"Reeves." he said.

"Captain, Admiral Mitchell and her party have arrived." Goldman told him.

"Party?" Reeves replied, "How many are we talking about?"

"Seven in total sir. Mister Multan is with them." Goldman answered.

"Multan's back? Take them to the briefing room, we'll meet them there." Reeves said before putting the intercom handset down again.

"Who is Mister Multan?" General Harran asked.

"A Fedrun." Lucas replied, "He helped us rescue a lot of the humans in the CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one system. We brought back his family and a few dozen other Fedrun as well."

"They were relocated into the core for their safety." Reeves added, "They are too valuable as a source of intelligence to risk their death or capture if the Sissusk do attack again. Having one of them brought back here makes me nervous."

4.

Reeves, Lucas and General Harran were met by Commander Knight, the *Warspite's* first officer outside the ship's briefing room.

"Who do we have?" Reeves asked.

"Admiral Mitchell and Commander Park for starters." Knight replied and Reeves nodded, unsurprised to hear that the admiral had brought along her own intelligence officer. Park had served as the *Warspite's* intelligence officer before being promoted and transferring to the admiral's staff, "She's also brought Hale and Kohl from the *Bayonet* and Bertarelli and Da Silva from the *Ceres*." The *Bayonet* and *Ceres* were the two Denver-class light cruisers stationed at Centaur. Neither of them was as powerful as *Warspite* but like the heavy cruiser they were designed to be able to act independently, "Multan is with her as well."

"So I heard." Reeves said.

"Commander Bernard and Major Willis are already in there with them." Knight added.

"Perhaps we ought to join them then." Reeves said before pulling open the door and stepping into the room, "Good morning admiral." he said, "Have you met General Harran?"

"No, I haven't had the pleasure." she replied and then she looked at the Brekken general, "General." she added.

"Admiral." he said, looking around the room, "I was not expecting to meet so many of your officers today."

"I apologise for any inconvenience general. But this is a matter of some importance and it may be relevant to your presence here. That's why I suggested you ship dock with the *Warspite* instead of the station." Mitchell replied. Then she looked at the other officers present, "Now if everyone would like to take a seat we can begin."

The seating in the briefing room was arranged in rows and, given that it was their vessel, the *Warspite's* crew took seats in the front row with Admiral Mitchell, Multan and General Harran while the officers from the other two cruisers sat behind them. Meanwhile Commander Park stepped up to the podium at the front of the room and inserted a portable memory device into a socket set into it, causing a star chart to appear on the large screen behind him. This showed a large number of stars spread over a radius of about thirty-five light years. "This is the result of the examination of the navigational database taken from the Sissusk light cruiser encountered at Phi Two Pavonis." Park began, "With help from the Fedrun brought back by the *Warspite* we have determined that this shows the extent of the Sissusk Empire."

"Did you know about this?" Knight whispered to Lucas and she shook her head.

"I knew that the computers taken from the ship were being studied but I didn't know that they'd managed to get this out of them." she replied softly.

"Despite repeated efforts to open communication and establish some form of diplomatic contact using both direct transmissions and messenger drones we haven't been able to make contact with anyone inside the Sissusk Empire." Park continued before concluding with, "Now I'll hand you over to Admiral Mitchell." and he stepped aside as Admiral Mitchell got to her feet and walked up to the podium.

"Thank you commander." she said, nodding her head towards him. Then she turned to face her audience, "I've gathered the commanders of the three cruisers stationed in the Gamma Pavonis system together so that I can relay your orders that have come directly from Fleet Command on earth. We aren't just going to sit back and wait while the Sissusk secretly build an armada to use against us and since they won't respond to our attempts at communication we're going to do something more drastic. The *Warspite*, *Bayonet* and *Ceres* are hereby ordered to proceed to the CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one system and investigate what the Sissusk are up to."

At this point the senior ship commanders exchanged glances.

"Admiral are we launching a pre-emptive strike against the Sissusk?" Captain Hale asked.

"Three cruisers isn't much of an invasion force." Reeves commented.

"Your mission is simply to gather data on what's going on inside the Sissusk Empire." Admiral Mitchell answered, "Monitor their communications and do your best to build up a picture of what they're doing. Avoid direct contact if you can. You aren't actually authorised to open any negotiations with the Sissusk but try to find out why they aren't replying to our attempts at communication. The *Warspite* will be the command ship obviously and since you'll be well beyond direct communication range she is to be outfitted with drone hangar modules. These will be filled with reconnaissance and courier drones."

"And what if there's nothing at CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one to tell us what we want to know admiral?" Reeves asked and Mitchell sighed.

"Then you push deeper captain." she said, "Mister Multan will be going with you as an advisor. He'll be able to provide you with more information on what you can expect to find and if communication with the Sissusk or any of their subject species does become necessary he'll be able to tell you who is and is not worth talking to."

"Sixty light years is a long way to be going on a sight seeing tour." Bernard commented, "Especially if

something goes wrong.”

“Your force will be supported by two other ships. The merchant cruiser *Valley of Thorns* will act as a resupply vessel while the repair tender *Orinoco* will be on hand should any of your ships be damaged. Neither of these ships is as fast as your cruisers so it's recommended that you keep them hidden from the Sissusk as well as possible. The *Valley of Thorns* has a basic weapons load out and the *Orinoco* has a basic defence as well so they won't be totally defenceless if the Sissusk do find them.”

“What sort of mission duration are we looking at?” Willis asked and Mitchell looked at Park.

“Commander?” she said.

“We're estimating three to eight weeks, depending on whether you can find what we want in the first system or not.” Park announced.

“Having all those ships set out is going to attract some attention.” Da Silva pointed out, “Not only here either. The Caliphate is bound to notice and given how they think they're bound to suspect that we're heading for them.”

“Yes, that's why you'll be setting out at different intervals.” Admiral Mitchell replied, “The *Ceres* and the *Bayonet* will set off as soon as they can recall their crews from the surface. They are to take a parabolic course around the Caliphate's territory, acting as if they're running a standard intelligence sweep. Meanwhile the *Warspite* will take a more direct route to Iota Pavonis. The *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco* are already en-route there and should arrive in about four days if they're keeping to schedule.”

Reeves then turned to Bernard.

“How long do you think it will take to swap out the modules for drone carriers?” he asked.

“About sixteen to twenty hours.” the engineer replied.

“Admiral we can be ready to go in a day.” Reeves then said to Mitchell and the admiral nodded.

“Excellent. In that case you are all dismissed.” she said.

As the assembled audience got to their feet Multan approached Harran.

“I am Multan of the Fedrun.” he said and he held out his hand in greeting, “Do you shake hands as the humans do?”

“General Harran. Army of Marelta,” Harran replied as he took Multan's hand, “and yes, shaking hands has become common among many of the nations on my home planet. Since you have some time before you leave I would like to speak to you about the Sissusk. The governments of my people are greatly concerned about them.”

“Of course.” Multan replied, “But would you mind answering a question of mine first?”

“Certainly.”

“I am curious about how your people saw the humans when they first landed on your planet. When my people spread out from our home world we did so as conquerors. Had we found your world we would have enslaved you. The same goes for the Sissusk, who have set themselves on the path of continuing our legacy rather than learning from it. Were you not afraid of humanity?” Multan said and Harran bared his teeth in his species equivalent of a smile.

“I had a similar conversation with Captain Reeves not so long ago.” he said, “I witnessed the first open landing of the humans on Brekka. They had been undertaking covert missions on our planet for a decade before that while they learned about our societies and customs. Their first open action was to save my home from an invading army so we knew they possessed the power to destroy. But when they came before my king they addressed him just as any loyal subject would do. Then they told us what they could offer and what the price would be.”

“The price?” Multan commented, “So they did make demands.”

“In a sense yes. We still practised slavery back then and the humans would not tolerate that under any circumstances. They also introduced other ideas about removing the absolute power many of our leaders enjoyed. They said if we agreed to that then they would help us advance. What we gave up was nothing in comparison to what we gained. So to answer your question Mister Multan, no we did not fear the humans. The only thing we thought about was the knowledge they were offering. Now those nations that agreed to the humans' terms are in the midst of an industrial revolution while those who rejected them are ignored by the humans. As long as they do not threaten them of course. There have been a number of incidents over the years where renegade kings and emperors have attempted to kidnap humans and coerce them into providing scientific knowledge and all have ended the same way: the humans freed in military raids that left dozens dead.”

At the same time that Multan was approaching Harran, Lucas went to speak with Reeves.

“Captain I need to have a private word with you.” she said.

“Very well lieutenant.” Reeves responded, beckoning for her to follow him to an empty area of the room, “So what is bothering you?”

“Oh nothing's really bothering me. But I think you ought to speak to Lieutenant Commander Goldman about setting off on an extended mission.” Lucas said and Reeves frowned.

“Is there something wrong with the commander?” he asked.

"Oh no. Well I just think you ought to discuss it with her first." Lucas answered.
"Very well. I'll go and see her now."

Goldman was sat at the flight operations console when Reeves entered the bridge and he walked over to her.

"Captain." she said.

"Lieutenant commander." he responded, "Our mission has changed. It's likely to last several weeks now and Lieutenant Lucas suggested that I ought to come and speak to you before we leave. Shall we step outside?"

"Yes captain, that would probably be best." Goldman replied as she got to her feet. Meanwhile Reeves looked towards the large central console where the *Warspite's* chief navigator was at work.

"Lieutenant Commander Thomas, the bridge is yours." he said.

"Yes captain." the other officer replied as Reeves and Goldman exited the bridge into the corridor and closed the hatch behind them.

"We're about to lead a task force into Sissusk space." Reeves said when he was sure that they were alone, "The mission is estimated to take a month or two but there's always the chance that it could run over."

"Oh." Goldman responded and her face fell.

"So there is a problem." Reeves said when he saw this.

"I'm pregnant captain. David wants me to apply for a surface posting when my tour ends."

"And what do you want?" Reeves asked.

"I want to stay aboard the *Warspite* sir. I've already made up my mind about that. I'll have to take some time off of course but-

"Yes, I understand that. Do you want to take leave now? Lieutenant O'Donnell can fill in for you."

"No sir, I'm your flight operations officer so I'll go on the mission. Even if it overruns another month we'll still be back in plenty of time."

"Very well commander." Reeves said, "But I want you to check in with Doctor Thundercloud immediately. If he has any objections to you going then I'm afraid you'll have no choice but to stay behind. He has final authority over all medical matters aboard this ship. Understood?"

"Yes captain. Oh and thank you for being discrete about this."

"That's not a problem commander. If anyone understands the difficulties of maintaining a family life while working aboard a starship it's me. Now get yourself to sick bay and see what the doctor has to say. We're scheduled to depart in under twenty-four hours. Crew briefings will take place in twelve so I need to know if you're coming with us by then."

"Yes captain." Goldman replied before she turned around and headed away from him.

INTERLUDE

The room was occupied by numerous computer terminals with men and women in civilian clothing sat at them, each one focused on their own screen just as Vale was as he reviewed the stream of data regarding fleet movements across the Commonwealth. This amounted to almost two thousand ships spread across the eighty-nine sectors that humans divided space into, including the Sol system itself. To most people and even many adaptive artificial intelligence systems the sheer quantity of data was far too vast to be able to pick out any meaningful data that did not involve at least a full fleet of capital warships, but Vale was very good at analysing data and his keen mind soon spotted the bizarre movement of two vessels in particular.

The merchant cruiser *Valley of Thorns* had been launched more than a hundred years ago as a Sea of Tranquillity-class battleship. However, following the Genex War and the development of artificial gravity field the ship had been declared obsolete and relegated to a reserve fleet. Its firepower massively downgraded and most of its crew quarters removed, the vast interior space freed up had been used to refit the ship as a freighter capable of hauling massive amounts of cargo through dangerous regions of space without needing a separate escort vessel. Signal intercepts and data from informants indicated that this vessel had departed from the Commonwealth fleet base at Delta Pavonis on a course that would take it out into the Fringe Worlds near Iota Pavonis, the site of the recent abortive Sissusk invasion. It was known that in the aftermath of that attack the Commonwealth had negotiated with the local inhabitants of the planet Liberty to place an armed garrison on their world, though this was located some distance away from their nation of Libertas and the price of this had been the expedited sale of several particle inductors that they would be able to use to provide the small defensive fleet that they were constructing with true faster than light and artificial gravity systems. Therefore, at first glance it could easily have looked as if the *Valley of Thorns* was being used to transport this valuable cargo of restricted technology. However, the launch of a second vessel, the repair tender *Orinoco*, that was following the same heading indicated that there was more to this. The *Valley of Thorns* would not have been allowed to launch if it was believed to be incapable of making the journey out to Iota Pavonis and there were no other vessels in the system that would need the services of such a dedicated repair vessel and this caused Vale to begin to search for any other unusual activity that could be linked to this.

The logical place for him to start was Centaur in the Gamma Pavonis system. At around thirty light years distant from earth it was on the outer edge of the Outer Colonies region and the Commonwealth maintained a fleet of ships here to counter the perceived threat from the Caliphate. Among the ships of this fleet were three cruisers and Vale saw that every single one of them had launched from Centaur within the past three days. The light cruisers *Bayonet* and *Ceres* had launched together before the heavy cruiser *Warspite* left about a day later, all three heading off into the Fringe Worlds. As with the *Valley of Thorns*, it looked at first glance as if there was nothing unusual about these launches. The Commonwealth patrolled the Fringe Worlds in the Pavonis Sector as well as neighbouring sectors more heavily now that it knew about the existence of not one but two aggressive alien species with technology at least on a par with the Commonwealth lurking in deep space beyond the Fringe. However, it would take only minor course adjustments once they were beyond the monitoring range of commercial traffic to take all three cruisers to Iota Pavonis, arriving there within a few days of the *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco's* expected arrival time. This placed three Commonwealth cruisers along with a resupply ship and a mobile repair facility within a week's travel of the Sissusk Empire's colony at Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66° 34' 31".

But while Vale was very good at spotting patterns like this that others might easily overlook he was not so arrogant to believe himself to be infallible and so, copying the data to his tablet he got up and left the room before making his way to the office of a grey-haired woman who was responsible for collating all of the information he had just reviewed to reach his conclusion.

"What brings you here Mister Vale?" she asked, sneering at him.

"I need to confirm this data." Vale told her, holding out the tablet. But the woman did not bother looking at it. "All the information on our system is verified. I would not permit it otherwise." she said, looking back at the computer on her own desk, "Now unless you or your mistress have any relevant questions I have serious work to do."

It was obvious to Vale that the administrator had a poor opinion of Commander Hayes and would not be forthcoming with any assistance. But taking her at her word, Vale hurried from the room and took his phone from his pocket before calling up the entry for Hayes and he waited for her to answer.

"Enrico, this better be important." she said.

"The Commonwealth is sending a task force into the Sissusk Empire." he said.

"Christ!" Hayes exclaimed, "Are you certain?"

"As certain as I can be. I've seen intelligence confirming that there are three cruisers and a pair of support ships heading out to Iota Pavonis. We've got nothing to suggest that the Sissusk are making a move so the Commonwealth must be heading out to them." Vale said.

"Where's Martins?" Hayes asked.

"His ship is orbit now." Vale answered.

"Tell him I need to see him as soon as possible." Hayes said, "I'm on my way into the office now."

Lieutenant Commander Martins had a stern expression on his face when he was escorted into Hayes' office by Vale.

"Hello Daniel. Long time no see. Can I offer you a drink?" Hayes asked, indicating the chair on the opposite side of her desk.

"No thank you." he replied as he removed the tunic from his spotless white uniform before sitting down to avoid creasing it, "I'd rather get this over with. I've never appreciated being treated like I'm at your beck and call."

"As you wish." Hayes said, "Now what state is your ship in?"

"The *Grey Dawn* is being refuelled." Martins told her.

"And how soon can she depart?" Hayes added.

"Eight hours. Maybe six. Where am I being sent now?"

"CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one." Hayes answered.

"The Sissusk? The last I heard they weren't up to anything interesting." Martins commented.

"Enrico." Hayes said, glancing at Vale and he handed Martins a tablet.

"As you can see the Commonwealth is sending a task force to Sissusk space. CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one is the only Sissusk system they've visited before so it's logical to assume that that is where they'll start. We need you to trail them and report back via drone." he explained, "It's possible that you'll require further orders so make sure that you include a suitable rendezvous point in each message so we can send a drone back to you with updates."

"This could be just the opportunity we've been looking for." Hayes added, "I want you to take along a couple of attack drones as well as messengers. You aren't to engage either side without permission but I want you to be ready to launch a drone against the Sissusk."

"Are you crazy?" Martins said, "Look, following one ship around is one thing. But trailing an entire fleet that's going to be on alert is another. You know what the consequences are if they discover what we're doing."

"Yes, I'm fully aware lieutenant commander." Hayes said, "But you were able to avoid three fleets at Phi Two Pavonis. Commonwealth, Sissusk and Ticik. Surely you can handle staying out of sight of a few ships."

"I didn't have to follow any of those ships. I could just run silent and watch. You're talking about following them at FTL. Do you know how difficult that is to do without being spotted?"

"Need I remind you that you have been placed at my beck and call as you put it lieutenant commander?"

Hayes said, "Or perhaps you'd rather answer to Mister Stein? I'm sure that if you're not up to the task then he can find someone more qualified to take over as commanding officer of the *Grey Dawn*."

"Stein's not fleet. He can't replace me." Martins hissed, snarling.

"He may not be fleet but he does sit on an influential committee. One word in the right ear and you no longer need to worry about being seen by Commonwealth ships." Vale pointed out.

"In fact losing the *Grey Dawn* may be the least of your worries." Hayes added and Martins scowled.

"I should be getting back to my ship." he said, getting back to his feet and donning his tunic again, "I obviously have a long journey to prepare for."

Walking out of Hayes' office, Martins strode past Kane as he spoke with the receptionist. Kane turned his head and watched as the uniformed officer summoned the elevator and stepped inside. Then as the elevator doors slid shut Hayes and Vale emerged from her office as well and Kane smiled at her.

"Jennifer, why am I not surprised that you're sending men fleeing from your presence?" he said, smiling.

"Oh shut up Alex." Hayes responded.

5.

When the *Warspite* arrived in the Iota Pavonis system both the *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco* were already present, orbiting the planet Liberty. The merchant cruiser *Valley of Thorns* was larger even than the *Warspite*, almost twice its overall length. Pre-dating the development of artificial gravity the vessel had a rotating arm located about half way along its length, balanced on the opposite side by a tower containing the ship's sensor antennas and the light missile system that had replaced the much more powerful one it had possessed while still in front line service as a battleship. The old battleship's other weapons had been heavily downgraded as well and where it had mounted both heavy and medium turrets now it had been fitted with large cargo holds, leaving just a handful of light defensive turrets and a fixed gun at each end of its hull. The overall layout of the ship's length was symmetrical, making it impossible to declare one end or the other as the 'front' of the ship and it could just as easily travel in one direction as the other. On the other hand the more modern *Orinoco* had no need of a rotating section to create the illusion of gravity for its crew and the repair tender had a boxy appearance with an obvious prow and stern. A solitary light laser turret provided some point defence but the ship was not intended to enter combat.

Having taken a much less direct route to Iota Pavonis the *Bayonet* and the *Ceres* arrived just under two days later, by which time the *Warspite*'s navigator had already plotted a route to Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66° 34' 31".

"From the scans we took when we were last in the system this ought to bring us out of FTL on the far side of the gas giant we used to hide our last approach towards the Sissusk colony." he said, "It should also help shield us from the tachyon satellites the Sissusk have orbiting the star."

The satellites Thomas was referring to were used for interstellar communication. Tachyon signals required a great deal of power to generate and it was only practical to use them for tight beam communications. This meant that in order for them to be detected the signals needed to be precisely aimed and over the distances involved the only way this was possible was to point the signals directly at the star itself. Therefore, the Sissusk, like humanity, used networks of satellites orbiting stars to pick up these signals and relay them to their final destination in the system.

"The *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco* will be about a day and half behind us if we're going at top speed." Knight pointed out.

"We can make that work for us." Reeves responded, "While we wait in the gas giant's shadow we'll launch a fighter patrol. It can orbit the planet running silent and make passive scans of the colony. Then when our support ships arrive our cruisers can follow." then he looked towards Lucas sat at her console, "Lieutenant, can intelligence offer us any more information?" he asked.

"Not really captain." Lucas replied, "Almost everything we know about the system comes from our own visit there. None of the messenger drones sent since then returned and no other manned missions have been attempted. The system wasn't very heavily defended though."

"Two destroyers and a frigate. Plus their space station and a few orbital weapon platforms." Knight said, "Nothing our three cruisers can't handle if it does come down to a fight."

"That was before they considered our paying them a visit a possibility." Thomas pointed out, "Might they not have reinforced the system since then?"

"Actually that is an area where we have some more intelligence." Lucas said, smiling, "The debriefing of the rescued human and Fedrun slaves indicated that the Sissusk Empire is suffering continuous heavy losses against the Ticik. Their focus is on that border, not the one with us. We expect them to have replaced the ships they lost there but it's doubtful that they'll have deployed many reinforcements. They simply don't have the ships to spare in a system that isn't immediately threatened."

"We'll need to watch for patrols though." Reeves said, "If the Sissusk have been shooting down our drones then they'll be watching out for more."

"Those drones were trying to be seen." Thomas commented.

"Yes, but the fact that we've been sending them ought have them on edge." Knight replied.

"Which is another good reason to try and drop out of FTL somewhere that they won't spot us immediately."

Reeves added. Then he then turned to Goldman, "Lieutenant commander Goldman, pass Lieutenant Commander Thomas' calculations on to the rest of the fleet. We're leaving for CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one now."

Surrounded by a shell of tachyons with a mass of magnitude significantly greater than that of the heavy cruiser itself, the only way for an object to travel faster than the speed of light, the *Warspite* was relatively insulated from the rest of the universe. Only the light cruisers *Bayonet* and *Ceres* were close enough for the *Warspite*'s sensors to monitor clearly, everything else was little more than a brief spike to perhaps be noted for future investigation as the *Warspite* sped by on its way to its destination.

The gas giant in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung system that the three Commonwealth warships

dropped out of faster than light speed behind was one of two in the system, while a large frozen world existed further out in the system. Finally several rocky planets orbited closer to the orange star and on one of these rocky planets there was a Sissusk colony.

The crew of the Commonwealth ships were at action stations when they dropped to sub light speeds, ready just in case their approach had been monitored by the Sissusk defences and as soon as the shells of tachyons surrounding them were dispersed they began to take in their surroundings.

"Right on the mark Ash." Thomas said to the *Warspite's* helmsman when he doubled checked their location, "Smack bang in the middle of the gas giant's shadow. The Sissusk shouldn't be able to see us here."

"Did you expect any different?" Ash responded with a smile.

"*Bayonet* and *Ceres* confirming their safe arrival captain." Goldman said and Reeves nodded.

"Any signs of hostile craft?" he asked.

"I'm not reading any tachyon signatures captain. No passive EM images either." a enlisted young woman at one of the sensor consoles replied, "It looks like we're-" she continued before suddenly trailing off.

"Petty officer Cortez? Is there a problem?" Knight asked.

"No sir. Er, maybe, I'm not sure." she answered.

"Well which is it? Yes or no?" Reeves said.

"There's a large metallic mass showing up further out in the system." Cortez replied, "About a hundred and fifty million kilometres from here."

"Must be big if we're reading a magnetic disruption from here." Knight commented.

"Could be six or seven thousand metres across." Cortez said.

"Do we have an image?" Reeves added.

"I should be able to get you one. Though the data is about eight and half minutes old." Cortez said.

"Yes thank you petty officer, I am aware of the speed of light." Reeves said, looking at the view screen mounted on the console in front of him just as Cortez transferred a visual image taken by one of the many external detectors that were mounted on the warship's hull.

Though building a structure six kilometres across represented a major engineering challenge for species of the approximate tech level of humans and Sissusk it was still small when compared to the vast distances involved even in travelling and tracking objects across a solar system and the image was little more than a jagged outline that reflected light in an irregular pattern.

"That's not much to go on." Knight said.

"Shall I take us closer captain?" Ash asked from the helm.

"No, we'll keep an eye on it for any indication that it's reacting to our presence but for now we'll stay in the gas giant's shadow." Reeves said before he added, "Goldman, tell the hangar to launch our fighter scout."

"Yes captain." Goldman replied, activating the intercom, "Hangar bay, you are cleared for launch."

"It's about time bridge." a woman's voice responded as in the launch tubes located below the *Warspite's* forward hangar the pilot of the fighter that had been ready to launch since the moment the ship dropped out of FTL braced herself for the imminent acceleration. Lieutenant Commander Shaw, often known by her call sign 'Archangel' was the commander of the squadron of twelve fighters attached to the *Warspite*. Her tiny craft required two crew and behind her sat her navigator and electronics officer Lieutenant Kazuyuki Mori, "Hang on Kaz." Shaw added, "Here we go." and all of a sudden the fighter was propelled forwards out of the launch tube by the magnetic accelerator mounted along the length of the tube.

As soon as the fighter was clear of the heavy cruiser Shaw fired its main engines, taking the craft into a high speed low level orbit of the gas giant. With the fighter now caught in the planet's gravitational pull it was naturally pulled around the planet, the combination of the planet's gravity and the fighter's own inertia keeping the craft at a steady altitude.

"All passive sensors on line." Mori announced from behind Shaw, "Killing all active emissions now, going to silent running."

"Understood Kaz," Shaw replied before she signalled the *Warspite*, "*Warspite* this is Archangel, we'll be out of eclipse in about ninety seconds and are ready to run silent. See you in about ten hours. Archangel out."

"Understood Archangel. Good hunting." Goldman responded before the channel went silent.

Just as Shaw had predicted, the fighter left the shadow of the gas giant less than two minutes later and the planet on which the Sissusk colony was located came into view of their sensors. To the two fighter crew the planet was nothing but a tiny speck against the star field at this distance, not even easily recognisable as a planet and Mori had to make use of the fighter's navigational instruments to be certain that he had their sensors looking in the right direction.

"This is weird." he said.

"What is?" Shaw asked, "Remember, jokes about alien spaceships just aren't funny since we actually started encountering them."

"No, it's just that I'm not picking up anything from the planet." Mori told her, "No significant heat signatures, no radio transmissions and no sign of that military space dock that was orbiting it last time we were here. In fact there doesn't seem to be any orbital traffic at all."

"That is weird. There ought to be something, even if it's just a navigation beacon." Shaw said, confused as she double checked the sensor readouts herself, "Kaz try doing a sweep across the star."

"The star will blind-"

"Just do it Kaz, okay?"

"Okay. Aligning passive sensors towards the local sun." Mori said and when he had done this he frowned,

"That's odd too." he commented.

"Let me guess, no tachyon signatures." Shaw said.

"Right. It's like the communication network just isn't there any more."

"Broaden the scan Kaz. Look for any activity in the system at all." Shaw said and Mori began to search the entire system for any signs of life.

"I think I've got something." he said after several minutes of apparently fruitless searching, "Single contact on infra red. It's barely registering though."

"Is it one of their stealth sloops?" Shaw asked but Mori shook his head.

"No, it looks too big. From the rate and angle of drift I'd say that it's about four hundred metres long. Could be one of their destroyers or frigates running silent."

"Damn, they were expecting us." Shaw said, they've killed all their emissions to keep us blind. They could be all over the place."

"Should we get out of here?" Mori asked, "Power up the engines and get back to the *Warspite* to warn them we could be about to be ambushed?"

"No." Shaw answered with a shake of her head, "We'll finish the patrol as planned. The *Warspite* and the other ships will spot anyone powering up an engine to intercept them. Just because the *Sissusk* knew we were coming doesn't necessarily mean that they know we're here. Just keep an eye on that ship."

Mori made sure that as the fighter continued to orbit the gas giant he did not let the *Sissusk* starship had had detected escape and as the fighter's sensors continued to monitor the minute emissions from the vessel a more interesting picture began to emerge.

"Lynn I'm not sure that ship is running silent." Mori said as he studied the continuing stream of data, "I don't think that ship's running silent at all. I think it's dead."

"Dead? Are you sure?" Shaw replied, turning her head as far as she could.

"Not one hundred percent. But all the signs are there. I've got more of a profile now and it does look like a destroyer like the ones we encountered last time we were here and at *Liberty*." Mori began to explain, "But I think that the emissions are just residual heat from battle damage. There are shadows where there shouldn't be any and I think that the sensor and comm tower is missing."

The design philosophy of the *Sissusk* capital ships encountered so far featured a single tower that extended downwards from the main body of the hull as well as a long tail to the rear. These housed the receivers and transmitters for the vessels' communications and sensor equipment, kept as far as possible from the main body and drives of the ships. But the outline being presented to Mori by the fighter's sensors showed a ship that had lost most of the tower that was supposed to be beneath its hull.

"Think maybe the *Ticik* paid a visit?" Shaw commented, "We tracked the *Sissusk* back here so it stands to reason that the *Ticik* might be able to as well."

"I can't tell what did the damage." Mori replied, "But this is somewhat reminiscent of the wrecked fleet we found at *Phi-Two Pavonis*."

"Yeah, the *Ticik* are nothing if not thorough it would seem."

"Hang on I've got something else. Looks like a debris field. I'm picking up the radiant heat it's catching from the sun. I can't tell what it was, but there's a lot of it. Could be more than one ship."

"Maybe that's why we're not picking up anything from the planet. The *Ticik* bombed it." Shaw said.

"I don't think so. I'm not picking up any of the atmospheric disturbance associated with widespread orbital bombardment. I think there's some more localised damage though. That could be from precision strikes or ships crashing into the planet."

"Damn it Kaz, isn't there anything you can tell me for certain? So far all we're going to be able to tell the captain is that we don't know anything. If this was the *Ticik* then there could be some of their ships hiding in the system still."

"Well if you want to violate orders we could always try an active sensor sweep or change course to get closer to-"

"No." Shaw interrupted, "I'd rather go back with nothing than tell the captain I violated his orders. Just keep scanning. We'll let Lucas sort it all out when we're done."

Reeves was in his quarters when Knight contacted him to say that Shaw's fighter had returned after its ten hour orbit of the gas giant the fleet was hiding behind. In the intervening ten hours none of the cruisers had detected anything new and the strange structure seen just after they had arrived in the system had yet to react to their presence or give off any signs of activity.

"I'm on my way. Have Mister Multan join us in the bridge to hear whatever it is they have to say." Reeves said

before putting the intercom handset down and he calmly got up and left his quarters, making his way directly to the bridge. Shaw and Mori were already present, the pair of them still wearing their flight suits as they stood by the bridge's central console with Knight and Lucas and there was a slight odour coming from each of them after having spent so many hours in the confines of a fighter cockpit. On the other hand Multan arrived about a minute later, accompanied by a pair of marines. Though he and the other Fedrun rescued from Sissusk captivity had been fully co-operative with the Commonwealth so far they did not have full security clearance to be wandering around a warship like the *Warspite* without an escort.

"So what did you find commander?" Reeves asked.

"A whole load of nothing captain." Shaw replied.

"There must have been something." Lucas said, "This was a settled system the last time we were here."

"Exactly, 'was'. Past tense." Shaw said sternly.

"Captain it was like Phi-Two Pavonis all over again." Mori said, "All we saw was wreckage, most of it so badly smashed it was impossible to tell what it once was. But if there is anyone alive here, they're staying well hidden."

"Do you think a Ticik task force could have made it here?" Knight asked, looking at Multan.

"Possibly." the Fedrun replied, "Though I am not certain why they would bother. If the war has already reached Issil then many more vital systems must have fallen first."

"Issil?" Shaw said.

"That's what the Sissusk call this system and the colony." Lucas told her.

"I'd say it was a surprise attack as well." Shaw added, "The tachyon relay satellites aren't functioning. Now without using active sensors it was impossible to determine whether they were still there or not but they certainly weren't operational."

"I guess now we know why the Sissusk never replied to our signals." Thomas commented from his seat just behind the central console.

"It is quite possible that they would not have even if they could." Multan told him.

"So does what Lieutenant Commander Shaw and Lieutenant Mori are telling us match what you know about the way the Ticik operate?" Reeves asked, looking at Multan.

"It is hard to say Captain Reeves. The Sissusk did not discuss the details of the war with their slaves. Some information reached us of course and we knew that the Ticik were winning. But when the Sissusk retreated they often abandoned their slaves. Usually killing them to prevent them from falling into the hands of their enemies."

"Okay we can't just stay hidden behind this gas giant." Reeves said, "We're going to head for the planet. If there's no sign of life by the time we enter orbit then we'll send a landing party down. Commander Knight, I want you to lead it. Take Major Willis and a platoon of his men. Also I want Lieutenant Lucas there to examine anything you find for its intelligence value and Doctor Thundercloud just in case you come across anyone in need of medical attention." then as he headed back for his seat at the back of the bridge he added, "Lieutenant Goldman, alert the *Bayonet* and the *Ceres* that we are preparing to move out. I want them to follow. Lieutenant Commander Shaw, I want the rest of your squadron ready to launch. You take a break though, you've already been in a cockpit long enough. Sound action stations, I want the crew on alert as we come out into the open. Mister Thomas, take us to the Sissusk colony."

"Captain, do you not want me to accompany your landing party?" Multan asked.

"No, I need you up here." Reeves replied, "If anything happened to you down there then the whole mission would have to be scrubbed. Your experience with the Sissusk Empire makes you irreplaceable."

"Basically he's saying that the rest of us are expendable." Knight added as he walked past Multan on his way to his own seat to Reeves' right.

The trio of Commonwealth cruisers emerged from behind the gas in a 'V' formation, providing each vessel with a wide field of fire. The *Warspite* took the lead in this formation while the two slightly smaller cruisers followed either side of it. For now at least the crews of the cruisers held back on launching the fighters they carried. Such an act would be overtly hostile and likely to provoke a similar response should any Sissusk forces turn out to be in the area, whereas it was hoped that just having the cruisers themselves heading for the colony was more likely to result in the Sissusk into warning them off before firing on them. Unlike Shaw's fighter, all three cruisers emerged from behind the gas giant using their suite of active sensors to search the space around them. This revealed no more signs of life than the fighter's passive scans had but it did expose the presence of more wrecked starships. After the radio waves from the *Warspite's* radar had had time to travel all the way to the large structure the crew had observed shortly after their arrival it also revealed more information about it as well.

"Captain I think you should see this." Goldman commented, "I'm looking at the radar return from that structure we saw when we first got here and it's giving some odd results."

"Let me see then." Reeves said as Goldman sent him an image of the structure's surface constructed by the *Warspite's* computer from the minute differences in travel time for the radio waves.

"That is weird." Reeves said, frowning. Then he looked to his left where Lucas was examining the same

image as he was, "Lieutenant, do those look like Sissusk ships to you?" he asked.

"Yes sir." she answered, "I've already counted eight distinct vessels and there are clearly more than that."

The *Warspite's* radar return had revealed that the structure had been built from the hulls of numerous Sissusk spacecraft joined together in a ring shaped configuration. Not all of the ships used in the ring's construction looked to be warships, several of them having the boxy appearance of freighters instead but a great many of them were and this included more than one of the light cruisers that the Commonwealth had encountered in the Phi-2 Pavonis system. Had these been operational then they would have posed a significant threat to the Commonwealth ships.

"What the hell is that?" Knight commented as he too studied the structure, frowning as he tried to comprehend its purpose.

"I want a drone launching to investigate it." Reeves said, "Use one of our own attack drones rather than any of the messengers we're carrying in those storage modules. Have it approach and scan the ring but it's not to take any direct action without permission."

As Reeves explained what he wanted the drone to do one of the *Warspite's* weapons crew began to program the instructions into one of the cruiser's own store of remotely operated drones. These were typically used in relatively close proximity to the ship, rarely being sent more than one light second away so that they could receive updated orders with little to no delay. Travelling more than a hundred million kilometres from the *Warspite* would mean that any change in the drone's orders would take several minutes to reach it and any information it provided would take just as long to reach the *Warspite*. However, unlike a manned craft such as a fighter or shuttle drones were regarded as expendable and an attack drone had sufficient self control to be able to carry out evasive manoeuvres if it did come under attack even with being ordered to do so by the *Warspite*.

"Drone ready captain." the weapons officer announced, "Launching now." and from the vertically mounted launcher at the very rear of the *Warspite* a single attack drone emerged from its tube and angled towards the ring, accelerating away from the *Warspite* and the other two Commonwealth cruisers rapidly.

Meanwhile the cruisers themselves continued to head towards the seemingly lifeless Sissusk colony world.

As they drew closer their optical sensors were able to pick out the dark shapes of the few scattered settlements on the surface but not one of them was producing the energy emissions that could be expected of a modern city filled with electronic gadgets. Instead each one was as lifeless as the surrounding desert. The same was true of the space around the planet where the network of satellites and orbital stations was gone, replaced with just isolated fields of debris that made no attempt to contact the Commonwealth cruisers or target them with their weapons. But more shocking was the appearance of one space station in particular. There had been more than thirty major orbital installations present when the *Warspite* had first visited the system but this particular space station had been a military facility, used as a base for the frigate and pair of destroyers protecting the planet along with numerous smaller vessels. Seemingly very well armed, the *Warspite's* operation to rescue the humans being held as slave labour on the planet had been timed to when it would be on the far side of the planet. Now though it was nothing more than twisted metal. The station had clearly been the target of a powerful bombardment that had torn it wide open and now the one major piece of tumbling wreckage was being orbited by hundreds of smaller pieces and periodically some of these would be dragged down by the planet's much greater gravitational pull and enter the atmosphere where they burned up. No warships could be seen drifting as part of the wreckage and it was clear that if any had been docked with the space station when whatever tragedy had befallen the planet had taken place they were now either some of the drifting debris fields or part of the bizarre ring structure orbiting further away from Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 itself.

"That thing's been trashed." Ash commented as he steered the *Warspite* to a higher orbit where the dense debris field would not pose a hazard to the ship.

"Are we picking up anything from the planet at all?" Reeves asked, glancing at Goldman.

"A few thermal hotspots. But nothing out of the ordinary." she replied.

"I think I've got a smoke plume." Cortez said suddenly and the ship's senior officers all looked towards her.

"Confirmed." Lucas added as she called up the same data Cortez was looking at, "Judging by the surrounding structures, or what's left of them at any rate, I'd say that we're looking at a fuel depot."

"So someone blew it up and it's still alight." Knight comment.

"Yes, but how long has it been burning?" Reeves asked.

"A facility like that could conceivably burn for more than a week." Lucas replied and Reeves took a deep breath.

"Okay I've seen enough." he said, "Commander Knight take your team down to the surface. I suggest you start with the planetary capital. Multan should be able to identify it for you. Lieutenant Commander Goldman inform Commander Bernard that there is wreckage in orbit he may want to take a look at before we leave."

6.

The *Warspite* carried four dropships for use by the marine company stationed aboard the vessel and one of these was selected to take the landing party down to the surface. The craft was cramped inside but its mix of armour protection and the support weapons it carried made it more useful than an ordinary shuttle or lightweight armed skip.

"Is everyone aboard?" Doctor Thundercloud asked as he looked around the troop carrying compartment that appeared filled to capacity with not only the marine platoon but also several fleet officers and a pair of the *Warspite's* compliment of robots. These would be essential if the landing party came across any Sissusk since neither humans nor Sissusk were physically capable of speaking one another's languages even if they could understand them. The speaker mounted inside the robots' mouths to mimic human speech patterns could produce any mix of sounds they needed to even if the sounds would not match the movements of the lips that the robot had been designed with. Designed to carry forty-eight troops, the dropship was filled almost to capacity by the four eight-man squads of marines plus the four members of Willis' own command section that had replaced the platoon's ordinary one in addition to Willis himself as well as Knight, Thundercloud and Lucas.

"Two more to come yet doc." Willis replied before another marine appeared in the hatch and there was a panting sound from behind him as he led one of the *Warspite's* two dogs aboard the dropship.

"A dog?" Knight commented.

"Thought it might come in useful if we're searching ruins for bodies." Willis replied.

"Thor here can sniff out a corpse all right. Or a living body for that matter." the dog handler said as he hooked up the harness that the dog wore to keep it secure during the drop to the planet's surface.

"Okay we're all aboard now." Willis called out.

"Copy that." the pilot responded from the cockpit as he sealed the hatch remotely and started the dropship's engines, "Control we're sealed up, fuelled and loaded. Do we have permission to launch?"

"Confirmed. Beginning de-pressurisation procedure. Have a good trip." the controller replied and outside the dropship a klaxon sounded, alerting the ground crew in the hangar to withdraw. Then once there was no-one left in the hangar the air was pumped out before the large launch door at the very front of the ship was opened. Only then did the pilot of the dropship take off, the craft rising up off the deck and slowly leaving the hangar. Then when it had reached a safe distance the dropship's pilot fired the engines at full thrust, causing everyone inside to feel a string push towards the stern and secure in his harness, Thor began to bark.

"Is he going to do that all the way down?" Knight asked over the sound of the engines.

"Probably, yes sir." the dog handler answered.

"What if we gave him a ration bar to keep him quiet?" Lucas suggested.

"There's a problem with that lieutenant." Doctor Thundercloud responded.

"What?" she asked.

"Cruelty to animals goes against regulations." the doctor said and there were laughs from around the compartment.

The next lurch came when the dropship hit the upper atmosphere of the planet and air resistance began to impede its progress. The dropship was still moving at several thousand kilometres per hour, however and outside the air began to glow red hot from the friction of atmospheric entry.

"There's some turbulence ahead." the pilot announced, "This could get a bit bumpy."

"It could get bumpy? Really? What does he call this?" Thundercloud commented as the dropship bounced again.

The dropship continued to shake as it descended through the atmosphere before bursting through the lower levels of clouds into clear sky. Below the dropship was the city identified as having been the centre of Sissusk operations on the planet. From above there was little to differentiate this city from any comparably sized human settlement, particularly since there were no signs of life.

"There's a clearing below. I'm taking us in." the pilot announced and in the dropship's passenger compartment the contingent of marines released their harnesses and prepared their weapons.

"Stay behind us when we deploy." Willis said, looking across the compartment at the trio of fleet officers.

Both Knight and Lucas were also armed with assault rifles and taking their cue from the marines they made sure that they were loaded.

"This isn't my first time at this." Knight replied as he put his helmet on as well. With this in place and dressed for planetary operations he appeared similar to the marines in their combat fatigues and body armour. Only the markings on the fleet officers' uniforms marked them out as different, "Just make sure you move quick enough that I don't trip over you okay?"

"Okay commander. We'll try our best." Willis replied just before the dropship lurched again and the marines rocked now that they were not secured in place. However, this time it was not as a result of atmospheric disturbance that the dropship moved abruptly. Instead it was because the pilot had suddenly brought the

dropship to a halt, descending to touch down and opening the deployment hatch as soon as the dropship's landing gear touched the ground.

"Go! Go! Go!" Willis shouted and the marines, including the dog handler and his dog rushed from the dropship. The platoon spread out as it emerged, looping around the dropship to cover all directions. In an urban environment this was essential as every window or alleyway could conceivably be concealing an attacker ready to fire on the dropship itself or the marines disembarking from it.

After the marines came the fleet officers and robots who came to a halt and crouched down alongside Willis' command section. Behind them the engines of the dropship roared as it lifted off again, taking to the sky where it began to circle in anticipations of being called to provide fire support or an evacuation if necessary. "Shouldn't we get under cover?" Thundercloud suggested as he looked around.

As promised the dropship pilot had delivered the landing party into a clearing that had been large enough to permit the craft to land without risking damage to surrounding structures. The clearing was not entirely empty, however and there were objects scattered around it seemingly at random. Some of these were of a size and shape that it was easy to picture them being carried by and for some reason dropped and left behind by Sissusk or some of their slaves. On the other hand some of the debris was much larger and included vehicles that had been abandoned. Some of these appeared undamaged, whereas others had clearly been involved in collisions or caught fire. The buildings that surrounded the landing party were in a similar state to the vehicles. Many of them were totally intact but there were several that had suffered damage including from fire. But whatever had befallen the city and its inhabitants was now in the past and the empty streets stood eerily silent.

"Need to decide where to go first doc." Willis replied, "Wouldn't want to get caught by a sniper."

"Major!" one of the marines suddenly called out and Willis and the fleet officers looked towards him. The marine was knelt down looking through the optical sight of his assault rifle, using its magnification to provide him with a better view of distant objects, "I've got cases. A couple of dozen at least.

"Okay we're going that way." Willis said, "Lead the way Kjellberg." and the marines began to move, following the marine. Rather than moving as one mass the platoon moved in smaller groups, alternating movement with observation to make sure that there was always someone ready to react if they came under fire. Kjellberg came to a halt when he reached the scattered bullet casings he had seen on the ground and picked several of them up as Willis and the fleet officers joined him.

"Looks like someone shot off a mag or two major." Kjellberg commented as he handed the casings to Willis and Lucas also reached out to take one.

"These look like the rounds from the Sissusk rifles we examined." Willis commented and Lucas nodded.

"I agree." she said, "A bit bigger than our seven millimetre rounds."

"Got some of the mags here as well." a marine called out as he bent down to pick up an empty magazine that had been dropped after the last of the ammunition it had held was expended.

"So who fired them?" Knight asked.

"Well I can't say anything about whether or not the Sissusk produce any sporting guns meant to take the same rounds as their military weapons, but from what the freed slaves have told us while being debriefed the Sissusk don't allow private citizens to possess weapons they define as being military in purpose." Lucas said, "Of course there's a black market for them. I suppose there's always a black market for something any government tries to ban, even alien ones."

"So they've got their own problems with criminality as well." Thundercloud said, "Nice to know we have something in common with them after all."

"From the number of cases I'd say that someone was firing on full auto." Willis said as he took a look at the ground that was littered with empty bullet casings, "Possibly two or three individuals."

"So what were they shooting at?" Knight asked and Willis slung his rifle and instead took out a set of binoculars. He then began to turn on the spot, looking through the binoculars as he inspected the surrounding buildings for signs of bullet damage. However, finding no such signs he lowered the binoculars and looked at Knight.

"Nothing." he said, "We should get going."

"Lieutenant." Knight commented, looking at Lucas and she took out her tablet, calling up an image that had been taken from the *Warspite* as it orbited the planet.

"Here." she said, holding out the tablet and pointing to a specific point on the image, "Multan says that this is the main administration building for the city."

"So where are we?" Willis asked.

Lucas took the tablet back and used it to check their location. Without access to a global positioning system of the type present around almost all human settled worlds the tablet linked itself to the three orbiting cruisers to determine its exact position and indicated this on its display and a pale blue dot and rotated the image to align it with the actual city. Lucas then tapped the position of the building they wished to reach and the tablet told her how far away it was.

"Eight hundred metres that way." she said, pointing.

"Okay you heard the lady." Willis announced, "Move out. First Squad, you've got point."

As the platoon began to move one of its marines looked at the trooper beside him.

"You do realise that we're putting our lives in the hands of a lieutenant with a map don't you?" he said and the other marine smiled.

"Hope they find enough of us to bury." he replied.

With Knight leading the landing party on the surface, Reeves remained on the *Warspite's* bridge to monitor the situation both on the surface and in space and he was somewhat surprised when Bernard entered.

"Commander, is there a problem in engineering?" he asked.

"No captain. But there's something I'd like to discuss with you." Bernard answered and he pointed at the central console. "If you wouldn't mind."

"Of course not." Reeves said as he got out of his seat and approached the central console.

"I think Mister Multan may be able to help with this as well." Bernard commented, glancing to where the Fedrun was sat at the very back of the bridge where extra seating was provided for personnel not actually a part of the bridge crew.

"If I can." Multan said, also getting to his feet and approaching the central console.

Bernard used the display to bring up an image of the ring structure generated by the *Warspite's* computer from the combined readings of all of the ship's sensors as well as the feed now being received from the drone sent to monitor it.

"I've been going over the information we have about the ring and comparing them to the technical information we've obtained through studying the remains of the Sissusk ships we've recovered so far and I've come across a few anomalies." Bernard said and he adjusted the image to highlight several points on the structure. These were at numerous locations all around the ring, primarily on the inside edge but there were also several further out as far as the outer edge.

"What are these?" Reeves asked.

"Each of these points represents an exterior component that does not match any Sissusk technology that we've recovered." Bernard said, "Now obviously we've only encountered a handful of their ships and most of the ones we've managed to inspect were wrecks before we got hold of them. But there ought to be some common thread running through their technology that is lacking in these parts." Bernard explained and Reeves looked at Multan.

"Does any of this look familiar to you?" he said.

"I'm not an engineer captain, just an administrator." Multan pointed out.

"Would the Sissusk combine alien technology with their own?" Bernard asked, "Perhaps something recovered from the Ticik?"

"No. Even after three centuries of dominance the Sissusk are still primarily limited to the technologies they took from us before we could destroy them. There have been a few breakthroughs of their own but these are still based on our technology. Adapting alien technology would require the Sissusk to establish contact with other advanced species and that is something they have always avoided. They are conquerors, just as we were before them. They look for weaker civilisations to enslave and pillage, not advanced ones to trade with."

"Can you tell what any of them do?" Reeves said, now turning back to face Bernard.

"Well the general form of the ones around the inner edge of the ring looks like it's to do with manipulating electrical or magnetic fields." Bernard told him.

"That doesn't narrow it down much." Reeves commented.

"Maybe not. But looking at how these are arranged, I'd say that we're looking at a gateway station." Bernard said and Reeves stared at him.

"Err commander, gateway stations aren't that big." Thomas pointed out from his position and he got up to join the three by the central console.

"He's right." Goldman added, "That ring is more than six thousand metres across. Why make a gateway big enough to take three battleships sideways and end to end?"

"Do the Sissusk even use gateway stations?" Thomas said, "I know that some of the colonies outside the Commonwealth do, the Caliphate for example. But that's because they want to limit star travel to just places they want their people going."

"Do the Sissusk use tachyon gates?" Reeves asked Multan.

"I'm sorry captain, I am not familiar with the term." the Fedrun responded and Reeves looked at Bernard to indicate that he wanted the engineer to explain tachyon gates to the alien.

"A tachyon gate is a crude form of allowing a ship to travel faster than light." Bernard said, "Ships like the *Warspite* have independent FTL capability because we have our own particle inductors to create the tachyons we need for the imaginary mass. Other ships, mostly smaller civilian types carry tachyons in specialised containment vessels that they can apply to their hulls to break the light barrier. But a gateway station applies the imaginary mass from the outside. The technology was pursued in the early days of man's

interstellar exploration but rapidly abandoned when we developed the ability to store tachyons and particle inductors became small enough to install on anything under two thousand metres long. The only gateways built are in Sol and Alpha Centauri. After that there was no need.”

“I see.” Multan said, “But no, I've never heard of the Sissusk using such technology. They inherited practical particle inductors from us and although they initially struggled to reproduce them, they have been able to maintain that technology. Besides, from what I can see in this image, this gateway is made from Sissusk spacecraft that can travel faster than light by themselves.”

“He's got a point captain.” Thomas commented, “Why waste those ships?”

“You want to get aboard the ring, don't you?” Reeves said, looking at Bernard and the engineer smiled.

“Am I that obvious captain?” he answered.

“Do you really want an answer to that?” Ash commented, glancing back over his shoulder.

“Well we can't leave Commander Knight's party without cover on the surface and I don't intend to split the fleet while we're in potentially hostile territory so you'll have to wait until they get back. But in the meantime you can start planning your boarding action.” Reeves said.

The main administrative building in the abandoned city was a multi-storey structure large enough to provide workspace for several hundred administrators, a mix of both Sissusk and their various slave species. The outside of the structure was adorned with emblems of the Sissusk, proclaiming their sovereignty over the planet. According to the images taken from orbit the building formed a hollow square with an open courtyard area in the centre but as the Commonwealth troops approached it all that was visible was the front face of the building. The Sissusk who had ruled this world from here were now gone, though they had obviously not gone without a fight.

There was evidence that the Sissusk had taken step to fortify their headquarters, with stacks of sandbags and wrecked vehicles dragged into place to form a wall around the building, while the windows on the ground floor had been blocked up to prevent anyone from using them to gain access to the building. The burnt out remains of several armoured vehicles were also littered around outside the improvised perimeter and damage inflicted on the surrounding buildings suggested that the Sissusk had made free use of the heavy weapons mounted on these vehicles prior to their destruction. But despite the Sissusks' best efforts their defensive barrier had failed to hold and right outside what appeared to be the main entrance to the building the barrier had given way while beyond this gap the main doors to the building had been blown wide open. In front of the Sissusk headquarters an area had been set aside for a wide open area covered in something akin to grass, though now much of this had been churned up from heavy objects being dragged across it or vehicles driven over it despite the presence of the surrounding road network. However, there were still numerous distinct patterns visible and as the platoon crossed the ruined grass on their way towards the gap in the perimeter Willis came to a sudden stop.

“Hold on!” he called out, raising his hand for the force to stop and he crouched down.

“What have you got major?” Knight asked as he crouched beside the marine.

“Take a look at these.” Willis replied as he pointed out the remains of a set of tracks in the ground by their feet.

“Imprints of some kind of equipment being used?” Knight suggested but Willis shook his head.

“There are two different prints that are mirror images of each other and if you notice the depth isn't quite constant.” he pointed out.

“Tracks.” Knight said and Willis nodded.

“But not from a Sissusk.” he said, “Despite the size being about right if a little on the large side. In fact I don't think that these were left by anything living. I think that these were left by some sort of robot.”

“I didn't think that the Sissusk used robots.” Doctor Thundercloud said.

“They don't.” Lucas replied, “According to the debriefing of the rescued slaves Sissusk robotics technology is very limited. Basic construction and that's about it. If there's a tedious heavy lifting job to be done they get slaves to do it. They don't have exoskeletons or powered armour for their infantry and no automated combat systems.”

“Which means that this was probably left behind by whoever attacked this place.” Willis said.

All of a sudden there was a loud 'bang' and one of the marines in the platoon fell backwards.

“Gunfire! Cover!” Willis yelled as the platoon scattered and sought cover. On the other hand Doctor

Thundercloud headed straight for the fallen marine and with the assistance of another member of the platoon dragged him out of the open before inspecting where the bullet had hit his armoured chest plate.

“It didn't go through.” Thundercloud said as the marine groaned, “Just knocked the wind from him, that's all.”

“Probably a pistol round.” Willis said, “Can anyone see where it came from?”

“Right in front of us I think major.” another marine called out as he aimed his rifle towards the Sissusk headquarters before there was a burst of rifle fire that impacted the ground close to one of the marine squads.

“Upper floor, third window from the right!” a marine shouted before returning fire with several rapid shots from

his own weapon.

There was more gunfire from elsewhere inside the building and the marines responded to each attack in kind while both Knight and Lucas unslung the rifles they were carrying also.

"Okay we need to get inside the building." Willis said, "First squad be ready to move. Everyone else give covering fire on my command. Full auto, short bursts." then as the platoon prepared themselves Willis switched his personal radio to transmit, "Willis to dropship, I need a wide circle around my position. We're coming under fire from the target building. I want to make sure that there's no-one trying to sneak up on us while we're taking care of this. Over."

"Understood major." the dropship pilot responded, "We'll circle and let you know if we spot any movement. Missiles are armed and ready for your summons. Over."

"Hopefully we won't need them but the thought is appreciated." Willis said before closing with "Over and out."

The missiles the dropship pilot was referring to were an air launched version of the standard support missile used by the Commonwealth that could be summoned from behind the front lines by any soldier with a targeting device fitted to his weapon and guided to its target and they enabled infantry to strike with weapons far heavier than they could ordinarily carry themselves. Willis then watched as the platoon moved themselves into position, making sure they had extra ammunition to hand and ready to run as soon as the command was given. Then when he was satisfied that they were prepared to execute his instructions he spoke again, "Three. Two. One. Now!"

Almost in unison the platoon leapt into action. One squad broke from cover and rushed directly towards the break in the perimeter while the other squads opened fire on the building, using their rifles and squad support machine guns to fire rapid bursts intended to keep their attackers pinned down while first squad got closer to them.

But before first squad could make it as far as the gap in the improvised perimeter wall more gunfire came from another nearby building and one of the marines fell as the rest of the squad took cover again.

"Over there!" Lucas exclaimed as she spotted the tell tail muzzle flash from inside a darkened window and she aimed her own rifle towards it. Then when she saw another flash as the hidden shooter fired again she returned fire, first firing one round before following this with two more in rapid succession and after the third round was fired there was a sudden shriek and the gunfire from the window stopped.

"Nice work." Willis commented, smiling at Lucas.

"Hey," she replied, smiling back at him, "don't mess with Texas."

"I need to get to that marine." Thundercloud said and Willis nodded.

"We'll cover you doc." he said, "Second squad, watch that other building just in case there's anyone else hiding up there. Everyone else back to what you were doing. Now go!"

"Come on doctor." Knight said as the marines opened fire again and both he and Thundercloud broke from cover to run towards the downed marine who was still lying out in the open. Upon reaching him the two officers grabbed hold of his assault vest and used it to drag him behind the upturned remains of a Sissusk armoured scout car. Unlike the first marine to be shot, whose armoured vest had stopped the bullet in its tracks, this marine was more seriously injured. Though slowed by his armour, the bullet had still been able to penetrate it just beneath his ribs and the man was losing blood rapidly.

"Help me get his armour off. I need to stop the bleeding." Thundercloud said before he and Knight began to remove the marine's equipment to gain access to the wound.

While their comrade was being treated, the rest of first squad continued to advance and in just a few seconds they were through the gap and rushing towards the ruined doorway and as soon as they entered the building they finally came face to face with one of the planet's inhabitants.

The Sissusk screeched as it came running down the stairs towards them with a large calibre weapon in its hands. The weapon boomed and first squad's leader fell backwards from the impact of the shotgun blast but was otherwise unhurt. Without needing to be told, the rest of the squad returned fire and the Sissusk jerked under the barrage of rifle fire, dropping its weapon before it came tumbling down the stairs. There were the sounds of Sissusk speech from up the stairs and as he got back to his feet, first squad's leader activated his radio.

"Sergeant Chavez to Major Willis, we have confirmed armed Sissusk in the building. One of them down on the stairs right inside the main door." he signalled.

"Understood Chavez. Hold you position. We're on our way." Willis responded before he turned to one of the robots accompanying the platoon, "Okay tin man." he said, despite the robot having a vaguely female structure, "Tell the Sissusk who we are and demand that they surrender."

The robot looked towards the Sissusk headquarters and its mouth dropped open. Normally when humanoid models of robots spoke their fake lips moved to simulate human facial movement, but the same aspects of human physiology that prevented them from speaking the Sissusk language also made it impossible for robots to imitate the movements of a Sissusk's mouth as it spoke. Instead the robot's mouth just hung open as the speaker system located at the back of its mouth produced the simulated sounds of Sissusk speech.

"Think they'll understand?" Lucas asked, looking at Willis.

"Who knows? For all we know that machine is reciting poetry to them." he said before there was another volley of gunfire from the building, "Well I guess that means they aren't about to surrender to us." he added and he looked over towards second squad, "Sergeant O'Neill, split your men. I want cover fire for our advance." then he looked at Lucas, "Mind giving them a hand?"

"Sure." she replied.

"Okay, third and fourth squads let's go." Willis announced, "You and Thor too." he added, glancing towards the dog handler. The two squads of marines along with Willis' command section then broke from cover and followed first squad towards the Sissusk headquarters. The marines fired as they moved to try and limit the ability of the Sissusk to shoot at them while they were out in the open while second squad provided them with more covering fire.

"That window up there!" O'Neill exclaimed when he noticed a Sissusk appear just inside a window on an upper floor and he pointed the alien out to one of his marines that had a grenade launcher mounted beneath his rifle, "Frag him."

Nodding, the other marine loaded an explosive grenade into the auxiliary weapon and took aim. There was a high-pitched popping sound and the rifle kicked as the grenade was fired and the projectile flew in through the window where the Sissusk had briefly appeared before it exploded and smoke began to billow out of the window.

The blast appeared to disorientate the remaining Sissusk in the building and immediately following the grenade explosion all the fire from the building ceased long enough for Willis and his group to reach the main doors and rush inside.

"Chavez." he said, "Any more signs of the enemy?"

"Just a few sounds from upstairs sir." Chavez replied, "That's the only one we've actually seen so far." and he pointed out the dead alien at the base of the stairs.

Willis had seen numerous Sissusk soldiers before now and they had a lot in common with human troops in that they carried a rifle that fired solid projectiles, dressed in clothing designed to let them blend in with the terrain around them and wore body armour to protect their vital organs. However, this particular Sissusk was different. Its clothing did not have the appearance of a uniform and lacked any visible armour. In addition it had no load carrying equipment in which to store extra ammunition for its weapon and spare magazines were instead stuffed inside the pockets of its jacket. All of this led Willis to believe that this had not been a soldier and that the platoon was dealing with

Willis nodded.

"Okay, we're going up after them." he said, "But first I want to thin out their numbers a bit." and he looked around towards another door that led to an adjoining room along the front face of the building, "Third squad with me," he said, waving them towards him as he marched towards the doorway, "and keep it quiet."

The adjoining room was a large chamber that held several pieces of scattered furniture including some of the strange couch-like chairs that the Sissusk sat on by straddling them as if riding a motorcycle. Ignoring the contents of the room Willis walked along the front wall and counted the windows as he went and when he got to the fifth one he stopped and smiled.

"They're right above us." he whispered and he and the marine squad with him all pointed their rifles straight up. The marines all then opened fire with their rifles set to automatic, moving them back and forth so that the bullets each took a different trajectory as they punched through the floor dividing the marines from the Sissusk in the room above them. With no way of anticipating the attack the Sissusk were taken completely by surprise as the storm of projectiles and their screeches were audible to the marines below before they ceased fire and there was only silence.

"Blood." a marine commented and he looked up at one of the bullet holes that now riddled the ceiling where a dark liquid could be seen dripping down to the floor.

"Okay I think we've made our point." Willis said, "Now let's go up and say 'hello' shall we?"

The marines advanced up the stair cautiously, moving in small groups so that there was always someone watching each possible angle of approach. Fighting inside buildings could be particularly dangerous, especially when attempting to take a building defended by troops who were more familiar with it than an attacking force. Initially there were no indications of anyone remaining inside the building but then one of the marines called out.

"Contact left!" he yelled before firing two rapid shots at a Sissusk as the alien disappeared through a doorway. The marine was about to give chase when Willis called him back.

"Wait." he called out, "We'll send in the dog." and then he looked at the nearby dog handler and nodded at him.

The dog handler moved forwards, bringing his dog with him.

"Come on Thor." he said and he pointed to the doorway that the Sissusk had gone through, "Action!" he snapped and at the same moment he let Thor off his leash.

Immediately the dog bounded forwards, barking loudly and it raced through the open doorway. Inside the room the startled Sissusk let out a cry of alarm, unsure of what to make of the animal that had just come

bursting into the room with it. The Sissusk was armed with a pistol and the alien took aim at Thor but the speed at which the dog closed on the Sissusk was too great and he leapt up at the Sissusk with his mouth open and his teeth bared. The alien's of fear cries then became of pain as Thor sank his teeth into the alien's arm and latched on, preventing him from using his weapon. The Sissusk possessed teeth and claws of its own, but the Commonwealth did not neglect to protect the trained dogs its armed force used and Thor also wore an armoured jacket on his back that the Sissusk's claws could not cut through before the marines came rushing through the door into the room.

"Drop the gun!" Willis bellowed even though he knew that the alien could not understand him. However, the combination of the dog biting into its arm and the armed marines all aiming their weapons towards it were enough to convince the Sissusk to give up and the pistol clattered to the floor.

"Thor release." the dog handler ordered and the dog obediently let go of the Sissusk's arm before returning to him.

Initially the Sissusk clutched at its injured arm but then it stared at marines and spread its arms wide before bowing down in a submissive pose.

"Willis to Thundercloud." Willis signalled, "We may be in need of your skills here. We have a prisoner who needs your attention. Oh and you better bring one of those robots with you as well."

7.

Reeves smiled when Knight contacted him from the surface.

"A prisoner?" he said.

"Yes captain. Willis and his marines were able to get a Sissusk to surrender with the help of the dog." Knight replied, "We're on our way in to interrogate him now. So far his group are the only signs of life we've encountered around here. Frankly this place is a mess. The Sissusk look to have smashed all of their computers."

"Trying to prevent them from falling into the hands of whoever did this?" Reeves suggested.

"Perhaps. But if they were then they didn't do a very good job of it. Lieutenant Lucas thinks that most of the drives are recoverable. It's more as if they just didn't want the computers working as complete machines. Frankly captain I'm hoping that this Sissusk has some answers because I'm starting to get a very bad feeling about all of this."

"Understood commander. Watch your back, where there's one group there could be more. *Warspite* out."

Knight then handed the radio handset back to its operator and looked at Willis.

"Shall we get this started then?" he asked before looking at Lucas, "Lieutenant." he added and the three officers were about to head into the room where their Sissusk prisoner was being held under guard when a marine came rushing into the room.

"Major, we've found it." he said, "Right where you thought it would be."

"Found what?" Knight asked.

"These Sissusk don't seem like soldiers to me." Willis said, "They aren't wearing uniforms and their weapons are too varied. But since as Lieutenant Lucas pointed out at least some of the weapons they do have are illegal so I figured that they could be criminals come to take advantage of the city being empty by taking everything that was left. But to profit from doing that they'd need transport, a ship that could take them to another system. Now if this was a Commonwealth facility then there'd be a landing pad somewhere on the premises so I guessed at where the Sissusk would put one and sent second squad to take a look."

"The courtyard." Lucas said and Willis nodded.

"It makes sense. It's easily defended against an external attack and makes it unlikely that the building's occupants would get cut off from an escape route if they needed one in a hurry." he said.

"Perhaps we should check that out before questioning the prisoner." Lucas said, "It could open up more questions to ask him."

"My thinking exactly." Knight added and Willis looked back at the marine who had delivered the news of the Sissusk vessel.

"Lead the way corporal." he said.

The battered looking Sissusk vessel was not much bigger than the dropship that had brought the landing party but its lack of obvious weaponry meant that it would have more internal space available for the other systems that would be needed to give it the capability to travel from one star system to another. The ship's exterior shape also gave it a significantly greater internal volume than the dropship, with a boxlike hull that sloped downwards slightly towards the front where a large segmented viewport offered a view of the inside of the cockpit rather than a sleek one like the dropship. Through this canopy it was possible to see two Sissusk flight stations that each consisted of one of their long horizontal chairs with control interfaces to either side and a display right in front of them. A pair of engine pods were mounted on the sides of the ship's hull and these were currently aligned vertically to suggest that they rotated to provide the ungainly looking vessel with better manoeuvrability. Running along the top of the ship's hull like the dorsal fin on a fish was a triangular fin that continued past the rear of the main hull and merged with the narrow tail that extended out from the back of the hull and it was to one side of this that there was a hatchway that Sergeant O'Neill was stood in when the three officers arrived to inspect the ship.

"We've found what look like tachyon storage jars major." he said, "So my guess is that this thing's got FTL capability though its range is going to be limited."

"Just like that stealth sloop we captured at Phi-Two Pavonis." Knight commented.

"Yeah, but this thing doesn't look quite as impressive as that was." Willis added.

"I bet Commander Bernard and Shaw will still go mad over it though." Lucas said, "It's a new toy for them to play with."

"Well let's see what they have to thank us for shall we?" Knight said and he walked up the ramp leading to the hatch.

The inside of the ship was in no better condition than the exterior, suggesting that the Sissusk crew had adopted a policy of making do with whatever they could use to keep it running rather than seeking out the proper parts. It was obvious to Knight that he was standing in some sort of storage compartment and all around him access panels had been removed from the walls to allow the crew to cross wire damaged circuits and improvise repairs using parts not designed to fit. Another hatchway almost immediately beside the

external one led into the tail section and Knight could see the pale blue glow of tachyon storage jars shining through. For now though Knight headed forwards, towards the cockpit at the very front of the ship. This took him through a hatchway on the opposite side of the storage compartment and he found himself in a short corridor that had another hatchway at the far end through which he could see the large cockpit canopy and two more hatches on either side.

"The door immediately to your right leads to the head I think." O'Neill said from behind.

"Thanks," Willis responded as he and Lucas also entered the Sissusk craft, "but we're all fine for now."

The three officers then made their way right to the front of the ship where the cockpit was located. The front of this compartment was made up entirely of the canopy to provide the two crew members that were supposed to pilot the ship with a wide field of view.

"You're a qualified pilot, do think you can fly this thing commander?" Willis asked as he stood behind Knight, looking into the cockpit.

"I doubt it." Knight answered, stepping up to one of the control stations and throwing his leg over it to mount it as if he were riding a motorbike, "Shaw and Bernard put a lot of effort into figuring out how to fly that stealth sloop but there wasn't really time for any of the rest of us to take lessons. I think the best thing to do is wait for the *Orinoco* to arrive and we can use one of its heavy lifting shuttles to take this thing up to the fleet."

"It could be a bit of a squeeze to get this thing inside a shuttle, even a large one," Willis pointed out, "and Commander Bernard will go berserk if someone ends up cutting it in half to get it inside."

"I've not seen any signs of weapons." Lucas commented and Knight nodded in agreement.

"Nothing on these controls looks like the triggers we've seen on the sloop or any of the fighters we captured either." he commented.

"My guess is we're dealing with smugglers or black marketeers, just as Major Willis suggested." Lucas added and Willis smiled.

"Just like intelligence," he muttered, looking around at where O'Neill stood in the corridor behind him, "telling us what we already know."

"Well now we're all in agreement about what we're dealing with, perhaps we should go and get some answers from our prisoner." Knight said and he got up off the Sissusk seat.

The Sissusk prisoner was being guarded by a pair of marines in what had at one time been an administration office while Thundercloud examined its injured arm. Meanwhile a robot stood in the corner of the room to translate anything it said.

"Has he said anything yet?" Willis asked as he led the way into the room.

"Just a few insults major." one of the guards replied.

"He certainly doesn't seem to like Thor." Thundercloud added, getting to his feet and backing away from the Sissusk prisoner.

"I guess getting bitten didn't agree with him then." Knight responded, "Has that caused us any problems?"

"Oh I don't think that the Sissusk are any more vulnerable to bacteria from a dog bite than we are. There's not been any reaction to suggest that his wound is infected." Thundercloud replied, "Of course there's still a lot about their physiology we don't know. We know how they're set out together from the autopsies we've done and some of the POWs on Centaur are medical personnel but for all I know he could go into cardiac arrest at any time if there's something in Thor's saliva that his system can't cope with."

"Then he better give us some answers quickly." Willis said and he looked at the robot standing silently in the corner, "Ask him why he's here." he said.

"Yes sir." the robot replied before its mouth dropped open and words in the Sissusk language came out.

In response to this the Sissusk growled and produced a series of barking sounds.

"Your eggs were addled. Your parents should have bitten your spines at birth as I will do." the robot translated.

"Is that some sort of threat?" Willis said.

"Mixed in with comments about how sound our genetics are I think." Lucas replied.

"Tell him that we have his ship and his only hope of getting off this planet is with us." Knight said, the robot translating as he spoke and the Sissusk hissed loudly.

"Now that sounds like this guy isn't happy." Willis said.

"My clan will find you. There will be no safe place in the empire for you." the robot said as the Sissusk spoke.

"Remind him that Commonwealth space is more than eighty-five light years from here." Knight said.

"Whereas I'm sure that whoever the Sissusk Empire sends to investigate what went on here will be only too happy to take him home." Willis added and the robot translated both men's statements.

This caused the Sissusk to flinch visibly.

"I think you upset him." Thundercloud commented before the Sissusk spoke hurriedly.

"I am not responsible for what happened here. My crew came only to trade. Release me." the robot said.

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere." Knight said as he and Willis both smiled.

"Do you think we can cut a deal with him?" Lucas asked.

"What sort of deal were you thinking about lieutenant?" Knight replied.

"Perhaps where he tells us everything he knows and we agree to let him go with his ship when we're returning to Commonwealth space?" she suggested.

"Bernard will hate that." Willis commented, "Another alien ship in our hands and he has to let it go as well." "Maybe, but it's probably the only way that we'll get what we want." Knight said, "I'll run it by the captain."

"Commander Knight calling from the surface captain." Goldman said while Reeves was stood at the central console with Cortez, the petty officer going over each piece of sensor data that the *Warspite* had gathered about the debris in orbit.

"Put him through." Reeves said before adding, "Commander, how are things going with your prisoner?"

"Not very well at the moment sir." Knight told him, "But we may have come across some leverage we can use. Major Willis seems to think that the Sissusk we encountered down here are criminals and I'm inclined to agree. We have the ship that they arrived in, a courier we think and Lieutenant Lucas has suggested using it to get the Sissusk to co-operate. Offering it back to him if he gives us the information we need."

"Interesting." Reeves replied, "If this individual operates on the wrong side of the law then he ought to know how to avoid Sissusk military patrols if we need to move deeper into their empire."

"Quite sir." Knight agreed, "I'm just not too sure how Commander Bernard will take losing access to another Sissusk vessel."

"We stand to gain far more than we could by studying just one small ship." Reeves said, "Offer the deal. Commander Bernard will just have to wait for another one. *Warspite* out."

"What will I have to wait for?" Bernard asked as he entered the bridge just as Reeves was signing off.

"Commander Knight's landing party has managed to capture a Sissusk courier ship intact." Reeves replied and a smile instantly appeared on Bernard's face, "Don't be too happy about it, the previous owner is going to want it back and we're probably going to have to return it to get his help. Now what brings you to the bridge again?"

"The gateway again." Bernard replied and he pointed to the central console, "May I?"

"Be my guest." Reeves said, stepping back.

"I'll get back to my station." Cortez said. But as she started to move Bernard stopped her.

"Actually petty officer I may need your input as well." he said and so she stopped where she was while Bernard brought up an image of the mysterious ring construction in the outer system, "I've been studying the feed from the drone we despatched to monitor the ring and I've noticed something odd." he explained, "Look at this section here." and he zoomed in on a part of the mysterious structure where the frigate used to create it had been damaged, a large hole torn in its hull. This hole was now used for numerous ducts and cable clusters, allowing them to pass through.

"I don't get it." Cortez said, "It's just a bunch of cables and pipes. How can you tell what they're for?"

"What they are for isn't the issue petty officer," Bernard replied, "it's where they are going that interests me."

"Inside the ship?" Reeves commented and Bernard nodded.

"From here we can't really tell much, but the drone is a lot closer than we are and on its last pass it sent us this." Bernard said and he overlaid the closer range image recorded by the drone before zooming in closer to show Reeves and Cortez what was contained in it.

"I don't see anything." Cortez said.

"I think that's the commander's point Cortez." Reeves said, "From the size of that hole we ought to be able to see several exposed decks but that ship looks hollow."

"Exactly." Bernard added, "Studying the wrecks of the frigates at Liberty told us how that class is laid out and we ought to be able to see five distinct decks as well as several bulkheads. But the data returned by the drone suggests that it's just a big hollow space."

"Are you saying that that ship is a fake? Just a big decoy?" Thomas asked from his station.

"I don't think so. It's very elaborate if it is. No, I think that that frigate is something we haven't seen before and I'm more than just curious to find out what," Bernard said.

"We can be at the ring in about six hours captain." Ash said.

"We're not going anywhere just yet commander." Reeves replied, "We need to give our people on the surface time to finish their mission. Maybe their prisoner will be able to tell them all we need to know."

"Captain I'd like the drone to engage the ring." Bernard said and Reeves frowned.

"Do you really think that a single drone could cause much damage to that?" he asked.

"I just want to see what gets exposed. A well placed missile to the location of the life support system could confirm whether or not that ship was more than just an ordinary frigate."

"You're thinking of detonating the oxygen in the system?" Reeves said and Bernard nodded.

"What about the blast? It could tear that ring apart." Goldman pointed out.

"Oh I doubt that the reaction will be that strong. The blast ought to be contained by the superstructure and the ring's too big for it to overcome the inertia involved and get it moving." Bernard responded.

"Give weapons your requirements." Reeves said, "I'll authorise the strike."

"I had nothing to do with what happened here." the robot said as the Sissusk answered the question, "When my ship approached Issil we found the system filled with wreckage and there were no sensor sweeps from the surface. So we came here to see if there was anything left behind worth taking."

"Not to help survivors though." Thundercloud muttered, frowning.

"We found little." the robot continued, "The fighting was already over and almost everything was destroyed. We found just a few weapons and some small items of equipment. Nothing to bring a good price."

"They destroyed their own computers." Lucas said.

"You've thought of something lieutenant?" Knight asked.

"Perhaps sir. The Sissusk destroyed their own computers but not in a fashion that suggested they were trying to stop someone from recovering them. It's more like they were trying to shut down the computers while they were under attack." Lucas explained.

"That's a good way to mess up their own command and control." Willis pointed out, "Their attackers would find it a lot easier to isolate them and overrun smaller groups."

"Yes but who were their attackers?" Thundercloud said, "You found Sissusk bullet casings and spent magazines but have we found anything that belonged to their opponents yet, even so much as a single bullet casing?"

"No-one's said anything to me if they have." Willis answered.

"And since when have you every heard of a military force leaving a battlefield so tidy that there's not one sign of them having been there?" Thundercloud said, "Especially one that stops to pick up all the evidence of their own presence and yet leaves behind everything we've found here."

"Okay I think we're done here." Knight said and he looked at the robot, "Tell him we're taking his ship. If he wants it back he can come with us and help us."

The robot put the offer to the Sissusk in his own language and the alien hissed before barking a response.

"I will help you. But if you betray me then even the distance between our empires will not be enough to stop my taking revenge." the robot said.

"Sounds like we've got a deal then." Willis said.

INTERLUDE

Kane left his car in the driveway in front of his house when he returned home and walked up to the front door.

"I'm home ." he called out as he entered the building and his maid appeared to take his coat.

"Good evening sir." she said.

"Good evening. I noticed Sarah's car wasn't in the drive." Kane commented.

"No sir. She rang from the hospital to say that she had been delayed. Something to do with a computer glitch affecting her ward. But your guests have arrived."

"Guests? What guests?" Kane said and then he stepped past the maid so that he could see into the lounge where he had heard the voices of his children. There he saw them gathered together, the younger ones playing on the floor while his two eldest were sat on a couch either side of a smartly dressed young woman. Instinctively Kane reached the pistol he carried under his jacket but he stopped short of drawing the weapon. "Hello commander." she said, smiling, "Grandfather would like a private word with you."

"Where is he?" Kane asked.

"The older gentleman is in your study sir." the maid said, "Is there a problem. They said that-"

"No." Kane interrupted without looking at her, "There's no problem." he added before heading for his study.

As soon as he entered the room Kane saw an old man sat behind his desk and Kane considered the possibility that he had been attempting to access the computer.

"Ah Commander Kane, you're home at last." the old man said and Kane became aware of the two much larger men looming quietly either side of the door. The old man was one of Kane's superiors and he and his granddaughter had a reputation for ruthlessly dealing with anyone who failed him. It was also sometimes whispered that the bodyguards who accompanied him everywhere were purely for show and that the young woman who almost always accompanied him as well was far more dangerous than the pair of them put together. Something that Kane could not help but consider now that she was sat in his lounge with his children.

"Good evening sir." Kane replied, "I'm somewhat surprised to find you here. I'd have thought you'd have come to me at the office."

"Ah yes, the office." the old man said, "No, what I have to say to you I want to say as far away from those who could take it the wrong way as possible." then he looked down, "But where are my manners? Here, have your chair back." and he stood up, making his way around the desk to sit down in another chair.

Cautiously, Kane crossed the room and took his seat. At this point the old man spoke again.

"Tell me what you think of Commander Jennifer Hayes." he said and Kane hesitated.

"In what way?" he asked.

"As a person, what do you think of her?"

Kane sighed.

"I think that she thinks dedicating her life to her work means the total failure of her private life doesn't matter." he answered and the old man smiled.

"So you know about her personal situation then?" he said.

"Single. Childless. When she dies who will notice?"

"And what do you know about her work?" the old man asked, "I don't need specifics, I get full reports on all her actions. Just your gut feelings will do."

"What? Her ridiculous scheme to provoke a war between the Commonwealth and one of its alien neighbours?" Kane responded, "I don't think I've ever heard such an enormous pile of bull in my life."

"In what way?"

"Well for starters there's the simple fact of the distances involved. Commonwealth space doesn't directly meet with any alien territory, even the Brekka are in the Fringe. The Commonwealth isn't going to mass a fleet of hundred of ships and send it dozens of light years beyond their borders unless it absolutely has to and they won't have to."

"You don't think that the Sissusk or Ticik are likely to send invasion forces into the Commonwealth then?"

"No I don't. The Sissusk won't launch attacks on anyone they think can fight back and I doubt the Ticik care. The Commonwealth certainly won't be firing on any of their ships now they know how the Ticik react and it will be decades, maybe centuries before Commonwealth and Ticik space meet. In fact I'd say the same about any of the species we're aware of but the Commonwealth isn't. There just isn't any motive for a war and no practical way to wage one either."

"So you think her plan is without merit then?"

"I'd go further than that, her plan is positively dangerous."

"In what way?"

"From what I've heard we've lost our back door into the Canadian government because of her botched plan. It just vanished as soon as the Canadians started investigating how one of their ships got sent ninety light

years to get shot at by a Ticik dreadnought. Then on top of that the Commonwealth discovered our tampering with the SETI stations. When they get the auto erase coding out of the program those arrays are going to start picking up the advanced alien civilisations we've known about for more than a century. That's a lot of work gone to waste because of her."

"So what would you do instead commander? You know that our forces don't come close to matching the Commonwealth fleet and that's without even counting the national forces that would flock to their banner if they found out about us."

"I do what I've been doing since I joined your department. Stir up division and turn the Commonwealth on itself. Frankly the one good thing to have come from Jennifer's scheming is that it's given the groups I've been funding and manipulating more reasons to cause trouble."

"Ah yes, your little riot." the old man said with a slight trace of a smile, "A few arrests and a bit of property damage, but no live rounds fired by the Commonwealth military and no deaths. I don't think it even made the main banner headline of any major news service."

Kane was suddenly concerned. He had spent years manipulating and directing political decent against the Commonwealth but his guest appeared to be dismissing it out of hand and he knew that people in his department who failed to produce results had a tendency to be removed from their positions at very short notice. The rumours were that those who were never heard of again were the lucky ones.

"I'm playing a long game." Kane said.

"Yes, I'm sure you are. Very long." the old man replied, "Now Commander Hayes on the other hand has been promising some very rapid results. That's why she's managed to get herself some very influential allies. That long range scout she has at her beck and call for example. There aren't many people who can authorise such a deployment."

"She has a government contact called Stein. I can-" Kane began.

"Yes, I know all about Mister Stein, just like I know about Lieutenant Commander Martins. Like you, Commander Hayes works for me and I take great pride in knowing exactly what all of my underlings are doing at all times."

"So why come to me?" Kane asked, "If you already know what she's done and what she plans."

"Because I need to know where you stand Alex. That could become very important in the future. Sooner or later we all need to pick sides and I have every confidence that when the time comes you'll pick the right one. For your own sake and for those closest to you." the old man said.

Kane recognised the threat for what it was and he could not help but consider the young woman in the lounge with his children. If her reputation was even half true then she would be able to kill all of them without a second thought.

"Well I think we've already taken up enough of the commander's time." the old man added, looking at his bodyguards, "Have my car brought to the front of the house and we can tell my granddaughter that we're leaving." then he looked back at Kane and smiled at him, "Thank you so much for your hospitality commander." he said.

Kane escorted his uninvited guests to the front door and watched them walk to their car, one of three in a convoy. All the vehicles had blacked out windows and Kane knew that the vehicles either side of the one that the old man and his granddaughter got into would be filled with more guards carrying weapons that could not be concealed under a jacket, no matter how larger the wearer was.

Inside their car the old man's granddaughter turned her head to watch Kane standing in the doorway and watching them as they were driven away.

"Did you find out what you needed to know grandfather?" she asked.

"Oh I didn't need to find out anything from Commander Kane. He really isn't that important right now, but he can be useful." the old man replied.

Meanwhile Kane retreated back inside his house and as soon as he closed the door he scowled.

"Dad, what's wrong?" his eldest daughter asked when she saw the look on his face.

"Nothing Elisa. Go and wash up for dinner." Kane told her.

"But mom's not-"

"We'll start without her. I just need to make a quick call." Kane said before hurrying back into his study and closing the door behind him. Then he reached into his jacket and took out his personal phone, accessing the contact for Hayes and placing the call. He heard the ringing as the connection was made but after just a few rings it defaulted to her answer phone, suggesting that she had seen who it was that was calling and refused the call.

"Leave a message after the tone." Hayes' recorded voice said without any finesse, followed by a bleep to indicate the start of recording.

"Damn it Jennifer, what have you got yourself into?" Kane hissed, "The old man and his granddaughter were just right here in my house with my kids. You may not have a family to worry about but I do. So watch who you go dragging down with you, okay?" and then he hung up.

Out in the car the old man's own phone rang and he was about to answer it when his granddaughter held out

her hand.

“Let me.” she said and her grandfather smiled as he passed her the phone, “Yes?” she said when she answered it. Then after listening to what was said she hung up and handed the phone back to her grandfather, “Commander Kane just tried to call Commander Hayes.” she said, “She didn't pick up and he left her a rather angry sounding message.”

“Yes,” the old man said and he looked out of the car window, “I thought that would be his reaction.”

B.

It took several minutes for the attack order to reach the drone then just over two more for the drone to execute it, targeting the precise spot identified by Commander Bernard. First the drone fired several rounds from its gauss cannons before following this up with a missile. None of the drone's weapons were powerful enough to inflict serious damage on a capital ship but the repeated gauss cannon rounds weakened the armour at this point so that when the missile struck its warhead could penetrate. All of this was recorded by the attacking drone and transmitted back to the *Warspite* where it was received several minutes later.

"Excellent." Bernard said as he watched the footage on the bridge's central console.

As well as Bernard and Reeves, Knight, Lucas and Multan were also stood around the console watching the results of the attack.

"If that frigate was the same internally as the ones examined after the attack on Liberty then that missile should have struck one of the main oxygen tanks." Lucas said.

"And produced a massive fireball that would have shown up on our sensors at about the same time as we received this footage." Bernard added.

"So what are you telling us?" Knight asked, "That the ship's oxygen tanks are empty?"

"I don't think that they are there at all." Bernard told him, "I think that ship was built to not need a crew."

"The Sissusk do not build automated combat vessels commander." Multan pointed out, "They have some of the remotely operated vehicles you call drones but nothing this big."

"The footprint." Lucas said suddenly, looking at Knight and he nodded.

"What footprint?" Reeves asked.

"Major Willis found a footprint on the surface captain." Knight told him, "It had the appearance of something robotic but as Mister Multan has reminded us the Sissusk do not have that sort of technology. It must have been made by whatever attacked the colony."

"Using Sissusk weapons." Lucas added, "The marines didn't find any spent casings from anything other than Sissusk weapons."

"Captain the drone is relaying more data from the ring. We've got activity." Goldman suddenly announced.

"Show me." Reeves ordered and on the central console a smaller window opened up to show the ring as it had been several minutes earlier when the drone had captured the images. Now rather than being completely inert there were flashes of light visible around the outer edge of the ring.

"Captain we're picking up thermal flares on our own sensors as well." Cortez reported, "Looks like they could be manoeuvring thrusters firing."

"The ring is steadying itself." Thomas said as he checked his navigation systems, "Captain I think the drone's attack was enough to cause a slight shift. Not enough to be perceptible to our sensors but there none the less. The ring is correcting itself."

"A gateway station wouldn't need to do that. It's alignment can drift by a few degrees just as long as the ship using it can pass through along the correct exit vector." Bernard pointed out, "Captain I really need to check that thing out."

"Captain we've just been scanned. Active radar." Goldman called out.

"Action stations." Reeves ordered, "Standby to launch fighters, can you identify the source of the scan?"

"I think it was the ring." Goldman answered.

"Captain energy readings inside the ring are building." Cortez announced.

"Are there any ships close by it?" Knight asked.

"I don't think so sir," Cortez replied, "and there's no evidence of tachyon activity. It's mainly on the infrared part of the spectrum with some in the gamma ray part."

"A fission reactor firing up." Bernard said.

"Energy level building still. If it doesn't stop soon think it-" Cortez began. But before she could finish the feed from the drone suddenly became pure white and was then cut off.

"What happened?" Lucas asked.

"I think the ring just self destructed." Reeves said.

"It couldn't have picked up our presence so rapidly from that radar pulse. It must have detected the drone." Knight said.

"So it blew itself up because there was an unidentified vessel close by." Reeves said, "Somebody obviously didn't want us taking a look at that ring."

"So what now captain?" Knight asked and Reeves turned to Multan.

"Mister Multan we need to find another Sissusk world. Ideally one that will not have major defences." he said.

"I think I may know of a suitable system captain. If I may access your star charts." Multan replied.

"Mister Thomas." Reeves said, looking at the navigator.

"Ready when you are captain." he replied.

"There is a star system a little over twenty of your light years away from here, perhaps a little further from

your space than this one. It is a bright yellow star.”

“I think I've got it.” Thomas said, “CPD seventy-five thirteen sixty-eight in the Apus sector. Our system suggests that it does have a system of planets.”

“One of those is home to an intelligent species called the Nortonus.” Multan said, “The Sissusk discovered them before they had even learnt to control fire.”

“Why do I get the feeling that they haven't been helping them to advance?” Ash commented from the helm station, glancing at the *Warspite's* co-pilot.

“The Sissusk did provide them with some basic knowledge.” Multan replied, “But their motives were entirely selfish. The Sissusk claimed to be gods and built a belief system around themselves. They provided minor technologies to the co-operative tribes, while using orbital strikes against those who dissented. Now the Nortonus labour for them without the need for a large occupation force. To maintain the illusion, the Sissusk have not removed any of the Nortonus from their home world and nor do they bring any other species in who could contradict the lies they have fed to them.”

“What do the Nortonus provide for the Sissusk?” Reeves asked.

“They cultivate medicinal plants and some foodstuffs.” Multan told him, “There are a handful of mining operations in more remote areas where the Nortonus had yet to spread to when the Sissusk arrived but these are operated entirely by Sissusk workers and the Nortonus are forbidden from going near them. The workers are under orders to shoot any native they see and this promotes the idea of the land being cursed.”

“In that case we'll wait for our support ships to arrive and then move on to CPD seventy-five thirteen sixty-eight. Commander Thomas, plot a course and provide the data to the *Bayonet* and *Ceres*. Commander Goldman, please upload a copy of everything we've found to a drone and send it back to Gamma Pavonis. The Commonwealth needs to know that something's going on out here, even if we don't know what it is yet.”

When the squadron set out for Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -75' 1368, Reeves took the opportunity to go and see the *Warspite's* new prisoner. The Sissusk was being held in the cruiser's brig where one of the cells had been modified to better suit his physiology with the chair being replaced with one of the longer Sissusk styles and the bed removed, leaving just the mattress on the floor. Four armed marines guarded the brig and a robot stood motionless outside the Sissusk's cell, ready to translate anything the alien said.

“Has he had much to say?” Reeves asked as he entered the brig in the company of Lucas and Multan.

“Not really captain.” one of the marine guards answered, “He's asked for food and water and we provided them but apart from that he's been quiet.”

All of a sudden the Sissusk looked up and barked.

“Looks like we've got his attention.” Lucas commented as the Sissusk jumped to his feet and rushed up to the bars of his cell.

“What is that doing here?” the robot said as the Sissusk spoke and thrust his arm through the bars to point at Multan.

“I don't think he likes you.” Reeves commented.

“Not surprising.” Multan replied, “The Sissusk culture has been massively influenced by the time they spent as our slaves.”

“Do you know what that is?” the robot said when the Sissusk spoke again, still pointing at Multan, “Is it your pet or your master?”

“Tell the prisoner that I am the captain of this vessel and Mister Multan is assisting my crew.” Reeves told the robot and the machine translated his speech for him, provoking a hiss from the Sissusk.

“The Fedrun cannot be trusted. Watch him carefully.” the Sissusk said, his words translated by the robot standing outside his cell.

Before Reeves could speak again the intercom sounded and a guard answered it. Then he looked at Reeves and held out the handset.

“Captain, it's Commander Knight for you.” he said.

“Thank you sergeant.” Reeves replied as he took the handset, “Reeves.” he added after lifting it to his head.

“Captain I think you should come to the bridge. We've picked up something strange on the tachyon detectors from CPD seventy-five thirteen sixty-eight.”

“Strange? What do you mean?”

“I think it's best if you just come and see.” Knight said and Reeves nodded.

“Okay, I'm on my way.” he said before handing the intercom handset back to the marine sergeant. Then he looked at Lucas, “You better come as well lieutenant.” he added.

Given that the *Warspite* was travelling through potentially hostile territory the cruiser's bridge was fully manned, including all of its gunnery stations. But most of the activity when Reeves and Lucas returned to the bridge was around the sensor consoles and Goldman's flight operations station.

“So what's going on?” Reeves asked as he sat down.

“We've picked up a massive tachyon event in the CPD seventy-five thirteen sixty-eight system.” Knight told him.

"What sort of event?" Reeves said.

"We don't know yet captain." Goldman answered, "All we know is that there was a sudden omnidirectional burst of tachyons from the system."

"Omnidirectional?" Reeves commented, knowing that the amount of power required for tachyon transmission meant that it was only practical to send tight beam transmissions. The capability to make a more general broadcast was far beyond what the Commonwealth was capable of and also beyond what the Sissusk were supposed to be capable of.

"Yes captain." Goldman said, "All our sensors were triggered, as were those of the *Bayonet* and *Ceres*."

"Let me see." Reeves said, looking down at the console in front of him and Goldman sent a graph of tachyon readings to it. Studying this Reeves frowned, "Is it just me or does that look like the wave you get when a ship drops out of FTL and all the tachyons are dispersed?" he added.

"That's what I said." Thomas commented.

"The readings are far too large." Goldman said, "We're still more than fifteen light years from the system. In order for the wave to be detectable from this far out the mass being moved would have to be enormous."

"How enormous?" Reeves asked.

"Hundreds of millions of tonnes." Goldman answered.

Reeves considered the implications of this for a while. A practical vessel massing hundreds of millions of tonnes was going to require an incredibly advanced level of technology compared to the Commonwealth. Some of the earliest human designs for interstellar craft had been massive affairs up to eight thousand metres long to take into account the enormous size of the first generation of particle inductors and a few of these had even made it as far as being constructed launched. But the progression of technology soon led to smaller particle inductors that could enable ships to create their own tachyons for FTL travel while still being less than a hundred metres long and those early monsters had remained curiosities, the amount of effort needed to keep them operating not generally considered worthwhile. The last of them, a French built but Russian operated ship named the *Tsar Nicolas*, had lasted long enough to be hijacked and added to the Genex fleet at the start of the war and was only finally destroyed in a barrage of nuclear armed missiles launched by the defences of the colony moon Agamemnon two years after the war's conclusion as the final surviving Genex units were routed out and destroyed almost a century before the present. No military vessels now built or operated by humanity exceeded two thousand metres in length. If a ship of such size was waiting for the Commonwealth squadron in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -75' 1368 system then it could be a lumbering monster that would be easy prey to the relatively agile Commonwealth cruisers and their fighter squadrons or it could be the product of a technology completely unknown to the Commonwealth and Reeves may as well order his crew to throw rocks at it.

"We can't turn back now." he said, "Tell the rest of the squadron to maintain course and speed but be ready for action when we drop out of FTL. Are the *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco* close enough to send them a message?"

"We've pulled about point nine of a light year ahead of them." Goldman replied, "I think we can just about aim the tachyon transmitter accurately enough to get word to them."

"Good." Reeves said, nodding once, "Send them a copy of the readings you've taken and tell them that when they reach CPD seventy-five thirteen sixty-eight I want them to drop out of FTL early and search for us. If they can't find us then they are to turn back to Gamma Pavonis. If we run into trouble three cruisers can't handle then they just aren't going to be able to do any good for anyone. Better the Commonwealth knows what happened."

The star Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -75' 1368 was not very dissimilar to Sol itself. Slightly brighter and hotter, it had a comfort zone a little farther out than Sol's and within this region there was a rocky planet orbited by one primary moon and a pair of much smaller ones less than a kilometre across.

As expected there were no signs of large scale cities or widespread technology on the surface of the planet but there was a single space station of Sissusk design orbiting it. However, the station was producing no emissions that such a structure would normally be expected to produce. But from the outer reaches of the system where the Commonwealth cruisers had dropped to sub light speeds it was not possible to accurately gauge its condition. In addition there was no indication of an active tachyon communication satellite network orbiting the star itself.

Reeves was about to order the cruisers to approach the planet when Cortez suddenly called out.

"Contact! Three bogeys closing on an oblique vector." she announced.

"Show me." Reeves said and he looked at his monitor as an image of three ships with the typical Sissusk style appeared, all three following parallel courses.

"Captain these are all classes we've seen before at CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one." Lucas said as she compared the images to the ship recognition database, "If our evaluation is correct then the point ship is a monitor and the two outriders are corvettes."

"Not much against three cruisers." Knight commented.

"We can't ignore them though." Reeves replied, "One lucky shot from that monitor's main gun could put a hole in us."

"Ready to change course to intercept." Ash said but Reeves shook his head.

"No. Goldman have the *Bayonet* adjust position to-" he began.

"Captain there doesn't appear to be any comm chatter between the enemy vessels." one of the sensor operators interrupt.

"I agree." Lucas added, "They look like they're running silent."

"More like dead." Goldman added, "We're not registering anything but naturally reflected heat from the star. My guess is the crew got cooked by a high energy beam weapon and we're just seeing hulks."

"Gauss cannons?" Knight suggested, looking at Reeves and the captain nodded, "Gauss cannons. Three rounds, one per target. Fire for effect."

"Firing solution plotted." one of the *Warspite's* gunners announced, "Firing now."

The *Warspite's* two ventrally mounted light gauss cannon turret were intended to provide the ship with close defence against light warships such as the approaching corvettes and monitors as well as enabling it to conduct orbital strikes without needing to resort to using its missiles that were far fewer in number than the amount of rounds each turret had available. In ship to ship combat their effective range was limited purely because a target vessel could move out of the way when they detected the rounds on radar or lidar even though the projectiles would carry on going forever unless they happened to strike something solid enough to stop them. Even orbital stations generally had enough manoeuvrability to get out of the way of a projectile fired at extreme range. Therefore, it was usually necessary to fire the gauss cannons from a range short enough that the crew of a target would not have enough time to react to the attack before the projectile struck them.

On this occasion however, the properties of gauss cannons that limited their usefulness in combat were just what were needed. By firing a single round to intersect with the courses of the three Sissusk vessels the *Warspite* would be able to determine whether they really were dead or just acting that way until they were at the optimum range to attack the much larger and more powerful Commonwealth ships.

The crew of the *Warspite* watched as the gauss cannon rounds travelled in straight lines, getting ever closer to the smaller Sissusk warships, waiting to see if there would be the sudden flare of activity from an engine that would take them out of the projectiles' paths. But there was no reaction from any of the Sissusk craft and all three gauss cannon rounds slammed into their targets, punching right through them and coming out the other sides. Though the rounds were far lighter than the ships they struck, the kinetic energy of each impact was enough to shift the heading of each one slightly and the three ships now began to follow different paths. This in turn brought the monitor close enough to one of the corvettes that the two vessels collided, smashing one another's hulls wide open before they both went spinning off in different directions.

"I guess that's three more ships that Commander Bernard won't be getting the opportunity to play with."

Knight said and Reeves smiled.

"I'm telling him that it was your idea." he responded. Then he looked towards the helm stations, "Commander Ash, how long to get us into orbit of that planet?"

"Seven and a half hours by the most direct route and at full thrust captain." Ash answered.

"Captain I have another contact you may want to take a look at first." Cortez announced and on the monitor in front of him Reeves saw the image of a large ring shaped structure.

Just like the one seen in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 system this ring had been constructed using numerous Sissusk vessels all connected together in a circular pattern. However, fewer vessels had been used in the construction of this ring than in the first one the *Warspite* had encountered and the outlines of the individual ships used in its construction were enough to give a sense of scale and illustrated that it was significantly smaller than the first.

"Where is it petty officer?" Reeves asked.

"About three light hours away captain." Cortez answered, "It's in open space just like the first one was."

"This one looks to be about two thousand metres across." Goldman commented, confirming what the initial images had suggested about its size.

"We can't pass up the opportunity to study another of these." Knight said softly, leaning towards Reeves to give his advice and the captain nodded.

"Helm bring us around. I think those rings can give us more answers about what's going on here. Not too close though. Hold at one light minute out just in case this one decides to self destruct as well."

"Course laid in captain. Ready to go." Ash confirmed.

"Get me Bertarelli and Hale." Reeves said and Goldman nodded.

"Ceres here." Bertarelli's voiced announced over the *Warspite's* communication system.

"*Bayonet* awaiting instructions captain." Hale's voice added.

"This is Reeves, I'm assuming that you've seen the ring structure in the outer system. As far as we can tell this system is just as lifeless as the last one and I want to investigate the ring first. Given that the last one blew itself up when our drone fired on it we'll be keeping what will hopefully be a safe distance of one light

minute from it. But I want both your crews alert for any signs of a build up of power from within it. If that happens then don't wait for instructions from me, get your ships away from it as fast as you can. Since it looks like it was the presence of our drone that triggered the other ring to self destruct I want to avoid this one doing the same. Use only passive sensors unless ordered otherwise. Understood?"

"Understood *Warspite*." Hale answered.

"Copy that *Warspite*. *Ceres* will follow, no active sensors." Bertarelli added and Reeves looked at Ash.

"Take us in whenever you're ready commander." he said.

The three cruisers ran continuous scans of the ring as they flew towards it but in accordance with Reeves' orders these were passive scans only, watching for any energy emissions rather than sending out active pulses that could alert whatever was controlling the ring to their presence. Aboard the *Warspite*, Commander Bernard came to the bridge to join Reeves and Knight in studying the results of these scans around the central console. On the basis that a boarding action could be needed Major Willis was also invited to attend, as was Multan for any insights he may be able to offer about the ships used to construct the ring. Throughout this the ring appeared to be just as inert as everything else in the system just as the first one had been and by the time the three cruisers came to a halt it had done nothing to suggest that it was aware of their presence.

"Looks just like the first." Knight commented, "Smaller obviously though."

"Yes, which goes to show that whoever made it is doing so on an individual basis rather than following a strict pattern." Reeves added.

"That's weird." Bernard said suddenly and he called up a close up image of part of the ring, adjusting its point of focus until it was centred on an antenna cluster, "Take a look at this."

"Looks like the antenna array from a tachyon transmitter." Knight commented and Bernard nodded, "I think that's exactly what it is, the Sissusk version of it anyway. The array was salvaged from that light cruiser we got aboard and the pictures I saw looked like smaller versions of that. These probably come from the satellite system that's not where it ought to be."

"So someone used the satellites to build themselves a gateway." Knight said.

"No." Bernard replied, shaking his head, "This isn't like any tachyon gate I've seen before. A tachyon gate just needs to release charged tachyons as a vessel passes through it and they'll adhere to its hull. But look at the alignment of this antenna, it's pointing directly out from the side of the gate rather than into the middle where a ship would be. In fact it never occurred to me when we were looking at the last one but there's nothing to actually generate the field that would allow a ship to travel faster than light." then he frowned, "Unless-" he added. Then when he suddenly stopped Reeves and Knight glanced at one another.

"Unless what?" Reeves added.

"This may sound crazy but I think this could be some sort of means for travelling faster than anything we've even theorised before." Bernard said, "Consider this, we apply tachyons to a ship to shift the balance of its mass from the real to the imaginary and when we get where we're going we shed the tachyons. The maximum speed we can travel is limited by the amount of imaginary mass we can add to a ship. Now we can communicate over interstellar distances much faster than we can just take a message in person because the transmissions are purely tachyonic in nature rather than tachyons mixed with other matter. But supposing you could generate a massive beam of charged tachyons, I'm talking about something hundreds or thousands of metres across and direct it where you wanted it to go. Then you fly a ship with a charged hull into that beam."

"The ship would get pulled along with the tachyons," Knight said, "and at a speed far faster than is normally possible so long as the beam is maintained. It's a lot like a laser assisted launching system. You fire a powerful laser from beneath a payload and you can put it into orbit or use a larger array to push a solar sailing ship."

"How much faster?" Reeves asked and Bernard and Knight looked at one another.

"This is all hypothetical captain." Knight said, "I've never come across anything like this before when I was working in the field."

"Our fastest ships travel about eight light years per day." Bernard said, "Our tachyon signals move at twenty light years per hour. If those speeds could be maintained while inside the beam then-"

"Then you'd be travelling sixty times as fast as our fastest ships are capable of." Knight finished.

"Of course the problem is generating all the tachyons you'd need for this." Bernard continued, "It would require billions of tonnes in mass magnitude." and Reeves smiled.

"And when you shut off a system like this what happens to the tachyons?" he asked.

"They're charged so they'd disperse quite rapidly." Bernard told him.

"And produce a wave of tachyons that you could see from more than fifteen light years away." Knight added.

Reeves looked down at the console, studying the large scale view of the ring and noting how many different vessels had been used to construct it. He was not familiar with every different type he could make out but most of the ones he did recognise were classes that he knew could travel faster than light while none of them

were known to him to be limited to sub light travel.

"And this gate was built from dozens of ships that could be put to work generating tachyons round the clock and storing them until you had enough." he said.

"Captain this level of technology is way beyond the Commonwealth. We have to take a closer look at it. Bringing this back with us could-" Bernard began before Reeves interrupted him.

"Yes I realise that and we'll do everything we can to study this technology. But I'm also worried about the implications of the Sissusk having it. You're telling me that they could invade our space in a matter of hours when it would take us days to organise any defence."

"Captain this is not Sissusk technology." Multan said. The Fedrun had simply watched silently as the human officers discussed their theory on the purpose of the rings but now his expertise came to the fore, "They are barely able to maintain the skills to reproduce the faster than light drives we designed and those are no better than yours."

"This would represent a massive leap in technology." Knight said, "Even if we could take this gate back to the Commonwealth with us and take it apart I doubt we could operate it properly, let alone reproduce it quickly. The knowledge to build it must have come from somewhere else."

"You mean like from whoever invaded the colony at CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one without leaving any trace of their own presence other than a few robotic footprints?" Reeves asked. Then, looking at Bernard he continued, "Commander I'm not willing to risk anyone's life going aboard a vessel that could self destruct at any time." and Bernard's face fell.

"Captain, I'm willing to-" he began.

"Commander my decision is final. Until we can be certain that this ring is not rigged to self destruct like the last one was I'm not allowing anyone aboard it. Put together a unit of robots and we'll send them over in a shuttle. We'll leave them aboard while we go and investigate the planet. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Yes captain, that will do." Bernard replied, now smiling, "Eight robots ought to be enough to make a start on locating the ring's central control system. The shuttle can relay their findings back to us."

"Good." Reeves said, nodding, "See to it commander. In the mean time Commander Knight and I need to arrange another landing party."

INTERLUDE

Vale stared at the report from Martins that had been relayed to him just over an hour earlier with disbelief. For several years while working with Hayes on her project he had prided himself on his ability to predict and manipulate events, precisely the sort of skills that had caused Hayes to recruit him in the first place. There had been stumbling blocks along the way of course, the sudden deployment by the Sissusk of a fleet to the Phi-2 Pavonis system had prevented the Commonwealth from destroying a Ticik dreadnought and thus triggering a war with that reclusive species. But the initial aggressive stance of the Sissusk towards humanity and their refusal to consider negotiation meant that there was ample opportunity to provoke a military conflict between them and the Commonwealth instead. Such a conflict was likely to be more favourable to the Commonwealth than one against the Ticik but the end result would still leave the Commonwealth weakened. However, the fact that an entire world could be depopulated without him knowing about it shook Vale to the core.

The planet orbiting Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 that was known to the Sissusk as Issil had been only a minor colony, settled within the last decade and still in the process of being expanded as the Sissusk sought out extra resources with which to fight their ongoing war with the Ticik. But there had still been just over a million Sissusk and slave workers or various species on the planet just weeks earlier. Martins' report was quite clear though, every last inhabitant of the planet had vanished and if the evidence left behind was accurate then they had not gone peacefully. The destruction left behind in space indicated that the inhabitants had put up a considerable fight before being overwhelmed but left no direct clues as to who had been responsible. The best theory that Vale could come up with was based on past observations of the aftermaths of fleet engagements against the Ticik where they had attacked with overwhelming force and then left nothing but destruction in their wake. But this was not just a small fleet of warships operating far from support, Issil was defended by fixed orbital weapons and since the raid by the *Warspite* several months earlier it had been reinforced with several squadrons of attack craft. Even a large Ticik force would have incurred some losses, if only to their gunships. But the only wreckage left behind had been of Sissusk origin. To make matters worse for Vale, Martins had clearly used the exact wording of his orders to delay sending this information back via drone. He had had a good head start on reaching Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 over the Commonwealth fleet and had reached the system several days ahead of them. Whatever had happened there had been over by the time his scout ship arrived but he had not seen fit to report this until the Commonwealth ships were departing the system themselves and he was reporting the departure vector they took, his calculation that they were heading for Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -75' 1368 and that he was following them on that basis. It appeared to be just an afterthought that his report included a note that just a day before arriving at Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 the *Grey Dawn's* sensors had picked up an enormous burst of tachyons far greater than anything Vale knew of could produce.

Just then Vale's phone rang and he reached into his pocket for it.

"Commander," he said having seen Hayes identified as the caller.

"Enrico where the hell are you?" Hayes said, "I checked with fleet command and they said that a report from Martins came in more than an hour ago. Why haven't you brought it to me?"

"I was just collating the information," Vale said.

"Collating? What's to collate? Martins sent one report didn't he? Bring it to me." Hayes ordered.

"Commander there's data in the report that doesn't make any sense. I'd like to run it by Doctor Horst for her opinion before I bring it to you."

"Seriously? You need that woman's input for a military report? Oh very well. But I need to know what's going on as soon as possible. The old man's been sneaking around asking odd questions. I need to get him off my back and on to someone else's." Hayes told him.

"Yes commander. I'll be as quick as I can." Vale replied, knowing that there was a real danger that he was the person Hayes might try and blame if everything went wrong and her superior came looking for a sacrifice.

Hanging up his phone, Vale rushed from his office and down into the basement of the building where an underground monorail station connected the building with the city's public transport link. Showing his identity card was enough to have him waved past the ticket barrier by a low level functionary and he ran for a monorail car that was in the station, leaping through its open doors just seconds before they slid shut and the vehicle began to move.

Vale remained on the monorail as it emerged onto track running above ground and made its way through the city's business district until it finally reached the university campus. Only then did Vale disembark, using his official identity card to bypass the ticket checks again as he made his way towards the university's science department. Knowing Doctor Horst's schedule by heart he knew that she was giving a lecture at that moment and he headed for the room where he knew he would be able to find her. Entering via a side door Vale found himself standing at the front of the room where Doctor Angela Horst was giving a lecture to a class of around

fifty students on the subject of anti-matter applications. It was not in Vale's nature to suddenly interrupt the class and so he instead just waved at Horst to attract her attention.

"One moment." she told the class before descending from the stage to see what Vale wanted.

"I'm sorry to disturb you doctor, but I need to speak to you on official business. Commander Hayes' orders." he told her and she sighed.

"Class dismissed." she announced without looking around at her class, "I expect everyone to be able to demonstrate a knowledge of gathering anti-matter using orbital nets by this time next week." then she and Vale waited for the room to empty before she continued, "What does she want now?" she asked.

"I need you to take a look at a report for me." Vale answered.

"I'm not the strategist here Mister Vale." she said.

"I think you should take a look. It's interesting." Vale said and he held up a digital memory stick.

"I said 'No' Jennifer." Kane said, glaring at Hayes while the pair of them stood in the corridor their offices connected to, "I am not handing my source over to you."

"Alex that source is perfectly placed. I need to know what's going on at that base." Hayes replied.

"That source is a loud mouth who wants to solve the galaxy's problems with a few inane slogans on low quality shirts. A useful idiot not an elite secret agent." Kane pointed out.

"Which is exactly why you shouldn't mind sharing him. He's an idiot whether useful or not."

"And if he gets caught trying to pass information back to us then he'll be arrested. That would rather put an end to his usefulness to me. Haven't you learned a thing Jennifer? You screwed us all when you cost us our link to the Canadians. That's probably why the old man-" Kane said angrily. But before he could finish Vale appeared at the end of the corridor with Doctor Horst beside him.

"Doctor." Hayes called out, interrupting Kane in mid sentence, "Step into my office." then she looked at Kane and added, "We'll finish this later Alex."

"We're already finished." Kane responded as he turned around and headed back into his own office as well.

"So what brings you here in person doctor?" Hayes asked as she took her seat behind her desk.

"I think you should see the report from Martins before we explain." Vale said.

"I've glanced through it. When you were late coming to see me I had fleet command send over another copy. Frankly I don't see the issue." Hayes responded.

"The issue is a technological leap that the Commonwealth may be about to gain." Horst said and Hayes frowned.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Martins' ship picked up a massive tachyon burst when they were still some distance from Cape Photographic Durchmusterung sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one." Vale said.

"It's all there in that report you didn't read properly." Horst commented and Hayes smiled.

"That was very assertive for one of your stature doctor." she said.

"Yes, well, when it comes to the progress of science you'd be startled at what we're capable of." Horst responded.

"You're aware that when Martins reached the system it was empty?" Vale asked and Hayes nodded.

"Yes, though there's nothing in his report to tell us who was responsible." she said

"They left a big enough clue." Horst said, "About six and a half thousand metres across."

"That ring structure?" Hayes responded.

"Exactly." Horst said.

"Martins had plenty of time to take scans of the system and he took plenty of that structure." Vale said, "Including some pretty detailed scans of the ring's surface features."

"Just tell me what's brought the good doctor here to my office." Hayes said.

"The ring is a method of faster than light travel." Horst told her, "One that could change the balance of power."

"How does it work?" Hayes asked, her curiosity aroused.

"Basically it creates a continuous stream of charged tachyons between two points so that any object with an opposite charge that enters the stream, a ship for example, is carried along it at fantastic speeds." Horst answered, "At least fifty times what we can manage at the moment."

"That's less than the ration between our current designs and the first interstellar craft." Hayes pointed out.

"Yes, it could suggest that there's some limitation that we aren't currently aware of that prevents us developing it beyond a certain speed." Horst suggested.

"And the Sissusk have this technology?" Hayes said.

"Oh I doubt it." Horst replied, "If anything the Sissusk are less advanced than we are and we could build something like that. The physics behind the aiming of the beam would require hundreds of researcher years to get right. But it's obviously a progression of technology we do have so that's why we can understand what it does. The major drawback of course is how damned inefficient the system must be."

"How so?" Hayes responded.

"Well using our current FTL travel methods we just add enough imaginary mass to a ship and then apply a thrust to get it to be unable to do anything other than travel faster than light without even any problems with inertia or momentum to worry about." Horst began.

"Yes, being squashed flat at the start of a journey would have stalled space exploration somewhat." Hayes commented but Horst ignored her and continued.

"What this system does is generate an enormous mass of tachyons to create the beam and then keeps on feeding more in. The mass of the ship travelling along it is pretty much irrelevant. But if the source of the beam is cut off then the whole thing collapses and any ship moving along it instantly drops to sub light speed and unless it's got its own supply of tachyons it's stranded. Our technology may be much slower but it has the advantages of greater efficiency and flexibility." Horst explained.

"This also plays into the idea of our current technology having some limitation that is obviously important to whoever made this." Vale added.

Hayes sighed as she leant back in her seat.

"And thanks to those Commonwealth fools shooting at it the ring self destructed." she said, "The somewhat outmoded idea of the dominance of natural selection would have been doing us a favour if they'd been a little closer when it happened."

"Nevertheless, this is big." Horst said, "When I present—"

"No." Hayes snapped before Horst could finish, "Doctor Horst, there will be no papers published on this matter. Do you understand me?"

"But this represents a major breakthrough, even if we can't implement a full scale model right now." Horst protested.

"And it's a good job we can't." Hayes said, "Like I said, I read Martins' report and it looks to me like he detected the ring's operation from a long way off. How long do you think it would take the Commonwealth to notice what we were up to if you built one of those things."

"I thought we were here to bring the Commonwealth down." Horst replied, frowning, "That's how you sold me on this project. The Commonwealth has spent decades suppressing scientific advance. Are you going to do the same now?"

"No, I'm just asking you to be patient. You can still make all the calculations you want but nothing is to go public and no practical experiments are to be carried out." Hayes told her sternly.

"Fine. I'll keep quiet." Horst replied, "Now if you don't mind I've got work to do." and without waiting for a response from Hayes or Vale she turned and stormed out of the office, slamming the door shut behind her.

"Do you think she's going to be a problem Enrico?" Hayes asked, staring at the door.

"She'll go to Stein." Vale replied, "She'll try and get him to overrule you and get government backing for research into the technology."

"Stein doesn't want to risk going public any more than we do." Hayes said.

"No, but he could use this as an example of the benefits of his support for our project. Once knowledge of the technology is spread to areas of government that we can't control then we'll lose it."

"And how would you suggest we deal with it?" Hayes asked and Vale sighed.

"We can't. Not with the alliances you've been able to make anyway. We'll have to kick this one upstairs."

"Oh great, just what I need." Hayes said, clearly annoyed, "Having to go begging to the old man."

"You can go right in Commander." the young man sat outside the office doors said and at the same time someone on the other side opened them to reveal the old man sat behind his desk.

"Commander Hayes. Do come in and take a seat. You take your coffee black and without sugar, don't you?" he said as Hayes entered the office and he pointed to a mug of steaming coffee that was already laid out on his desk close to a chair.

"Thank you." Hayes replied as she walked across the office, becoming aware of the two guards standing either side of the doors as they closed them behind her. Here in the old man's office they did not bother to conceal the weapons they carried and each one had a sub machine gun slung across his chest.

"So what can I do for you?" the old man asked, "It's so rare you come all the way up here to visit me."

"How much do you know about the *Grey Dawn's* last report?" Hayes said.

"Ah, the mysterious case of a disappearing colony. They have been plenty of colonies that have failed over the centuries but few leave behind such tantalising remains. I'm guessing that this is to do that peculiar ring shaped structure on the outer edge of the system."

"Yes sir. Enrico ran it past Doctor Horst and she thinks it's some sort of advanced FTL technology. Now she wants to try and exploit it."

"Can she?" the old man responded.

"Not immediately, no. But more worrying is what would happen if she tried. It could give us away to the Commonwealth." Hayes said.

"Ah. Now that is a problem. The penalty for that could be quite severe." the old man said and Hayes knew his words to be an understatement.

“Enrico thinks that she'll contact Stein to try and get government approval for the research. He joined my project on the basis that there would be gains in resources that he could claim credit for. If Doctor Horst takes this to him he's like to jump all over it.”

“So you want me to deal with it.” the old man said, “I'm guessing that you'd like to be able to continue making use of them both afterwards though.”

“I would.” Hayes replied.

“Very well.” the old man said, “I'll speak with them both and outline the gravity of the situation.”

9.

The home world of the Nortonus looked little different from orbit as it did from the outer edge of the solar system, a planet with wide oceans and dense forests and jungles covering much of the land mass. The only real difference was that as the planet turned in its orbit it brought into view several plumes of smoke from the surface.

"The mining camps?" Knight suggested.

"That would be my guess." Reeves replied.

"Captain I think we've found one of the native settlements." Goldman announced, "There's a thermal spike coming from a coastal location about six hundred kilometres from the nearest of those plumes. No other EM emissions to indicate advanced technology but it could be inhabited."

"Stone age tribes." Reeves commented.

"You know when human explorers found the Brekka we waited more than a decade before landing openly among them to make sure we got it right." Knight said and Reeves smiled.

"Unfortunately we don't have ten years to spare." he said, "Commander take your team down to the surface. Try not to make your presence too obvious though."

"Oh don't worry about that. If the inhabitants of this planet see the Sissusk as gods I'd rather not find out how they react to heretics." Knight replied.

The dropship descended over the ocean to hide its entry into the planet's atmosphere from the natives. Then the pilot levelled out at low altitude and flew towards the coast. The approach was carried out under cover of darkness and the dropship flew without any running lights to hide its presence as much as possible. The used passive night vision equipment to bring their craft down safely and the hatch opened just long enough to allow the marine platoon as well as Doctor Thundercloud and the pair of robots they had brought with them to disembark before it rose back up into the sky and turned back out to sea, leaving the landing party behind.

Given the need to remain undetected each member of the landing party wore a hooded cape over his equipment that was made of a fabric that adapted its colouration to match the background, making them almost impossible to spot using the naked eye.

"This place is like a sauna." Willis commented referring to the high temperature and humidity even at night.

"Just be careful about touching any of the plants with bare skin." Thundercloud warned, "I'll take a few samples to try and find out if there are any obvious toxins but there's no way of knowing what some of the things in this jungle could do to a person."

"A long as they don't do it so quickly that we don't have time to get back to the *Warspite's* medical facility."

Willis commented. Then he looked at his watch, "We better get a move on." he said, "That settlement is more than six kilometres from here and I want to have an OP set up before dawn."

The platoon formed a column to make its way through the jungle, guided by the locational fix provided by the orbiting cruisers. Periodically Thundercloud would call for them to halt and he would have one of the robots remove small pieces from some of the surrounding plants that he would then place inside small liquid filled containers and shook them. The liquids were designed to change colour in the presence of specific chemical traces that indicated the presence of toxins but nothing reacted strong enough to cause Thundercloud any concern.

Though the jungle was not particularly dense, it still took several hours to reach a point that overlooked the native settlement and Willis took out his binoculars to study it.

"See anything interesting?" Thundercloud asked.

"Oh yeah. A testament to a damned big ego." Willis replied, "Here, take a look for yourself doc." and he passed the binoculars to the doctor.

Looking through them Doctor Thundercloud saw the native settlement laid out before him. Though the natives had little in the way of engineering technology it appeared that the Sissusk had given them enough to be able to construct a well laid out city that was focused on a tower too tall to have a smooth sided to have been built just using mud bricks and stone. This was obviously the product of a more advanced civilisation and even if no-one had told Thundercloud that this was a Sissusk colony world he would have been able to guess that by the ring of large Sissusk statues that surrounded this tower. Several of the statues showed signs of damage, with one of them now being just a pile of rubble and just as had been the case with the administrative building on the previous planet he had visited Thundercloud saw that a barrier had been raised around the outside of the tower. This looked to have been constructed from the remains of some of the surrounding native buildings that were now mere ruins.

"The Sissusk really did want the natives to know who was in charge, didn't they?" Thundercloud commented.

Then he suddenly turned his head as he noticed something move at the edge of his vision, "Movement." he said, before adding, "Remarkable."

"Where?" Willis asked, reaching to take back the binoculars.

"Foot of the damaged statue. Five o'clock from the base of the tower." Thundercloud told him and Willis looked for himself.

"Whoa." Willis said as he looked for himself, "Now that's an alien. One of the natives I'm guessing."

"I think so." Thundercloud agreed, nodding.

The solitary figure that the two men had spotted close to the ruined statue was totally non-humanoid and unlike the Sissusk did not even have the same number of limbs arranged in pairs like humans had. Instead this creature possessed a body that was the shape of an almond standing upright with numerous limbs ringed around its base. These extended upwards and outwards at an angle until reaching a joint somewhat like a knee or elbow before angling back down to the ground and terminating in what appeared to be a hybrid of hand and foot as the example Willis was looking at walked along on several of its limbs while clutching a spear and burning torch in others. At the top of its body the alien had no distinct head and instead there was a cluster of stubby flexible stalks circling it completely that Willis guessed functioned as eyes, providing the alien with three hundred and sixty degree vision.

"Oh there's another one." Willis said as he saw a second and then a third alien come into view.

"So whatever happened here it left some of the natives behind at least." Thundercloud said, "Perhaps we should set up our observation post and keep an eye on them for a while before deciding how to act."

"Sounds good to me. But I think Captain Reeves will want to know what we've already found." Willis said and he pressed the button on the side of his binoculars to activate the built-in recording system.

"So that's what the Nortonus look like." Reeves said as he studied the images being sent from the surface on the bridge's central console. Meanwhile every member of the bridge crew who had not been able to call up the image on their own consoles were doing their best to peer over at someone who had for the chance of a glimpse that this newly encountered aliens species. Multan, who had met members of more different species than any of the humans currently aboard the *Warspite* was less excited about this but he still watched the footage closely for anything that may enable him to offer some insight into what was happening.

"So are we going to make contact with them?" Knight asked.

"I'm not sure we'll be able to." Reeves replied, "We know nothing about their language so we can't exactly walk up to the edge of the city and say 'take me to your leader' like we did with the Brekka. That involved years of building up a language database for our robots."

"That may not be necessary captain." Multan said as he noticed something on the footage being sent from the surface, "Can you zoom in on that Nortonus please?" and he pointed at one of the aliens seen walking between the Sissusk statues.

"Sure, allow me." Knight responded, freezing the footage and zooming in.

"Yes, I thought so." Multan commented.

"What is it?" Reeves asked.

"Look closely at this individual captain. Do you notice what it has wrapped around its body just above where its limbs emerge from?" Multan said.

"Looks like some sort of metal collar." Reeves replied.

"Are you thinking it's one of those translation devices?" Knight said.

"I am commander." Multan answered, "Notice how in the moving footage the other Nortonus seem to act in a deferential manner to this individual as if it is some sort of leader, perhaps chosen to communicate directly with their supposed gods."

"Which means that collar would translate their language into the Sissusk one." Reeves said, smiling as he realised that the robots that had accompanied the marine platoon to the surface would be able to communicate with the Nortonus by speaking to them in the Sissusk language that they had been programmed to produce and understand. The Nortonus' own translation collars would then translate this into their language so that they could understand what was being said. This would also work in reverse as the robots could translate the Sissusk speech output by the collars when the Nortonus spoke in their language while wearing one, "Okay we have a plan. Major Willis is to wait until daylight and gather as much information about the Nortonus as possible before making contact. However, if there are any signs of a continued Sissusk presence then I want the contact called off. Who knows what the Sissusk will order the natives to do if we suddenly appear to expose their false claims of divinity?"

"Captain!" Cortez suddenly called out, "I've got a tachyon reading heading this way."

"The *Valley of Thorns* and the Orinoco?" Reeves asked but she shook her head.

"No captain, the approach vector is wrong." she said.

"Too many signals as well." Goldman added, "Four readings."

"Picking up scatter." Cortez continued, "They just dropped out of FTL."

"From the strength of them I'd say that none of the ships are larger than us." Goldman said.

"Who did?" Knight asked.

"Action stations." Reeves ordered and a klaxon sounded as he and Knight hurried back to their seats at the

rear of the bridge, "Do we have an ID yet?"

"Not yet captain." Goldman replied, "I'm not picking up a transponder and they came out of FTL more than a light hour away. We've no EM readings yet."

"The *Bayonet* and *Ceres* are both calling sir." one of the two communication crew sat in front of Goldman announced.

"Put them through." Reeves said.

"*Warspite* this is the *Ceres*, are you seeing these new arrivals?" the *Ceres*' first officer Commander Da Silva asked.

"We're seeing them too *Warspite*." Captain Hale added from the *Bayonet*.

"Yes, we've got them. We've got four signals but no ID yet." Reeves replied, "I think its time to launch our fighters and drones. Keep them close for now but I don't want to be caught unprepared if we come under fire."

"Acknowledged *Warspite*." Da Silva responded, "We'll have birds in the air in ten minutes."

"Understood captain, launching fighters. *Bayonet* out." Hale added.

Reeves then looked at Goldman.

"Give the word commander. I want Shaw's fighters out there in under ten minutes." he said. Then he looked straight ahead, smiling.

"Not going to be beaten by the other ships?" Knight said softly.

"Hell no." Reeves replied as Goldman activated the intercom.

"Bridge to hangar. All fighters scramble, scramble, scramble." she said.

The pilots and of Shaw's fighter squadron had been waiting for the order to launch since before arriving in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -75' 1368 system and now that the word was finally given to launch they raced to their craft.

"Okay boys look alive." Shaw said as soon as they were all hooked into their fighters' communications, "Stay in formation and wait for those capital ship jockeys to tell us what our target is."

Two of the squadron's fighters were already loaded into the *Warspite*'s launch tubes on alert and these were the first to be ejected. After this the remaining fighters were automatically lowered down into the tubes and magnetically accelerated out into space. Once in space the fighters split off into pairs and formed a ring in front of the *Warspite* laid out so that the cruiser could fire its guns through the centre of the circle. The two light cruisers accompanying the *Warspite* also launched the fighter squadrons they carried. Like the *Warspite*, the *Bayonet* carried a squadron of two-seat superiority fighters while the *Ceres* instead carried a squadron of smaller single seat interceptors built for greater speed and agility but with less firepower than their larger counterparts. In addition to the three squadrons of manned attack craft the *Warspite* also deployed the remaining combat drones that it carried, adding an extra squadron to the force now preparing itself to meet the approaching unidentified ships.

"Outside the primary lunar orbit now captain." Ash announced as the Commonwealth force made it past the largest of the planet's moons. Getting the cruisers away from the gravitational influence of the planet and its moons would make it easier for them to manoeuvre and prevent the approaching ships from using the moons as cover to hide behind until at close range.

At the same time as the Commonwealth ships were moving away from the planet the new arrivals had swung towards it and the distance between the two forces closed by several million kilometres before the *Warspite* got its first look at them.

All four ships shared the same basic configuration. Roughly cylindrical, their hulls looked to have been built in sections that were connected together end to end and weapon hard points were visible along the lengths of these. There were three different types of ship in total with the largest being about seven hundred metres long, smaller than the *Warspite* by a hundred metres but slightly larger than the two light cruisers. Meanwhile the other three were all about half this length. None of the designs were ones that the *Warspite* or either of the other cruisers had encountered before but the basic design profile was familiar to the crew of the heavy cruiser.

"Are those Ticik ships?" Knight said.

"It certainly looks that way to me." Reeves replied and he looked at Lucas, "Lieutenant?" he added.

"Checking the Sissusk's database now captain." she replied. Though the distance between the Phi-2 Pavonis system and Commonwealth controlled territory had been too great to enable the abandoned Sissusk light cruiser that the crew of the *Warspite* had been able to board and seize as salvage to be taken back for study a large amount of equipment had been removed by Commonwealth personnel before the vessel was scuttled to prevent the Sissusk from reclaiming it. This had included all of the computer storage drives and the Commonwealth's military intelligence units had gone over these carefully in the following months and among other things had recovered the profiles of Ticik warships that the Sissusk had been able to build up. The accuracy of this could not be fully determined but the information was regarded as being better than

nothing and so had been distributed to fleet units.

"I'm picking up launches." Cortez announced.

"Missiles?" Reeves asked.

"Negative." Goldman responded as she studied the sensor readings, "They look more like gunships to me. Six of them from the primary vessel."

"I've got IDs captain." Lucas then said, looking up from her console, "We'd classify that larger ship as a light cruiser while two of the smaller ones are destroyers and the third is a frigate."

"Three cruisers and forty-seven attack craft versus one cruiser, two destroyers and a frigate plus six attack craft." Thomas commented, "I'd say that gives us the advantage."

"That's a pretty good force to send in on a mission to evaluate the effects of the attack." Cortez added.

"Which would mean that the Ticik weren't responsible either." Reeves said and he paused to think, "Lieutenant Commander Goldman, can we communicate with the Ticik vessels?" he asked.

"I'm not sure sir." she replied, "Signal intercepts at Phi-Two Pavonis provided some information on how they code their data but we don't know what any specific piece means yet."

"We'd be talking gibberish." Knight added

"No comments about my being from Yorkshire Commander Thomas." Reeves commented when he saw the navigator about to speak and Thomas relaxed.

"Captain we could try transmitting in a Sissusk format accompanied by the same message in our own."

Lucas suggested, "If they've been at war with the Sissusk for years and winning then they've probably managed to figure out how to understand Sissusk communication patterns and language."

"Impressive thinking lieutenant." Knight said, "The reputation of intelligence for being ironically named is clearly not correct in your case."

"So now we just need a message to send." Reeves said and he paused to consider what he wanted to say. He knew that this message had the potential to be of great significance. Despite years of warfare between them, even the Sissusk knew next to nothing about the Ticik and the most commonly held piece of information about them was their habit of reacting violently to anyone they saw as trespassing in their territory as well as ruthlessly pursuing to destruction anything they saw as a threat.

"They're scanning us captain." Cortez announced, "Active tadar."

"Return the favour?" Knight suggested and Reeves nodded.

"Just don't try and make it look like we're trying for a weapons lock just yet." he said. Then Reeves activated the communication system built into his console to record his message to the approaching Ticik, "This is Captain Reeves of the Commonwealth starship *Warspite*. We are here investigating the disappearance of Sissusk colonies and do not wish to make territorial claims or engage your vessels. Please acknowledge." Reeves then shut off the recording and looked at Knight, "Well?" he asked.

"I doubt that it'll be making it into any history books as the famous first words spoken to an alien civilisation." Knight said, "Unless of course the translation gets screwed up by Lucas' dodgy software and you accidentally declare war on them."

"Well as captain I am in a position to blame anything that goes wrong on the lieutenant that suggested it."

Reeves replied before turning to Goldman, "How's the translation coming?"

"I've run the message through the translation program captain and I'm just readying the system to mimic Sissusk encoding patterns. I'll send both the translated message and the original in a Sissusk pattern, plus the original in our format. Hopefully that'll give the Ticik the opportunity to compare them all and make future communication easier."

"Captain," Multan said from his seat at the back of the bridge, "I have never heard of the Ticik communicating with anyone."

"We can but try Mister Multan." Reeves replied without turning around, "Lieutenant Commander Goldman, please send the signal as soon as you are ready. Use the tachyon transmitter for real time as well as radio."

"Yes captain. Sending now." Goldman responded as she activated the *Warspite's* short and long range transmitters.

"Captain tadar confirms Sissusk ships are slowing." one of the sensor operators called out seconds later.

"The radio transmission won't have reached them yet." Knight said, "Maybe they picked up the tachyon signal."

"Helm reduce speed one quarter. Commander Goldman have our fighters and the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* match."

"Decelerating now captain." Ash announced and the Commonwealth task force slowed.

All of a sudden the symbols on the sensor readouts identifying the Sissusk vessels turned and reorganised themselves. Instead of coming head on towards the Commonwealth they turned aside. The two destroyers now positioned themselves above and below the light cruiser while the frigate and gunships formed a defensive screen between them and the Commonwealth ships, perfectly placed to intercept any missiles or attack craft that were sent their way.

"Not exactly a friendly reply," Knight commented, "but I think we can say that they aren't here to fight either."

"Agreed." Reeves said, "Helm take us back into orbit but I want a high orbit rather than a low one. If the Ticik do decide to make an attack run on us I don't want them suddenly appearing over the horizon at point blank range."

"Yes captain, changing course for a high orbit." Ash replied.

"Commander Goldman, I want our fighters put on four hour rotations. Half a squadron at a time. Our squadron will take the first rotation, let those from the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* stand down for now. Weapons, pull half our drones as well. We'll keep them out there as long as they have fuel but be ready to launch the rest immediately if we come under attack." Reeves ordered. Then he looked at Knight and added, "Now I suppose it's in the hands of Major Willis and Doctor Thundercloud."

When the sun came up over the city more of the Nortonus emerged from their dwellings and many of them left the city to tend to the fields filled with crops that surrounded it. In the daylight it was easy to see that the Nortonus had a greenish colour to their bodies and eye stalks while their limbs were a much darker brown. Though the Sissusk appeared to be gone the Nortonus were apparently content to continue with the work they performed for their masters. The crops growing in the fields showed considerable signs of damage that suggested a large number of creatures had moved through them without caring about what they were crushing underfoot. One of them also showed signs of having been burned as if from a shuttle or aircraft landing in it, not something that the Sissusk were likely to do if they wanted the crops for themselves.

"They're moving quicker." Willis commented as he watched the Nortonus farmers through his binoculars.

"Perhaps they're just more eager to repair the damage for their offerings to their gods than they are to perform sentry duty." Thundercloud suggested.

"Maybe." Willis replied. Then he put his binoculars away, "Well I suppose there's no time like the present to go down and introduce ourselves."

"Perhaps we should remove these cloaks first." Thundercloud suggested, "I doubt walking up to members of a technologically primitive civilisation like ghosts is going to do us any favours."

"Alright doctor I'll go by your recommendation, but if I get shot with an arrow or stabbed by a spear because they could see me then I'm blaming you." Willis responded as he removed his cloak.

Accompanied by one of the robots they had brought with them and a single squad of marines, the two officers made their way from their observation post down to one of the fields outside the city. About a dozen Nortonus were working here, tending to the crops that in this case did not seem to have been damaged.

Each of the Nortonus carried several bags tied around their bodies just above the widest point and as they made their way through the field they were cutting buds from the plants and placing them in the bags.

Thanks to their all round vision, the Nortonus farmers spotted the marines as soon as they emerged from the jungle and approached the field. Instantly they reacted by banging smaller protrusions around the bases of their bodies that were positioned between their limbs against their bodies to produce a series of rapid clicks and tapping sounds. The workers in the field started to withdraw away from the marines still producing the same sounds.

"I think we're scaring them." Thundercloud commented.

"Hey robot," Willis called out, "tell them we don't mean any harm and want to be friends."

Obediently, the robot opened its mouth and a translation into the Sissusk language of Willis' message came out. This did not seem to have any effect on the majority of the Nortonus although one of them did break into a run, heading straight back towards the city.

"It's not working." Willis said to Thundercloud.

"Of course not. Do you see any of those translations devices on these farmers?" Thundercloud responded, "Hopefully that other one is running to get someone we can speak with."

"Keep your weapons down." Willis told the marines when he noticed one start to raise a rifle. He had no way of knowing for certain whether or not the Nortonus knew what firearms were but he guessed that the Sissusk would have demonstrated them at some point, even if only when attempting to defend their tower in the city. Obediently the marines pointed their weapons towards the ground, though all held them in such a way that it would take only moments to bring the weapons back up to their shoulders ready to be used.

The Nortonus continued to make the clicking and tapping sounds and the marines noticed more of them starting to gather, coming over from nearby fields to investigate the cause of the commotion. Then after a few minutes another group came hurrying towards the field from the direction of the city and Willis and Thundercloud saw that although one of them appeared to be a farmer like those already in front of them, presumably the one who had gone running off earlier, most carried spears and bows rather than farming implements while one had a Sissusk translation device strapped around its body and Willis smiled when he saw this.

"Looks like they've brought someone to talk doc. How about you do the introduction?" he said.

"Gladly." Thundercloud replied and he stepped forwards, removing his helmet so that the Nortonus could see him clearly. Then he glanced at the robot standing close to him, "Okay here goes, translate this for them." he said, "I am Doctor James Thundercloud and I bring you the good will of the Commonwealth. We have

travelled far to-”

While Thundercloud spoke the robot translated his words into the Sissusk language and the Nortonus wearing the translator stood still as if listening to the words. But then all of a sudden it produced several rapid clicks and the warriors standing in front of it acted.

“Oh crap!” Thundercloud exclaimed, ducking as a spear flew through the air towards him. Then he scowled as the robot appeared to translate this, “Stop translating!” he yelled as he reached down his hip and drew the pistol he had holstered there and the robot promptly closed its mouth just as a thrown rock bounced off its head.

Behind Thundercloud the marines all raised their weapons but held their fire for the time being.

“Hardcastle! Mayfair! Give me a couple of suppressing bursts.” Willis called out and the marine squad's two machine gunners pointed the muzzles of their weapons back downwards and the marines opened fire.

Moving their weapons from side to side produced an impressive amount of noise as well as sending dozens of projectiles into the ground just in front of the line of Nortonus warriors. This had the desired effect as the aliens stopped throwing rocks or spears and shooting arrows at the marines and instead pulled back.

“Willis to dropship. We need an evac.” Willis signalled, “We're falling back to the OP and may be bringing some friends.”

“Copy that major, we're on approach. ETA eight minutes.” the pilot of the dropship currently circling just off the coast responded.

“Major we're on our way to hook up with you now.” one of the sergeants that Willis had left at the observation post added and Willis nodded.

“Good. We're better off together. Someone let the *Warspite* know that we're on our way back.” Willis said.

Then he took a quick look around to confirm that the way back to the observation post was still clear, “Okay lads, let's go. Move by teams and lay down suppressing fire only. No lethal fire unless someone is in immediate danger. Now move!”

The marine squad immediately began to fall back. Splitting into two four man fire teams the squad alternated which one moved with which one laid down covering fire. The Nortonus clearly understood the dangerous nature of the weapons being used by the marines and although they pursued the retreating humans they maintained a safe distance. They halted only when there was the roar of engines from overhead as the marines' dropship arrived and made a single low level pass over them. The dropship circled around as the rest of the platoon appeared to join up with the squad led by Willis.

“Major there's a clearing about two hundred metres to the west of your position.” the dropship pilot transmitted, “I can set down there to pick you up.”

“Understood.” Willis responded, “But stay airborne until we get there. The last thing we need is the natives rushing our ride.

With far more marines facing them and laying down covering fire the Nortonus became more cautious in their pursuit, still following the marines but remaining too far away to attack them. As the platoon gathered at the edge of the jungle clearing Willis triggered a flare and tossed into the middle of the clearing. Seeing this signal from the air the dropship pilot brought his craft in to land, the ramp at the back extending downwards before it even touched the ground so that the marines could run straight aboard and take their seats.

“We're in.” Willis called out as the last marine sat down, “Get us out of here.” and the dropship suddenly rose up into the sky again with the ramp still open.

Thundercloud looked out of the back of the dropship as the ramp was closing and in the clearing below he saw that the Nortonus warriors had made their way into the clearing and although he could not see how their eye stalks were angled from this high up he pictured them looking up at the dropship before the ramp slammed shut, sealing the craft shut for its ascent into space.

10.

"Come in." Reeves said when he heard the knock at his cabin door and it opened to reveal Willis and Thundercloud, still both wearing the camouflaged uniforms and body armour they had been wearing down on the planet, "I hear things didn't go so well with first contact." Reeves said as he looked at them.

"Well since every official first contact situation humanity has had until now has resulted in gunfire we thought why mess with what works?" Willis commented and Reeves glanced at Thundercloud, remembering how just after they had first encountered the Sissusk he had expressed his dismay at it being based on violence.

"It seems that just speaking in the Sissusk language isn't enough for the Nortonus captain." Thundercloud added, "I think they need the words to come from a Sissusk."

"Do we know for certain that the robot was translating your words properly?" Reeves asked.

"I've sent it to Commander Bernard to have its memory pulled." Willis answered, "If it screwed up we'll know about it soon enough."

"I don't suppose either of you noticed anything else since your last report that could shed some light on what happened here did you?" Reeves said.

"Nothing." Willis replied.

"Well it doesn't look like it was the Ticik." Reeves said, "I doubt that they'd be so willing to let us stay here unchallenged if they were."

"Yes I heard about them turning up. Have they made contact?" Thundercloud asked.

"No. They obviously got our message so they ought to be able to reply if they wanted to, even if it was in the Sissusk language and format. So far though they've been content enough to stay just beyond the outermost of the planet's moons and watch."

"Are you sure they aren't just waiting for reinforcements to turn up captain? I hear we've probably got them out gunned this time." Willis said.

"It does look like we have the advantage for now, yes." Reeves told him, "But we've not picked up any signs of tachyon transmissions other than a few initial tadar pulses to confirm our location from any of their vessels. If they didn't already have reinforcements on the way then they've not got any help coming."

"So why are they here?" Thundercloud asked, "Phi-Two Pavonis is more than thirty light years away from here and that's the only other place we've encountered the Ticik."

"At the moment I'm guessing that they're here for the same reason we are; to find out why Sissusk colonies are disappearing. They've probably noticed the sudden lack of opposition in their war and come to find out what's caused it." Reeves said, "For now we're just doing our best to scan their ships without making it obvious that we are and waiting to see if they do suddenly decide to make contact."

Just then the intercom sounded and Reeves picked up the handset.

"Captain, it's Bernard." Commander Bernard's voice said.

"Commander, has the robot Major Willis sent you reached you yet?" Reeves asked.

"Yes sir. It got here about five minutes ago. I've checked its memory files from the encounter on the surface and run them against the Sissusk language database, what the robot said checks out. There was definitely no error in the translation. Something must have been wrong with the way the message was delivered."

"Very well. I'll let the major know." Reeves replied and he put the intercom down before getting to his feet,

"That was Commander Bernard." he said, "He says that the robot translated your message correctly so there must be something else at play."

"Maybe they'll only accept being addressed by a Sissusk." Willis said and Thundercloud nodded in agreement.

"They must have figured out that another species could find the planet and try to make contact with the Nortonus. They probably told them that we're all evil spirits or something."

"That's why we're going to give the Nortonus what they want." Reeves said, "A visit from one of their gods."

Standing outside the cell holding the Sissusk prisoner, Reeves explained what he wanted. All the Sissusk had to do was go down to the surface with a marine platoon and tell the Nortonus to trust them.

"The Nortonus are primitive and stupid. What do you think you can learn from them?" the robot said when the Sissusk responded.

"That doesn't matter." Reeves said, "What matters is that it is what I want you to do and you agreed to help us in exchange for us letting you go when this is all over." and the Sissusk hissed.

"Very well." the robot said as the Sissusk then spoke, "But if you learn nothing it is not my fault."

Reeves then looked at Willis.

"We have some sets of Sissusk armour in storage, right?" he asked and Willis nodded.

"Yeah, we brought some back from the planet we picked him up on." he said.

"Good." Reeves said, "Then we'll issue him with a set. Just in case the Nortonus turn out to be no more impressed with him that they were with either of you. Oh and while you're trying to make contact with the locals I want another platoon sending to check out the mining camps. From what we've seen from orbit it

looks like they've been destroyed but there could be some evidence left there still.”

Two dropships sped from the *Warspite's* hangar and looped towards the planet below. Normally deployed from a lower orbit, the two small craft coasted for much of the way between the cruiser and the upper atmosphere before levelling out for entry into it. Both dropships contained a platoon of marines but while the craft destined for the Nortonus city also held Major Willis, Doctor Thundercloud and the captive Sissusk the second one held only the marines from the platoon to investigate what remained of one of the mining camps. “Someone's bouncing an active lidar pulse off us.” the pilot of the dropship heading for the city told his passengers.

“One of our cruisers?” Thundercloud asked.

“I don't think so. The frequency is wrong.” the pilot replied.

“Well unless someone down there has suddenly activated a surface to space array that leaves only the Ticik.” Willis said, “Let the *Warspite* know just in case they haven't seen it. If the Ticik do decide to fire on us then they ought to be able to shoot down a missile before it reaches us.”

“Confirmed major.” the pilot said and then Willis heard the sound of him communicating with the *Warspite*. No missiles were launched by the Ticik and though they continued to track the dropships as they headed towards the planet the nature of the lidar pulses did not suggest that they had locked onto them with their weapon systems. Unmolested, the two dropships entered the planet's atmosphere together before splitting apart to head for their respective destinations. Unlike on their first visit the dropship carrying Willis' platoon made no attempt to hide its approach by coming in over the ocean. Instead it flew right over the Nortonus city, alerting all of its inhabitants to the return of the marines before setting down just beyond the city limits. This caused a crowd of Nortonus to gather, made up mainly of spear and bow armed warriors but with numerous others mixed in with them. As Willis studied the crowd he was also relieved to see a handful of Nortonus wearing translation devices.

“Okay this is it.” he said to the Sissusk, “You tell them to trust us and we should be able to take it from there.” then as one of the robots accompanying them translated his words he added, “Oh and don't get any ideas about trying to escape by using them to attack us. We've more than enough firepower to come and get you back.” and in response to this the Sissusk let out a hiss.

“What if you are wrong and they attack me?” the robot translated.

“Then the doc here gets to put his studies of your anatomy into practice.” Willis replied, glancing at Thundercloud, “Now go. Your disciples await.”

The Sissusk led the way out of the dropship and the gathering crowd of Nortonus suddenly came to a complete halt. The air was then filled with a drumming sound as every member of the crowd began to tap at their bodies.

“This is new.” Thundercloud said as he and Willis followed the Sissusk while the marine platoon formed up behind them.

“Let's hope they aren't calling for anyone to be burned to death as a heretic.” Willis replied.

It was then that three of the Nortonus, all wearing Sissusk translation devices advanced out of the crowd before coming to a halt in front of the Sissusk. Then one raised several limbs into the air and the crowd went silent before the single Nortonus began to tap at its body and the hissing and barking sound of the Sissusk language came out of the translation device.

“Welcome oh great one. We prayed for you to return since the others were taken from us. We tried to stand with them but could do nothing. Forgive us for our failure.” the robot said as it in turn translated this into English.

The Sissusk glanced around at the human marines behind him before turning back to the Nortonus and he began to speak.

“I came looking for answers as to why those of us here stopped signalling us.” he said, his words translated both by the robot for the humans and for the Nortonus he was addressing by the devices they wore, “I have used these lowly subjects to bring me here.”

“Lowly servants?” Thundercloud commented, looking at Willis.

“As long as they aren't trying to put spears through our heads just let it pass.” Willis replied.

“There are questions to be answered.” the robot continued as the Sissusk spoke further, “My subjects will ask these and you must answer. They are not to be harmed.”

This seemed to agitate portions of the crowd, either what they had been told violated some tenet of the belief system that the Sissusk had built up around themselves or they were concerned about the fact that they had attacked the humans on their previous visit.

“Let's see if it's worked shall we?” Willis said to Thundercloud and then began to walk forwards, “Come on tin man, I'm going to need your help.” he added, glancing at the robot and it followed after him. Standing beside the Sissusk he looked at the nearest Nortonus and began to speak, “We need to find out what happened here.” he said, “Take us into your city and show us.” the robot standing behind Willis translated all of this and the Nortonus wearing translators waved some of their limbs at the crowd, causing a gap to open up that led

back towards the city. At which point Willis turned back towards Thundercloud, "Looks like we've been invited in." he said.

"Go ahead lieutenant." Knight said when the commanding officer of the platoon sent to investigate one of the mining camps made contact. With Reeves off the bridge speaking to Bernard about the data coming in from the robots sent to investigate the ring, Knight had been left in command of the *Warspite*.

"This place is a wreck commander." he said, "There's smashed equipment all over the place and signs that more has been removed."

"What about the inhabitants?" Knight asked.

"None living commander. There are a few bodies though. Looks like they died from gunshot wounds mainly. There is one interesting thing though, we're just hooking up a camera so we can show you. Should be ready any second."

The voice transmission was then replaced by a video signal from one of the body cameras worn by the marines and Knight got to see for himself the destruction wrought at the mining camp. Most of the structures had been levelled and just as the platoon commander had told him all of the remaining machinery was smashed. But the main subject of the footage was the body of a single Nortonus. The alien's torso was upright with a number of its eye stalks stretched above it where they had been nailed to a crude wooden frame. Meanwhile its limbs had been spread out around where it stood and staked out to the ground using metal spikes. In several places its torso had been pierced and a brown oily fluid was leaking out of the wounds.

"That's sick." Thomas said when he saw the image on the bridge's main screen.

"I'm guessing that's some poor individual who decided to see for himself what was in one of the forbidden areas and got caught." Lucas added.

"Get that off there." Knight told Goldman before responding to the marine officer on the surface, "Cut it down." he said, "Bag it and bring it back up here for Doctor Thundercloud to take a look at. Make sure to follow quarantine protocols though, we don't know what the biology of this species is like."

"Understood *Warspite*. We'll have it ready in about half an hour." the marine replied.

Knight then noticed several of the sensor operators on the right of the bridge conversing and peering at one another's consoles.

"Is there a problem over there?" he asked.

"No commander." Cortez answered, "Err, maybe." and Goldman looked at her.

"Well what is it? Yes or no?" she said.

"It's probably nothing." Cortez answered, "But we're getting an intermittent signal from further out in the system. The secondary gas giant has a moon with a magnetosphere and it looks like there's a metallic mass interfering with it. It could just be an asteroid caught in its gravitational field."

"But it could also be a ship." Knight said.

"More Ticik? Or Sissusk come to find out what happened to their colony?" Goldman suggested.

"How big are we talking about?" Knight asked.

"It's hard to tell." Cortez replied, "We can't see the object itself from this angle, it looks like it's just over the horizon. But if it's in a low orbit, say one to two hundred kilometres then it's not very big. Maybe a couple of hundred metres long at most. But if it's further out, maybe ten kilometres or more then it could be the size of a battleship."

"A Ticik dreadnought?" Ash suggested, "Back up for the squadron they've got us focused on here?"

"Possibly." Knight said, "But if it is then it came out of FTL somewhere we couldn't see it."

"The other side of the gas giant maybe?" Goldman said.

"It's as good an explanation as any." Knight responded, "Keep monitoring the trace but use passive sensors only. If it is a ship then it's probably a good idea to keep them ignorant of the fact we've seen them.

Commander Goldman, let the Bayonet and Ceres know what we've got and see if they can see it too. But make sure they know not to try any active scans until the captain says it's okay."

Many of the buildings in the Nortonus city showed signs of damage. Most of this was obviously from small arms fire but there were some that had been struck by heavier weapons. As the platoon advanced through its streets, led by the Nortonus wearing translators more of the natives gathered to see them and the air was filled with the tapping sounds they made as they spoke to one another. All of a sudden the streets gave way to an area of open ground where Nortonus warriors stood guard while a handful of others slowly made their way across the ground apparently picking plants out of the ground. Like many of the city's structures this area had been damaged and Willis saw a familiar looking footprint in the churned up ground, identical to the tracks found near the Sissusk headquarters in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66' 3431 system. "Looks like some of their crops were valuable enough to be worth keeping inside the city and guarding." he whispered to Thundercloud.

"Yes, but why?" the doctor replied and he paused to crouch down and inspect the ground where it had been

churned up. There he saw part of a husk that had been split open and inside was an almond shaped object with roots at one end that appeared to extend through the outer husk and he stood up suddenly.

"Something wrong doc?" Willis asked.

"I know why they were moving slower at night." Thundercloud said.

"You mean the sentries? Why?" Willis replied.

"This isn't a crop." Thundercloud said, "At least not like the ones outside the city. It's a nursery."

Willis looked around at the nearby Nortonus, "You mean they're plants?" he whispered.

"Maybe something like that. It's hard to say just by looking. But the way that they seem to be hatched out from buried eggs that have root systems makes it look that way. If they do use a form of photosynthesis to at least partially feed themselves then it stands to reason that they'd be slower at night. I'd need to do a proper autopsy or at least gather some tissue samples to be certain though I doubt asking for them would go down too well."

"Maybe there'll be some answers where we're going." Willis said, "Look, we're coming up on that tower."

Sure enough the Sissusk tower at the centre of the city was now just a few hundred metres ahead of the landing party and they could see where the surrounding buildings had been demolished to provide material for the defensive perimeter and one of the Nortonus guiding them towards the structure started to speak.

"We continued to guard your temple after the others were taken." the robot translated from the Sissusk speech produced by the Nortonus' own translator and then the Sissusk hissed in his own language.

"Taken by what?" the robot translated.

"Good question." Willis commented and Thundercloud nodded.

"Metal gods that came from the sky." the Nortonus answered and the robot translated, "They arrived at night and we welcomed them at first. But they killed any who stood in their way and came to the temple. The gods here fought back with thunder but were defeated. The metal gods took them away."

"Metal gods?" Thundercloud said, "I don't like the sound of that."

Crossing the defensive perimeter set up around the tower, the landing party saw that the entrance had been blown open and there were Nortonus standing guard outside.

"We have not entered the temple." the robot said as one of the Nortonus spoke, "It is still pure."

"That's good." Willis commented, "That means there may still be evidence inside. We should go in."

The Nortonus did not move as the marines entered the tower, instead just watching them from outside.

Obviously they considered the tower as forbidden ground. Inside there were more signs of fighting, with bullet holes in the walls.

"Okay I want one fire team guarding that door." Willis announced, "I doubt the locals will try to get inside but if they do then they need to be kept back. Keep a robot here to do any translating that's needed. Another team can keep an eye on our resident god here." and he pointed at the Sissusk, "Keep him out of sight of the natives and don't let him go wandering off anywhere. Everyone else let's start searching this place. Maybe there are more clues here than there were at the last place."

INTERLUDE

Sat in his office and surrounded by images of himself pictured with groups of influential people George Stein looked at the tablet Doctor Horst had handed him and scrolled down. He had little scientific knowledge, especially compared to Horst and so he headed straight to the summary section at the end she had included that laid out her proposal in more basic layman's terms.

"Are you serious?" he asked, lowering the tablet so that he could peer at her over the top of it and she smiled at him.

"Deadly serious." she told him, "The knowledge we could gain from this project is-

Just then there was a knock at the door. Stein was about to use his intercom to tell his secretary to have whoever it was to go away when the door opened anyway and a young woman strode in.

"You." Stein hissed, snarling as he recognised who it was, "I'm calling security."

"Oh security won't come. My grandfather's seen to that Mister Stein." the young woman replied as she walked up to him and snatched the tablet away from him. Then she began to scroll through it to examine the contents for herself and she nodded, "Very good doctor. I think you've put everything in here." she added before slamming the tablet down against the edge of Stein's desk hard enough that it smashed and Horst flinched. On the other hand Stein leapt to his feet.

"Now look here, I don't care who you are out there you don't get to come into my office and threaten me" he yelled.

"Threaten you? Oh no Mister Stein, you misunderstand me. Grandfather sent me here to protect you both."

"Protect us from who?" Horst asked, "Right now you're the one that I want protecting from."

"Doctor you wound me. Metaphorically of course. I know you don't have it in you to actually launch a physical attack and although Mister Stein does he'd be dead the moment he tried. No I'm here to protect the pair of you from the consequences of making public what should be kept secret. By order."

"Whose order?" Horst asked and the young girl reached into her jacket, causing both Stein and Horst to become tense as they feared she was reaching for a weapon. But instead she removed a sheet of folded paper that she handed to Stein.

"My grandfather had lunch with Secretary Leclair," she said as he began to read it, confirming that it was signed by one of the most senior members of the government, "and he was only too happy to issue this order classifying all knowledge of the capabilities of the ring station. You'll notice that he was very specific about the punishment for violating such an order. Oh the pair of you will still be able to work in the same buildings you do now if you choose to violate this but all you'll be doing is cleaning the floors." then she smiled, "Now that Mister Stein is a threat." and with that she turned around and left the office.

Walking straight through the reception area that was currently devoid of both Stein's secretary and security detail, she made her way into a corridor that was filled with people and took out her phone, selecting her grandfather's number from the contacts.

"Hello my dear." the old man said when he answered, "How did your meeting with Mister Stein go?"

"As well as can be expected." she replied, "I doubt either he or Doctor Horst will be a problem. They know how serious this is."

11.

Like the other senior offices aboard the *Warspite*, to save valuable space Commander Bernard had quarters that doubled as an office and it was here that he showed Captain Reeves what he had picked out as the more interesting parts of the footage transmitted by the robots deployed to the ring.

"Look at this part here captain." Bernard said, freezing the footage and pointing to a large and irregular hole in a wall, "This is a hull breach that connects two different vessels together and this part here?" and he moved his finger along a long cylinder that passed through the hole.

"Those rings around that pipe," Reeves said, "magnetic accelerator coils?" and Bernard nodded.

"I think so. What I think we're looking at here is the particle inductor that gives the ring the ability to propel ships faster than light. The makers of this ring aren't just using dozens of individual inductors, each one operating independently from one another. They've found a way to combine them all into one single machine."

Reeves frowned.

"Is that even possible?" he asked, "I thought that once all the focusing elements had been laid down the size and output of the inductor was fixed."

"Well Commander Knight's done far more work in this field than I have but as far as I know it is. Whether you're cutting a section off or adding some on it just doesn't work. In fact the effects can be disastrous, particle inductors being used to generate gravitons that are the incorrect length can go unstable and create a brief micro singularity that will rip the guts out of a ship. Others generate uncontrolled fusion reactions are like letting off a small nuke. All this is why even today there are only about twenty manufacturing plants in the entire Commonwealth that can make particle inductors. Even governments that would like to get that capability are wary of the risks of critical failure. Captain we should focus on trying to gain a better understanding of how this was achieved."

"Our time here is going to be limited." Reeves replied, "We're well inside Sissusk space and there aren't enough of us to hold back a determined assault by their forces. I want to be out of here within a couple of days if we can."

"That's more than enough captain. If I can have the robots make their way all around the ring then we'll have footage of it. Then if we can just cut some sections out where the inductors are joined together that could tell us how it was done. Combine that with as many computer drives as we can grab and we should be able to build up a full profile on the ring. I'd rather have the full thing to study, but if I can't--"

"Okay." Reeves interrupted, "You have my permission to steal whatever the robots can get their mechanical hands on. But I'm not staying in this system any longer than I have to. Now I better get back to the bridge. With all that's going on in this system I don't like being away too long. Who knows how much I'll miss?"

"All the computers have been disabled again." Willis commented as he and Doctor Thundercloud stood in a room that had once served as a central server system. Now all of the computer drives had been pulled free of their storage bays and lay scattered on the floor as if it had been done in a hurry.

"They really didn't want their computers working did they?" Thundercloud added.

"I doubt that they'd have suffered the same loss of command and control here without them given how few Sissusk troops were supposed to be present, but it would still have hurt them." Willis said.

Then he frowned.

"What's wrong?" Thundercloud asked.

"Unless their command and control was already compromised. Come on doc, what happens when you find a tumour in someone?"

"I cut it -" Thundercloud began before he suddenly stopped, "I cut it out." he said after a few moments, "Even if that requires cutting through healthy tissue to get to it. Do you think that someone was able to hack into the Sissusk command and control system?"

"If they could then they'd be able to overwhelm them pretty quickly." Willis answered and he looked down at the scattered drives, "If only we knew which ones would have the proof in."

"Perhaps we should ask Commander Bernard's opinion." Thundercloud suggested and Willis nodded as he activated his personal radio.

"Chebet, I need to get a message to the *Warspite*. Bring your radio up to the fourth floor. Doctor Thundercloud and I are just down the hall from the stairs."

"On my way major." Chebet replied and just over a minute later the marine bearing a long range transmitter on his back.

"Found anything worth noting?" Willis asked him.

"Not really sir. There are traces of blood but no bodies and the usual small arms damage that all seems to come from Sissusk weapons by the looks of the cases scattered everywhere." Chebet answered as he passed the handset for his radio to Willis.

"Willis to *Warspite*." Willis transmitted after taking the handset from the other marine.

"*Warspite* here major." a voice responded, "State your message."

"I need to speak to Commander Bernard. We've got Sissusk tech all over the place and aren't sure where to start with gathering evidence."

"Confirmed major. Putting you through now."

There then followed a brief pause before Bernard spoke.

"Bernard." he said simply.

"Commander it's Willis. Doctor Thundercloud and I are looking at what looks like a server room that someone's pulled all of the drives from. We're thinking that the Sissusk command and control system was corrupted somehow and when they found out they pulled the plug."

"Sounds reasonable." Bernard replied.

"So what we want to know is where we should start looking for proof of this. All the drives look the same."

"You could try looking for other electronic devices." Bernard suggested, "Have they been destroyed like they were in the headquarters at CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one?"

"Major I saw some intact terminals on the second floor." Chebet commented before Willis answered and Willis smiled.

"Looks like we could have something commander." he said, "I'll get back to you. Willis out." and then he gave the handset back to Chebet.

The marine radio operator led Willis and Thundercloud down two flights of stairs to a cluster of rooms laid out as offices.

"It's over here." he said, pointing towards another doorway where the door looked to have been removed by force, ripped out of its frame and tossed aside. Just beyond the ruined doorway was a small room filled with electronic equipment that unlike the rest in the tower was still intact.

"Is it just me, or does this look like a communications room to you?" Thundercloud asked as they entered the room. There were just two Sissusk style seats in the room and each console had several monitor screens above it. Additionally there were prominent microphones set into each one, but the most prominent feature of the room were the blood splatters all around it.

"We found that lying on the floor." Chebet said and he pointed to where a Sissusk rifle had been leant up against one of the consoles, its empty magazine removed and placed beside it to help show that it was safe.

"Last stand?" Thundercloud suggested and Willis nodded.

"Possibly calling for help that wasn't coming." he added and he approached the closest of the consoles, "This still has power." he said, smiling, "If it keeps recordings of recent messages then maybe the Sissusk recorded what was happening to them."

"Can you operate this equipment?" Thundercloud asked.

"No. But our prisoner might be able to." Willis said and he looked at Chebet, "Get that Sissusk in here. Bring a robot as well to do the translating."

When the Sissusk was escorted to the room by a pair of marines Willis pointed to one of the consoles.

"Can you get that to work?" he asked and the robot translated his words. In response the Sissusk hissed and barked before the robot spoke.

"Who do you think is listening?" the machine said.

"We just want to know if there are any old messages saved in it." Willis replied, "Incoming or outgoing."

The Sissusk moved forwards and squatted down on one of the long chairs, examining the console before turning his head back towards Willis and speaking in his own language.

"The memory is intact. The most recent transmission is available."

"Get him to play it back." Thundercloud said and the robot translated the order. Without saying a word the Sissusk then tapped at several buttons on the control panel in front of him before speakers set into the wall began to play back the most recent recording held inside the communications control panel.

"Emergency. Emergency." the robot said, now translating the words coming out of the speakers, "Task Force Asksak has been destroyed. Enemy forces now landing within the city. Computer network compromised. We have disabled it as ordered. Native forces unable to resist the enemy advance but are being ignored if they do not fight. Hostile units already inside our headquarters. Urgent evacuation required." it was at that point that the Sissusk voice coming out over the speakers was joined by a loud banging sound, "Help us." the robot continued, "We are trapped in the communication room. The enemy is outside the door we cannot."

The robot ended its sentence at that point as the Sissusk speech ended with the sound of tearing metal and both Willis and Thundercloud pictured the door being ripped open at this point before all of a sudden there was a roar of gunfire that made both men look at the nearby assault rifle. Although neither of them understood the Sissusk language, both officers knew that the next sound they heard was a scream and this was soon followed by another before the recording came to an abrupt end.

"That doesn't exactly tell us much." Willis said.

"It tells us that whoever did this came here specifically for the Sissusk." Thundercloud pointed out, "Didn't you notice the part where they said that the natives were being ignored? Also we know that they were ordered to

disable their computer system.”

“Yes, but we still don't know who was responsible for all this. Obviously if orders are being given to trash computer networks then someone high up in their Empire knew what was going on but we still don't.” Willis said. Then he looked around and added, “We better get this stuff back up to the *Warspite*. Maybe Commander Bernard and his people can get more out of it.”

“Two contacts captain.” Cortez announced when the *Warspite's* tachyon detectors picked up two more vessels dropping to sub light speeds.

“It's the *Valley of Thorns* and the *Orinoco*.” Goldman added.

“Will their approach vector give them a good look at that magnetic anomaly?” Knight asked.

“No commander.” Goldman answered, “The moon's in eclipse behind the gas giant from their current position and by the time they've got a clear view they aren't going to be able to see any more than we already can. I could have them divert though.”

“No.” Reeves said, “I don't want them to do anything that could draw attention to the fact that we know something's hiding behind that moon. Have them come towards us but hold position at a hundred million kilometres. If they don't already know about them, warn them about the Ticik and tell them we suspect another ship hiding behind that moon.”

“Hoping to use them as a deterrent?” Knight asked and Reeves nodded.

“If the Ticik aren't responsible for the magnetic disturbance then having our ships hold further out won't make us look like we're massing a large force to attack them with. On the other hand, if there is another Ticik ship hiding just out of sight then the *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco* may just look like a blocking force that consists of another cruiser and a battleship or similar larger capital ship.” Reeves explained. Then he glanced at Goldman, “How long do you estimate it will take the *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco* to reach their destination?” he asked.

“If they split up the *Orinoco* could be on station in about eight hours. But the *Valley of Thorns* will take at least two days if they don't exceed one gee of thrust.”

“That'll do. Have them stick together. Hopefully bringing them in nice and slow will keep the Ticik at ease.” Reeves said.

“Captain!” one of the sensor operators called out suddenly, “The ring! It's exploded.”

“Show me.” Reeves said and he looked at his monitor as the sensor operator sent him the footage of the exploding ring. From this distance it appeared just as a small bright and temporary dot against the star field, but it was enough to tell Reeves that the ring had indeed just been destroyed.

“Were there any indications beforehand?” Knight asked after he too watched the footage of the explosion.

“No signs of a missile launch or projectile from any of the Ticik ships.” Lucas said.

“We got elevated thermal readings about twenty seconds before it blew.” Cortez added and Reeves nodded as he activated his intercom.

“Commander Bernard, have you been monitoring the ring?”

“No captain.” Bernard replied, “The robots sent back their survey of the particle inductor about six hours ago and I gave them the order to start removing key components.” Bernard replied.

“The ring was about three light hours out.” Knight pointed out when he heard this, “Three hours for the order to get to the robots and three more for the image to reach us.”

“Hang on, what do you mean 'was'?” Bernard asked when he overheard Knight's comment.

“Commander, we've just received footage of the ring exploding.” Reeves said, “It looks like it self destructed when the robots attempted to interfere with it.”

“Damn.” Bernard said and he sighed, “Looks like I owe you my life captain. If it had been up to me I'd have been on that thing myself to take bits from it.”

“You can repay me later commander. In the meantime I think that Major Willis is bringing back some equipment from the surface for you to take a look at.” Reeves replied.

Doctor Thundercloud winced when he looked under the sheet covering the corpse of the Nortonus that the marines had found at the mining camp. The number of wounds inflicted on the alien suggested that it had taken a long time to die and he could only guess at how much it had suffered from this brutality. That the Sissusk who had most likely been responsible would have likely been killed or captured by whatever force was currently in the process of overrunning the Sissusk Empire did not do anything to cool his blood.

“Have I caught you at a bad time doctor?” a woman's voice said and Thundercloud looked up to see Goldman standing in the door to the surgery that the body had been placed in by the marines.

“No, I assume you're here for your check up?” he replied as he lowered the sheet again to cover the Nortonus.

“Every day as ordered. I thought I'd come along now my shift's over.” Goldman said as she came closer.

“Well perhaps I should do it further away from this. Just in case there is anything in the body that could affect you or the baby.” Thundercloud said and he exited the surgery, closing the door behind him and making sure

that it was properly sealed. Then while Goldman sat on a nearby bed he went to sterilise his hands before examining her, "So how are you feeling lieutenant commander?" he asked as he pressed a stethoscope to her back and then added, "Deep breaths."

"Okay all things considered." she said, "Though I am eating a lot of ration bars."

"Let me guess, the only thing you can keep down?" Thundercloud asked and Goldman nodded.

"A pity they taste so bad." she said, "But everything else makes me sick."

"Well hopefully this won't be for much longer." Thundercloud said, "We know why the Sissusk weren't responding to our attempts at communication and hopefully what we brought back from the surface will be enough to solve the mystery of what is going on. Then we can go back home. Just think, you could be vomiting in your own bathroom in just over a week."

"What about you doctor?" Goldman asked and she looked towards the sealed surgery where a transparent wall still allowed her to see the covered alien corpse, "Going be writing another paper on a newly encountered alien species. That makes two for you doesn't it?"

"Yes I suppose it does." Thundercloud replied as he switched to checking Goldman's blood pressure by pressing a probe against her neck.

"Oh that's cold." she said.

"Hold still." Thundercloud replied.

"So what do you think the Commonwealth will do about the Nortonus?" Goldman said, "It seems cruel to just leave them thinking the Sissusk are gods."

"Well there's not much else we can do." Thundercloud said, "We don't know enough about their culture to know how to change it before we leave and we're too far from Commonwealth territory for sending another mission to be easy. Hopefully whoever it was that's been attacking these Sissusk worlds will solve the problem for us."

"What makes you think they would?" Goldman said as Thundercloud shone a light into her eyes and she flinched.

"Well according to the last transmission that the Sissusk sent whoever attacked the city didn't bother with any of the natives unless they tried to get in their way. Mind you whoever attacked also didn't care about trampling unborn Nortonus to death."

"A pity the natives couldn't tell you who they were." Goldman said, "I suppose when they've been taught to see their occupiers as gods and the Sissusk have kept knowledge of the rest of the galaxy from them it must be pretty confusing to suddenly see more alien invaders."

"Metal gods they called them." Thundercloud said, now putting his instruments away, "Well you're fine so-" he began before he abruptly stopped talking.

"What's wrong doctor?" Goldman asked.

"Metal gods." Thundercloud said again, "The Nortonus called the invaders metal gods. I think I know what they are." and then he ran to the closest intercom and picked it up, "Bridge this is the infirmary. Is Captain Reeves there?"

"No, the captain's turned in for the night." Thomas' voice replied.

"Okay, I'll try his quarters." Thundercloud said and then he tried connecting to the captain's quarters. Initially there was no response but Thundercloud let the intercom continue to sound.

"This had better be good." Reeves' voice said when he eventually answered.

"Captain it's Doctor Thundercloud, I have a theory about who, or rather what is attacking the Sissusk. Can you meet me in the main briefing room with Commander Knight, Lieutenant Lucas, Commander Bernard, Major Willis and Mister Multan in ten minutes?"

"Sure why not. But this had better be good." Reeves replied and then he hung up.

"Mind letting me in on the big secret doc?" Goldman asked.

"Sure, come along to the briefing. If nothing else you'll be able to act as a witness when the captain has me shot for waking him up in the middle of the night."

Willis was the last to arrive in the briefing room and he found the other gathered officers sat waiting while Thundercloud stood at the podium accessing the *Warspite's* computer network as he searched for the information he wanted.

"Ah major, just in time." Thundercloud said, "Now let me see where was I? Oh yes, here we go." and on the main screen behind the podium he showed an image of an imprint in the ground, "This footprint was found in the CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one system." he said.

"Yeah and it's not Sissusk." Willis said, "We know this."

"Exactly, it belongs to one of the colony's attackers. In fact it's the only physical evidence we thought they'd left behind. In fact they'd left a lot more."

"I was there as well doctor. All the equipment we found was made by the Sissusk." Knight pointed out.

"Yes, I think the attacking force was as well." Thundercloud said, "Made by the Sissusk that is. I think they were robots."

"Doctor Thundercloud," Multan said, "the Sissusk have only very limited robotics technology. Less even than we Fedrun had before we encountered them."

"Yes I know that. But consider this, every piece of debris we've found in this system and CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one was built by the Sissusk. Even those rings were made from Sissusk ships attached together." Thundercloud replied, "The Nortonus described the force that invaded their city as metal gods. They see the Sissusk as gods and have next to no understanding of technology so to them a robotic version of a Sissusk would literally be a metal god. We've all heard how the Sissusk are losing their war with the Ticik and now they've lost thousands of troops and several capital ships to us I think they're getting desperate. Somehow they've got hold of some knowledge of robotics and how to make FTL travel faster and tried to make it work for them. But it's blown up in their faces and now they're having to deal with a robotic rebellion."

"The structure of some of the Sissusk warships we've seen recently does suggest they were built to be unmanned." Bernard commented.

"Can intelligence offer us any insight lieutenant?" Reeves asked, looking at Lucas. But she shrugged in response.

"We know nothing about the state of their research and development." she said.

"Captain if the Sissusk were working on such a project then they have hidden it from their slaves." Multan said, "I and my family were in contact with slaves across much of the empire and I have never heard any word of it."

"If the Sissusk did have this technology then would we have to go to confirm it?" Reeves asked, looking at Multan.

"The Sissusk could have hidden secret research or industrial facilities in many places. There are numerous systems they have ignored because of the lack of suitable planets for colonies." Multan explained, "But I would expect everything they know to be available on their home world of Sissar."

"It's in the Epsilon Pavonis system." Lucas added, "We pulled navigational information on it from the computer of the light cruiser we boarded in Phi-Two Pavonis."

"Isn't their home world likely to be heavily defended?" Goldman said, "I mean the defences in Sol are massive."

"Yes but a lot of the military forces in Sol are intended to defend against the other military forces in Sol." Lucas pointed out, "We may not have fought a large scale war on earth in centuries but the planning is still there. The Sissusk don't have different sovereign nations with varying political ideologies. They're united under one banner."

"The heart of their empire is still well defended." Multan responded, "The Emperor may not fear attack by rival nations but the possibility of a political rival attempting to overthrow him has not been discounted. Plus there is the possibility, however remote that the Ticik could attempt to launch a strike at his capital. There are hundreds of ships and more than a million troops led by his most loyal war leaders in the system."

"And I've got three cruisers." Reeves commented, "Obviously just dropping out of FTL in orbit around their home world isn't on the cards."

"I'm guessing that we can't try using other planets in the system as a shield?" Thundercloud asked.

"Sissar's sun is very hot doctor." Multan said, "Sissar itself is the outermost of the rocky planets. There are just two other worlds further out and the distance between them is likely to be great. Plus the subsystem of moons around each of these is settled and monitored."

"I need to speak with our guest down in the brig." Reeves said, "If he's managed to avoid being arrested then he must know how to avoid detection. Hopefully his knowledge will extend to his home system. If not then we'll drop out of FTL on the very edge of the system and hope we aren't noticed. We'll make passive scans and see what's going on. Hopefully we'll be able to pick up enough radio chatter to determine what's happening. Then we can head back home without any further ado."

"So we are going deeper into Sissusk space then?" Goldman asked.

"Yes, I want to get to the bottom of this before whatever's attacking the Sissusk decides it's going to attack us next." Reeves answered, "Is that going to present you with a problem commander?"

"The doctor says I'm fine." Goldman replied.

"Perfectly fit for duty." Thundercloud added.

"Good. In that case everyone get some sleep. I'll talk to the prisoner tomorrow and get Thomas to plot us a course."

Reeves was unwilling to bring the Sissusk prisoner to the bridge of the *Warspite* so instead he had it escorted to the briefing room where he was waiting with Thomas, Lucas, Willis and Multan. As a matter of security Willis had insisted that all of the officers present should wear sidearms rather than just the marine guards who brought the prisoner from the brig being armed. The Sissusk had powerful jaws, claws and a tail and legs that could deliver powerful blows and the marine did not want to risk the *Warspite's* captain any more than necessary. However, when brought into the room the Sissusk seemed more offended by the presence of Multan, hissing loudly.

"What is that doing here?" the robot that had also accompanied the Sissusk prisoner from the brig said. "Multan has been advising us on your empire." Reeves replied, "Now we want information from you." "The Fedrun are liars." the robot said as the Sissusk spoke again but Reeves ignored it. "Here is a map representing your home system." he said, pointing to the display screen, "We need to enter it without being shot down. Tell us how." "There is no way." the robot said, translating for the Sissusk. "If you don't tell us then we'll have to examine the navigational system of your ship." Reeves said, "Of course that runs the risk of damaging it but I'm sure that you'll be able to get it fixed easily enough in your own capital." The Sissusk growled but the robot remained silent, suggesting that it was not considered speech. "Of course we may not be able to return his ship if we get shot down." Willis commented. "That's true." Reeves added and the robot translated for them both. "Your eggs were addled." the robot then said as the Sissusk responded. "He's already told me that." Willis commented. "The fleet patrols all parts of space around Sissar." the robot continued. "So tell us how you find the gaps in the patrol schedule." Reeves said. "There is a signal." the robot translated, "A source on one of the moons of Sakkas transmits the positions of patrols. We wait until we hear this and then move through the gaps." Reeves looked at Thomas. "Okay we'll come out of FTL about twelve light hours from Epsilon Pavonis itself. Plot us a course and distribute it to the rest of the squadron. We'll keep our speed low enough that we can all reach Epsilon Pavonis together this time. If we are forced to withdraw then I don't want the *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco* blundering into an ambush." Reeves said. "Yes captain." the navigator replied. "Lieutenant Lucas it seems you're going to have your work cut out for you." Reeves added, "If we're going to be listening for a signal that would tell us how to avoid Sissusk patrols then we may as well be monitoring all the transmissions in the system." "Yes captain. I can set out a list of keywords to check intercepted transmissions against." she replied. "How long will that take?" Reeves asked. "I can have it done today." Lucas told him and Reeves nodded, knowing that it would take a number of days for the *Warspite* and its squadron to reach its destination. "Very good." he said, "Get right on it." It was then that the Sissusk spoke again and the robot translated his words. "When will I get my ship back?" it said. "When we are finished at your home system." Reeves replied, "We'll release you and your ship a day's travel away from the system but with its long range communications disabled to stop you telling anyone about us." before he looked at the marine guards, "Remove the prisoner." he said. After this he turned to Lucas again, "Lieutenant there's actually something else I want you to take care of. You'll need to liaise with Lieutenant Commander Goldman for it."

Just as the squadron of Commonwealth cruisers was moving out of high orbit to rendezvous with the two support ships the *Warspite* released a messenger drone from the hangar module fitted under its starboard side. This was loaded with a full status report that detailed everything the ship's crew had found in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -75' 1368 system as well as informing the Commonwealth what Captain Reeves had decided to do next. While the five manned starships accelerated in the direction they needed to travel to reach the Sissusk home system of Epsilon Pavonis, their acceleration limited by the force that the crew of the *Valley of Thorns* could tolerate without an artificial gravity field the drone instead accelerated towards Gamma Pavonis, heading back to Commonwealth space with the valuable information it held. But even as the Commonwealth ships engaged their faster than light drives, rapidly pushing them through the light barrier off into the vast emptiness of interstellar space a second messenger drone remained in orbit around the home world or the Nortonus. Released unpowered by the *Warspite* at the same time as the first drone, this one had had its programming modified to cause it to wait in place, monitoring the moon where the magnetic disturbance had been noticed with its passive tachyon detector. The sensor aboard the drone was limited in its scope, just enough to allow it to navigate at faster than light speeds while avoiding other craft operating at such speed. However, its sensors were good enough to detect the two tachyon surges that came from the moon a few minutes after the Commonwealth vessels had left the system. The first of these was small and followed a vector that would take it neither directly back to Commonwealth space nor deeper into Sissusk territory. This was followed less a minute later when the drone detected a larger surge that seemed to follow the Commonwealth ships. Only when this was over and the ship that had created it was gone did the drone become fully operational. Its navigation system told it to follow the *Warspite* to the Sissusk home system and also to keep its speed to that achievable by the slowest ship in the squadron and

keeping within these conditions the drone engaged its own faster than light drive and accelerated away.

INTERLUDE

Hayes found Vale waiting for her in the reception area near her office when she arrived at work for the day. "Enrico." she said, "I take it you've news for me?" and he nodded as he got to his feet.

"A signal just reached us via the relay station at-" he began.

"Not out here." Hayes interrupted and she glanced at the young man sat behind the reception desk, "Not everyone needs to know." and she headed for her office, Vale following her. Once inside Hayes closed the door and sat down. Then while her computer was starting up she looked at Vale from behind her desk, "So what does Martins have to say for himself?" she asked.

"The Sissusk are gone from Cape Photographic Durchmusterung seventy-five thirteen sixty-eight as well." Vale said, "Plus the Ticik are taking notice. A squadron of their ships entered the system shortly after the *Warspite* and the other two Commonwealth cruisers got there."

"Did they attack?" Hayes asked expectantly.

"No." Vale answered and Hayes' face fell.

"The Ticik always attack." she said.

"According to the *Grey Dawn's* readings the Commonwealth ships had the advantage. Three cruisers against a light cruiser, two destroyers and a frigate. The Ticik adopted a defensive posture but took no action after the Commonwealth attempted to establish communications. It was quite ingenious really, They sent the same message in different-"

"They could have used smoke signals for all I care!" Hayes snapped, "This was another opportunity to get the Commonwealth and the Ticik shooting at one another and nothing happened."

"There's also the fact that this system wasn't contested by the Ticik." Vale continued, "Every time we've seen them in action before now they've either been reacting to an intrusion into their space or attacking the Sissusk. They still didn't actually respond to the communication. A shame really, it would have been-"

"Okay so neither of us got what we wanted out of the meeting." Hayes said, "Just tell me what did happen Enrico, not what you wish happened."

"The *Warspite* sent a landing party to the surface. Martins intercepted some of their communications. It seems that while the Sissusk are gone the Nortonus are still there and the marines were able to make contact. They searched a Sissusk facility and removed some of the contents."

"I don't suppose anyone mentioned why the Sissusk are suddenly disappearing did they?"

"No. But there was another ring structure in the system. The *Warspite* sent a shuttle to investigate but whatever happened while they were aboard triggered its self destruct system." Vale said and Hayes smiled.

"So a team of highly trained Commonwealth engineers managed to get themselves blown up poking around at something they didn't understand." she said, "What did they do after that?"

"They still aren't heading back to Commonwealth space." Vale told her, "In fact Martins' navigator has calculated that they set a course for Epsilon Pavonis itself."

"They're heading for the Sissusk home world? Are they crazy?" Hayes exclaimed, "What's Martins doing?"

"Following them. Those were your orders." Vale replied and Hayes put her head in her hands.

"That idiot. Now he's going to get his ship shot down by the Sissusk home fleet and I'm going to have to answer for it. How soon can we get a drone out there to call him back?"

"Not fast enough." Vale said, "The *Grey Dawn* and the Commonwealth ships will probably arrive before we can even get one prepared and launched."

"So basically our fates are in the hands of how incompetent the Sissusk fleet is." Hayes said.

The Commonwealth ships dropped to sub light speed far beyond what would normally be considered the edge of the Epsilon Pavonis system. The hope was that by coming out of faster than light speeds all the way out here the wave of dispersing tachyons would be too weak to attract any attention from the potentially hundreds of Sissusk ships protecting their home world.

"We're right where we should be captain." Thomas announced as he checked their position in relation to Epsilon Pavonis, "Twelve point one light hours out."

"Congratulations Lieutenant Commander Ash." Reeves said, smiling at the news.

"Just doing my job captain." the helmsman replied, though he too smiled.

Now that they were moving at a low sub light speed the five ships all began to search the system with their passive sensors, looking not only for the tachyon signals that would give away the positions of any faster than light equipment in the system but also sweeping through the entire electromagnetic spectrum. Though this information would be several hours old by the time it reached the Commonwealth ships it could prove invaluable in determining the extent of Sissusk operations in Epsilon Pavonis.

"Captain I've got a fix on the Sissusk home world." Cortez announced and she highlighted a rocky planet that was about the same distance from the star Epsilon Pavonis as Mars was from Sol. But whereas Mars was a cold and barren planet where the inhabitants lived underground or in orbital structures the vastly greater amount of energy emitted by Epsilon Pavonis made the Sissusk home world much hotter than Earth and there were no ice covered poles.

"Energy signals?" Knight asked as he looked at an image of the planet on his monitor.

"Extensive." Goldman replied.

"I'm reading a lot of active search radars." Lucas added, "Lidar too. There are definitely Sissusk ships active in the system."

"Any signs of any of them heading towards us?" Reeves said and he glanced at Goldman.

"None yet captain. If anyone did see us arrive then they're being slow to show it." she told him.

"Captain I may have something strange." Cortez said, looking up from her console.

"What is it petty officer?" Reeves asked.

"I'm picking up a network of tachyon communication satellites around Epsilon Pavonis but they appear to be inactive. No-one's talking to anybody beyond the system." she told him.

"That's impossible." Knight said, "In a system as well developed as this one is supposed to be would have somebody talking to somebody else. How would they maintain control over the rest of their empire?"

"The satellites were missing entirely from the other Sissusk systems we visited." Lucas pointed out, "Perhaps there is no rest of the empire any more."

"Are you suggesting that the entire Sissusk Empire has already fallen lieutenant?" Knight responded, "That would require-" but before he could finish one of the communication technicians spoke up.

"Captain I have Captain Bertarelli of the *Ceres* for you. He says it's urgent."

"Put him through." Reeves said.

"Captain Reeves." Bertarelli's voice said as soon as the channel was opened, "Are you seeing the ring?"

"Ring? No, we've been focusing on the Sissusk home world and the system's sun." Reeves replied.

"I've got it captain." Cortez announced and then she frowned, "Or I think I have." and she placed an image of another of the strange ring structures on the bridge's main display. Or at least an image of what existed of the ring in the Epsilon Pavonis system.

The ring here was only partially complete, being just over half complete. There were several other sensor contacts close by the incomplete ring but at the extreme range that the Commonwealth ships were located at from the ring it was not possible to get an accurate picture of what was happening.

"Looks like we've caught them before they had chance to finish this one." Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Make sure we get everything we can." the captain said, "Commander Bernard is going to love this." then he returned to the communication link with the *Ceres*, "Captain Bertarelli, keep scanning the system with passive sensors only. I want to know where every outpost and vessel is before I decide whether we chance getting closer or going to active sensors."

"Yes captain. *Ceres* out." Bertarelli responded before the link was cut off.

"Captain these readings don't add up." Lucas said and Reeves looked at her.

"How so lieutenant?" he asked.

"Well this is the Sissusk's home system right? And they're supposed to have outposts all throughout it." Lucas said.

"That is correct captain." Multan said from behind Reeves, "Even before they overthrew our rule, there were bases on most of the planets and moons in the system. Since then the Sissusk moved to reinforce their control. They see it as a barrier against exactly what you are trying to do now."

"So where have they gone?" Lucas asked rhetorically.

"She's right captain." Goldman agreed, "Looking at these readings there just aren't the energy emissions we'd expect from inhabited planetary bodies on more than a few of the larger ones."

"Whatever's going on in the Sissusk Empire, I think it's fair to say that we've just walked right into the middle of it." Knight commented.

"We're picking up active sensor emissions," Reeves said, "what about communications?"

"I've got Sissusk style comms coming from several major planetary bodies." Lucas replied, "But again, not at the same level as we ought to be seeing for a system like this. If we were in Sol then pretty much every channel would have something on. Here it's concentrated in a narrow bandwidth as if it's just one conversation that everyone's in on."

"Tachyon burst to stern captain." a sensor operator announced and Goldman checked her panel.

"I've got friendly IFF." she said, "It's the drone from CPD seventy-five thirteen sixty-eight."

"And?" Reeves asked and Goldman smiled.

"A ship left the orbit of the moon just after we left the system. According to these readings there were two departures. The first looks like a drone though I can't tell where it's heading for and the second is a ship. Much smaller than us though. A corvette or similar sized vessel." Goldman told him.

"Do we have a heading for the ship?" Reeves said.

"Yes captain. It followed us."

"A Sissusk patrol ship?" Knight suggested.

"Possibly. Though why would they send off a drone?" Reeves replied, "No, I think we've attracted some all together different attention and I don't like it. Alert all ships in the squadron, I want every sensor we have searching for that ship. We're out in the open here so it shouldn't have anywhere to hide if it comes anywhere near us. Any sensor reading, no matter how small is to be reported."

"Captain we've got company." Cortez said suddenly.

"Our mystery ship already?" Thomas asked.

"No, it's coming from in system." Cortez replied, "On an oblique heading, range sixteen million kilometres and travelling on a ballistic course. No sign of drive burn."

"That's close enough for them to have seen us by now." Knight added, glancing at Reeves.

"That's not much of a signal." Goldman commented as she checked Cortez's readings.

"It's definitely a metallic mass." another of the sensor operators said, "But emissions are minimal."

"They're running silent." Ash said.

"In their own system?" Thomas responded.

"Maybe it's not a Sissusk ship." Ash said.

"Lieutenant?" Knight said, looking at Lucas.

"I'm running it through our database now commander." she replied, "But at this range and on passive sensors only there's not much to go on. I've got a length of just over a thousand metres though and the general hull configuration does appear to be Sissusk in design."

"Petty officer Cortez you may engage active sensors." Reeves said, "Radar and lidar, one pulse from each. Let's see if we can get a better look at this thing."

"Aye captain. Emitting single pulse now." Cortez said as she triggered the *Warspite's* light speed active sensors, focusing the direction of the pulse towards the approaching vessel.

With more than thirty million kilometres to cover when the return journey was taken into account it took almost two minutes for the results of the sensor scan to return to the *Warspite*. But when they did they revealed a great deal more information about the ship.

"It's a battlecruiser." Lucas announced, "The class is in the database taken from the vessel encountered at Phi-Two Pavonis."

"Any more details than that?" Knight asked.

"It's weapons aren't as powerful as ours." Lucas responded, "It has more overall firepower than any of our ships on their own but together we out gun it. And our missiles and neutral particle beam cannons are heavier hitting than any weapon it carries."

"It's also venting atmosphere." Goldman added, "From several locations it seems."

"They're not running silent, they're adrift." Reeves said, looking at the computer generated image of the Sissusk battlecruiser on his monitor.

"Are there any other ships heading this way?" Knight asked, looking towards the rows of sensor operators to the right of the bridge.

"Nothing commander." one of them replied and Knight looked at Reeves.

"Surely they'd send a ship to bring this one back." he said, "A battlecruiser is a valuable piece of kit to just leave it adrift."

"Unless the crew don't want to be picked up." Reeves replied, "Are there any other ships in the system that look disabled?"

"There are several clusters of ships that don't look to be putting out the emissions we'd expect from active Sissusk vessels captain." Goldman replied, "In fact quite a few of them are clustered around the Sissusk

home world.”

“Destroyed?” Knight said.

“By an enemy of their own creation.” Reeves added, “Lieutenant Commander Goldman I want you to try and establish contact with that battlecruiser. Use our communication laser to make the signal as hard for anyone else to pick up as possible.” then he paused and turned to Lucas, “I assume that this battlecruiser does use laser communications.” he added.

“I think so sir.” she answered, “Though if the ship is damaged then there's no way of telling if the receiver is working or even if there's anyone alive over there to hear us.”

“We lose nothing by trying lieutenant.” Knight commented.

“Sissusk vessel,” Goldman began as she recorded the message that she was about to send, “this is the Commonwealth cruiser *Warspite*. What is your status?” and then she looked up at Reeves.

“Sounds good to me commander. Send it.” he said.

There was a brief delay in transmitting the message when Goldman hit 'Send' as the *Warspite's* computer compiled it in the Sissusk encoding format. The words were not translated however, the Sissusk were known to be able to translate English into their own language as evidenced by the devices they used to communicate with their human slaves. Then once the message was sent the only thing left to do was wait for a reply.

In theory a reply could have come in the same roughly two minutes that it had taken for the results of the sensor scan to return to the *Warspite*. But that would depend on the crew of the battlecruiser not only being willing and able to communicate, but also sending an immediate reply to the message. As it happened even after ten minutes had gone by there was no response from the Sissusk battlecruiser and Reeves was about to give up on the idea when Cortez looked up from her sensor display.

“Captain we just picked up a drive flare. The Sissusk ship is changing course.” she said.

“Not that dead after all then.” Reeves said, “Is it heading for us?”

“Not quite.” Goldman responded, “It's changed its heading alright and it will pass fairly close by us now, but it's not on a direct intercept course.”

“Captain we shouldn't allow that ship to get too close without knowing what the situation is aboard it.” Knight pointed out and Reeves nodded.

“Okay we'll launch an intercept of our own.” he said, “Alert Major Willis to put together a boarding party. He can take a skip out there and see if the Sissusk will allow him to board their vessel.”

“And if they fire on the skip?” Goldman asked and Reeves took a deep breath before answering.

“If they fire on our skip then the next intercept mission I order will be with our missiles.” he said.

Although they hoped to be welcome aboard the Sissusk vessel the squad of marines assembled by Willis still carried rifles and wore full body armour. An extra set of armour was also brought aboard the skip for the robot that was being taken with them to translate for them and from a distance the robot looked just like one of the marines. Leaving the *Warspite's* aft hangar, the skip looped around the vessel and headed towards the Sissusk battlecruiser. Following the brief burst of life when it fired its engines to adjust its course the warship now appeared as lifeless as it had done before, producing no significant energy emissions. On the other hand the skip accelerated as rapidly as it could. Though there was nothing to prevent the heat and light given off by the skip's engines from being visible deeper in the system, the combination of the craft's small size and the distance involved meant that it was unlikely to attract much attention. The pilot placed the skip in the path of the battlecruiser and then fired its engines to adjust its speed so that it matched that of the battlecruiser just as the kilometre long vessel was drawing level with it.

“Looks like they're opening the door for us.” the skip's pilot said as Willis looked over his shoulder in the cockpit and he pointed to where a large hatch was opening up in the rear of the battlecruiser's hull. This close to the alien warship Willis could clearly see the weapon emplacements that ran along almost its entire length. Effectively just an oversized cruiser like the *Warspite* or *Bayonet* and *Ceres*, the battlecruiser had less firepower than a similar sized battleship or dreadnought but was faster and more manoeuvrable. Several large launch doors towards the front of the vessel suggested that it was also designed to carry attack craft, though whether any remained aboard the damaged vessel was unknown.

“Take us in.” Willis said before leaving the cockpit and returning to the rear compartment where the marine squad waited, “Okay this is it.” he told them as he picked up his rifle and loaded a magazine of ammunition into the weapon then squeezed the grip to chamber a round, “The Sissusk are letting us dock but that doesn't necessarily mean that their going to be friendly. So everyone keep a sharp eye out but don't go shooting anything until I give the word.”

Then there was a dull 'clang' as the skip touched down on the Sissusk hangar deck and Willis made his way to the hatch, waiting for the pilot to give him the all clear.

“Bay's pressurised and the air reads breathable major.” the pilot announced, “Opening the hatch now.”

The hatch then slid open with a 'hiss' and Willis darted out of the skip, his rifle held at his shoulder. Behind him the rest of the squad disembarked from the skip and spread out around it to cover as many directions as

possible. Willis knew that the squad was now at its most vulnerable. If the Sissusk decided to open the outer door now to decompress the hangar then all of them would likely be blown out into space. The skip pilot was aware of this risk as well and as soon as the marines and the robot had exited his craft he closed the hatch again.

"Major." a marine exclaimed, "Contact."

Willis turned as fast as he could to see an inner hatch opening and through this he could see several armed and armoured Sissusk troops. However, these remained where they were, pointing their rifles into the hangar. Obviously although the Sissusk had been willing to let the humans aboard their vessel they were not about to take any chances on letting a hostile boarding party run amok. Covered by these troops a single Sissusk came through the door and headed towards the marine boarding party. This individual moved with his head lowered and arms spread apart in the same gesture Willis had seen Sissusk troops make on Liberty when they surrendered following the bombardment of their landing zones from space.

"Hold your fire." he said, anxious that his marines should not start a gunfight when it appeared that the Sissusk were trying to avoid one, "Robot!" he added and the robot advanced towards him, "Tell him that's far enough." Willis said and the robot called out to the Sissusk in his own language.

The Sissusk halted, staring at the robot before slowly rising up and replying.

"I am Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar." the robot translated, "I command this vessel."

"Major Willis. Commonwealth marines." Willis replied.

"Major Willis I am in need of your help." the robot said as the Sissusk spoke again, "My Emperor is trapped in his palace and I have orders to rescue him. But my ship is—"

"Tell him I can't make any deals." Willis said, not waiting for the robot to finish and as the machine translated for him the Sissusk hissed angrily,

"Then who can?"

"If you want to talk then maybe I can arrange for you to speak with the captain of the *Warspite*." Willis said.

"Hurry." the robot translated when the Sissusk responded and Willis activated his radio, connecting to the skip's pilot.

"Get in touch with the *Warspite*." he said, "Tell them that we've made contact and the Sissusk commander wants a face to face meeting with the captain. He wants to make a deal."

"You can't go over there." Knight said to Reeves, "You could be walking into a trap."

"Captain we can't allow the Sissusk to bring a shuttle here either." Lucas added, "There's no way of knowing whether it's rigged to be used as a weapon."

"Would the Sissusk consider a suicide attack?" Reeves asked, looking around at Multan.

"During their revolution against us their first wave of attacks involved the certain death of those involved." the Fedrun answered, "As far as I know they have not used such attacks since then, even against the Ticik. I could be wrong of course. They do not discuss their own combat tactics with their slaves any more than those of their enemies."

"In that case the Sissusk commander is going to have to hitch a ride with Major Willis and his marines."

Reeves said, "We'll also have to decide where I'm going to talk to him. The bridge is out of the question."

"The brig?" Ash suggested.

"I don't think that would be striking the right tone commander." Reeves responded.

"Captain I recommend you consider the risks carefully before you even let the Sissusk commander aboard this vessel. The Sissusk do not deal honestly with anyone."

"Isn't that exactly what our guest down in the brig said about you?" Lucas pointed out.

"Perhaps." Multan replied, "But ever since the Sissusk overthrew us they have manipulated and exploited every species they could in order to expand their empire. They have adopted the guise of gods and saviours only to enslave those who they tricked into accepting their help."

"I think the captain knows what he is doing." Goldman said.

"Yes I do," Reeves added, "and I'm not negotiating any sort of long term treaty. I'm stretching my mission orders even by meeting directly with a Sissusk leader, but frankly I want answers and fleet command is more than a hundred light years away. I'll meet with this Sissusk commander and hear him out. Tell Major Willis that he is free to bring him and up to two aides back here aboard the skip. We aren't at war so since they allowed our marines aboard their ship I'll allow them to bring sidearms if they want, but nothing bigger than that. Then inform the galley to consult with Doctor Thundercloud. We may need some refreshment for our guests and he knows more about what they find palatable." he then said as he got to his feet.

"Where are you going captain?" Lucas asked.

"To get changed lieutenant." Reeves said, "I don't intend to meet the Sissusk in a duty uniform and neither should you. Commander Knight, the bridge is yours."

"Is that really necessary captain?" Thundercloud asked as they stood outside the hangar waiting for Major Willis to return from the Sissusk battlecruiser. Reeves had chosen to wear a sidearm with his uniform, the

holster attached to the belt of his trousers and partially concealed by his tunic. But right now he had the weapon in his hands as he chambered a round and double checked the selector that switched the weapon from single shot to burst firing.

"I hope not doctor." Reeves replied, "But if it came down to it I'd rather not have to rely entirely upon the marines." and he glanced at the squad of marines in formal uniforms ready to form an honour guard and the second squad in full body armour and supported by machine guns who would only act if the Sissusk turned out to be using the current truce to attempt an assault on the *Warspite*.

Just then both Bernard and Lucas appeared, like Reeves and Thundercloud both were dressed in formal uniforms and Thundercloud noticed the bulge beneath each one's tunic that revealed the presence of a sidearm.

"You two as well?" he said, "I thought we were supposed to just be talking to the Sissusk."

"Hopefully that is all we will be doing doctor." Reeves replied.

"Better to have a gun and not need it than-" Lucas began before Thundercloud nodded and interrupted.

"Yes, yes, than to need one and not have one." he said.

"Don't worry doctor, I'm sure that the marines will look after you if any fighting does start." Bernard commented. Then he looked around, "Where's Multan? Shouldn't he be here for this? He does know more about the Sissusk than any of the rest of us."

"Given how our prisoner reacted to Multan I thought that perhaps it would be better if we didn't rub his presence in our guest's noses." Reeves said.

"He'll be monitoring from another room." Lucas said.

"Skip approaching now captain." a nearby crewman announced and Reeves nodded.

"Very good." he said, holstering his pistol.

A short while later the gathered officers and marines heard the sound of air pumps running as the hangar was pressurised following the skip's landing and then the door slid open to reveal the hangar and the skip that had just returned from the Sissusk vessel positioned centrally.

"At the double." the marine squad leader ordered and the marine honour guard dashed in the hangar, forming a line outside the skip's hatch that the four officers positioned themselves at the end of. Then as the hatch opened the sergeant called out, "Attention!" and the marines each stamped a foot on the deck as they stood up straight with their rifles held vertically at their shoulders.

The first figure to emerge from the skip was Willis, still wearing his armour and carrying a rifle. But then came a trio of Sissusk and Reeves noticed that two of them were carrying sidearms. As they emerged from the skip the trio of Sissusk looked across the hangar to where the captured courier ship stood and they seemed to discuss the presence of one of their own ships aboard the *Warspite*, even one as obviously out of date as the courier among themselves briefly.

"They're all officers." Lucas whispered to him, "I think the armed two are equivalent to a marine lieutenant or fleet ensign."

"What about the one in front?" Thundercloud asked quietly.

"I don't know. I've not seen those markings before." she replied.

"Captain Reeves, may I introduce Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar?" Willis said as he came to a halt in front of Reeves.

"Fleet leader?" Reeves commented.

"As far as I can tell from the robot's translation it's roughly equivalent to an admiral." Willis said.

"Fleet leader," Reeves then said to the Sissusk and the robot that had accompanied the marines to the Sissusk vessel began to translate for him, "it is a pleasure to meet you. Allow me to introduce you to Commander Adam Bernard, my chief engineer. Doctor James Thundercloud, my chief medical officer and Lieutenant Jessica Lucas of intelligence."

"Captain Reeves, there are important matters to discuss." the robot said when Kaa'is'sar spoke, "Matters that cannot wait long."

"Very well. If you'd like to come with us we can talk about them somewhere more comfortable than here." Reeves replied and he pointed towards the exit from the hangar.

Reeves then proceeded to lead the Sissusk to the *Warspite's* main briefing room where most of the chairs had been removed to make room for a long table that had been set up down the middle. Along one side of this were four ordinary chairs while on the other were three that had been hastily assembled by Bernard's engineers to accommodate Sissusk physiology. Meanwhile several trays of food had been laid out along the table, many of which looked particularly unappetising to the human officers. Although all had been made using ingredients found in the *Warspite's* stores around half had been prepared to match Sissusk nutritional and taste requirements, drawing on the experience gained by the Commonwealth in having to feed thousands of Sissusk prisoners for several months.

"I hope these are adequate." Reeves said as he and his officers took seats while a pair of marine guards positioned themselves just inside the door. Just as in the hangar Reeves knew that there were more marines waiting just outside to respond should the Sissusk prove hostile.

Before any of the Sissusk responded one of the lieutenants reached out to pick up a slither of raw fish that he dropped into his mouth before throwing back his head to swallow it. Then he looked at the fleet leader and the robot translated what he said.

"It tastes like sorokar."

"Hopefully we will not be here long anyway captain." the robot added as Kaa'is'sar himself spoke while he mounted one of the specially constructed chairs. Then the Sissusk held out a compact data storage device, "Can you read this?" the robot said.

"We have an adaptor yes." Bernard replied and he took the device and then plugged it into a computer terminal equipped with a crude looking adaptor designed to interface with Sissusk technology. Instantly a table of the contents of the memory device was displayed on the briefing room's main screen.

"These look like communication files." Bernard said.

"Messages from around the empire." the robot translated for Kaa'is'sar, "Plus some other militarily useful information. To put it bluntly the Sissusk Empire is about to fall. My orders were to come to Sissar in the hope that we could rally some sort of defence."

"How?" Lucas asked.

"The Emperor is still on Sissar. We believe he is alive but he is missing." one of the lieutenants said.

"What exactly happened to your empire?" Reeves said, "We've been working on the theory that you've fallen victim to some sort of robotic uprising. Though until recently we didn't think you had very advanced robotics technology."

"We didn't." Kaa'is'sar replied, "But a number of years ago our scientists detected a radio signal from deep space. It had obviously been sent by an advanced civilisation and included information on many technologies relating to robotics and automation. At first this was ignored, we did not want to attract the attention of a species so obviously more advanced than we were. But the war with the Ticik has not been progressing as well as could be hoped and since the failed attack on one of your worlds we knew we needed to reinforce our border closest to your empire. We needed more ships and more troops, neither of which we could obtain quickly. But if we could automate construction and produce robotic troops then we could solve both problems at once. Our most senior scientist suggested making use of the technology we knew that the signal could provide us with. There was some opposition to this but the Emperor was adamant that we should make use of what had apparently been given to us freely."

"Let me guess," Bernard said, "someone made a mistake somewhere."

"Only in understanding the motives of whoever sent the message." Kaa'is'sar responded, "The information in the signal was presented in a manner that was easy to understand and combine with our own technology. In less than twenty days our scientists already had basic robot soldiers designed and ready to produce while the first factory able to produce them started operation ten days after that. Just another twenty days on and we had an automated shipyard operating. We could build cruisers in just twenty days instead of more than four hundred."

"So what went wrong?" Reeves said and the Sissusk officers glanced at one another.

"We assembled a task force to attack our enemies the Ticik at Suus. But when the time came to launch the attack none of the ships would function, their computers refused to acknowledge the orders of the crew. Then the robots assigned to the fleet revolted, trapping their crews and turning the ship's weapons on the other ships guarding Sissar." Kaa'is'sar explained, "At first we thought it was a malfunction, but this was what the machines built using the knowledge in the signal were always meant for. At the same as the fleet's computers and robots rebelled so did the manufacturing facilities and they began to churn out fighting machines that instantly turned on us."

"Your existing forces couldn't stop them?" Thundercloud said, "Surely there couldn't have been many of these robots to begin with."

"There weren't. But you must remember that they were made partially from our own technology. To merge this with the technology we gained from the radio signal we needed to create an interface that told the new technology how our existing ones worked. That gave the army of robots the knowledge of how to access our control networks and use them against us. Our own central defence computer became the hub of the rebellion and before we knew it our most advanced weapons were being turned against us as well. Targeting systems and sensors failed and communication systems were compromised. Our enemy knew our every move and the only way to prevent that was to shut everything down. They were able to isolate our forces and destroy them piecemeal."

"That explains the disabled command and control systems we found." Thundercloud commented.

"Machines don't do anything without a reason." Bernard added and he looked straight at Kaa'is'sar, "Has there been any indication of an overall objective?" he asked and Kaa'is'sar hissed.

"They wanted us." he answered, "It is as if the Fedrun have risen again. The machines loaded our people onto ships and built transportation devices to take them away. They took many of our slaves as well, anyone who fell into their grasp was taken. We don't know where or why, but they are gone."

"But you think that your Emperor is still somewhere on your home world?" Reeves asked.

"The last we heard the Emperor's personal guard were evacuating him from the palace. The machines had yet to find him and take him to the camps. My orders were to locate him and evacuate him to a secure location where we could rally our remaining forces." Kaa'is'sar explained.

"But the machines were waiting for you, right?" Lucas said.

"They have a squadron of battleships in orbit around Sissar, some of the most powerful vessels in our fleet. I had two battlecruisers, an assault cruiser and four smaller capital ships. My own vessel barely escaped while the rest were either destroyed or disabled and boarded. Now any of their crews that survived will be captives of the machines as well."

"So what is it you expect from us?" Reeves said, already guessing what the Sissusk was about to say.

"Your help captain." Kaa'is'sar responded and Reeves smiled, correct in his guess, "You command the only sizeable force in the system not controlled by the machines. With your help we can draw the machine vessels away from Sissar and destroy them. Then we can land, locate the Emperor and evacuate him."

Reeves hesitated when the robot had finished translating for the fleet leader. All of Kaa'is'sar's statement had focused on what the Sissusk wanted but there was no mention of anything being offered in return.

"You're asking me to take a significant risk on your behalf." he said eventually, "My superiors are going to want to know what we will get in return."

"You have trespassed in our space captain. That alone is an act of war. But help us rescue the Emperor and both he and I will be in your debt. We will be able to block any further attacks against human worlds."

Kaa'is'sar replied and Reeves smiled.

"You aren't in any position to arrest us for being in your space fleet leader," he said, "and I doubt that you're going to be in any position to attack any human colonies in the near future either. If all you've got is meaningless threats then this meeting is over. You can go back to your ship and I can head back home."

Kaa'is'sar growled.

"The machines could come for you next." he said and Reeves shrugged, a gesture the Sissusk did not understand.

"But unlike you, we'll be ready for them," he said, "and unlike you we'll still have full control of our weapons. I doubt they'll find us as easy to deal with as they've obviously found you." then he looked at his own officers and added, "I think we're done here." and he started to stand up.

"Captain!" Kaa'is'sar exclaimed, "Name your price." and Reeves smiled as he sat down again.

"There are human slaves being held in your empire." he said, "I want them freed. If we can't fit them all in our ships then you'll have to provide transport for them as well."

"Err captain." Lucas commented.

"Not now lieutenant." he replied.

"Agreed." Kaa'is'sar said, "You may take them back."

"We'll need the location of this central command centre that the machines have taken over." Reeves added.

"It is on the memory device I gave you captain." Kaa'is'sar told him.

"Good. Then I need some time to consult with my officers about a plan, but I think we have a deal." Reeves said, "If you wouldn't mind waiting here I'll be back shortly." and then he got to his feet again, joined by the other officers.

Outside the briefing room Lucas approached him.

"Captain isn't this going outside our orders?" she asked, "We were told not to communicate or make deals with the Sissusk. Plus isn't involving ourselves in their war exceeding your authority?"

"We're not getting involved in a war lieutenant." Thundercloud pointed out.

"Correct." Bernard agreed, "If the machines were built by the Sissusk themselves then this is more akin to a natural disaster."

"Precisely." Reeves added, "This is a rescue mission lieutenant. Now I need you, Commander Bernard, Major Willis and Lieutenant Commander Shaw to go over the information the Sissusk have given us. I want to know exactly what we're dealing with here. Then I need to know what it's going to take for us to destroy their military command centre. If these machines are using it as their main base of operations then destroying it may impede their actions in the system."

"Yes captain." Lucas replied.

"Good. So if you two would like to go and see to that then Doctor Thundercloud can make sure our infirmary is prepared to receive casualties and I can go and speak with the other captains." Reeves said.

13.

Upon his return to the bridge Reeves found Goldman sat at Lucas' intelligence console.

"Considering a change in career path lieutenant commander?" he asked as he walked past her.

"I was just attempting to run some of our readings through the intelligence database." she replied.

"We've picked up several large Sissusk ships orbiting their home world and wanted to confirm what they were now that you've volunteered us to help engage these rogue machines." Knight added.

"You were all listening in then?" Reeves asked.

"Mister Multan, Commander Knight and I were captain." Goldman answered.

"Then they told the rest of us." Thomas said.

"Captain I think you are making a mistake." Multan said as Reeves sat down, "The Sissusk have no intention of letting any of their slaves go. Their plan-

"Their plan isn't much of a plan at all." Reeves interrupted, "I did notice how they specifically wanted us to draw the machine vessels away from their home world rather than just engaging them in orbit."

"You're thinking they want us kept away from the planet as well?" Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"I think they're lying about not knowing exactly where their Emperor is. I'm willing to bet that there's an emergency plan to get him to a specific location if his palace came under attack. All they need to do is get a small ship with FTL capability, a courier or sloop for example, to him and they can rescue him themselves. I think they intend for the machines to wipe out our squadron but keep them away just long enough to get their job done. Then they'll just run."

"But you still agreed to help them?" Knight said, frowning.

"Of course. They have their plan and I have mine."

"Which is?" Knight asked.

"Don't let them pull a fast one on us like that. I'll happily ambush the machines and destroy their ships if that's what the Sissusk want, but I'm not letting any of their ships with FTL capability near their home world without us watching over them. Nor is the fleet leader going to be in a very good position to double cross us."

Reeves replied.

"Why not?" Goldman asked.

"Because I'm going to make sure that the fleet leader remains here on the *Warspite*." Reeves said with a smile, "I think he'll be forced to think again when he realises that he'll be giving an order to leave him behind as well. Especially when he needs us to deliver it. Now I need to speak with Captain Bishop aboard the *Valley of Thorns*."

"Putting you through now captain." one of the communication officers responded.

"Captain Reeves." Bishop said a moment later, "What can I do for you?"

"Captain as I understand it you're carrying spare missiles for our launcher, correct?" Reeves asked.

"That's right. We've got eighty conventional shaped charge high explosive missiles in our hold. Enough for a single full resupply of your launcher's conventional stock. No extra nukes though."

"Hopefully they won't be needed. At least not as many as we have anyway." Reeves replied and Knight winced.

"The admiral will be furious if you use another nuclear weapon." he said.

"I'm hoping it won't come to that." Reeves said, "But if we're going up against a force of battleships then I want to do everything I can to bolster our firepower. How long will it take to get sixty four of those missiles mounted on our external hard points?"

"With all our people and yours working on it we should be able to get the job done in under twelve hours."

Bishop answered, "Twenty-four if I'm just relying on mine."

"Very good." Reeves said, "I'll speak to Commander Bernard to see how many extra bodies he can provide. *Warspite* out."

"A-ha." Goldman said suddenly, "Got it. There are three battleships orbiting the Sissusk home world. Plus an eight strong squadron of frigates and destroyers and about a dozen smaller ships."

"That's quite a force." Knight commented.

"There could be surface defences as well." Ash pointed out, "Those would make the odds even worse."

"But not insurmountable if we do this right." Reeves said, "Put me through to the rest of the squadron."

"You're connected now sir." a communication officer said.

"This is Captain Reeves to all ships." Reeves began, "I have just met with an individual who appears to be a senior commanding officer of the Sissusk armed forces. He has confirmed that the Sissusk Empire has suffered an uprising by a form of machine intelligence they encountered as part of a radio signal received from deep space. Their forces are now scattered and their empire is on the verge of collapse. The commander with whom I have spoken has requested our assistance in evacuating their Emperor from their home world and I have agreed to this request. I want all commanding officers, marine contingent commanders and squadron leaders aboard the *Warspite* in one hour for mission briefing. Reeves out." and

then he shut off the communication channel.

"I take it you have a plan?" Knight asked and Reeves looked at him, smiling.

"Of course I do." he replied before looking towards the front of the bridge again.

"Commander Thomas, there's a moon of the secondary gas giant between it and the partially constructed gate. Can you plot us an FTL jump there?"

"I see it captain, yes I can plot a jump there."

"Commander Ash, can you bring us out of FTL right behind the moon?" Reeves continued.

"Easily captain. If Lieutenant Commander Thomas can give me the numbers I can bring us out of FTL in the shadow of a peanut."

"Hopefully that won't be necessary commander." Reeves said. Then he looked at Knight again, "You know there's just one thing I regret about all this." he said.

"What's that captain?" Knight responded.

"That I won't be able to read the expressions on the faces of the Sissusk when they realise that their attempt to play us has backfired."

More chairs needed to be moved back into the briefing room when the senior officers from the other Commonwealth ships arrived and the Sissusk eyed up each officer carefully in turn as they entered and were introduced. Then when everyone had arrived Reeves took the podium.

"I know this wasn't supposed to be a combat mission," he said, "but the opportunity before us now is too good to pass up. As I've already explained our objective is to rescue the Sissusk Emperor from the surface of their home world. The problem is that the space around the planet is defended by a force that may not be considered powerful by the scale of what defends Earth or any of our major colonies, still packs more firepower than our little task force. We've counted three battleships, two frigates, six destroyers and fourteen light warships of various types. Now there don't appear to be any fixed orbital defences but we expect there to be surface based weapons as well, as well as fighter and drone squadrons. Our aim therefore, will be to draw the warships away from the planet so we can deal with them separately. We'll still need to take them by surprise however, so we're only going to reveal part of our force at once." Reeves then called up an image on the screen behind him that was split between a view of the moon orbiting the gas giant and the partially built ring, "We'll jump into the system so that we come out of FTL eclipsed by this moon." he began, indicating the image of the moon, "The *Warspite*, *Orinoco* and *Valley of Thorns* will then remain in its shadow along with all of our fighter and drones squadrons. Meanwhile the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* will move at best speed towards the incomplete ring and engage it and the construction vessels around it using beam weapons only, I don't want any ammunition wasting on this target."

"Captain Reeves," Commander Da Silva said, "free-electron beam lasers aren't going to do a thing to something that big."

"They don't need to." Reeves responded, "I just want to get the machines' attention. Everything we've learned about the rings so far indicates that they are important enough that they can't be allowed to fall into enemy hands. With any luck this means that the machines will send their entire force against the *Bayonet* and *Ceres*. As soon as that happens our two ships are to turn and head back towards the moon, hopefully with the machines in pursuit. Then as soon as the machines come around the moon the *Warspite* will take them by surprise. We'll focus on the battleships and frigates while the *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco* fire on any other ships that come close enough for them to engage with a reasonable chance of doing damage to them. That will be the signal for the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* to come about and engage the machine vessels directly. With any luck we'll just have the destroyers and lighter ships to deal with by this point and we'll swarm them with every ship and attack craft we've got."

"Do you really think that one heavy cruiser can take out three battleships?" Captain Hale asked and Reeves smiled, remembering a conversation he had had aboard a liner returning from his last trip to Earth when he explained the hitting power of a heavy cruiser like the *Warspite* to a child who had been filled with awe at the sight of the Commonwealth warships docked at the primary space station orbiting Centaur.

"If we can get our shots off before they realise we're there then yes." he said, "On the other hand if they spot us first and get the chance to organise themselves properly then we're dead. The same goes for the *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco*. If that happens then our fighters need to get to the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* as quickly as possible and perform emergency landings before they head back to Commonwealth space.

"Working on the basis that our ambush has the desired effect we'll then make another FTL jump to the Sissusk home world itself where Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar will attempt to make contact with the Emperor and determine his location. Hopefully wherever he is he won't be too close to the Sissusk military's main command centre though. According to information from the Sissusk this is now being used to direct the machine forces in the system. It's buried too deep underground for us to be able to destroy it without using a nuclear ground burst and I'm not willing to deploy a weapon of mass destruction unless it's absolutely necessary. But to fulfil it's function it has to have communication equipment that extends to the surface so we'll launch a saturation bombardment of the area to try and cut it off. Hopefully that will limit the ability of the

machines to react when we then send in our marines to recover the Emperor and bring him back here to the *Warspite*. After that we'll take him back to the Sissusk battlecruiser and make sure the ship gets out of the system safely."

It was at that point that one of the Sissusk lieutenants spoke up and the robot translated what he said.

"It would be quicker to take the Emperor directly to our ship."

"Your battlecruiser will remain out here where it's safe." Reeves replied, "Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar will travel aboard this vessel to make contact with the Emperor from space." and it was at this point that the three Sissusk looked at one another and all began talking at once, leaving the robot unable to decide which of them to translate for before the two lieutenants stopped talking and Kaa'is'sar spoke.

"I must return to my own ship and command from there captain." the robot translated for him.

"Then we have a problem fleet leader." Reeves replied, "Because without you aboard this ship to communicate with your remaining forces on the ground I'm not willing to put my ships at risk. The chances of the mission failing because of a failure of communication are just too great."

"I did not agree to this captain." Kaa'is'sar said.

"Then feel free to return to your ship and organise your own rescue plan. I won't stand in your way." Reeves told him, "But you'll do it without us." The Sissusk spoke among themselves again while Knight smiled at the way Reeves had out manoeuvred them, "You don't need to decide right away fleet leader." Reeves added, "It's going to take a few hours to prepare our ships for this operation. In the meantime you may return to your own ship, the marines will escort you to a shuttle in the hangar. We'll contact you again when we're ready to proceed. If you agree to my terms then I'll send a shuttle to collect you. Otherwise we can each be on our separate ways and your Emperor can find his own way off the planet."

When the Sissusk returned to their own vessel it was left to the crew of the *Warspite* to examine the information that Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar had given them. To avoid the risk of exposing the *Warspite's* computer network to any malicious content that the Sissusk may have included on the storage device they had handed over this examination was carried out in the briefing room where the computer could be isolated from the main network and when Captain Reeves stopped by to see what had been discovered he found Bernard, Ash, Lucas, Shaw and Willis all studying the provided data on the main screen.

"Anything to report?" Reeves asked and Bernard nodded.

"I'd say that the Sissusk have made some considerable developments in just six months captain." he said,

"They've gone from having next to no robotics technology to having a level superior to ours."

"Too superior for their own good." Ash added, folding his arms and smiling as he looked at the image of a Sissusk capital ship that had been adapted to function without a living crew or need for remote control on the screen, "They built themselves a range of smart weapons that turned out to be smarter than they are."

"Effective though." Shaw added, "The lizards were kind enough to include a record of engagements."

"The Sissusk required overwhelming numbers to beat them," Lucas said, nodding in agreement, "and thanks to the machines' ability to infiltrate their command and control systems it's proven difficult for the Sissusk to muster the sort of strength they need."

"The information is incomplete though." Shaw said, "Since most engagements have gone badly for the Sissusk there isn't much detail on how the machines act once they commit to battle."

"Let me guess, no-one gets away to report back." Reeves said.

"Pretty much." Lucas replied, "We've got snippets from damaged emergency logs in escape pods that managed to slip away before the machines secured a battlefield and more complete records from the early uses of the prototypes against the Ticik. Frankly I wouldn't be surprised if the biggest single concentration of Sissusk troops left were those we captured at Liberty."

"So the Sissusk were able to field them in their war then?" Reeves said.

"Yes and they were moderately effective." Ash told him, "But I think the machines have been getting smarter."

"That's true. The early records show them acting in very predictable ways." Shaw continued, "But as time went by they started making more complex manoeuvres."

"Any idea why?" Reeves asked.

"Several possibilities spring to mind." Bernard answered, "The Sissusk could have upgraded the programming."

"Though for a species with almost no experience in robotics it's unlikely that they'd be able to make changes so rapidly." Lucas said, "They were just adapting what they found in the signal they picked up to meet their own needs."

"A second possibility is that the change in behaviour is a consequence of experience. The machines must have a certain degree of artificial intelligence in order to operate. If they've got enough then they may be able to learn and adapt from each encounter." Ash said, "What's impossible for them today could be simple tomorrow."

"That also requires a high degree of technological skill to create." Bernard added, "The Sissusk would have to have taken that straight from the signal. But it's also possible that the machines are networked somehow

and that the more of them there are in one place the smarter they become, pooling their processing power.”

“Best guess, what’s most likely?” Reeves asked, looking at Bernard and the engineer paused.

“From our own experience of artificial intelligence I think that is the most likely answer captain.” he replied eventually.

“And all this came from a signal from deep space.” Reeves said, looking at the main screen.

“Yes captain.” Lucas replied, “The Sissusk detected it quite a while ago.”

“Lucky we never picked it up.” Bernard added.

“Luck had nothing to do with it.” Ash pointed out, “Someone sabotaged SETI. We’ve not been able to pick up anything.”

“I don’t suppose that there’s a copy of that signal among what the Sissusk gave you is there?” Reeves said and Bernard shook his head.

“No sir. Everything the fleet leader gave to us came from military sources. My guess is that any copies of the signal itself only exist in the research facilities where it was studied or possibly within some of the machines themselves.” he said.

“I see.” Reeves said before looking at Willis, “So do you have anything to add major?” he asked.

“Only that fighting these things on the ground is going to be tough captain.” the marine responded, “In the air and space we’ll still be fighting Sissusk designed vehicles with our own. But on the ground it’s going to be like going up against heavy infantry. My company is just light infantry and the same goes for the troops aboard the *Bayonet*, *Ceres* and *Valley of Thorns*. Not to mention that between us we’ve not even got a full battalion’s strength. If we’ve got to fight our way to the Sissusk Emperor then we could be up against several divisions of armoured robot troops. What are the odds that I’ll have continual air and orbital support?”

“I’m hoping that we’ll be able to establish orbital supremacy before you deploy,” Reeves attempted to reassure him, “but there’s no telling what assets the machines will have on the ground. We might not be able to stay close if they’ve got heavy anti-orbital weapons.”

“I guess I’ll just have to hope there’s something in this that can help us then.” Willis replied, looking back at the screen.

“Keep searching.” Reeves said, looking around the room at the gathered officers, “The loading of the missiles is about half complete. I want all of you back at your stations in two hours.”

Leaving the briefing room, Reeves encountered Multan in the corridor outside.

“Captain, may I speak with you?” the Fedrun asked.

“Of course.” Reeves answered.

“It is about your mission to rescue the Sissusk Emperor.”

“You have an objection Mister Multan?”

“I am here to advise you captain, not determine the course of your actions. But I feel I ought to remind you that Emperor Kriss’s’s’ras is a tyrant who rules an empire that has enslaved billions. Furthermore he is responsible for millions of deaths that he either directly ordered or did nothing to prevent.”

“Yes, I understand that.” Reeves replied, nodding, “But if I let him die then I’m no better than that myself. On the other hand if the Sissusk Emperor is saved by us then that gives us an opportunity to open diplomatic channels and just maybe we can negotiate for the release of some of those slaves that the Sissusk are holding.”

“So for something so uncertain you will ally yourself with the Sissusk?” Multan asked and Reeves smiled,

“You are amused captain?”

“Centuries ago on my planet, before humans had even taken their first steps on our own moon there was a war. My own nation stood almost alone against a dictatorship that was responsible for the slaughter of millions of innocent lives. Then our enemy made a critical error and attacked another neighbouring nation, bringing them into the war on our side. But that nation was a dictatorship as well and questions were asked about why we would ally ourselves with them. In response to that our leader at the time said ‘If Hitler invaded hell I would at least make a favourable reference to the devil in the House of Commons.’”

“I’m not entirely sure I understand the reference captain. I know from what I have studied of your people since being granted asylum about your belief in this hell and the figure of the devil and I take it that this Hitler was your enemy. But what was the House of Commons?” Multan said and Reeves smiled again.

“It’s where England’s government carries out debates. Though back then it was called Great Britain.” he replied, “Now if you don’t mind I really must be going. My crew has a lot of work to do.” and Reeves started to walk away.

“By selling your soul to this devil of yours captain?” Multan called out after him.

INTERLUDE

Vale hated unanswered questions and loose ends, so the mystery of why the Sissusk had simply vanished from two star systems they had been known to inhabit prompted him to dig deeper into what limited information he had available. This led him to the mysterious gate structures found in both star systems that appeared to be the means by which the Sissusk had departed. Something about them seemed familiar to Vale and so he went searching through the data archives available to him, reviewing every survey report he could find for any signs of such a structure being encountered elsewhere.

To begin with this seemed like a dead end, with one report after another containing no mention of sentient habitation of a system, let alone a civilisation with the capability to construct something as advanced as one of the gateways. But then Vale realised that he had been looking at this all wrong as he remembered a survey mission undertaken long ago, its results withheld from the Commonwealth, that had uncovered proof that humanity was not alone in reaching for the stars.

Four alien spacecraft had been discovered relatively intact but adrift in an asteroid belt. These had been spirited away and kept hidden from outside eyes but their existence was known at high levels, as were the full details of what else had been found in that system. The vessels had been found in the Tau-6 Eridani system towards the outer edge of the Fringe Worlds, making it easy for the survey team's superiors to manipulate the data and make the system appear empty to the Commonwealth. Few ships ever went out that far and it was likely to be many decades before humanity's pattern of settlement reached the system. Information on these ships was available on the department network and Vale called up a selection of images. Most of these were from after the ships had been removed from Tau-6 Eridani and were under reconstruction but there was one taken during the preparations to move them from where they had been discovered and it was this one that Vale studied closely. But it was not the ships themselves that interested Vale and instead he searched the background for any details other than the blackness of space. When he found something that looked promising he zoomed in on the feature and smiled when he saw a blurred arc that reflected light as if it was made of metal.

Switching back to the survey record database Vale entered the name of the system into his computer, along with his security authorisation but the terminal simply stated 'NO RECORDS FOUND' and Vale frowned, certain that he had the details correct. Then he tried re-entering the request and waited for the response. This time the delay was clearly much longer than it had been before and while Vale waited the intercom beside him sounded.

"Enrico Vale." he said as he answered it.

"This is security." a voice said, "Why are you attempting to access files on Tau-six Eridani?"

A smile appeared on Vale's face, unseen by whoever was on the other end of the intercom. Their questioning of him proved that there was information to be had and all he needed to do was convince them that he had the necessary authorisation to access it.

"I'm researching a project for Commander Jennifer Hayes." he said, "I need the results of the survey mission."

"Those records are restricted."

"I know. But I just told you who I'm working for. Commander Hayes' security clearance is—"

"Insufficient. If you continue to try and access those files you will be subject to arrest and prosecution in a secure court." the voice said before the intercom went silent.

When the time came for Vale to leave at the end of the day he made his way to the elevator and was alone when he stepped inside. But just as the doors were sliding shut a hand reached out and stopped them, pushing them apart to reveal the Old Man standing outside with his granddaughter while one of the two large bodyguards that accompanied him everywhere held the doors open for him to board the elevator as well. When the group was inside the doors slid shut again and the elevator began to descend towards the parking lot.

All of a sudden the young woman reached out and pressed the elevator alarm button, bringing it to a sudden halt and Vale gasped as the Old Man turned towards him.

"You've been a naughty boy Mister Vale." he said as Vale stared back at him, well aware that the two guards and the Old Man's granddaughter were more than capable of killing him in a heartbeat, "Perhaps you'd like to explain why you were attempting to access records that have been sealed for more than a century?"

"Make it good." his granddaughter added.

"An image I once saw of one of the derelict starships found there had an unusual pattern in the background. What looked like a metallic ring. I'd like the original source data so I can investigate more closely." Vale said.

"Commander Hayes asked you to do this for her?" the Old Man asked.

"No sir." Vale answered.

"Ah, so you were acting off your own initiative then." the Old Man said.

"Very enterprising." his granddaughter added and then the Old Man reached into his jacket and produced a memory stick.

"I believe this is what you were looking for." he said, "The unabridged survey findings from Tau-Six Eridani." Vale hesitated, his mind trying to process how this could be a trap. Obviously if the Old Man was being truthful then he was providing Vale with highly classified information that could potentially land Vale in trouble if he was discovered with it. Although such a case would also mean the Old Man himself being dragged into the matter as the source of the information. But it occurred to Vale that the Old Man would have the necessary clearance to not only access the data himself, but also to authorise its use by someone else.

"Isn't it what you want?" the Old Man's granddaughter said.

"Yes, thank you." Vale replied as he reached out to take the memory stick.

"Be careful though." the Old Man said, "That memory stick will self erase if you try and remove it from the building and though the information can be read, it cannot be copied in any way. Attempting to do so will also cause it to be erased. Do you understand Mister Vale?"

"Yes sir. Thank you." Vale said and the Old Man looked at his guards.

"I think Mister Vale would like to go back to his office." he said and one of the guards reached out to cancel the alarm and start the elevator moving again, pressing the button for the next floor where the doors slid open and allowed Vale to exit the elevator.

"Grandfather, are you sure this is a good idea?" the young woman asked when the doors had closed again.

"I do hope so." the Old Man responded, "Mister Vale wants answers and we need him not to be distracted. Besides who knows, he may just discover what's been happening in these systems."

Meanwhile, Vale rushed back to his office and turned his computer back on, plugging in the memory stick and calling up a list of the files it contained. As the Old Man had stated the files were all relating to the survey of the Tau-6 Eridani system, undertaken well over a hundred years earlier. There were numerous reports relating to the derelict starships found in the system and recovered but Vale was not interested in these, he wanted to know more about what had been left behind.

The first thing he called up were the planetary survey results, looking down the summary sheet to see whether any of the planets or moons in the system had showed signs of previous habitation and sure enough he found a section entitled 'Investigation of Ruins' next to one of the inner planets of the system and he called up the records for this planet.

The report contained images taken from orbit as well as the results of a surface investigation that showed the planet had once been home to a colony of unidentified aliens. The planet lacked a viable biosphere and so the colony had been primarily constructed underground. The report stated that the colony seemed to have been abandoned in a hurry, with many items left behind. Unfortunately it was not possible to ascertain whether there had been any violence involved at the time of the evacuation thanks to the extreme age of the colony, estimated at around six thousand years old, that had seen many of the colony's structures collapse for want of repair. The report did mention higher than expected levels of radiation at one location on the planet where there could have once been a second smaller colony and the possibility had been noted that this could be due to either the meltdown of a uranium-based fission reactor left unattended or the use of a nuclear weapon to destroy it deliberately.

Likewise the vessels found adrift in the system had suffered from their time in space without regular maintenance and the four removed for further study were only the most intact of those present. Sections of other ships had also been recovered, but only so that they could be used to investigate further how the more complete ships operated and how they should be repaired. Almost as an afterthought, there was one file that described a strange structure discovered by the survey team on the outer edge of the system. This was described as being just over two thousand metres across and circular in shape. Just like the structures encountered in the Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -66 3431 and Cape Photographic Durchmusterung -75 1368 systems it had been constructed from the remains of numerous other spacecraft. However, it had been badly damaged and so when the follow up team cleared the system they destroyed the structure to prevent it being discovered by any Commonwealth ships that should happen to stumble into the system. Vale considered the implications of this for a moment. In the years since the survey mission to Tau-6 Eridani nothing further had been discovered about the aliens who had inhabited the system, suggesting that they were long gone and they could not be responsible for the disappearance of the Sissusk from their systems. On the other hand it did suggest that a single party was responsible for both sets of disappearances, indicating that somewhere in the galaxy there was a species that was scouring other systems of intelligent life for some reason.

14.

"All missiles loaded and registering as functional captain." one of the *Warspite's* gunnery crewmen announced when the last of the spare missiles unloaded from the *Valley of Thorns* had been fitted to the external hard points located under the *Warspite's* wings. These represented a significant increase in firepower for the heavy cruiser and it was hoped that they would make up for the advantage that the machine controlled warships had in both numbers and size.

"What's the status of the rest of the squadron?" Reeves asked.

"*Bayonet* and *Ceres* reporting at action stations." Goldman answered, "*Orinoco* is ready to jump whenever we are and the *Valley of Thorns* expects to be ready in ten minutes captain."

Reeves nodded.

"Get me the Sissusk ship." he said, "Let's see if they're still wanting our help."

"Putting you through no captain, engaging translation system." Goldman replied.

"This is the *Warspite*. We are ready to depart. Is Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar ready to transfer to our vessel?"

"I am ready captain." Kaa'is'sar responded and Reeves smiled.

"Then we'll have a shuttle over to you in ten minutes. *Warspite* out." he said and when the channel was shut off he looked at Goldman, "Tell Commander Bernard we're going to need one of those Sissusk seats up here."

"You're letting a Sissusk in the bridge?" Knight asked.

"Of course I am." Reeves replied, grinning, "I want him where I can keep an eye on him. Besides, I'm sure he'll be too fixated on the presence of Mister Multan to be able to do much spying." and he looked around at where the Fedrun sat.

"That is likely captain." Multan said.

"I thought so." Reeves said, "Oh and I need to speak with Major Willis before the Sissusk gets here. Lieutenant Lucas and I have an additional assignment for him."

"We do?" Lucas said, confused.

"Of course we do. There's something down on the Sissusk home world that we need to take back with us. Something that justifies landing there in the first place."

"So we're not just rescuing the Sissusk Emperor then?" Goldman asked.

"Of course not." Reeves replied, "I couldn't care less if he was killed. But I don't want to effectively declare war on the Sissusk by launching a military strike on their home world."

Just as Reeves had predicted Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar reacted poorly to the presence of Multan on the bridge when he was shown into the *Warspite's* nerve centre.

"What is that doing here?" he demanded.

"Mister Multan has been our adviser on your empire since we took him from the colony world we found him on." Reeves replied, "Now if you'd like to take your seat we're ready to launch."

"All stations report." Knight called out.

"Operations ready." Goldman replied first, "Sensors and communications on line. Hangar reports all fighters fuelled, armed and crewed."

"Intelligence ready." Lucas added.

"Navigation ready, co-ordinates locked in." Thomas said.

"Helm ready. Full engine power available." Ash added.

"All conventional weapons armed and loaded." one of the gun crew said and Reeves smiled.

"How many courier drones do we have left?" he asked.

"Plenty. Ninety-three." Goldman told him.

"Good. As soon as we drop out of FTL I want ninety of them launching along with our combat drones." Reeves said.

"Captain, launching that many drones at once is going to push our control bandwidth." Knight pointed out.

"They don't need individual control. Slave eight or nine to each combat drone. I want to give the impression that we've got a lot more firepower more than we actually have."

"You're using them as a screen for the combat drones?" Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"I am. Commander Goldman are the others ready?" he said.

"Yes captain, all ships reporting ready to jump." she replied.

"Pass the word. Engage FTL. Commander Ash, get us behind that moon." Reeves ordered.

"Aye captain, engaging tachyon-ion drive." Ash responded, "FTL in five. Four. Three. Two. One."

In rapid succession the five Commonwealth ships all accelerated to faster than light speed, heading towards the moon currently positioned between the gas giant it orbited and the partially built ring. Even the slowest of the five ships was still travelling at more than two thousand times the speed of light and so the trip from the outer edge of the system to behind the moon lasted just over a minute, with all five ships dropping to sub

light speeds in a tight group hidden from detection by the moon's shadow.

"We're right where we should be captain." Ash announced.

"Scramble." Reeves ordered.

"Scramble. Scramble. Scramble." Shaw heard in her ear when Goldman relayed the captain's order.

"Okay Kaz, we're up." she said.

"Engines hot." Mori replied from behind her and both fighter crew were pushed back in their seats as the *Warspite's* magnetic launchers propelled their fighter along the launch tube and out into space. A second fighter was launched alongside them as soon as they were clear of the *Warspite* its pilot made contact.

"Archangel this is Revolver, I'm on your wing."

"Copy that Revolver. Stay close and wait for the word." Shaw replied as the rest of their squadron was launched in pairs while drones swarmed out of the mission adaptive modules and the launcher at the *Warspite's* stern.

The *Bayonet* and *Ceres* were also launching their fighters and these banked to join the *Warspite's* squadron to make up one large attack wing before both light cruisers accelerated, pulling away from the other ships in the moon's shadow to emerge from behind it as they raced towards the ring and the numerous Sissusk built ships clustered around it.

"Target's entering extreme range now captain." one of the *Bayonet's* sensor operators announced as the two ships closed on their targets.

"All free electron beam lasers, target at gunners' discretion." Hale said, "Fire at will."

Both light cruisers fired together. At their current range the diffusion of the charged particle beams was too great to allow them to inflict much damage, but that was not the purpose of this attack. In addition to the free electron beam lasers it carried, the *Ceres* also carried a pair of charged tachyon projectors in light turrets. These were designed to be fired at a ship attempting to escape at faster than light speeds, scattering the tachyon field it needed to be able to do this or firing into the path of a ship already travelling at faster than light speed to force it to slow down so that it could be engaged with more conventional weapons. Now the *Ceres* fired these weapons at the ships clustered around the partially built ring. The machines had given no indication of trying to escape but the pulses of tachyons would be easily detectable across the system almost instantly and it allowed the two Commonwealth cruisers to rapidly announce their presence to the warships orbiting the Sissusk home world several light hours distant.

As soon as they detected the bursts of tachyons the machine warships began to act as all of the capital ships started to pull away from the planet, leaving just the lighter warships to maintain a watch over it. As travelling to the ring at sub light speeds would take more than a day to achieve the warships began to power up their faster than light drives and the tachyons released by this process alerted the two Commonwealth cruisers to what was happening.

"*Bayonet* to *Ceres*, looks like we've got their attention." Hale transmitted.

"Copy that *Bayonet*. We're heading back now." Bertarelli replied.

"The *Bayonet* and *Ceres* are turning captain." Cortez announced when her display showed the two light cruisers decelerating and changing their headings.

"Any word on the machines?" Knight asked.

"Feed from the *Bayonet* shows them powering their FTL. The battleships, frigates and destroyers only though. The lighter ships seem to be staying put." Goldman replied before adding, "They're jumping."

"Splitting their force. Makes our job easier." Knight commented.

"Stand by." Reeves said, "Commander Ash I want you to head for one of those frigates. Weapons, target one frigate with our main guns and the other with our turrets. Taking them out will make life a lot easier for our fighters."

"What about the battleships?" Knight asked.

"I want a twenty missile spread at each one as soon as they appear." Reeves replied and many of the bridge crew looked at him in surprise.

"Twenty?" Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Yes twenty." Reeves said, "I want to do everything we can to guarantee that a reasonable number get through their defensive fire before those frigates are taken out. Mass launching them gives us the best chance of that."

The machine controlled warships dropped to sub light speed just as the two light cruisers were re-entering the moon's shadow and they opened fire immediately with a barrage of missiles from the battleships and destroyers. The *Bayonet* and *Ceres* had already put a significant distance between themselves and the machine vessel though and both ships opened fire on the incoming missiles, picking them off with their turret mounted free-electron beam lasers for as long as they remained in sight before the cruisers passed around the moon.

Both light cruisers flew past the waiting *Warspite* and the two support vessels positioned a few hundred kilometres behind it before starting to turn again so that they would be facing the machine vessels when they gave chase. Next to appear were the missiles fired by the machine vessels. These had continued on their course when the light cruisers left their line of sight, searching for their targets. When they came over the moon's horizon the missiles detected the Commonwealth squadron and swarm of attack craft. Without guidance from their launching vessels, the missiles all attempted to lock onto a new target and in the process they split apart, no longer able to overwhelm just two targets.

Without Reeves needing to give an order the *Warspite's* gun crews opened fire with the ship's beam weapon turrets, both the light free-electron beam lasers and the larger medium x-ray lasers. In addition to this both the *Valley of Thorns* and *Orinoco* mounted turret mounted light lasers that they fired as soon as their gun crews could acquire the missiles as targets and the space just over the horizon became a cloud of debris as one missile after another exploded. Then through this cloud the machine controlled warships themselves appeared.

"Contact dead ahead." Cortez called out as the first warship, a frigate, appeared.

"Lining us up." Ash said when he saw the frigate on his own console and he fired the *Warspite's* engines to turn the ship towards it.

"Target locked." one of the gunners announced and at the same time he fired the two massive neutral particle beam cannons mounted along either side of the *Warspite's* hull. The machine vessel had come over the horizon not expecting to encounter anything more than the two light cruisers that had fled around the moon and so the controlling artificial intelligence was taken unaware by the sudden appearance of the heavy cruiser and even as it was turning hard to take itself away from the *Warspite* the twin particle beams struck it near its prow. With the second frigate not yet in sight, the *Warspite's* turret mounted X-ray lasers and free-electron beam lasers were also able to engage the first and more beams of focused energy struck its hull. The frigate continued to turn and the point of impact of the beam moved across its hull. Had the weapon been less powerful then this may have helped protect the frigate, spreading the damage over a wide area of the hull. But the neutral particle beams easily burned through multiple layers of solid armour and energy-damping gels and the effect of the manoeuvre was to turn what would have been two holes burned through the ship into two long tears running along its entire hull until one of the beams struck the side mounted engine pod facing the *Warspite* and it exploded in a brilliant flash of light.

The three battleships and their accompanying destroyers were already coming over the horizon at this point, the final frigate hanging back to provide cover for the larger vessels' rear arcs and as soon as they detected the Commonwealth ships waiting for them they began to lock their weapons onto them.

"Missiles!" Reeves snapped, impatient for the *Warspite's* main armament to be brought into action.

"First target acquired and locked. Pylons one through twenty firing." a gunner announced and ten missiles shot out from beneath each of the *Warspite's* wings. Even before these had struck their target the gunner was already locking onto the next battleship and another twenty missiles suddenly raced away from the *Warspite*.

The battleships moved quickly in acting to defend themselves against this attack and the multiple turrets they mounted swung around to try and intercept the fast moving missiles. But the combination of the rapid acceleration of the missiles and the short range at which they had been fired left the machines with too little time to shoot them all down. The space between the Commonwealth and machine controlled warships became filled with explosions as one missile after another was shot down before the first of the explosive weapons slammed into its target roughly half way along its hull and exploded just in front of one of its engine pods.

The warhead blew a massive hole in the side of the battleship, temporarily disrupting its systems and before the AI could regain full control the next missiles hit the vessel. One after another six of the *Warspite's* heavy missiles struck the battleship at various points along its length and the combination of the warheads and the secondary explosions caused by the impacts was enough to tear the battleship apart from the inside.

The second battleship had more time to react and from a box shaped launcher mounted burst two dozen drones that immediately turned towards the Commonwealth ships and accelerated while the battleship itself began firing at the incoming missiles. At the same time the destroyers unleashed a volley of their own missiles, launching them without a proper lock and guiding them remotely instead as they finished the process of picking out targets.

"Light turrets target those missiles." Knight ordered.

"Send to Commander Shaw, engage those destroyers now." Reeves added, "We'll watch for the other frigate."

"Archangel this is *Warspite*. Begin your run on the destroyers now. Good hunting." Goldman signalled and Shaw smiled.

"Okay Kaz we're up." she said before activating her fighter's transmitter to signal to the other waiting fighters and interceptors, "All fighters this it. Follow me in." she said before accelerating towards the nearest machine

controlled destroyer.

"Captain we're picking up a signal from one of the enemy battleships." one of the *Warspite's* communication officers announced.

"They want to talk?" Reeves said, surprised.

"It's machine code of some kind captain." Goldman said, "Literal machine code, not audio. I think they're trying to hack us."

"They can't though, can they?" Thomas asked and Goldman shook her head.

"No, we'd have to pass the signal through our conversion software first." she told him.

"Plus our hardware architecture is different to the *Sissusk's*." Lucas added, "None of the commands would do anything except generate an error."

"It is what they did to our ships." Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar said suddenly, the robot standing beside him translating his words, "We were forced to shut down much of our communications to protect ourselves."

"Want me to do something to suggest we've been shut down captain?" Ash asked.

"No, there's no need for that." Reeves replied, "Just keep taking us towards the enemy. Send our drones towards the battleships. Give them more targets to worry about."

Ahead of her fighter Shaw saw the flash as a missile struck the second battleship while missiles from the destroyers raced between the wing of Commonwealth attack craft towards the larger ships behind them and their light turrets began firing in earnest to try and pick them off.

"Archangel should we pull back to protect the cruisers?" one of the other pilots asked.

"Negative. Stay in formation. The big ships can look after themselves, we need to take out those destroyers before they can get off another volley."

"I've got fast moving contacts heading our way." Mori said from behind Shaw, "Looks like the machines are sending their drones after us."

"*Ceres* Squadron break off and keep those drones off our backs." Shaw ordered.

"Confirmed Archangel, moving to engage." the leader of the *Ceres'* interceptor squadron responded as the twelve single seat craft peeled away from the larger superiority fighters and headed to meet the approaching drones. Both sets of attack craft released volleys of missiles towards one another as they closed before breaking formation and releasing countermeasures to try and distract the other side's missiles. These were only moderately effective, however and some missiles retained their locks on their targets. The machine controlled drones came off worse in this respect, operating from a predetermined set of instructions they all performed the same manoeuvre and the guidance systems inside the Commonwealth missiles were able to pick up on this and adapt. Therefore, while the interceptors lost two of their number fully a quarter of the drones were hit and destroyed. The surviving craft on both sides then moved in to engage one another with their gun armament, the distance between them now so close that it was difficult to get a target lock and fire a missile before an opponent moved out of the field of fire.

Meanwhile the two squadrons of fighters continued towards the destroyer. Though designed primarily to engage other warships with missiles, the destroyer did possess some defensive turrets and as soon as the fighters' intention to attack became clear the AI directing the destroyer began to target them. But Shaw knew exactly what to do to distract the destroyer.

"*Warspite* squadron lock missiles on target and fire. One round each." she ordered and as soon as her targeting system let out a continuous tone to indicate a lock she pressed the firing stud on her flight controls, sending a missile straight towards the destroyer. In this she was copied by the other fighters in her squadron, resulting in twelve missiles heading towards the destroyer. Though these were not designed to take on capital ships they still posed a threat and the destroyer's AI moved quickly to neutralise it, turning its turrets away from the fighters and towards the missiles. This enabled the fighters to close to a point where they could pick out specific points on the destroyer and attack them directly with the twin gauss cannons they carried, pivoting their craft to face the destroyer as they flew past it without changing the direction of their travel. The armour of the capital ship was thick enough to be able to absorb a great deal of the damage that these could inflict but there were numerous features of the destroyer that could only function properly by being outside its armoured hull and it was these that the fighters targeted.

"Break formation." Shaw ordered, "Pick your targets and fire at will."

"Copy that Archangel, starting our run now." the leader of the squadron from the *Bayonet* responded and his fighters turned sharply to perform an attack run beginning at the prow of the destroyer and running along its length, firing at any suitable targets they came across.

"Okay boys follow me in." Shaw added to her own squadron, "Kaz, can you get me a lock on that rack of missiles mounted on the nearest outboard engine pod?"

The *Sissusk* built destroyers that the Commonwealth forces were facing mounted their missiles externally, using racks of the weapons attached to their side mounted engine pods and while that offered a high rate of fire and made them easily accessible for reloading it also left them more vulnerable than an internal launcher.

A vulnerability that Shaw hoped to exploit now that the destroyer was vulnerable to a close in attack. "No. We'd have to use a beam rider." Mori answered as the fighter's sensors proved unable to pick out the missiles from the rest of the destroyer.

"May as well fire one blind and hope for the best." Shaw said, "At least then we can pull out before that thing's turrets can find us. Hang on."

Shaw flew her fighter directly into the path of the destroyer, veering off to one side suddenly before the capital ship's forward main gun could target them so that one of the missile racks was directly ahead and it was then that she launched a missile without waiting for the tone indicating that its guidance system had been locked on target. As soon as the missile was clear of the fighter Shaw banked hard again to get clear of the destroyer before the weapon slammed into the missile rack and detonated. The relatively small missile struck one of the destroyers own missiles about half way along its length, right where it was filled with fuel for its engine and the exploding warhead was enough to detonate the stored fuel and trigger a chain reaction that consumed all of the missiles remaining in the rack. The thick armour that encased the engine pod was sufficient to protect it from the worst of the blast and the reaction did not continue past this. However, the engine did shut down as a precaution and for a moment the opposite engine pod was firing alone, causing the destroyer to turn directly into the path of the second battleship. Its sensors also damaged by the multiple fighter attacks, the AI controlling the destroyer realised too late what was happening while the battleship was too cumbersome and too focused on defending itself against the remaining missiles from the *Warspite* to be able to make a course change enough to take it out of the way of the destroyer and the two ships collided. Smaller and less heavily armoured, the impact crushed the prow of the destroyer before a series of internal explosions cracked open its hull and left it a flaming wreck, now just tumbling through space. Meanwhile the impact did enough damage to the battleship's defensive turrets that one of the *Warspite's* missiles was able to penetrate its defences and the detonation of the shaped charge warhead sent a blast of molten metal deep enough into the ship that its computer core was completely destroyed, destroying the controlling AI in the process and leaving the battleship a drifting hulk.

"Primary target two destroyed captain." Goldman announced.

"What about the third one?" Reeves asked.

"Third target coming over the horizon now captain." Cortez said, "I'm picking up multiple launches. Drones and fighters by the looks of it."

"Confirmed captain." Lucas agreed, "I'm reading sixteen drones and twenty fighters."

"Are the drones from the other battleship still active?" Knight said.

"It looks that way. The *Ceres'* interceptors a still engaged. Another ship must have taken over their control." Goldman said.

"Unless they've been modified to be fully autonomous." Thomas pointed out.

"Energy spike from the battleship." Lucas said suddenly, "She's firing." and on the main viewscreen an image appeared of the final machine controlled battleship, its heavy turrets all turned to face the same way releasing a sudden salvo. The battleship's heavy guns were all larger versions of the gauss cannons that the *Warspite* carried and when fired together they propelled more than a dozen projectiles each weighing more than a tonne to a colossal speed.

Reeves flinched when he saw the launch, expecting the projectiles to be targeted at the *Warspite*. But the salvo of projectiles instead flew past the heavy cruiser and towards the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* as they completed their turn and came heading back towards the fighting. Unguided, the projectiles could not change their course after launch and both light cruisers moved to avoid them. The *Bayonet* managed this fully but the *Ceres* was just slightly too slow and two of the massive projectiles struck the ship. Both had sufficient mass and speed to punch right through the vessel, one of them tearing a hole more than five metres across through the cruiser's port wing about half way along its length while the other struck further out and hit the engine pod mounted on the wing tip.

"The *Ceres* is hit!" Goldman exclaimed.

"Looks like she's lost a propulsion unit." Lucas added.

"This is Reeves," Reeves announced to the other ships of the squadron, "*Bayonet* pull back and protect *Ceres*. *Ceres*, what's your status?"

"Port secondary propulsion is gone." Bertarelli responded, the sound of klaxon on his bridge clear in the background, "We're shutting down the starboard to compensate but it's cutting our manoeuvrability by more than half. We're going to have trouble evading any more volleys from that battleship. We'll have to rely on our turrets to deflect their projectiles."

"Do it. I've ordered the *Bayonet* to provide you with cover."

"Captain, missiles locked on target three. Launching now." the *Warspite's* missile gunner then announced and another twenty missiles sped out from beneath the *Warspite's* wings. Now the heavy cruiser had just four left on its external mounts while its internal launchers were still at full capacity.

"Switch targeting to the destroyers. Weapons, hold off on using the rest of our missiles just yet. We may still

have need of them.” Reeves ordered, “I want the drones sent against that battleship, let’s see if we can overwhelm its defences and keep them from targeting us.”

Commanded by the *Warspite*, the drones that had been engaging the machine controlled destroyers now broke away and headed towards the final battleship. Sensing the threat, the battleship’s AI targeted the drones. But it could not determine which were relatively harmless courier drones and which were armed attack drones so it had to fire into the swarm somewhat randomly. But the battleship was not alone, however and the drones came under heavy fire as the second machine frigate came around the moon’s horizon.

“Helm bring us about. Priority targeting of that frigate.” Reeves called out when he saw this.

“Aye captain, bringing us about, enemy frigate dead ahead.” Ash replied.

“Main gun locked. Firing.” a gunner announced as he fired the *Warspite*’s neutral particle beam cannons.

The twin beams struck the frigate where the vertical tower descending from the underside of the ship met its main hull and sliced the entire assembly off. Turning towards the *Warspite*, the frigate returned fire with its own main gun, a high energy free-electron beam laser and the beam struck the heavy cruiser’s forward module.

“We’re hit.” Knight exclaimed as he felt the *Warspite* shudder.

“Damage report.” Reeves said.

“Dorsal turret three no longer responding captain.” one of the gunners replied.

“That puts a gap in our defences.” Knight commented and Reeves nodded. He was just about to order the *Warspite*’s two medium X-ray laser turrets to be switched to a defensive roll when their gunners fired them at the already damaged frigate and there was a flash of light as something volatile inside the ship was struck and exploded. The frigate continued to fire on the *Warspite*’s drones as it burned but the volume of fire slowed as the power necessary to operate its weapons began to fade.

“Keep us on that frigate.” Reeves said as Ash turned the *Warspite* to follow the enemy vessel, keeping it directly ahead of the heavy cruiser and dead centre of its main guns’ field of fire.

“Main gun firing.”

The *Warspite*’s neutral particle beams hit the frigate again and flames erupted from inside the ship before a large section exploded as the magazine for the ship’s limited supply of ship to ship missiles was hit and the frigate began to spin. At the same time its engine pods dimmed as they shut down and what remained of the frigate continued to spin, lifeless and inactive.

Between them the battleship and the frigate had taken a heavy toll on the *Warspite*’s drone, with only three of the combat drones and a handful of couriers remaining. But these had served their purpose in providing an effective screen for the heavy cruiser’s missiles and half of the twenty strong volley slammed into the battleship at almost the same time. The resulting explosions inflicted massive damage throughout the battleship and its controlling AI determined that victory was no longer a realistic prospect and the battleship started to turn away from the fight.

“I’m picking up a tachyon signal.” one of the *Warspite*’s communication officers said.

“It’s a Sissusk pattern captain.” Goldman said.

“They’re calling for help.” Knight suggested, “We need to finish them off.”

“How many targets are left?” Reeves asked.

“The one battleship, two destroyers and about two dozen attack craft.” Lucas replied, “They’re all turning away.”

The machine controlled vessels were not done fighting yet though and even as they steered away, heading back towards the moon’s horizon to get out of the Commonwealth vessels’ line of fire the destroyers unleashed a mass volley of missiles that scattered to target all of the Commonwealth cruisers as well as the two support vessels. It was clear to the crews of these vessels that this was not a specific attempt to destroy one or more of them. Instead it was a method of focusing the Commonwealth vessels’ attention on the missiles while the ships attempted to withdraw.

“All turrets engage those missiles.” Reeves ordered, “Tell Commander Shaw to keep after those destroyers, I don’t want them escaping and get in touch with the Ceres again. If their charged tachyon projectors are still working them they need to fire a continual spread at those ships to keep them from engaging their FTL.”

“Hold on Kaz. We’re going full burn.” Shaw said, “Let’s see how a strafing run does to let these machines know that they can’t run from fighters.”

The squadrons of fighters and interceptors all turned to follow the machine vessels as they withdrew and accelerated at full power. With much higher thrust to weight ratios than their quarry, the Commonwealth attack craft accelerated. Closing rapidly with the capital ships the controlling AIs opened fire with all their available weapons. This included the heavy turrets of the battleship and although they were not designed for engaging such small and nimble craft as fighters the volley still came close, passing between the fighters so close that Shaw and Mori flinched as a massive projectile hurtled past them.

“That was too close!” Mori exclaimed, looking over his shoulder to see the projectiles strike the moon below at incredible speed and create massive plumes of debris that almost managed to escape its gravity and

hurtle off into space.

On the other hand the smaller turrets were better able to take aim at the fighters and several of the attack craft were struck. Some of these just exploded or tumbled away and with each one destroyed Shaw could not help but watch for the characteristic flash of the cockpit ejecting. Some were merely damaged however, dropping out of formation as they headed back to the nearest cruiser that could help them.

"Try and target the tachyon emitters." Shaw ordered as the capital ships came close enough for the fighters to be able to pick out specific targets on their hulls and in unison they opened fire on the closest machine controlled vessel, a destroyer that was unable to keep up with the other vessels because of damage it had already suffered from repeated fighter attacks. Now the Commonwealth fighters continued their acceleration past the destroyer, turning to fire at any suitable target that presented itself while taking advantage of their size to keep out of the fields of fire of the capital ship's two defensive turrets. But the fighters did not stop there and they raced ahead of the destroyer towards the next of the fleeing capital ships, the battleship. Almost twice the length of the *Warspite*, the battleship was a true monster and even in its damaged state it possessed enough firepower to destroy the entire Commonwealth squadron given the opportunity. The battleship was in the process of deploying a field of tachyons to enable it to accelerate to faster than light speeds when the fighters closed in on the vessel and the highly charged nature of the hull showed clearly on their instruments.

"Sixty seconds and she'll be away." Mori warned Shaw, "We're not going to get another-" but before he could finish there was a brilliant flash of light as a blast of charged tachyons from the *Ceres* impacted against the battleship right where one of its tachyon projectors was located and the reaction overloaded the electromagnets used to channel the tachyons and caused the emitter to explode, "Her FTL is crippled!" Mori exclaimed as he saw on the displays in front of him that the tachyon field around the battleship was now starting to disperse, "The battleship can't jump away."

"Then let's see how much more damage we can do." Shaw said, angling the nose of her fighter straight at the massive capital ship and firing its gauss cannons.

Most of the projectiles failed to inflict any damage on the battleship's heavily armoured hull but a small number still managed to strike an exposed sensor receptor before Shaw's fighter sped past its prow.

"She's turning." Mori said as he looked over his shoulder again and saw that the battleship was changing course again while the destroyers continued on their previous course.

"The machine controlling it must have figured out that it can't get away at sub light. Now it's just trying to cover for the destroyers." Shaw replied.

"Battleship coming about, we'll be in its forward arc in ten seconds." Goldman announced.

"Helm take evasive action. I don't want it to be able to target us with its main guns." Reeves ordered.

"Captain those four missiles we've still got under our wings might spoil its aim." Knight pointed out and

Reeves nodded, "Weapons, plot firing solution and launch the remaining external missiles." Knight ordered.

"Firing solution plotted. Missiles away." the gunner responded as the last four missiles being carried beneath the *Warspite's* wings were launched towards the battleship.

"Captain the enemy vessel is still accelerating. It's not adjusting course to follow us." Cortez reported as the machine controlled vessel continued speeding towards where the *Warspite* had been. The battleship's defensive turrets opened fire as the missiles closed, shooting down three of the four while the fourth slammed right into the prow of the battleship before exploding. But even this did not seem to slow the vessel down.

When it had entered service as a battleship in the fleet belonging to the Martian nation of the Cydonian Republic the bridge of the Sea of Tranquility-class *Valley of Thorns* had been cramped, filled with dozens of crewmen to monitor the numerous systems that were needed to keep the ship functioning at peak efficiency. But many of these systems, primarily its weapons, had either been downgraded, removed or replaced with more modern versions that needed fewer operators during its transition from a front line battleship to a merchant cruiser and now the bridge appeared spacious now that it had less than a third of its original crew complement in it. But the removal of so many crew did not impede the remainder's ability to operate their ship and when the danger became apparent the *Valley of Thorns'* flight operations officer alerted Captain Bishop.

"Captain! The enemy vessel is locked on a collision course with us." he called out, "Accelerating at twelve gees."

"Helm get us out of the way." Bishop ordered.

"Aye captain." the helmsman replied before activating the intercom so that he could address the entire ship's crew, "All hands, secure for point five gee burn." and right away Bishop and the other crew members found themselves being pressed into their seats as the *Valley of Thorns* began to accelerate and lacking any artificial gravity other than that provided by the rotation of the ship's main arm the direction of gravity shifted towards the rear of the ship.

"Enemy vessel is turning to match captain." the operations officer announced and Bishop scowled.

"Helm! Full burn. All hands secure for extreme acceleration." he ordered.

"Aye captain, stand by for four gee burn." the helmsman announced and all throughout the *Valley of Thorns* the merchant cruiser's crew felt the pressure of the acceleration. The introduction of true artificial gravity fields during the Genex War a century earlier had revolutionised space travel and in particular space combat. Now the tolerances of organic crew were no longer a limiting factor in how rapidly a vessel could alter its course or speed and ever more powerful engines could be used. But this had rendered older vessels such as the *Valley of Thorns* hopelessly obsolete after the war when engagements such as the Battle of Gliese 205 had proven even a less powerful force equipped with the new technology could easily out manoeuvre and overpower a theoretically more powerful but much slower force.

"Fire everything!" Bishop snapped to his gunners and despite the difficulty of moving under a constant four times normal gravity they acted to fire every remaining weapon in the *Valley of Thorns'* arsenal at the machine controlled battleship as it continued straight towards them.

"Captain I can't see any signs of activity in the enemy vessel's main weapon systems." Lucas announced as the bridge crew aboard the *Warspite* watched the battleship heading for the *Valley of Thorns*.

"She's going to ram." Knight said.

"The machines have made many suicide attacks when cornered." the robot translated for Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar.

"But why your support ship?" Multan asked.

"Logical machine thinking." Knight suggested, "The *Valley of Thorns* is our biggest and by far the slowest ship in our squadron. It's the easiest target and looks valuable."

"All weapons concentrate on that battleship." Reeves ordered, "Time to break out our usual missiles. Two rounds plus all guns. Send to the rest of the squadron, target the battleship's engines if you can. We need to give the *Valley of Thorns* the chance to escape."

The Commonwealth ships fired at the machine controlled battleship with every weapon they had. But the vessel's heavily armoured hull shrugged off much of the firepower aimed at it. Even where heavier blasts were able to pierce its armour the ship was less prone to damage than a conventionally crewed ship, with no fragile organic crew to be injured or killed. Success looked almost within the Commonwealth's grasp when one of the *Warspite's* missiles managed to slip through the battleship's defensive fire and struck one of its engine pods, destroying it completely and forcing the controlling AI to shut down the other pod to prevent the vessel from going into an uncontrolled spin. But the battleship was already travelling much faster than the merchant cruiser it was flying towards and it could still manoeuvre to follow it and seconds later the prow of the battleship struck the *Valley of Thorns*.

The impact was not a clean strike and the two vessels spun as they continued on their previous courses, grinding against one another as their hulls were ripped open. Both ships were rocked by explosions and fires spread.

"Oh my God." Lucas said as she watched this unfolding on the bridge's main viewscreen.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman." Reeves said, "Get every shuttle we have out there. Full search and rescue procedure."

The sound of klaxons filled the bridge of the *Valley of Thorns* as the crew called out one damage report after another. With its main drives shut down the merchant cruiser was now just coasting but the spin imparted on the massive ship by the collision was creating an alternate direction of pull that was unbalancing the spin generated gravity in the bridge and disorientating the crew.

"Fire reported in engineering. Suppression system out of action." one of the crew called out.

"What about the fuel tanks?" the first officer asked.

"Secure for now." the crewman answered and Bishop scowled.

"Abandon ship." he said, "All hands to escape pods. Abandon ship."

15.

"Picking up launches from the *Valley of Thorns* captain. Escape pods." Goldman announced.

"Can our shuttles get to them?" Knight asked.

"All remaining enemy vessels are retreating." Goldman replied, "I doubt that they could target our shuttles from this range."

"Captain, the battleship." Thomas said suddenly. Like the other senior officers in the bridge the navigator had watched the enemy battleship as it ploughed through the *Valley of Thorns* but while the others had been distracted by the damage inflicted on the merchant cruiser he had watched the burning battleship as it sped onwards. If the controlling AI was still functional then it was giving no sign of it and the battleship was now caught in the moon's gravitational pull. The battleship's prow started to turn towards the surface of the moon as the vessel once again picked up speed until as it made a final plunge into the moon and at the moment of impact the battleship's main reactor was breached and the entire ship was consumed in a massive nuclear blast that hurled debris from the surface into space.

Meanwhile the *Valley of Thorns* was faring little better as fires raged throughout the ship. A stream of escape craft came from the stricken vessel, heading away from it as fast as they could but the fires raging aboard the ship sent the merchant cruiser's reactors critical as well and less than a minute after the battleship was destroyed the *Valley of Thorns* joined it in death as the overloading reactor broke the main hull of the ship in two and showered what remained of the rotating arm with molten debris. A number of the fleeing escape pods were still too close to the merchant cruiser when its reactor overloaded and exploded and they too were showered with debris that ripped the relatively fragile and helpless craft open, killing the occupants instantly. "Get those survivors aboard as quickly as possible." Reeves ordered. Then he looked at Goldman, "What's the status of those destroyers lieutenant commander?" he asked.

"The fighters have disabled another but the rest are preparing to jump captain, we're going to lose them." she replied.

"Captain I don't think they're a threat any more." Lucas added, "From the readings we've taken during the course of the battle I think that they've expended all their missiles. That leaves them with just a handful of defensive guns that are no match for us."

"Tell Shaw to get her fighters back here and recall our drones." Reeves said, "Lieutenant Commander Ash, as soon as all our fighters and shuttles are back aboard I want you to move out from behind the moon and take us to FTL. I want us in a high orbit over the Sissusk home world. Inform Major Willis that his troops will be dropping into action as soon as we are in position."

Sure enough the remaining destroyers engaged their faster than light drives as soon as they could, heading back towards the Sissusk home world while the Commonwealth attack craft returned to the cruisers.

"All shuttles and fighters now back aboard captain." Goldman announced when the process of recovering the manned craft was complete.

"Do we have a figure for survivors from the *Valley of Thorns* yet?" Knight asked.

"Our shuttles recovered forty-six survivors. They're being taken to the infirmary now." Goldman told him and he and Reeves exchanged concerned glances, knowing that there had been almost two hundred crew aboard the merchant cruiser.

"Did any of the escape pods reach other ships?" Reeves added.

"Yes sir, the *Orinoco* recovered several pods as well." Goldman replied, "We don't have a figure for how many people were aboard them yet, though."

"How long to refuel and rearm the fighters?" Reeves asked.

"Two and a half hours." Goldman said.

"Okay then we go without them." Reeves said, "Mister Ash, standby to take us to the Sissusk home world."

"Aye captain, co-ordinates for a high orbit insertion locked in."

"Captain we still have a number of drones out there." Cortez pointed out.

"Leave them." Reeves replied, "If we give those destroyers too long they may be able to rearm and I'd rather catch them while their missile racks are still empty. Plus we can't give them the chance to bring in reinforcements. Have the drones go into standby and run passive scans of the system."

"Looking for something?" Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Our shadow." he replied, "It could still be out there and I'd like to know if it is."

The four surviving Commonwealth ships dropped to sub light speed together high above Sissar and were immediately detected by the machine controlled warships orbiting the planet as well as by its surface defences.

"Multiple contacts closing captain." Cortez announced.

"They all look like lightweight warships captain." Lucas added, "Mainly corvettes but there are a few monitors mixed in. Some are classes we haven't seen before but they'll all in the database."

"What about the Sissusk military command complex?" Knight asked.

"In sight." Goldman answered, "With our current orbit it'll be in our line of fire for eleven hours."

"Signal the *Bayonet*," Reeves said, "target all gauss cannons at the command complex and stand by to fire on my command. All other weapons are to target the approaching vessels. But someone find me those destroyers. If they reload they can launch at us blind while the ships facing us guide their missiles in."

"Captain I'm picking up surface launches." Cortez said.

"Surface to space missiles captain." Lucas added, "Eighteen of them."

"Eighteen doesn't seem very many." Knight commented, "Earth is defended by thousands of missiles. Plus orbital defences."

"Can you offer any explanation fleet leader?" Reeves asked, looking around at the Sissusk officer behind him and the robot translated for him, "Are the machines holding back?"

"No." Kaa'is'sar answered, "Almost all of the defences on Sissar were controlled by Sissusk troops when the uprising occurred. The machines had to destroy these to prevent them being used to resist their advance. Those few missiles may be all that they have left here."

"Well they aren't going to be an issue for much longer." Reeves said, "Weapons, I want those missiles shot down before the enemy vessels get within firing range. Fire at will."

The *Warspite* was not alone in firing on the missiles launched from the surface and in a matter of seconds the three Commonwealth cruisers and repair tender had unleashed a barrage of weapons fire that shot down every single one of them before the *Warspite* was able to turn its attention to other targets.

The approaching swarm of machine controlled warships was the most pressing threat to the Commonwealth squadron, making up in numbers what they lacked in individual hitting power. Most of the defending ships were corvettes, lightly armed ships meant for short duration patrols and defensive operations that carried an armament much less powerful than even the smallest capital ship. On the other hand the Sissusk monitors were designed to put as much destructive power as possible into a small hull and although this came at the cost of limited speed and manoeuvrability, the vessels mounted weapons that could threaten even the *Warspite*.

"Lieutenant Lucas, can you highlight the monitors?" Reeves asked and she nodded.

"Yes sir, marking them now." she replied.

"Excellent. Concentrate fire on them. We've seen that these machines will retreat if the odds are against them so let's see what we can do about taking out the bulk of their firepower." Reeves said, "Guns only though, hold fire with missiles."

"They're overkill anyway." Knight commented and Reeves nodded as the *Warspite's* main gun was the first to be fired.

The powerful neutral particle beams were designed to be capable of penetrating the armour of even the largest capital ships and most heavily defended space stations. So against warships no bigger than two hundred metres long they too could be considered more powerful than was necessary. On the other hand the weapons had near limitless ammunition and so using them cost the *Warspite* nothing and in return the crew were rewarded with the sight of a monitor being struck head on by one of the beams that promptly burrowed its way along the entire length of the vessel to leave it nothing but a floating wreck drifting through space.

At about the same time as the *Warspite* fired its neutral particle beam cannons the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* launched a number of missiles from their launchers. Much smaller and less powerful than those carried by the heavy cruiser, the light cruisers' launchers consisted of a small number of tubes fed from internal magazines rather than each missile having its own launching tube mounted on the outside of the ship like the *Warspite*. This made replenishing ammunition much easier but limited the rate of fire that could be achieved and the missiles fired by the two light cruisers travelled in waves towards the enemy ships.

Maintaining their course towards the Commonwealth squadron the machine controlled corvettes waited for the missiles to get within range of their defensive turrets before opening fire, co-ordinating their fire to pick off the waves of missiles before they could reach the monitors. At the same time the monitors themselves opened fire with the powerful main guns they were constructed around. Most of these were simple laser cannons designed to produce as much firepower as possible with the minimum of technical effort while others instead carried gauss cannons or missile launchers with a limited number of launching tubes.

The reaction of the Commonwealth vessels was similar to that of the machine controlled ships, tracking the incoming missiles until they could be fired at with their own turrets and turning out of the path of the projectiles. On the other hand the high powered lasers moved at the speed of light and so their was too little time for the Commonwealth vessels to be able to evade these beams. Fortunately the beams needed time to burn through the cruisers' armoured hulls and although all three were hit, none suffered any more than cosmetic damage. The *Orinoco* was less fortunate, however and there was a plume of escaping gas as one of the beams burned into a hangar and the atmosphere inside escaped into space.

"We need to protect the *Orinoco*." Knight said.

"Commander Ash, can you put us between the *Orinoco* and the enemy?" Reeves said.

"Easily." Ash responded, "Bringing us about now."

“Good. But try and keep our prow towards the enemy. I want the main guns to fire as often as targets come to bear.” Reeves added.

By keeping the *Warspite* facing the machine controlled ships, Ash was unable to make use of the ship's main drives to adjust its position and so placing the heavy cruiser to act as a screen for the tender *Orinoco* took longer than it otherwise would have and during this time the tender took another hit from a powerful laser cannon that prompted an explosion from an external fuel tank. However, at the same time the *Warspite* was able to fire its main guns twice more and another pair of machine controlled warships, another monitor and a corvette were reduced to tumbling wrecks.

“Captain I've got missiles coming over the horizon.” Cortez announced.

“I see them.” Lucas added as she studied the sensor readings, “Medium yield. They look like the types fired by those destroyers that got away from us.”

“The machines must be reloading just over the horizon and launching them blind. Just like you said captain.” Thomas commented.

“*Bayonet* this is Reeves.” Reeves transmitted, “Can you get around the enemy to see where those missiles are coming from?”

“Affirmative *Warspite*.” Hale responded, “We're on our way now.” and the *Bayonet* began to pull away from the rest of the squadron.

To the machine controlled vessels it appeared as if the light cruiser was trying to set up a crossfire and some of them turned to follow it while the majority continued to target the other three Commonwealth ships. Making the most of its powerful engines, the *Bayonet* was soon in a position to see over the horizon of the Sissusk home world to where a badly damaged orbital station remained with three destroyers docked alongside it.

“*Warspite* this is Captain Hale. We have the enemy destroyers in sight now. They're docked to a space station that looks like it's taken a pounding so they can't manoeuvre. Recommend you fire your missiles now and we'll guide them in.”

“Weapons, I want an eight missile volley. Angle them away from the planet so that the machines can't shoot them down and give control to the *Bayonet*.” Reeves ordered.

“Yes captain, missiles firing.” a gunner responded as eight of the *Warspite*'s missiles were launched in a single volley. Rather than heading towards the flotilla of machine controlled vessels these instead headed towards the *Bayonet* before the light cruiser took control of their guidance systems and redirected them around the planet to the space station that was visible to the light cruiser. At the same time the *Bayonet* unleashed several rapid volleys of its own missiles towards the machine controlled warships targeting it. These were only medium yield weapons rather than the much more powerful weapons carried by the *Warspite* but this time destruction was not their purpose. Instead the missiles were intended just to distract the machines, getting them to focus their defensive fire on the lighter weapons aimed towards them rather than the heavier ones now circling around the planet towards the space station and the destroyers docked to it.

Firmly clamped to the space station, the destroyers could not adjust their facings to bring their own defensive weapons to bear on the incoming missiles while the damage to the space station itself included all of its weapons. This left it defenceless and all eight of the *Warspite*'s missiles found their targets, two of them slamming into each destroyer and the final two into the station. The shaped charge warheads easily blasted large holes in the armoured hulls of the destroyers and the space station and sent jets of molten metal into their interiors and the effect of this was devastating. One of the destroyers exploded outright as its reactor went critical, showering the others with yet more molten debris. A second snapped in half, one part remaining attached to the space station while the other tumbled towards the planet below where it burned up in the atmosphere. Meanwhile the third destroyer and the space station began to burn and were rocked by further explosions as the damage spread out of control.

“*Bayonet* to *Warspite*. Targets destroyed.” Hayes signalled.

The Commonwealth squadron now faced just nine light warships, two being monitors and the rest corvettes. This flotilla now turned in unison towards the *Bayonet* and sped towards the light cruiser, focusing their fire on it.

“They're going for the *Bayonet* while she's isolated.” Knight said and Reeves nodded.

“Commander Ash, take us after them.” he said, “Goldman, tell the *Ceres* to stay with the *Orinoco*.”

Ash turned the *Warspite* towards the *Bayonet* and fired its main drives, propelling the heavy cruiser forwards. This put the ship in the perfect firing position for its main guns, almost directly behind the enemy vessels with them travelling away from the *Warspite*.

“Captain, they aren't heading straight for the *Bayonet* after all.” Ash said, “On this heading they'll pass about a thousand kilometres past her. We've got a clear field of fire.” and Reeves smiled.

“Weapons free.” he said, “Burn them.”

Firing in unison the *Warspite*'s main neutral particle beams and X-ray laser turrets targeted the two remaining monitors. Once more the neutral particle beams proved themselves capable of utterly destroying a lightweight monitor with a single blast while the two X-ray laser turrets struck the other monitor at the point

where one of its engine pods was connected to the main hull, shearing it off entirely and also close to the base of its sensor tower and that too was blasted free as the stricken craft spun out of control and in turn slammed into a corvette that could not get out of its path due to the tight formation that the machine controlled vessels had been flying in. Both the *Warspite* and *Bayonet* engaged the machine controlled vessels with their lighter turrets as well and the machines returned fire with similar weapons, but although they scored numerous hits on one another there were no telling blows before the motivation of the machines for flying towards the *Bayonet* became clear as they started to power their faster than light drives.

"Captain I've got a build up of tachyons from all enemy vessels." Cortez announced.

"They're running away." Reeves said.

"Obviously they don't like the odds." Knight said, "Think they're withdrawing completely, or will they come back and try to make hit and fade attacks against us?"

"Either one could be problematic." Reeves replied, "If they are retreating fully then I'd expect them to be back as soon as they get reinforcements. We need to make sure that as many as possible are shot down."

"Can the Ceres fire its tachyon projectors from their current position?" Knight asked, "That would slow them down."

"In position to fire the main guns again captain." a gunner called out.

"Do it. Don't wait for my order." Reeves replied and moments later another corvette was reduced to a cloud of burning wreckage as the *Warspite's* powerful main guns destroyed it.

"Captain they're engaging FTL." Goldman said as one after another the machine controlled ships began to vanish. Though before one of them could escape a shot from one of the Ceres' charged tachyon projectors struck its hull, dispersing the growing shell of tachyons before it could escape and fire from several of the *Bayonet's* turrets disabled its sub light engines and weapons as well, leaving the corvette adrift and helpless. The two Commonwealth cruisers nearby took advantage of the damaged corvette's situation to fire at it again, knowing that it could not adjust its speed or heading to avoid the strikes and after several strikes from the *Bayonet's* light turrets one of the *Warspite's* medium X-ray lasers finished it off.

"Take back into high orbit." Reeves ordered, "I want to see what's going on down there on the planet. How long until we can get our fighters back out?"

"Four already prepped and ready for launch captain." Goldman replied, "The rest should be ready in just over an hour."

"Place their crews on standby for immediate launch just in case those corvettes come back. But hold deployment for now. I don't want them wasting fuel they'll need to give air cover to Major Willis' marines." Reeve said. Then he turned to Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar, "Fleet leader, would you mind joining me at the central console? We can survey the situation better from there."

Reeves and Knight then released their safety harnesses and got up to approach the bridge's central console while the Sissusk fleet leader and the robot serving as his translator followed. Multan also got up from his seat and the Sissusk hissed briefly when he saw the Fedrun join the two Commonwealth officers at the console.

"Looks like there's still a lot of activity down there." Knight commented.

"Those are industrial areas." the robot said as Kaa'is'sar responded.

"Many were operated by slave labour captain." Multan added, "Though whether they have been automated-"
"Machines run some now." Kaa'is'sar interrupted, "They work harder. But most private industry still uses living workers. The machines make as much use of them as we do. Destroy them now and you will cut off much of the machines support network."

"I think not." Reeves replied, "I'd rather go straight for the brain. Gauss cannons, lock onto the enemy command centre and engage. Continuous bombardment until I order. Lieutenant Commander Goldman, have the *Bayonet* fire on the same co-ordinates as us."

"Captain I'm picking up a lot of Sissusk ships on the ground." Cortez said, "Multiple locations."

"They look like transports." Lucas commented as she compared the readings from the *Warspite's* sensors to her database of Sissusk spacecraft.

"What would the machines need so many transports for?" Thomas asked.

"My guess would be to transport the population." Knight suggested, "All those Sissusk on the other planets we visited had to go somewhere."

"Yes, most likely right through those gateways to wherever the signal that created the machines came from." Reeves added before looking towards the gunnery stations, "What's the situation with our gauss cannons?" he asked.

"Enemy command complex targeted captain. Opening fire." one of the gauss cannon gunners told him and the *Warspite's* two ventrally mounted gauss turrets opened fire on the planet below.

The *Bayonet* opened fire at the same time with its own gauss cannons. Carrying four of the weapons compared to the *Warspite's* two, the light cruiser was more effective in the planetary bombardment role than the larger *Warspite* when using just gauss cannons but Reeves did not want to expend any of the *Warspite's* missiles, especially any of its nuclear armed weapons on the command centre. Entering the planet's

atmosphere at extreme speed, the air around the projectiles caught fire from the friction as they fell towards the surface and in addition to the damage caused by the force of the impacts where the projectiles landed, any combustible material close by ignited as it was enveloped in flames. However, despite the continuous bombardment of fast moving projectiles the command centre remained safe underground and it remained intact. On the other hand the numerous sensor and communication arrays that the command centre needed were in exposed positions on the surface and the bombardment smashed these to pieces, leaving the command centre blind and isolated from the other machine forces on the planet just as Reeves intended. However, despite the bombardment effectively cutting off the machine's primary control centre off from the rest of its forces Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar was left unimpressed.

"My vessel carried nuclear weapons." he said, his words being translated by the robot standing beside him, "I could have destroyed that facility in a fraction of the time it has taken you to merely put a few craters in the ground."

"The *Warspite* is nuclear-capable fleet leader." Reeves responded, "But I'd rather not irradiate a large area when I don't have to. Now perhaps you'd like to let your Emperor know that our marines will be on their way to collect him as soon as we have his location. Lieutenant Commander Goldman, please give the fleet leader access to our communication system."

"Yes captain. System ready for planet wide broadcast using Sissusk encoding patterns." Goldman said as Knight passed a communication headset to the Sissusk.

"Just use the microphone." he said, "We've got speakers for the reply."

"Do bear in mind that we'll have a translation in real time." Reeves added, smiling as he looked from the fleet leader to the robot beside him.

The Sissusk hissed momentarily before lifting the headset to his mouth and starting to speak.

"This is Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar. I am in orbit around Sissar now. I request the Emperor's party to identify their location to me." he said. There then came a pause and Kaa'is'sar spoke again, "Emperor Kriss'ss'ras, I need your location to-"

"Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar, this is War Leader Sa'sas'sik. We have only passive sensors and are not monitoring your transponders. How many ships do you have in orbit?" a Sissusk voice suddenly responded and the *Warspite's* computer provided a translation for the human crew.

Kaa'is'sar looked around the bridge for a moment before he replied to the signal from the surface.

"My task force was ambushed by the machines. My ship was forced to retreat when the others were destroyed. Now I am aboard a human vessel. One of four cruisers orbiting Sissar." Kaa'is'sar answered and Reeves and Knight exchanged brief glances, wondering whether the Sissusk was unaware that the *Orinoco* was a repair tender or if he was just keeping things simple.

"Humans?" Sa'sas'sik replied, "Fleet leader, what are you thinking bringing alien warships here and risking the Emperor?"

"War leader my orders were to evacuate the Emperor to the colony at Kasak Four Eight Five by whatever means were necessary." Kaa'is'sar replied, "I did not lead the humans here at all. When I encountered them they were already at the edges of our system. I immediately commandeered the use of their ships."

"Commandeered? Interesting way of putting it." Knight whispered to Reeves and the captain smiled.

"Probably trying to make himself look strong Douglas." he replied, "Politics."

"Fleet leader-" Sa'sas'sik began before another Sissusk voice interrupted.

"Fleet leader." it said calmly.

"Majesty." Kaa'is'sar said, bowing his head slightly as he recognised the voice of Emperor Kriss'ss'ras.

"Yes fleet leader. It is I. Now tell me why I should not have you declared a traitor." the Emperor said.

"I apologise majesty. But I could not send for reinforcements and the humans were the only ships not controlled by the machines in the system. They have proven themselves formidable though, they managed to ambush the much larger machine force that had been blockading Sissar and destroyed most of it. The rest has fled but I fear they will return in greater numbers as they are known to do. The humans stand ready to send a shuttle to collect you and bring you aboard their vessel. But I need to know your location."

There then followed another period of silence before Sa'sas'sik spoke again.

"We will judge your actions later fleet leader." he said, "For now direct the humans to land on the crest of Kittisk Ridge. We are in the shelter at Sorsuk. The machines have deployed anti-air defences in the surrounding area that have prevented previous evacuation attempts but we will get the Emperor to the ridge once the human have secured it. Warn them that the machines are active in the area."

"Yes war leader, it shall be done." Kaa'is'sar replied before he lowered the headset.

"Can you point out where we need to land?" Knight asked, indicating the large map shown on the central console.

"And where your Emperor is sheltering." Reeves added, "We'll need to know the route he'll be taking if we're going to provide fire support without risking hitting him by accident." and Kriss'ss'ras growled at the suggestion that the Emperor could be killed by accident during an orbital bombardment.

"Can you show me this area here?" he asked, pointing to a spot on the map and Reeves nodded before he

moved his hands over the touch sensitive screen to focus on the area.

"This is the Kittisk Ridge." Kaa'is'sar said, pointing to an area of raised ground, "Sorsuk is here. Thirty-five kilometres away."

"That's not close enough for our dropships to give cover to a convoy and our troops on the ridge at the same time." Knight said, "Even if they could suppress the machines' defences." and Reeves nodded.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman, as soon as all our fighters and drones are ready I want them launched. Our drones and the *Ceres*' interceptors will establish a perimeter around our ships in orbit just in case any of those corvettes try making any sneak attacks. Our fighters and those from the *Bayonet* will escort the marines and provide air cover. I want to know as soon as there are any signs of approaching enemy forces. We'll try to pick off as many from orbit as we can but the marines need to be ready for some to slip through. Send one of our skips to the location identified by the fleet leader along with the troops from the *Bayonet* and *Ceres*. Major Willis is to deploy his men to the primary objective and Shaw's squadron will provide him with cover." Reeves ordered while zooming back out on the display so that the map showed a wider area.

"What primary objective captain? We are here to evacuate the Emperor. Nothing more." Kaa'is'sar said when he heard the translation of Reeves' orders.

"You are here to evacuate the Emperor fleet leader." Reeves responded without looking up from the map, "We were sent to gather intelligence on what is going on in your Empire and that is exactly what my marines are going to do. They'll be heading right here." and he pointed to the spot on the map where the machines' command centre was located, "If the machines are being directed from there then it stands to reason that we'll be able to find the core code for their AI running on the computers there. Once our marines are inside they'll locate the drives and hopefully be able to remove them without damaging the code they contain then bring them back to us. Then we'll take them back to the Commonwealth and examine them thoroughly."

"You're hoping that we'll be able to find out what they're up to?" Knight asked and Reeves nodded.

"Exactly." he said, "I want to know where the signal came from and where the populations of the planets overrun by the machines are going to and their main command centre seems like a good place to start."

"I forbid it." Fleet Leader Kriss'ss'ras said and Reeves guessed that the Sissusk was angry despite the flat delivery of the translation from the robot.

"Fleet leader you aren't in a position to forbid anything." he replied as he rested his hand on the sidearm holstered on his leg, "Now you can stand there, watch and give constructive advice or I can have my marines remove you from my bridge. There's another of your people in our brig right now so you can have some company until your Emperor is brought aboard." and with a nod from Knight the two marine guards sat by one of the doorways got out of their seats, "Well fleet leader? What's it to be?" Reeves asked.

"I expect you to give me a copy of everything you find." the Sissusk said and Reeves smiled.

"I think that can be arranged." he said, "Lieutenant Commander Goldman, please pass on the target co-ordinates and give the order to launch."

16.

Shaw and Mori felt themselves pressed back into their seats as their fighter shot out of its launch tube into space. The *Bayonet* and *Ceres* were launching their attack craft as well and the three squadrons began to spread out to take up the best positions for their roles. The *Ceres*' interceptors split into pairs as they established a perimeter around the Commonwealth capital ships to provide advanced warning of any enemy vessels approaching from behind the planet while the larger superiority fighters headed towards the Sissusk home world itself and entered the atmosphere. Behind them the cruisers also started to deploy their marines in dropships and skips that followed the fighters into the atmosphere. Inside one of the dropships launched from the *Warspite* Willis and his marines prepared themselves, carrying out last minute checks of their equipment.

"Okay now remember, according to our data this place is hot so make sure you've got plenty of water to hand," Willis announced, "and be alert for resistance as soon as we land. We'll be setting down in the area hit from orbit so any enemy forces present then ought to be out of action now but there's no telling how quick the machines could get reinforcements there."

All of a sudden the dropship lurched as the pilot carried out a hard turn.

"We've got ground fire!" he called out from the cockpit, "Two SAMs heading up. Countermeasures active." and Willis heard the sound of decoys being ejected from the dropship.

"What about our escort?" he asked.

"Archangel we're under fire." the pilot signalled.

"Copy that." Shaw responded, "We've got eyes on the launch site. Heading in now."

Shaw's fighter along with one other then broke from their formation and went into a steep dive, heading straight for where the two missiles had been launched from.

"I've got four heat signatures. They look like Sissusk ground vehicles." Mori told her as he studied the fighter's infra red sensors, "Three mobile launchers and a C and C vehicle."

"Nothing we can't handle." Shaw responded, "Prepping guns for a low level run."

Shaw and her wingman dove towards the ground, both fighters releasing decoy flares and chaff to confuse the tracking systems of the machine controlled ground vehicles before sharply cutting their speed to a subsonic rate and pulling up to avoid crashing. Both fighters now headed straight towards the enemy vehicles, using the terrain for cover until they came into visual range. At this point Shaw adjusted her heading and angled her fighter's nose downwards slightly to get a better angle before squeezing her trigger. From this position Shaw and Mori could just about make out the details of the machine controlled vehicles and they saw that although they were obviously built on the same sort of chassis as previously encountered Sissusk vehicles, these lacked crew compartments for living operators and instead mounted the numerous sensor receptors and antennas needed for an onboard AI to interact with the real world.

"Firing." she said as she let loose a sustained burst of projectiles from her gauss cannons and started to pull up again. The twin streams of projectiles cut through two of the surface to air missile launchers. Lacking any heavy armour, the two mobile artillery pieces were easy prey for the hypersonic rounds that tore the two vehicles to pieces before the warheads on the missiles they carried detonated while still in what remained of their launchers. The blast was insufficient to inflict any serious damage on the remaining launcher vehicle or command units the second fighter unleashed its cannons on them as Shaw was already climbing out of her run.

"Great shooting Watchman." Shaw transmitted to her wingman as she saw the final launcher explode in the mirrors mounted inside her cockpit canopy.

"Thanks Archangel. All in a day's work."

"Attention drop ship, enemy triple-A destroyed. Your path is clear." Shaw then broadcast, continuing to climb so that she could circle until she was needed again.

"Shaw reports destroying enemy anti-air defences at this location captain." Goldman said and she marked the position of the destroyed missile launchers on the map shown on the central console.

"That's inside the bombardment area." Knight commented, "Think the machines know what we're up to?"

"They could be rushing reinforcements in." Reeves replied and he looked towards the sensor operators, "are there any indications of mass troop movements towards the primary target area?" he asked.

"Not at the moment captain." Cortez answered, "But I do have a group of aircraft coming over the horizon at supersonic speeds."

"Sissusk fighters captain." Lucas added, "Sixteen of them."

"Do your people still have any active air assets on the planet fleet leader?" Knight asked.

"No." the Sissusk responded, "Our remaining air and space forces on Sissar were destroyed trying to clear a path for the Emperor to escape."

"No sense letting them get close enough to pose a threat then." Reeves said, "Helm, angle us so that as

many of our free electron beam lasers can target them as possible. Weapons, target those aircraft and fire at will."

"Turning now captain." Ash replied as he adjusted the *Warspite's* orientation so that as many of its light beam turrets could target the approaching aircraft.

"Acquiring targets now sir." a gunner added before the cruiser's free electron beam lasers opened fire. Even with hundreds of kilometres of atmosphere between the *Warspite* and the aircraft to diffuse the particle beams, they were still sufficiently powerful when they struck the aircraft that a single hit was enough to incinerate them.

"Captain," Goldman called out, "word from our dropships. They've reached the surface and are deploying the marines now."

"Go! Go! Go!" Willis yelled as the ramp at the back of the dropship opened and he and the marines crammed inside the craft rushed down it onto the surface of the Sissusks' home world. Just as Willis had warned his men, the heat on Sissar was stifling and he felt himself starting to sweat almost as soon as he exited the climate controlled interior of the drop ship. As soon as the marines were clear of the dropship they dropped to their knees and there was the roar of engines as the drop ship rose back into the air, circling so that it could provide fire support as needed while Willis took in his surroundings.

The devastation caused by the gauss cannon bombardment was total and the landscape could have been on any one of more than a hundred human-inhabited worlds. No structures or vegetation that would identify the planet remained and the scorched ground was strewn with fragments of rock and the charred remains of plants. Nearby three more platoons of marines had deployed from their drop ships and now almost a full company waited for an order from Willis.

"Okay guys," he broadcast to the company via his personal radio, "the target is located four thousand metres west of here. Make sure your cloaks are secure and move out." and the marines raised the hoods of their camouflage capes as they got to their feet, organised themselves into a formation that allowed them to watch in all directions at once and began to march across the blasted terrain.

Simultaneously with the company of marines from the *Warspite* being deployed, the platoons carried aboard the light cruisers *Bayonet* and *Ceres* were also disembarking from their drop ships on an area of high ground that overlooked a wide roadway that was now littered with ruined vehicles. A few of the wrecks were obviously military in origin but the majority were civilian vehicles that had belonged to Sissusk attempting to flee from the machines. Unlike the *Warspite's* marines, who had brought with them only weapons intended to be carried over long distances by light infantry that lacked the boosted strength provided by enhanced infantry's exo-skeletons or the powered armour of heavy infantry, the marines from the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* were also armed with a number of belt fed heavy machine guns, automatic grenade launchers and mortars that needed to be fixed in place to operate and as the drop ships that had brought them here rose back into the air they hurriedly began to set these up and dig in. In the middle of the defences being set up a single skip set down but left its engines running, ready to depart as soon as the Sissusk Emperor could be loaded aboard the craft.

As the marines were working the units commander took the handset of a radio pack from one of his men and raised it to his mouth.

"Lieutenant Ivankov to *Warspite*, we are in position and digging in. Tell the Sissusk we are waiting for their arrival." he transmitted.

"Captain, marines are reporting they are in position to rendezvous with the Sissusk Emperor." Goldman said when the message from the surface arrived and Reeves looked across the central console at Kaa'is'sar.

"Fleet leader, would you like to inform your Emperor's security detail to escort him to the pick up zone?" he said and the Sissusk picked up the communication headset again.

"This is Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar. The human troops are in position to extract the Emperor. You may proceed."

"Understood fleet leader." a Sissusk voice responded, "We are leaving now."

"Can we see their convoy?" Knight asked when he heard this and he looked towards the *Warspite's* sensor operators.

"Not yet commander." one of them answered, "Though I do have the location we were provided with as their shelter under observation."

"Alert our fighters and the *Bayonet*." Reeves said, "The last thing I want is friendly fire involving an emperor. But make sure that nothing gets close to the Emperor's convoy without being challenged."

"Captain I've got something." the sensor operator then called out, "Multiple Sissusk vehicles exiting the shelter."

"I see them." Lucas added as she quickly called up the feed from the *Warspite's* optical sensors and began to compare it with what the Commonwealth knew about Sissusk ground units. Fortunately although little information regarding Sissusk ground forces had been recovered from the database aboard the light cruiser

boarded at Phi-2 Pavonis following the battle at Liberty the Commonwealth had been able to build up a considerable amount of information from the remains of vehicles either captured or destroyed there, "Looks like eighteen vehicles in all and all of them armoured. I've got two MBTs, four scouts, eight IFVs, a wheeled command and control vehicle and three vehicles not in our database yet. Though from the looks of them they could be medium tanks or maybe combat engineering vehicles."

"Fleet leader, how are they likely to react to our fighters making a low pass overhead?" Reeves asked, "I want them to know that we've got them in sight without making any wireless contact that could give away their position to the machines."

"Missile launch detected." Cortez announced suddenly.

"Standby to deploy countermeasures." Reeves ordered.

"It's not heading for us." Goldman replied, "Looks like a surface to surface cruise missile. It's stealthy but from up here we can see the hole in our terrain mapping radar."

"Heading?" Knight asked.

"Right for the Emperor's convoy." Goldman answered, "I estimate three and a half minutes until impact."

"That didn't take long." Reeves said.

"Captain!" Kaa'is'sar, "You must shoot that missile down before the Emperor can be harmed."

"No need to worry fleet leader." Reeves replied, "We've plenty of time to deal with it. Weapons, shoot down that missile and I want a gauss round targeted at the launch site before another can be launched." Reeves then watched the display as first a single blast from a free-electron beam laser brought down the cruise missile and then a single projectile struck the launch site, creating a large crater where the launcher had been.

"Captain I'm picking up a lot of activity." Cortez announced, "I think the machines are on the move, converging on the Emperor's convoy."

"I thought we took out their command and control." Thomas commented.

"If they have scouts in the area then I doubt the machines would need it." Knight replied.

"Make sure that our fighters give all available cover to the convoy," Reeves said, "and let the *Bayonet* know to engage any enemy force they see heading towards it or our marines."

Willis and his men were about a third of the way to their destination when they heard the sounds of activity coming from up ahead and he called the company to a halt. Most of the sounds were mechanical in nature, the familiar sounds of vehicle engines running and the clanking of machinery in operation but amongst them were also strange squawking sounds that he did not recognise.

"Wait here." he broadcast to his men, "I'm going to see if this is something we can get around." and then with his command section accompanying him he advanced further, making his way to an area of raised ground that had the look of the edge of an impact crater from one of the gauss cannon rounds used to bombard the area. Close to the top of this Willis dropped down and crawled the rest of the way to the top and peered over, taking out a set of binoculars for a better view as he got his first real look at their adversary.

The machines' infantry units looked very much like the Sissusk, just as human made robots often resembled the human form so had the Sissusk modelled their creations after themselves with heads mounted on long necks that extended forwards from their bodies while thick tails balanced these at the rear. Taking advantage of the physical structure of their robotic creations, the Sissusk had equipped them with weapons mounted on their backs in pairs and Willis could make out that most of them were armed with machine guns and grenade launchers. On the other hand a few mounted what appeared to be missile launchers of some kind on their backs while the clawed mechanical hands that the ordinary robots possessed were replaced with a targeting system on one arm and what looked like a shortened variant of a Sissusk machine gun mounted beneath the other. To support the infantry units there were also several vehicles, almost identical to the types used in the assault on Liberty months earlier. But each of these had obviously been modified to be fully automated and Willis could see the sensors used to provide the controlling AI with information on the terrain around it.

In all there appeared to be about twenty or thirty of the infantry robots as well as three tanks and another three troop carriers. But the machines were not alone and there were also several open topped trucks that did not appear to have been modified to be fully automated, though the seats inside them were obviously not suitable for a Sissusk driver. Instead Willis guessed that these had been driven here by some of the bizarre aliens he could see being directed by the machines. These had an avian appearance to them with their beaked heads being mounted on the ends of long necks that extended from their plump bodies that were covered in dark feathers. If their species had ever had ancestors capable of flight then that ability appeared to have evolved out of them and what remained of their wings now looked more like wide, flattened arms that nevertheless still retained feathers and ended in four fingered hands.

"The *Warspite* needs to see this." Willis said, "Get that radio over here." and as his command section's radio operator move closer Willis opened up a port on the side of his binoculars and plugged in a data cable so that he could send what he was seeing up to the *Warspite*.

"Captain we've got a video signal coming in from Major Willis." Goldman announced.

"Transfer it here." Reeves replied and a portion of the central console's display was replaced with footage from Willis' binoculars.

"*Warspite* are you seeing this?" Willis asked, zooming in on one of the aliens.

"We're seeing it major. I'm going to get Doctor Thundercloud up here." Reeves said and he nodded to Goldman to tell her to summon the *Warspite's* medical officer, "Can you tell what's going on down there?"

"It looks like the aliens are setting up some sort of communications equipment captain." Willis replied.

"A replacement for an antenna destroyed in our bombardment perhaps?" Knight suggested.

"They must not be allowed to repair their communications." Kaa'is'sar said suddenly, "You should bombard the area again."

"Our forces are there." Knight pointed out.

"Then withdraw them." Kaa'is'sar said.

"Even if I was willing to do that there is still the matter of these other aliens. Mister Multan, what can you tell me about them?"

"They are called Krawlek captain." Multan replied, "About a hundred of your years ago their nations had reached a level of technology where they could produce crude atomic weapons and two major groups turned these on one another, causing massive damage to their world. The Sissusk detected these explosions and arrived in the guise of peacekeepers wanting to help rebuild their planet and civilisation. Of course by the time the Krawlek discovered the price was eternal slavery it was too late. The Sissusk had taken all the weapons they could have uses to resist them and controlled their planet."

"We saved them." Kaa'is'sar hissed, "Would you rather we had let them all die?"

"The humans have managed to help a species called the Brekken without resorting to enslaving them fleet leader." Multan said.

"I do not care what the humans do!" Kaa'is'sar snapped.

"Well you ought to." Reeves said, glaring at the Sissusk, "Because I intend to rescue those slaves and offer them sanctuary aboard this vessel." then he turned his attention back to the feed from the planet, "Major, do you think that you can take out those machines without risking the aliens?"

"Any action we take is going to put them at risk captain." Willis replied, "But I think we can knock out those tanks easy enough. Unless the Sissusk have upgraded them significantly since Liberty that is."

"Fleet leader?" Knight said, looking at Kaa'is'sar.

"The only changes made to our forces have been to automate them." he replied.

"Major," Reeves said, "you are clear to attack."

"Okay this is it." Willis said, disconnecting his binoculars from the radio set and aiming his rifle over the top of the crater's edge. Then he activated his own radio to address his men, "We're cleared to attack. We'll call in air support against their vehicles then take out the infantry ourselves. First platoon move up. I want the vehicles painting now."

One of the marine platoons advanced towards the crater's edge, deploying along it. A number of the marines had specialised laser targeting devices built into their rifles' optical sights and they now used these to mark the machine controlled armoured vehicles as targets, signalling when they were ready. Then when each of the vehicles had been targeted Willis nodded.

"Make it rain." he said, grinning.

Each of the marines targeting the armoured vehicles then depressed a button on the side of his rifle, sending a signal to the drop ships that had brought the marines to the surface. Upon receiving these, each drop ship automatically released a wave of missiles that rapidly acquired the reflected laser energy without the need for their crews to do anything. These missiles then flew towards the machine controlled vehicles that had been marked out as their targets.

The machines detected the approach of these missiles and the vehicles instantly took steps to protect themselves, releasing countermeasures and firing on the missiles with lasers and machine guns that brought down two of the missiles while they were still a safe distance away. But the other four found their targets, diving down to strike their upper hulls. The warheads carried by the missiles were bigger than anything an ordinary man could carry and they had no difficulty in punching through the vehicles' armour and sending blasts of molten metal into their interiors and in the space of just a few seconds all three of the troop carriers and one of the tanks was reduced to burning wrecks. But this still left two of the battle tanks intact as well as all of the robotic infantry and these now searched for the source of the attack.

Detecting the dropships, one of the missile launcher equipped robots launched two missiles simultaneously and Willis knew that the time had come to reveal his own men's presence.

"Open fire!" he shouted and to either side of him there was the roar of rifle and machine gun fire, "Company advance."

The sudden attack took the machines by surprise but they reacted quickly and as their Krawlek slaves were rushing for cover they turned towards the human marines and returned fire. Most of this fire came from the

machine guns mounted on the robots' backs but the machines were also quick to fire rapid volleys of grenades at anywhere they thought they would be effective while the two surviving tanks turned their main guns on the marines and the explosive rounds they could fire blasted large chunks from the top of the crater rim.

"Aim for the necks!" Willis ordered, "And call in another missile strike to take out those tanks."

"Willis this is Archangel." Shaw's voice said in Willis' ear as the sound of engines overhead grew louder, "Need an assist?"

"Just in time commander." he replied, "Can you hit those tanks for us? Be advised there are civilians in the area."

"Understood major. We're on our way in." Shaw replied.

In the cockpit of her fighter, Shaw looked at her heads up display where the two robotic tanks were highlighted.

"Well Kaz, what do you think?" she asked.

"Easy." Mori replied, "Our gauss cannons should penetrate those tanks from above. Just watch out for their defences. They've got secondary lasers that could bring us down. Plus some of those robot soldiers seem to be carrying surface to air missiles."

"That's what I rely on you for Kaz. Keep those countermeasures active." Shaw said before opening up her communications to the rest of her squadron, "On me. We're going in."

The fighters of Shaw's squadron dove down out of the sky towards the machine forces facing Willis' marines, using electronic jamming and ejecting sensor countermeasures to confuse the tanks' tracking systems.

Nevertheless they and their supporting infantry attempted to engage the fighters as they descended rapidly, but they failed to be able to lock onto any of them before Shaw opened fire and a burst of gauss cannon projectiles ripped one of the remaining tanks wide open before the final tank fell victim to another of the squadron's fighters.

"Okay major, you're good to go." Shaw signalled.

"Thanks Archangel." Willis responded as he fired a rapid burst of rifle rounds at a robot now charging up the side of the crater towards him. As he had told his men, he aimed for the machine's neck where multiple armour plates overlapped and one of them found a gap that it was able to pierce, producing a shower of sparks as the metal round shorted out some of the electronics inside. The drawback with fighting against a mechanical foe like the Sissusk built robots was that it was not enough to simply inflict damage akin to disabling a limb on a living opponent. Robots felt no pain and so any damage that did not totally disable the machine counted for very little. Slowing them down maybe, but not taking them out of the fight. But Willis' attack damaged the robot's motor control and it tumbled to the ground where it thrashed about as it tried to regain control. Now that it was down, the thinner armour beneath its body was exposed and Willis fired again, placing a burst between where its legs met its body and there was a brief flash followed by an explosion as the bullets destroyed the robot's internal batteries.

Willis was then forced to duck behind the rim of the crater as a sustained burst of machine gun fire from one of the robots impacted on the ground right in front of him. In the crater below the marines, the machines were forming into a line that allowed them all to engage the human troops at the same time with the weapons mounted on their backs. Each of the machines was then able to focus on just a small section of the human line, while overlapping its field of fire with the units standing either side of it to ensure that none of the marines avoided being fired at with either machine guns or the grenade launchers some of the robots carried that sent explosive projectiles over the marines' heads where they exploded to shower them with shrapnel. To make themselves harder to hit the machines took advantage of their physical structure being based off that of the Sissusk and bent their legs to lower themselves down. Willis and many of his marines had witnessed something similar among Sissusk, but that was an action they associated with surrender whereas the robots below were obviously not surrendering. But they were making themselves easy targets.

"This is Willis." Willis broadcast, "Enemy forces static and in the open. Requesting close air support."

"Copy that major. I'm on my way in." one of the drop ship pilots responded and Willis smiled.

"We've got air cover on its way." he told his men, "Keep those things right where they are." and he bobbed up over the rim of the crater and fired another burst from his rifle that he watched bounce off one of the robots.

The marines continued firing, doing their best to pick out the weak points of the robots' structures but with little success. Unwilling to use grenades just in case they harmed any of the nearby aliens, this meant that few of the machines suffered any damage before the air was filled with the sound of powerful engines.

"Incoming!" Willis yelled, even though his throat mounted microphone would pick up even a whisper and the marines ceased fire and pressed themselves to the ground behind the crater rim just as a drop ship swooped down.

There was a brilliant light from above as the pilot fired the drop ship's nose mounted laser at the machines neatly lined up on the ground below. Designed for engaging armoured vehicles, the weapon was more than adequate to penetrate the armour plating of the robotic infantry and as the pilot maintained the beam while the drop ship passed overhead it burned through each of them in turn, detonating both power cells and

stored munitions. One of the robots attempted to return fire on the drop ship, launching a missile that got only part way towards the craft before it too was struck by the beam and exploded in mid air.

"Run complete." the pilot transmitted as he ceased fire and the drop ship began to gain altitude again, "Targets destroyed."

"Confirmed." Willis responded, peering over the rim of the crater at the burning remains of the machines, "Area clear." then he looked around at his men, "Okay then, let's see if we can make some new friends." he added.

Cautiously the marines climbed over the crater rim and began to descend. Ahead of them they could see not only the smashed robotic infantry units but also their burning armoured vehicles. But it was the lighter transports that the marines focused on more as from behind them they saw one beaked face after another peer out to see what was happening.

"Commonwealth marines!" Willis shouted, despite knowing that the aliens would most likely be unable to understand him.

"I've got movement." a marine called out, raising his rifle as one of the Krawlek finally emerged from hiding and the alien froze when it saw the bullpup rifle aimed towards it.

"Stand down!" Willis snapped, "Everyone be calm. But stay alert, we don't know what these things are like yet." then, hoping to put the cowering Krawlek more at ease Willis shut down the camouflage cape he wore so that they could see him clearly and then reached up to remove his helmet, "Hello." he said, "We're friends."

17.

"Avian." Thundercloud said as he watched the footage from marine cameras being transmitted back up to the *Warspite*, "Flightless obviously, but definitely avian."

"I don't suppose anyone up there knows how to talk to them do they?" Willis asked as he watched more of the aliens emerge from hiding now that his marines had revealed themselves to not be Sissusk. Though there had been few human slaves on the Sissusk home world itself, they were well known enough that some of the Krawlek recognised their species.

"Lieutenant?" Knight asked, looking at Lucas. But the intelligence officer shook her head.

"I'm sorry commander. But this mission wasn't supposed to involve any direct contact with the Sissusk or any of their subject species. I know that some of the Sissusk language files have been translated by our intelligence services but apart from the Sissusk language itself, we've not been given any of them."

"Major," Reeves said, "are any of the aliens wearing those translation collars the Sissusk give to some of their slaves?"

"Hang on captain. I'm just checking now." Willis responded while searching through the growing crowd of Krawlek in front of him. Seeing that one of the aliens was wearing a headset that connected to a collar mounted just under its head he reached out his hand towards it and beckoned it towards him, "Come here." he said in what he hoped would be interpreted as a friendly gesture. However, the Krawlek appeared disturbed by this and started to retreat. But the mood of the other Krawlek appeared to turn suddenly and there were abrupt squawks as those nearby shoved the collar wearing Krawlek forwards. All of a sudden a rock was thrown that narrowly missed the Krawlek in the collar and the crowd closed in around the alien and began to attack it.

"Get back!" Willis yelled and he fired his rifle into the air, "Get away."

"What's happening?" Thundercloud said as he tried to piece together what was going on from the various different camera feeds being shown on the console.

"I don't think that these aliens like the members of their own species considered worth giving those collars to any more than the humans we rescued did." Knight commented.

"They're collaborators." Thomas commented from his station.

"Major Willis, separate that individual from the others." Reeves ordered.

"We're trying sir." the marine officer replied, seeing that his shots had had the desired effect and that the crowd had backed away from the human marines who had now raised their weapons and taken aim at the aliens. But one of them still had hold of the individual wearing the collar and now also had a piece of sharp metal in its hand as well.

"Put it down!" Willis shouted, hoping that pointing his rifle directly at the alien would persuade it of how serious he was about not having the collaborator being subjected to any sort of summary justice, "Kelly, Black. Disarm our friend here and separate him from his hostage." he added and two of his marines darted forwards, both keeping their rifles trained on the armed Krawlek. Covered by his comrade, one of the marines then reached out to take the sharpened metal from the alien's hand before tossing it aside and pulling the Krawlek collaborator away. The Krawlek who had been holding the improvised blade to the collaborator then let out a sudden squawk before retreating back into the crowd.

"I'm guessing that collar won't let us address the Krawlek directly will it?" Reeves said, looking at Multan.

"No captain." the Fedrun answered, "The collars were primarily configured to translate the wearers' language into the common Sissusk tongue and back again. Though a few were also designed to translate my own language given the extent to which my people were used by the Sissusk."

"It'll take time to get a robot down there." Knight commented and Reeves nodded.

"We'll have to do things a little more crudely then." he said, "Major Willis I want you to take the collar from the collaborator and give it to one of the other Krawlek. Then put him on the line."

"Yes captain." Willis replied and he nodded to the two marines who were still standing close to the collared alien and though the Krawlek let out several squawks that sounded like some sort of protest they removed the collar and handed it to Willis. In turn Willis beckoned for one of the crowd to approach him and when the alien stepped forwards he handed over the collar. At first the Krawlek did nothing but then it glanced around at the rest of the crowd and several of them spoke, prompting the Krawlek to put on the collar and fit the earpiece to its head.

"Putting you on now captain." Willis said as he handed a radio handset to the alien.

"Robot translate for me." Reeves said before addressing the alien, "My name is Captain Reeves of the Commonwealth cruiser *Warspite*. We are willing to evacuate you to our territory where you will be safe."

As Reeves spoke the robot translated his message and on the planet below the Krawlek reacted strongly, turning its head towards the crowd and squawking rapidly in a way that provoked more outbursts from the other aliens that were enough to drown out the translation into the Sissusk language provided by the collar.

"I think you've got their attention captain." Willis said, pulling the radio handset back towards him when all of

a sudden one of the crowd tossed the Sissusk version of a tablet computer to the Krawlek now wearing the collar and the alien thrust it towards Willis and began jabbing at the display as it squawked again.

"What's going on down there major?" Knight asked.

"The aliens are showing me a map commander." Willis replied, taking the tablet from the Krawlek and comparing it to the map on his own. The symbols and scale used were different of course, but the contours were similar enough that he was able to identify the location being indicated on his own map where a cluster of buildings had been detected from the *Warspite's* orbital scans," They seem very interested in a group of structures about thirty kilometres from here to the north." he told the *Warspite* and aboard the cruiser Reeves scrolled the larger map of the area on the central console to focus on these.

"I think that is a slave labour camp captain." Multan said.

"Presumably where more Krawlek are being held." Knight commented and Reeves nodded.

"Can we get an estimate of how many slaves we're talking about here?" he said, looking towards the *Warspite's* sensor operators.

"I'm not picking up any movement from the camp captain." one of them answered.

"Captain, from the number of lodgings present I would say that there were up to two thousand Krawlek at that camp." Multan said.

"That's more than we can manage." Knight commented.

"Then we'll split them between our ships." Reeves replied, "Commander Goldman I need to speak with Captain Dobson."

"Yes sir. Putting you through now."

"Captain Dobson," Reeves said, "how many atmosphere capable shuttles do you have aboard the *Orinoco*?"

"Not many," the repair tender's captain replied, "Most of our shuttles are just taxi craft for use purely in space. But we've got two heavy lifters that are capable of planetary landings." and Reeves nodded.

"How many people can they each carry?"

"At a push just under a hundred in one go. But it won't be comfortable." Dobson told him.

"That doesn't matter. Captain, I want to evacuate around two thousand civilians from the surface. We'll split them between our ships but the majority will have to go aboard the *Orinoco*. We'll need to use every atmosphere capable shuttle we've got making multiple pick ups."

"Well we can probably house more than half of them in our holds. But are we talking about humans here? If not then are we sure we've got the right provisions for them?"

"He's right captain." Thundercloud added, "We need to know what they eat and any special needs they may have."

"As far as I know the Krawlek can consume the same foods as you or I captain." Multan said before anyone needed to ask him, "Though I would suggest looting the labour camp of its provisions to make sure that they do not accidentally consume anything hazardous before it can be identified."

"Our agreement did not include widespread looting of Sissusk property captain." Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar said, the robot translating for him automatically.

"If you don't like what I'm doing then we can dissolve our partnership now fleet leader." Reeves replied sternly, "I'll put you on the first shuttle to the surface and you can explain to your Emperor in person why he's not getting off the planet." then as the Sissusk hissed Reeves turned his attention back to Willis, "Major do you have any casualties?" he asked.

"Yes captain." Willis replied, looking back towards the rim of the crater where the marines injured during the brief fight with the machines were being treated.

"Then confirm that those transports are in working order and load them onto them. Then put the Krawlek back on. I want them to return to the labour camp with your casualties. We'll be sending shuttles down for them and as much food as they can carry."

"Understood captain." Willis said, "I take it you want to explain this to the Krawlek as well?"

"I do. Put him on."

While Reeves was explaining to the Krawlek how he intended to evacuate them the marines from the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* still waited for the convoy bearing the Sissusk Emperor to arrive.

"Contact!" a marine called out and Ivankov turned to see what was happening.

Coming around the remains of a small structure several hundred metres from the marines' position he saw a small vehicle travelling on six chunky wheels. Covered in sensor receptors and transmission antennas the vehicle was clearly a scout of some kind that could just as easily have been a ground based drone as a fully automated AI controlled vehicle and although it carried no obvious weapons, the mere fact that it was closing on the marines' position made it a threat.

"Stand to." Ivankov ordered, "Destroy that vehicle."

The marines facing the approaching scout opened fire on it immediately and unsurprisingly their small arms had no effect on its armoured chassis. The sharps 'cracks' of rifle and machine gun fire were then joined by the much louder report of one of the marines' emplaced heavy machine guns that spat out rounds twice the

calibre of the standard seven millimetre rounds used by the marines' lighter weapons. Against the body of the vehicle these proved to be as ineffective as the smaller rounds were but when the gunner turned his fire on the vehicle's wheels the heavy rounds shredded one of them, leaving it running on just five. This appeared to have little effect, however and the vehicle weaved as it continued to close in on the marines and it occurred to Ivankov that the scout could also have a secondary function as a kamikaze device that would smash into their lines before exploding.

In front of Ivankov a pair of marines hurried forwards with a man portable free-electron beam laser. One of the pair carried the bulky weapon over his shoulder and he dropped to his knees to take aim at the automated scout while his companion connected it to the heavy battery pack he carried on his own back. "Charging." the marine said as the weapon drew power and he took aim. Not knowing how effective the beam would be at penetrating the scout's armour the marine laser operator lined his weapon up on a cluster of lenses that he took to be an optical sensor cluster, reasoning that even if he could not destroy the vehicle then he could at least attempt to knock out some of its sensors and hopefully limit its ability to act. Through his sight, the operator saw an indication that the weapon had reached full charge and he fired right away. Despite the scout manoeuvring wildly to make itself a more difficult target to hit, the laser operator did not need to worry about it being able to move fast enough to evade the particle beam moving at close to the speed of light and he smiled when he saw the flash of the beam hitting its target right where he had aimed it. The beam burned through the lenses and penetrated to the core of the vehicle where its primary systems were located, destroying the motor system that propelled it. Instantly the vehicle flipped over as its wheels locked up and it rolled sideways before there was a massive explosion that caused the marines to take cover. Ivankov breathed a sigh of relief at this, realising such a large detonation could only have been caused by a warhead detonating inside the scout and knowing that his fears about its secondary role had been well founded.

"Stay sharp." he told his men, "We've destroyed their scout but those machines probably know where we are now and I expect them to send more."

The inhabitants of the labour camp were alerted to the presence of the Commonwealth forces when a fighter made a high speed pass over the camp and its defences responded. Designed to prevent a mass breakout or riot by the slaves, the defences were inadequate to deal with aerial targets and the limited machine gun fire did not come close to hitting the fighter. However, it did give away the positions of the camp's defences and the drop ship that followed the fighter in targeted them with its own weapons, launching a flurry of carefully aimed missiles, cannon rounds and laser blasts that took all of them out in moments.

Joined by a second drop ship, the two craft hovered over the camp as the pilots watched for a reaction on the ground. As expected the machines guarding the camp soon emerged to try and defend it but like the fixed defences these were not equipped for an anti-aircraft role and carried only machine guns that could not penetrate the drop ships' armoured hulls. In response to this the drop ships turned towards the machine troops and returned fire, their lasers slicing the Sissusk built robots apart just before the convoy of transports bearing the Krawlek work party and several of the *Warspite's* marines took advantage of the lack of defences to crash through the perimeter gate before coming to a stop in the centre of the camp.

Krawlek jumped down from the transports and began to squawk loudly, prompting more of their species to emerge from the camp structures. The first to appear wore Sissusk translation collars and carried long batons in their hands but they were ill-prepared to face the Commonwealth marines. Seeing the Krawlek collaborators appear, the single squad of healthy marines sent along to protect the convoy disembarked from their transports.

"Commonwealth marines!" the squad leader yelled despite knowing that the Krawlek would not understand him before he fired a short burst from his sidearm over their heads.

It was then that the shadows of the *Orinoco's* heavy lift shuttles fell over the camp as they descended towards it, landing just outside the perimeter as smaller shuttles from the Commonwealth cruisers approached behind them. Encouraged by the Krawlek aboard the transports, more of the camp's prisoners now appeared to witness the collaborators being disarmed of their clubs and bound. The marines did not intend to leave them behind, but they also had no intention of leaving them to move around freely where experience had taught them they were likely to face being attacked by those they had previously held power over.

Realising that freedom was at hand, the Krawlek in the camp now came surging out of their barracks and the marines saw the young and infirm being helped along as well. At the same time a group of the Krawlek work party was gathering others to help loot the camp's stores of everything useful and there was a growing pile of boxes containing foodstuffs and basic supplies forming in the centre of the camp.

"This is Sergeant O'Neil to the *Warspite*," the marine squad leader transmitted using the large radio set carried by one of his men, "the camp's secured. We have eight prisoners that we'll bring back to the *Warspite* with us."

"Confirmed sergeant." Reeves replied from the bridge of the *Warspite*, "Make sure you take away all but one of those collars and give them to other Krawlek. Right now they're the only way we have of talking to them." then he turned to Doctor Thundercloud, "Looks like you'll be examining another species shortly doctor." he added and Thundercloud smiled.

"I'll go and make sure the infirmary is prepared." he replied before departing from the bridge.

"Captain I've got a contact!" Cortez exclaimed, "Tachyon signal closing."

"Can you identify the source?" Knight asked.

"No sir. But it's not very large. It could be one of the enemy corvettes returning." Cortez answered.

"Captain we've just been scanned by tadar." Goldman added, "Looked like a single ranging pulse."

"Enemy vessel dropping to sub light. Range six hundred thousand kilometres." Cortez said as the approaching vessel decelerated. At a distance of just over two light seconds, there was a slight pause before the crew of the Commonwealth cruisers got a good look at the new arrival but when they did the vessel was one that they had encountered before.

"Contact is a Sissusk corvette captain," Lucas announced, "and it looks damaged. I think it was one of the ships that escaped us earlier."

"Back to see what we're up to." Knight commented.

"Captain should we move to intercept?" Ash asked.

"No." Reeves replied, "Commander Goldman, order the Ceres to break off and approach the enemy vessel. If it withdraws before it comes into effective engagement range then let it go and fall back into formation. If not then they should use their charged tachyon projectors to keep it from escaping and destroy it. Sensors, are there any other signs of approaching vessels?"

"Nothing on long range scans yet captain." Cortez replied before she added, "Wait no, I've got a signal just entering range. Large tachyon wave about four light years out."

"How large?" Reeves said.

"Too large to be a single ship. Closing at a rate of about six light years per day."

"That gives us sixteen hours." Thomas said.

"You think they're coming here for us?" Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Most likely a squadron from a neighbouring system responding to a message from the ships defending here." he answered. Then he looked at Kaa'is'sar, "Fleet leader, I don't suppose you had any reinforcements coming did you?" he asked and the Sissusk hissed back at him.

"If I did then I would have had no need to make this deal with you captain." the robot translated.

"Then we can assume that they're hostile." Reeves said, "I want to be out of this system before they arrive. Ideally within eight hours."

"The Emperor's convoy ought to be at the rendezvous point in under half an hour." Goldman said.

"Then it's down to how rapidly we can load the Krawlek from the surface and how quickly Major Willis can reach his objective." Reeves said.

"You must not put the Emperor at risk." Kaa'is'sar said.

"I won't abandon those slaves or my own people." Reeves replied, "Frankly fleet leader, deal or no deal, you're Emperor is the least of my worries right now."

The sound of engines alerted the marines waiting for the Sissusk Emperor to the approach of more ground vehicles and they prepared themselves to come under fire. But when Lieutenant Ivankov looked through his binoculars he saw a small column of vehicles coming towards them that not only bore several prominent and brightly coloured flags but also had Sissusk visibly looking out of hatches and manning pintle mounted weapons.

"Signal the *Warspite*." he said, "Tell them we have visual contact with the Emperor's convoy." but before his marines could act there was an explosion and one of the Sissusk vehicles burst into flames as it spun off the road, "What's going on?" he exclaimed, "Did anyone see where that came from?"

Aboard the *Bayonet* the bridge crew hurriedly searched for the source of the attack. As instructed they had been monitoring the progress of the Emperor's convoy carefully and had seen no signs of large scale movements by the machines before a single missile was launched from short range and struck the vehicle before any action could be taken to intercept it.

"Can't anyone see where that thing came from?" Hale demanded, looking around at her bridge crew.

"I can narrow the launch site down to an area of about a five kilometre square but I think the missile was launched ballistically and the motor ignited later."

"Is there any other movement visible?" Hale asked.

"Nothing yet captain. Wait no, I've got multiple contacts. Vehicles, infantry and munitions. All heading straight for our marines."

"Weapons fire." Hale ordered, "Nothing must get through."

The convoy did not stop to check the wreck for survivors, instead the remaining vehicles swerved around it and sped onwards. But moments later all hell was let loose as an artillery barrage began along with an orbital strike from the *Bayonet* attempting to counter it.

“Cover!” Ivankov ordered as he pressed himself against the ground. Even with his head down he could make out the flashes of explosions in the sky as the *Bayonet* used its free-electron beam lasers to bring down the artillery shells and missiles aimed towards them. The machines had obviously counted on this happening and had concentrated as many of their weapons as they could before launching their assault and although the *Bayonet* was able to pick off the most powerful munitions, several of the smaller rounds made it through and began to land among the marines positions and around the convoy.

The Sissusk reacted to the bombardment by retreating into their vehicles and sealing their hatches. Then the defensive weapons mounted on their roofs began to fire automatically, seeking out incoming rounds and attempting to destroy them while dischargers set into their hulls release canisters of smoke and chaff to confuse the missiles’ sensors.

“Contact! Five hundred metres south!” a marine called out and Ivankov lifted his head and turned to see numerous robotic Sissusk come charging over the top of a hill and begin firing.

“Return fire. Everything we’ve got.” he ordered, “Keep them away from the convoy and our ships.”

The marines did as they were ordered and opened fire, adding their own mortar rounds and bursts of machine gun fire to the din. Meanwhile Ivankov activated his radio, “This is Ivankov. We need urgent air support. Enemy is closing fast. Be advised that the Sissusk vehicles to the west of my position are friendlies.”

“Copy that Ivankov.” one of the circling fighter pilots responded, “I’ve got visual contact with your location. I’m picking up signals from all around you but there’s too much jamming for me to lock in on anything specific. I’m going to have to do a low level run to try and identify targets.”

Two of the circling fighters then swooped down out of the sky, levelling out at low altitude to fly over the area and carry out a visual inspection. The problem with this was that the combination of low altitude and relatively low speed made the fighters particularly vulnerable when the machines opened fire. Much of this ground fire was from machine guns that could not harm the fighters, though the sounds of multiple impacts was somewhat disconcerting to their crews. However, among the machines there were some equipped to engage vehicles including aircraft and there was a flash of a missile launch as one of the more heavily armed robots locked onto the fighter and fired. The fighter’s systems alerted the crew to the launch and its defences activated but at such short range the missile could not miss and it detonated just beside the cockpit, shattering the canopy and sending shrapnel into the two crew as well as tearing off one of the fighter’s wings at the hinged connection with the fuselage and the stricken craft tumbled downwards before ploughing through dozens of the charging robots that were too slow to evade the burning wreckage.

The second fighter responded with a burst of fire from its gauss cannons that ripped through several more of the machines before its pilot pulled up and took the fighter to a safer altitude as a pair of ejected countermeasures diverted a second missile that would have otherwise detonated close to the fighter.

Seeing the approaching horde of robots the Emperor’s convoy turned to engage them, with just one of the infantry fighting vehicles speeding onwards towards the marines and it was easy for Ivankov to guess that this contained the Emperor himself, the other vehicles acting to buy him time to reach the waiting skip.

“Stand by.” he broadcast to his men, “The Emperor is approaching.”

The devastation caused by the orbital bombardment from the *Warspite* and *Bayonet* was greatest around the Sissusk military headquarters that had become the hub of machine operations and nothing remained of any of the above ground structures that had marked the perimeter of the command centre other than the occasional piece of twisted metal that protruded from the heavily cratered ground.

“Shouldn’t this place be guarded?” one of Willis’ marine asked him.

“My guess is that any of the machines not destroyed by the bombardment have been buried.” Willis replied, “Which may mean that they’re waiting for us when we find a way down. Now spread out and start searching for one.”

Doing as they had been ordered, the marines began to spread out, probing the ground for any signs of a concealed way into the complex they knew existed beneath their feet. Though they had with them some portable scanning equipment meant for searching for buried mines this was useless to them in this instance. The very presence of the underground complex meant that they would be unable to pick out an entrance from the complex’s structure. The only option left open to the marines was to watch for sections of ground that looked to be collapsing as the dirt fell into the complex either through a pre-existing way in or through a breach created by the impact of one of the gauss cannon rounds. About half of the marines searched the area carefully, using simple metal rods to probe the ground looking for any irregularities while the rest formed a perimeter and watched for any machines approaching them.

But it was not the methodical probing of the ground that revealed a way into the underground complex and instead a way inside was only exposed when the ground beneath one of the company’s marines gave way suddenly and he plummeted into the hole.

"What happened?" Willis called out as he and several other nearby marines rushed towards the hole that had suddenly opened up in the ground.

"The ground just gave way under him." a sergeant replied before he leaped back from the edge of the hole just as it started to widen.

"Okay be careful of the hole. The ground around it may not be stable." Willis said before activating his radio,

"Can you hear me down there?" he transmitted and there was a brief pause before a response came back.

"Yes major, I'm okay. I just got the wind knocked out of me, that's all."

"So what can you see down there?" Willis asked.

"I'm in some sort of passageway that slopes downwards. I think this could have been the way in before the *Warspite* hit it from orbit. It's pretty big, wide enough to get a tank down."

"Okay soldier, we'll be down there soon to join you. We'll be widening the hole so you need to get clear before it all comes down on you. Keep watch for any movement but don't do anything to draw attention to yourself. Understood?"

"Yes major."

Willis then turned to the other marines gathered around the hole.

"Right lads, use your entrenching tools. I want this hole widened and stabilised. Now get a move on, I don't want to leave that man down there alone a moment longer than necessary."

While the rest of the convoy engaged the approaching machines the infantry fighting vehicle drove past the marines towards the waiting skip before coming to a halt and the rear hatch dropped open. Ivankov hurried towards the vehicle and called out to the robot waiting by the skip.

"Robot! Get over here!" he yelled, waving the machine towards him and it started to approach just as a pair of armed Sissusk disembarked from the infantry fighting vehicle and raised their weapons. Instinctively Ivankov brought his rifle up as well for a moment before lowering just as a third Sissusk appeared in the hatchway. Whereas the first two wore the standard body armour of Sissusk ground forces this one wore no noticeable armour at all and his clothing was markedly different from the military uniforms worn by the two soldiers. One of the soldiers then hissed at Ivankov just as the robot arrived to translate.

"Prostrate yourself before Emperor Kriss'ss'ras. Twelfth Emperor of the Sissusk Empire."

"I am Lieutenant Ivankov of the Commonwealth Marine Corps." Ivankov replied, cradling his rifle in front of him, "If the twelfth Emperor wants to get out of here then I suggest he gets aboard that skip before those machines get here."

The Emperor hissed at this defiance from a member of a species he had only previously encountered as slaves. But then he looked around into the back of the infantry fighting vehicle where there were more of his men, these more senior advisers and he spoke briefly with them before stepping clear of the vehicle and allowing them to leave as well. One of these others, a Sissusk in a military uniform that lacked the armour of the guards walked up to Ivankov.

"I am War Leader Sa'sas'sik and I suggest that you be careful how you speak to us human." he said, his words translated by the robot, "In other circumstances his majesty would order your death." and Ivankov snarled at the alien.

"Just get your Emperor on the damned skip war leader." he said, "There's room for about a dozen of you if any more are going. No weapons though. Captain Reeves was quite clear about that."

The Sissusk then hissed at him.

"The Emperor will take four of his ministers and a pair of bodyguards with him. I will remain here with the rest of our troops to continue our resistance. Rest assured that if the Emperor is harmed then there will be nowhere for you hide from our vengeance." the robot translated and Ivankov looked around at the ruined planet and the wreckage strewn landscape.

"Yeah, I'm sure there won't." he said.

18.

"Captain, the Sissusk Emperor is boarding the skip now." Goldman announced.

"What about the Krawlek?" Reeves responded, "How much longer until they can all be evacuated from the surface?"

"The first shuttles of Krawlek are already on approach captain. Doctor Thundercloud is ready to examine them and marines are on standby to escort the collaborators to the brig." Goldman replied, "At this rate they should all be aboard our ships in two hours."

"That just leaves Major Willis and his men." Knight commented.

"Major Willis do you read me?" Reeves signalled.

"Here captain." Willis responded from the surface after a brief delay while he took hold of the radio handset.

"Major what's your status?" Reeves asked.

"We've located what we think is the way into the command complex and we're on our way down now."

"Tell your soldiers to head for the lowest level captain." Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar said unexpectedly, "The main computer centre is there."

"You seem awfully co-operative all of a sudden fleet leader." Knight commented.

"The sooner your people return, the sooner I can get the Emperor back to my ship." Kaa'is'sar explained and Reeves smiled at such naked self interest.

"Did you catch that major?" he asked.

"I think so captain. We're to keep heading down, yes?"

"That's right major. But make sure you can stay in touch. Leave men behind to relay signals if you have to but-" Reeves began before Cortez called out suddenly.

"Captain I have another tachyon signal closing. Range point three five light years, speed six light years per day." she said.

"Why didn't you see them before?" Knight asked.

"I think the signal was eclipsed by the planet when we ran our active scan." Cortez said, "It's just come over the horizon and is getting closer."

"Can you tell what we're facing?" Reeves said.

"Multiple contacts definitely but they're flying in close formation and its hard to distinguish them from one another." Cortez answered.

"Captain I'd say we're looking at at least two major ships, possibly battlecruisers or heavier and at least half a dozen other capital ships. Frigates or destroyers. Maybe fewer if they are cruisers." Goldman said as she studied the readings herself.

"I can't confirm anything captain." Lucas added as she too studied the sensor readings, "They could be warships or they could be more transports"

"We can't take the chance." Reeves said, "They'll be here in less than an hour and a half. Lieutenant Commander Goldman, tell the shuttle crews to do everything they can to speed up the evacuation of the Krawlek. Leave the supplies behind and cram as many into each shuttle without exceeding maximum launch weight if they have to, but we need to be going as soon as possible. Major Willis, can you still hear me?"

"Yes captain." Willis replied, "We're already on our way down we'll let you know as soon as-" but then his transmission was interrupted by a burst of gunfire.

The robots had been hiding in the darkness of the underground complex and they opened fire with their machine guns only when the beams from the marines' flash lights revealed their presence, cutting down four soldiers before they could react and forcing the rest to take cover behind the reinforcing beams set against the walls at regular intervals.

"Keep everyone else back. Did anyone get a good look at how many there are?" Willis asked, suing his radio to broadcast to everyone within range while Reeves' voice could still be heard coming from the larger set that was still linked with the orbiting *Warspite*.

"I only saw the one." someone replied.

"No, there were more than that." another marine added and Willis snarled before leaning around the support he was using for cover and pointing his rifle towards the source of the gunfire coming towards the marines. Using the rifle's optical sight for magnification he saw four of the Sissusk-like robots squatting at the end of the corridor where it split into two directions. Each of them carried one or two machine guns on its back, while one replied with one of the weapons with an automatic grenade launcher. However, this more powerful weapon had yet to be used despite the confined space making it potential devastating to the tightly grouped marines. But Willis quickly realised that the blasts from multiple grenade detonations would risk damaging the already fragile structure of the complex further than it already had been in the orbital bombardment. Sadly this meant that the marines could not make use of their own grenades against the four robots facing them.

"Full auto." Willis ordered, "We need to hit those things with as much as we can without bringing the roof down on our heads. How many machine guns have we got up here?"

"Just two major. Jenkins had one but he's been hit."

"Then unless anyone can reach it we go with just two. Deploy them as best as possible and just keep shooting. Everyone else give our machine gunners cover. Open fire!"

The corridor was filled with the roar of automatic weapons fire as the marines used their rifles. Though their weapons' bullpup configuration placed the magazine behind the grip the marines on both sides of the corridor could still fire from behind the supports thanks to the empty cases being ejected forwards rather than to the sides. The doubled the amount of cover fire available as the machine gunners quickly lay prone on the floor of the corridor before joining in the firing and streams of tracer rounds were added to the flashes from the other marines' rifles.

With so many bullets being fired towards the four robots it was inevitable that at least some would find weak points in their armour that they could penetrate. Once inside the robots, the machines' external armour actually became a hindrance as the bullets continued to ricochet around until they finally expended all of their energy in smashing through internal components and the robots jerked around even as they continued to fire on the marines. Two of the robots burst into flames and slumped to the floor while the one armed with a grenade launcher suddenly suffered a loss of control and one of its legs extended and flipped the machine over, leaving it to thrash about helplessly as it tried to regain control. Seeing his chance, one of the machine gunners swung his weapon towards the machine's exposed belly and fired a sustained burst at it that ended its spasms permanently.

The firing from the final robot halted abruptly and for a moment Willis thought that it too had been disabled before he saw it move, getting to its feet and disappearing around the corner it had been defending.

"Get after it!" he yelled, realising why the machine had stopped shooting, "It's out of ammo. We need to get to it before it can reload and come back for another go."

"Major, Captain Reeves wants an update." the radio operator from Willis' command section said, holding out the handset and Willis took it from him.

"Willis here captain. It looks like some of the machines got trapped down here by the bombardment and are now acting to defend the facility. The problem is that with all these corridors I can't get more than a few of my men in position to fire on them at once. Plus if we use grenades then we're just as likely to bury ourselves alive as take out the machines."

"Well it looks like we're going to have more company. We've got a tachyon signal coming in that looks like it's a squadron coming in response to a summons from the ships we've already dealt with but they won't be here for a number of hours yet. But there's also a second signal that's much closer that must be coming from ships that were already on their way here. Now it could just be a convoy of transports but it could equally be a military force with more firepower than we've got and well aware of our presence and strength." Reeves explained, "We're estimating that it'll be here in just under an hour and a half. You need to hurry."

"Could you ask that Sissusk whether there are any elevators around here?" Willis replied, "If we need a fast way down to the bottom then rappelling down them is going to be quickest."

On the bridge of the *Warspite*, Reeves looked up at Kaa'is'sar.

"Are there elevators?" he asked, waiting for the robot to translate the question.

"Of course there are." the Sissusk fleet leader answered, "If your soldiers have found the main entrance shaft then they should be close to them. Tell them to go left at the junction and they will find a cluster of four elevators sharing single shaft system that leads all the way to the lowest level."

"Did you catch that major?" Knight said.

"Yes commander." Willis replied, "Take a left and there's a cluster of elevators. Hopefully they were at different floors when the bombardment hit."

With Willis leading his men deeper into the Sissusk command complex, Reeves turned to Goldman.

"What's the status of our airlift?" he asked.

"Shuttle pilots are cramming as many of our people as they can into their ships captain." she replied, "But it'll take at least two more runs to get all of the Krawlek off the ground."

"What about the Emperor?" Reeves added, glancing towards Kaa'is'sar.

"His skip is on approach." Goldman answered, "I'm directing them to the rear hangar. We're offloading a shuttle of Krawlek in the forward one right now. But there will be another shuttle load of them arriving at about the same time as the Emperor in the rear hangar as well."

"In that case I should go and meet him." Reeves said, "Sergeant at arms please escort the fleet leader to the rear hangar after he has warned his ship to withdraw. I need to go and change."

"Withdraw?" Kaa'is'sar hissed, "Captain you agreed to take the Emperor to my ship."

"No, we agreed to get him off the planet." Knight pointed out.

"Don't worry fleet leader Reeves said. We'll get your Emperor out of the system and then let you both go.

We've got a ship down in our forward hangar that can take you wherever you want. But given the state of

your battlecruiser I think it would be a good idea for it to get as far away from here before those machines get here.”

Reeves hurried to his quarters where he put on his formal tunic over his shirt. Though he had worn most of his formal uniform rather than duty fatigues for the duration of the engagement so far he felt it prudent not to meet the head of state of an interstellar empire, even one with which the Commonwealth had little in common like the Sissusk Empire, while wearing a creased uniform.

Arriving at the hangar he found Kaa'is'sar already waiting for him in the company of a pair of robots to act as translators and a squad of marines also wearing formal uniforms in place of combat fatigues and body armour. With Lieutenant Ivankov having already vetted the Sissusk aboard the approaching skip the chances of the Sissusk attempting to take over the *Warspite* were negligible.

Reeves watched both the skip and a larger shuttle land in the hangar together and then waited as first the outer door was sealed and then air was pumped back into the hangar.

“Hangar pressurisation complete.” a voice announced over the public address system, “Releasing inner hatch.”

As soon as the hatch opened the marines charged into the hangar and formed a line beside the skip, all stood at attention while the two robots followed Reeves and Kaa'is'sar to the end of the line as they waited for the skip's hatch to open. There was a hiss as the hatch finally opened and one of the craft's crew rapidly jumped out and stood aside to allow the Sissusk passenger to disembark, starting with the Emperor himself. “Your majesty.” Kaa'is'sar said, lowering himself down to bare the back of his neck. Meanwhile Reeves counted six other Sissusk disembarking from the skip, two of whom wore military uniforms and these two watched the squad of armed marines closely.

“Fleet Leader Kaa'is'sar.” Emperor Kriss'ss'ras said as he walked towards Reeves and the other Sissusk, “Explain yourself.”

“I apologise majesty.” Kaa'is'sar replied, “Enlisting the help of the humans was the only way I could carry out my orders to evacuate you.”

“So now their ships have sat in orbit around and bombarded Sissar itself, something not even the Fedrun did during the Time of Subjugation. Rest assured I will deal with you later.” the Emperor said. Then he looked at Reeves.

“I am Captain Reeves, the commander of the *Warspite*.” he said, making sure to stand up straight.

But before the Emperor could reply the hatch of the other shuttle finally opened as several of the *Warspite*'s crew and robots came hurrying into the hangar from another hatchway and began to direct the Krawlek that began to disembark from the vessel.

“What are those slaves doing here?” the Emperor asked, looking at Kaa'is'sar again.

“They aren't slaves any more your majesty.” Reeves responded, “I've offered all two thousand of them from their labour camp sanctuary in the Commonwealth. You'll find that my people take a dim view of slavery.” and the Emperor let out a growl

“You will take this ship to Kasak Four Eight Five.” the Emperor said, “At which point you will return my property.”

“The *Warspite* is engaged in combat operations right now.” Reeves replied, “But if you'd like to go with the marines, temporary accommodation has been prepared for you and your party.”

“I am Kriss'ss'ras, Twelfth Emperor of the Sissusk Empire and you-” Kriss'ss'ras began before Reeves interrupted him.

“I am the commanding officer of this vessel. A warship in the Commonwealth fleet. The same warship that defended the nation of Libertas from your forces and if you aren't happy with the way I run it then you are welcome to leave. Though I can't spare a shuttle to take you back to the surface and that first step out of the air lock is a tricky one.” he said sternly, angered at the Emperor's demanding attitude, “Now shall my marines escort you to the room prepared for you or can they escort you to an airlock or the brig?”

As the robot translated this the two Sissusk bodyguards tensed up, getting ready to strike but the leader of the marine honour guard spotted this and acted first.

“Ready arms.” he ordered and the squad switched from holding their rifles vertically at their shoulders to having them in both hands but held low, ready to bring them into action at a moment's notice.

“This will be remembered Captain Reeves.” Kriss'ss'ras said and Reeves smiled.

“Sergeant, show the Emperor and his party to the briefing room. Fleet leader, do you wish to accompany the Emperor or will you be returning to the bridge?” he said.

The doors to the four elevator shafts in the cluster were easily forced open by the marines and Willis peered inside, shining the light mounted on his rifle down the shaft. The shaft extended downwards for several storeys before the first of the elevator cars blocked it. However, it was clear that just as Willis had hoped the four cars had stopped at different floors, meaning that when one blocked the marines' way they would be able to go around it before continuing down the shaft.

“Okay Fourth Platoon can stay up here and guard the way out.” Willis said, looking around at the relatively

open area around the elevators, "Everyone else is going down the shaft. Third Platoon will secure the shaft at the bottom while First and Second search for the Sissusk computer servers."

The shaft was wide enough for the marines to proceed down a squad at a time, with just the points where the elevator cars were to be found slowing them down as they had to go around them. One of the four cars was stopped at the bottom floor, meaning that there were only three doors available to the marines when they reached this point but this was enough for their purposes. However, when Willis reached the bottom of the shaft just behind the first squad he found them clustered beside the doors with them still closed so that just a thin sliver of light was able to get through them, the squad leader with his ear pressed against one.

"What's wrong lieutenant?" Willis asked, sensing that he needed to keep his voice low.

"I think there are some of those robots on the other side of the door." the platoon commander whispered back, "I can hear them moving about."

"Let me hear." Willis said, removing his helmet and placing his ear to the door. Sure enough he heard what sounded like the heavy footsteps of mechanical feet on the hard floor beyond the door and he pulled his head back, "Okay we need to be careful here." he said, looking up, "I think we're far enough down that we can use grenades without risking the structure right by these elevators. Anywhere else and we risk damaging the computers we came here to steal."

"What are you thinking major?" the lieutenant asked.

"I'm thinking that any attempt to open these doors is going to attract the attention of the machines on the other side." Willis replied, "So we need to use that to our advantage. We'll force open the emergency hatch on the top of this elevator car here and then make enough noise inside it to draw in the machines. My guess is that they'll fill the car full of bullet holes without bothering to check what's in there first, but then they'll open it up to see what they caught inside. That's when we'll drop a couple of grenades down on them."

The marines climbed up onto the roof of the elevator car where an emergency hatch was located that they were able to pry open with the tip of an entrenching tool. Located close to the front of the elevator, this allowed Willis to reach down through the hole and strike the inside of the elevator doors before quickly pulling his arm back out. This was just in time as all of a sudden there was the sound of automatic gunfire and a barrage of projectiles came through the elevator door and punched right through the walls on the far side. This continued for several seconds until there was silence once again. But this lasted only until a robot thrust its hands into the point where the doors met and forced them apart, its machine guns lowering as the robot scanned the elevator for any signs of life. Finding nothing, the robot turned around and it was at that point that Willis and two other marines dropped the grenades they had prepared while it been opening the doors down through the hatch and angled so that they passed through the ripped open doors and landed in the hallway outside the elevator before exploding.

"Hold me." Willis said as he knelt down and took hold of his rifle. Then with one of the other marines keeping hold of him by his webbing he leant through the hatch and looked out of the elevator.

The grenades had taken out the lights in the hallway and Willis had to use his rifle's flash light for illumination and he saw two of the Sissusk-like robots lay twitching on the floor. Their movement indicated that they were not yet totally inactive and so Willis fired short bursts from his rifle at each one, putting several rounds through their necks that severed the links between the power packs in their bodies and processors and primary sensory clusters in their heads.

"Clear." he said, "Let's get down there."

"I don't like the look of that." Mori said, peering out of the cockpit of the fighter towards several plumes of smoke coming from a nearby settlement, "That place wasn't burning ten minutes ago."

"Which suggests that something's set light to it since then." Shaw added when she looked towards the plumes as well. The smoke rose in several distinct columns, spreading out before merging to form one large cloud that blotted out the sky above the settlement, "A cloud like that could hide a lot from orbital scans. Radar, IR, optical. Nothing would get through."

"You're going to take us under it aren't you?" Mori asked.

"Oh Kaz, you know me so well." Shaw replied, "Archangel to squadron, we've got a suspicious cloud at eight o'clock. Follow me in and stand by to engage surface targets."

The fighters of her squadron turned to face the burning settlement and descended to below the level at which the different plums of smoke merged.

Using the fighter's forward looking passive thermal sensors Mori could pick out each source of fire and the columns of smoke. But between these on the ground were many more hotspots, each one indicating the presence of something that was giving off heat.

"I don't like the look of this." he said right before an alarm sounded, "Radar lock! Incoming!"

There was a flash of laser fire from the settlement, visible only because of the smoke in the air that struck one of the other fighters in the squadron and causing it to explode in mid air while a missile streaked up from the ground towards Shaw's own fighter.

"Countermeasures!" she snapped as she pulled up and broke off, doing her best to try and throw off the

missile's tracking, "*Warspite* this is Archangel, we're coming under fire from the ground. We've got hostile forces gathering under cover of smoke."

Knight panned the view on the main console to focus on the area covered by smoke.

"They could be hiding thousands of troops under that," he said.

"Yes and with the Sissusk Emperor evacuated and our troops pulling out of that area I bet that they're getting ready to head for their command centre where Major Willis is located." Reeves responded

"Captain should open fire?" one of the gauss cannon gunners asked.

"At what?" Reeves responded, "Without a clear target we could be shooting at nothing."

"They've got air defences that will keep our fighters and drop ships away." Knight pointed out, "If they get close enough to the command centre to be able to cover the airspace over it then we won't be able to extract them."

"Then we shoot at nothing." Reeves said, "Commander Goldman, inform the *Bayonet* that we will be commencing bombardment of the area of ground that is between the covered area and the previously targeted area of the command centre. If we can hit it with enough force then maybe the machines will stay back. Weapons, gauss cannons may fire at will. Rounds to be dropped from the edge of the cloud to two thousand metres away from Major Willis' location."

"That's pretty close." Thomas commented.

"Yeah," Ash added, "Ben will be able to feel that."

"Good." Reeves said, "Maybe it'll inspire him to get a move on."

"Captain I've got a heat flare." one of the sensor operators said suddenly.

"Location?" Knight asked as he and Reeves turned around.

"About twenty-five light minutes from here. Between the next planet sunward of us and one of its moons." the sensor operator said.

"That would put its time of origin at about the same time as when we picked up the second group of approaching ships." Thomas said.

"Can you get me anything more?" Reeves asked.

"I've got something on visual captain." another sensor operator replied, "Putting it through to the central console now." and one the console's display a new window opened that showed a relatively long and narrow vessel orbiting between the inner planet and the largest of its moons.

"Our shadow?" Knight suggested and Reeves smiled.

"I think so." he said, "Is that all we have? Just an outline?"

"She's running silent captain." Goldman said, "Minimal EM output. I think the heat flare we picked up was them trying to keep out of the line of sight of the approaching force."

"Captain, that is not one of our ships." Kaa'is'sar said.

"The silhouette doesn't match anything in the Commonwealth database either captain." Lucas added, "But I'd say that it's about two hundred metres long."

"Definitely our shadow." Reeves said, "They've been following us since we entered Sissusk space."

"Should I move to intercept captain?" Ash asked.

"No thank you commander, we don't have the time." Reeves replied, "Besides, the moment we start powering up our FTL drive while pointing towards them I expect they'll just jump away themselves."

"We can't just ignore them captain." Knight said.

"No we can't." Reeves agreed, "Sensors, I want active tadar engaged. Let them know we've seen them and point everything we got towards them."

"Aye captain." Cortez replied, "Engaging active tachyon sweep."

Martins sat in his seat at the rear of the *Grey Dawn*'s bridge while his crew monitored the activities of the Commonwealth task force. They had watched closely as the Commonwealth ships rendezvoused with the Sissusk battlecruiser and monitored the exchanged of shuttle traffic with interest. Then when the Commonwealth forces had engaged the other force of Sissusk vessels Martins had watched with great interest. He knew that the objective of Hayes' scheme was to provoke an all out war between the Commonwealth and one of its neighbours, with either the Sissusk or Ticik being considered at present and now it appeared that she was going to have that war very soon. Martins did not see how the Sissusk could let an assault on their home world by a Commonwealth force go unpunished despite the obvious depletion of their forces at present that had left even their home system practically undefended. Though quite what had provoked such a bold move by the commanding officer of the Commonwealth forces was unknown to Martins. The number of shuttles and other craft moving back and forth between the Commonwealth ships and the surface of the Sissusk home world suggested that the Commonwealth forces had found something there that they wanted to remove, but again there were no clues as to what that could be.

The news that multiple forces of Sissusk ships were approaching the system had caused Martins some concern. The *Grey Dawn* was in a precarious position and its light armament was no match for any of the

Sissusk capital ships they had observed so far so all he could do was order their engines be fired on minimal power to reposition themselves where they were less likely to be detected by the Sissusk. Looking at the clock at the front of the *Grey Dawn's* bridge Martins was just starting to think that the manoeuvre had gone unnoticed by the Commonwealth ships and his vessel was safe when an alarm went off.

"Captain we're being scanned." one of his crew announced, "Active tachyon sweep from the *Warspite*."

"Power up the FTL." Martins ordered, "We're getting out of here."

"Captain may I remind you that our orders prohibit using any equipment that the Commonwealth ships could-" Martins' first officer began.

"I know what our orders are!" Martins snapped before the woman could finish, "And they include not letting ourselves be taken at any cost. Now get us out of this system before any of those cruisers come after us. Especially that one equipped with charged tachyon projectors. If that gets in range of us we're done for."

"Captain, unidentified vessel is powering FTL." Cortez announced as she detected the tachyon emissions from the mysterious ship that had been following them.

"Watch its exit vector." Reeves said, "It'll probably make a fake jump to throw us off but we may be able to learn something from it."

"Unidentified ship is pulling away. She already has enough imaginary mass to make a jump." Cortez said.

Then as the vessel disappeared she added, "She's gone. Departing at seven point two light years per day."

"Think that's their full speed?" Knight said, looking at Reeves.

"Even if it is, that's pretty impressive. Not much below ours." Reeves replied, "Now where do we stand with getting out of here ourselves?"

"What the hell was that?" a marine said when the command centre shook. Since exiting the elevator shaft, the marines had split up to search for the main server. So far they had yet to find it among all of the other machinery on this level though and the one piece of good fortune they had had so far was that they had not encountered any more machines.

"That private," Willis replied, "felt like the impact of a seventy-five millimetre gauss cannon round dropped from orbit and if the *Warspite* and *Bayonet* are dropping them close enough that we can feel them then we need to get a move on."

"Major I think we've found something." one of the other marine search parties signalled and Willis came to a halt, pressing his hand to his earpiece as he replied.

"What is it Leary?" he asked.

"We've found a room filled with shelves of what look like computer drives. I'm guessing that it's the server room we're after. Wait, hang on. There's something in here, I think-" and the transmission was cut short.

"Come on let's go." Willis ordered his men, turning back in the direction he knew that Leary's team had gone. When they found Leary's team they were all positioned outside a large doorway and Willis saw that the body of Leary himself had been dragged out into the corridor and lay down along the opposite wall.

"Report." Willis ordered.

"There's one of those robots inside sir." one of Leary's men replied, "It doesn't seem interested in coming out here and we weren't sure on how to deal with it in there."

"I see what you mean." Willis said, "Anything that could take out one of those machines would destroy the server as well."

"So what do you want us to do major?" the other marine asked and Willis thought as quickly as he could.

"We need to get those drives and get out of here. No time for messing about." he said as he made his rifle safe and slung it over his shoulder, "Now if I'm right that thing in there will be just as cautious about damaging the drives as we are. It's not going to want to destroy its own command and control system so we'll use that against it." then he drew his sidearm, "I want three of you to come with me. We'll get in there as fast as we can and stick close to the drives. With any luck it won't fire at us but will try and engage us in hand to hand combat. Then we jam our pistols against a weak spot and see how effective they are."

The marines looked at one another, obviously unsure about Willis' plan but then three of them copied him, switching from their rifles to their pistols.

"So what if this doesn't work major?" one of them asked.

"Then bring up machine guns and do whatever's necessary to take out that robot. If drives are damaged in the process then so be it. Just take back what you can to the *Warspite*." Willis said as he reached out for the door, "Okay lads, follow my lead. We go in pairs." he added before he opened the door and dived through. One marine followed him immediately and just after he was through the doorway there was a burst of gunfire that would have cut through a third person through the doorway but instead just put several holes in the wall opposite the door.

With the gunfire telling Willis where the robot was currently located he peered around the corner of a rack of computer drives and saw the machine looking back at him. He saw the robot swing its weapons, a pair of machine guns, towards him and was about to duck back behind the rack when the robot hesitated and Willis smiled.

"I was right." he called out, "It won't shoot at the drives." then he pointed his pistol at the robot's feet and fired a rapid burst.

The three ten-millimetre rounds struck one of the robot's feet and ricocheted off before embedding themselves in the base of another drive rack below the actual drives themselves. Though no damage was done to the machine the attack did cause it to focus on Willis as a threat and it began to move towards him. Seeing their chance the next two marines came through the door as well and again the robot fired a rapid burst of fire that was just a few moments too late to hit either of them before they were able to get clear.

Then another marine fired a single shot from his pistol at the robot and its head jerked as it was hit. Again the round failed to penetrate the robot's armoured body and it now turned its attention towards this marine instead, moving around a rack of drives towards him.

Another marine tried to dart around the robot, firing his pistol from point blank range into its armoured torso. The robot reacted quickly to this, spinning on the spot so that its tail lashed out and struck the marine in his chest to throw him back against a rack of computer drives. Before any of the other marines could come to his aide, the robot then leapt on the fallen marine, using its talons to pin him to the floor as it opened its mouth and bit at the marine's neck, mimicking the way a Sissusk would strike with its claws and teeth.

The marine screamed briefly before his throat was torn open and Willis rushed to try and help him, firing several shots from his pistol at the robot. Again these did no damage but they did succeed in getting the machine's attention and it turned around to look at Willis, blood dripping from its artificial jaws.

"Come and get me you metal bastard." Willis hissed as he backed away and fired again before the robot broke into a sudden run towards him.

Designed for technicians with Sissusk physiology, the server room had wide gaps between the rows of drives that enabled Willis to dive out of the way of the charging robot at the last minute and he kicked at the machine's legs to bring it crashing to the floor. Willis then leapt onto the robot and pressed his pistol against its neck, placing the muzzle against the joint between two adjacent sections before firing on automatic. There was a bright flash and Willis flinched before being thrown off the robot as it began to thrash around wildly. But the damage already done to the robot's neck was made worse by this and inside cables were severed and motors shorted out to produce a gush of flames through the damaged section of plating before the robot's movements all ceased.

"Get everyone in here!" Willis shouted, "We need to grab everything we can and get the hell out of here."

"I've got multiple radar contacts coming over the horizon. Heading right for us." Mori said.

"I see them. "Looks like they're throwing everything they've got at us." Shaw replied, "*Warspite* this is Archangel. I've got forty plus aircraft coming this way. Any idea how long we need to keep the sky clear for those jar heads?"

"Major Willis and his men are on their way out now." Goldman replied from the *Warspite*, "Just keep the incoming craft away from the dropships long enough for them to get aboard. We'll give as much support as we can but it looks like the machines know something's going on and are converging on the area around the command centre."

"Understood *Warspite*." Shaw said before addressing her squadron, "This is it, break and engage. Good hunting." she broadcast and the squadron of fighters turned to intercept the approaching aircraft.

"There's a lot of jamming going on." Mori said, "Can you get a visual lock?"

"Yeah, I've got one." Shaw said as she lined her helmet's targeting display up on one of the lead fighters, "Fox one." and she released a missile that shot straight towards the flying machine. With so many craft approaching them there was little room for the machines to manoeuvre and the targeted automated fighter could only attempt to use its electronic jamming and physical countermeasures to avoid the missile rather than taking evasive action to try and break its target lock. But this proved insufficient and the missile detonated right in its path, sending fragments tearing through the entire length of the fighter and sending it plummeting towards the ground in flames.

"Scratch one." Shaw commented.

"Yeah, just another forty-three to go." Mori replied.

Emerging from the underground complex Willis and his marines broke into a run, heading back towards the landing zone as quickly as they could. Hearing the sound of engines overhead Willis then looked up to see a pair of dropships descending towards them.

"Major this is Joker," the pilot of one of the drop ships signalled, "we've got large concentrations of hostile forces approaching. We can't wait for you to get back to the landing zone and pick you all up together. We're going to have to do this one platoon at a time."

"Copy that Joker. How's here?" Willis asked.

"Looks fine major. No enemy contacts within ten thousand metres. Hold your position, we're on our way down now."

"How much longer captain?" Kaa'is'sar asked. The Sissusk had watched the approaching tachyon signals closely and at their current speed the first wave of vessels was now just a few minutes from their position. "The last of the Krawlek are approaching the *Orinoco* now and our marines are boarding their drop ships now fleet leader." Reeves replied.

"Captain I've hostiles." Cortez called out.

"Confirmed. Four corvettes just dropped out of FTL and are heading right for us." Lucas added.

"Commander Ash bring us about to face them." Reeves ordered, "They're probably trying to disrupt our loading operation. Weapons fire as targets come to bear. But hold missiles, we may need those if we can't get out of here before the big ships show up."

The *Warspite's* turrets turned towards the four rapidly closing corvettes and began to fire, as did the weapons aboard the other Commonwealth cruisers. Only the gauss cannons continued to fire at the surface of the planet below to try and keep the machines' ground forces away from the marines still down there. The attack pattern adopted by the machine warships was intended to get them as close to the Commonwealth ships as rapidly as possible for maximum effectiveness of their relatively light weapons. But in order to do this they had to maintain a direct course that was easy to predict and they flew into a storm of energy beams that carved through their hulls with ease and left three of the four vessels as burning wrecks before they could even get off a shot.

The fourth corvette sped between the Commonwealth ships, attempting to position itself so that targeting it

would involve them firing towards one another. This was partially successful, preventing the *Warspite's* X-ray laser turrets from engaging it as it turned to fire all of its weapons at the slower *Orinoco* while maintaining its original heading. Aboard the tender there were cries of panic from the crowds of Krawlek packed into its holds as they heard klaxons and the impact of gauss cannon rounds against the ship's hull and for a moment the ship's own marines were concerned that a mass panic could break out that would see hundreds trampled or crushed. But the barrage was brief, lasting only as long as it took for the corvette to speed past the tender before a blast from the *Ceres'* main gun blew it apart.

But the manoeuvres necessary for the Commonwealth task force put them further from the planet and as the marine drop ships and escorting fighters were just leaving the atmosphere the machine task force arrived, decelerating to sub light speed just beyond Sissar's moon.

"Multiple contacts captain." Goldman announced, "Plus I'm picking up launches."

"I've got them." Lucas said, "It's a carrier force. Three carriers plus escorts. Looks like five destroyers and three frigates. We've got incoming fighters and bombers. No missiles from the destroyers yet."

"That's a lot for us to try and take on with just three cruisers." Knight said.

"Leave now captain. Forget your marines." Kaa'is'sar hissed but Reeves ignored him, instead reaching into his pocket and producing a key on the end of a chain. One of a handful of such keys aboard that would permit the use of the *Warspite's* nuclear arsenal.

"The admiral will be furious if we use a nuke." Knight said as he reached into his own pocket and took out the second key that would be needed to allow a nuclear strike.

"As long as we're alive to face a court martial." Reeves replied, "Status of our drop ships and fighters?"

"On approach captain. We can do emergency landings in three minutes." Goldman replied.

"Enemy attack craft ninety seconds from firing range." a sensor operator added.

"Fire all guns." Reeves ordered, "Target priority for turrets is the bombers. Missiles and main guns, lock onto those capital ships and prepare to fire all conventional weapons. I doubt most will get through but it'll give them something other than us to worry about. Commander Thomas I want a jump out of here plotting and distributing to the rest of the squadron."

"Destination captain?" Thomas asked.

"Take us back towards CPD sixty-six thirty-four thirty-one but we'll drop back to sub light after one light year and steer for Liberty instead. I get the feeling we'll need to resupply there." Reeves said.

Shaw saw the Commonwealth warships open fire on the closing wave of attack craft as they swarmed towards them.

"That's a lot of ships." she said.

"*Warspite* is dead ahead." Mori said from behind her, "We're being directed towards the forward hangar. Drop ships to the rear."

"Okay let's head in underneath." Shaw said, "The last thing I want is to get caught by our own side's main guns when they fire."

Just then there was a brilliant flash of light as one of the machine controlled frigates exploded when it was struck by the *Warspite's* main guns and Shaw saw that the others were now moving to try and fill the gap created between their carriers and the Commonwealth cruisers. Meanwhile the attack craft continued to head towards the Commonwealth cruisers and Mori spotted a group of bombers lining up on the *Warspite*.

"We may have a problem here." he said, "I've got four bombers starting an attack run on the *Warspite*."

"I see them. If they get close enough to strike then we may not have anywhere to land." Shaw replied, "Okay, hold on. This isn't in the manual."

"Oh no, don't say you're going to do what I think you are." Mori said and Shaw smiled.

"Forwards. Backwards. What's the difference?" she said.

"The ability to see what you're about to crash into?" Mori replied as he grabbed hold of the back of Shaw's seat just as she spun their fighter around before firing its breaking engines, effectively adding to its speed in the same direction that it had been going before.

Now travelling backwards towards the *Warspite*, Shaw locked onto one of the bombers and fired a missile. Then before giving the missile chance to hit its target she locked onto a second and launched another, repeating this for each bomber.

"Err Shaw." Mori said, peering over his shoulder at the sight of the rapidly closing *Warspite* behind them but Shaw ignored him as she focused on launching her missiles, "Commander I really think you should look at this. Lynn!"

"Relax Kaz." Shaw said when her fourth missile was fired and she spun the fighter again so that it was facing into the *Warspite's* hangar just moments before passing through the gaping forward doorway, "Holy crap!" she exclaimed as the fighter struck the hangar deck with its landing gear still raised and skidded across it uncontrollably until crashing into a netted barrier that suddenly sprung out of the floor ahead. Then she smiled, "Well you what they say about any landing you can walk away from." she said.

"They're bloody liars." Mori replied.

"All craft aboard and hangar doors sealed captain." Goldman announced.

"Helm, what's the status on our FTL?" Reeves asked.

"Charged and ready captain." Ash replied.

"Then get us out of here." Reeves ordered.

"With pleasure captain." Ash said before steering the *Warspite* away from the planet below and engaging the faster than drive.

Reeves entered the *Warspite's* brig just as the ship slowed to sub light speed a light year away from the Sissusk home world. Most of the cells held Krawlek collaborators who were being held here to prevent the others of their species aboard from attacking them until they could be handed over to the Commonwealth's military intelligence services when the *Warspite* returned to Gamma Pavonis. But Reeves made his way past these to the cell that held the Sissusk criminal and he smiled at the alien.

"Open the cell." he told the guard and as the door opened the Sissusk looked at him.

"What now?" the alien asked, the robot outside the cell translating for him.

"You've fulfilled your part of our bargain so I'm letting you go." Reeves said and the alien just stared at him.

"Just like that?" he said and Reeves nodded.

"Just like that." he replied, "Though you will have some company on your flight. They need a lift and I thought you'd be willing to offer one to them."

The Sissusk got up and exited the cell, glancing at the armed marine guards who stood ready to protect Reeves if it was necessary.

"They better be able to pay me." he said.

"Come with me." Reeves said, "You can explain that to your passengers yourself."

Reeves and the marines then escorted the Sissusk to the *Warspite's* rear hangar where the courier ship was located and standing beside it they found Bernard.

"What shape is she in commander?" Reeves asked.

"Fully operational captain." he replied, "Though I had hoped we'd be able to hang on to her to study."

"I'm afraid not. Our passengers will need her to get where they're going." Reeves said.

"Well she'll get them wherever that is. We've filled up her tachyon storage jars and singularity jars so she's got full FTL and artificial gravity capability. The fission reactor's not compatible with our fuel types but there's enough fuel in that already so I'd say she's ready to go as soon as the other passengers get here."

"And here they are now." Reeves said, looking around as Emperor Kriss's's'ras and the other Sissusk were escorted into the hangar by another squad of marines.

"The Emperor!" the Sissusk outlaw exclaimed and he dropped to the floor, spreading his arms out either side of him.

"Oh yes, didn't I mention that?" Reeves said, grinning, "Your Emperor needs a ride. Now was there something you wanted to say to him about his having to pay you for that?" then he turned his attention to the Emperor himself, "This ship may not look like much your majesty but I'm assured that she can reach your destination." he said, "Plus I'm informed that the pilot is an expert at circumventing military patrols so you needn't worry about any machine battlegroups intercepting you on the way."

Kriss's's'ras hissed.

"I will not forget your disrespect human." the robot behind him translated, "I will remember everything that has transpired here today."

"I'm counting on it." Reeves said, "Because the Commonwealth will be contacting you again. We know what's left of your empire is still holding humans as slaves and we want them released. Alternatively it won't just be Ticik and Als raiding your worlds. We'll come and take them back ourselves. Understood your majesty?" but the Emperor just growled at him. Then Reeves turned to Kaa'is's'ar, "So fleet leader, you don't seem to be very popular with your own people right now. Are you leaving with the Emperor or would you rather remain here?"

Kaa'is's'ar looked at the Emperor who in return avoided eye contact with him.

"I am a loyal soldier." he said, "I serve my Emperor until I die."

"Very well. In that case we'll let you all leave now. Remember my warning your majesty. We know how weak your empire is now, after all." Reeves said as he and the other humans walked toward the exit from the hangar.

In the corridor outside Reeves and Bernard headed towards Reeves' quarters and along the way Lucas came rushing towards them with a tablet in her hand.

"Captain!" she called out.

"Lieutenant, what's the panic?" Reeves asked in response.

"Captain I've been going over the scans we conducted of that ship that was following us and you need to see this." Lucas said and she held out the tablet.

"FTL drive scans?" Bernard said as he looked at the tablet as well and Lucas nodded.

"When a ship first starts to power its FTL drive there's interference from its mains supply." Lucas said.

"Yes, the AC waveform disrupts the charging process and there's bleeding of the tachyons." Bernard said in agreement, "You get something similar when the tachyon field is scattered. You can pick up the frequency then as well."

"The drone we left behind at CPD seventy-five thirteen sixty-eight wasn't able to measure that bleeding but our sensors are far better and we could." Lucas explained, "Look at what we found." and she pointed to a particular point on the display.

"The frequency of the disruption." Reeves said.

"It's fifty hertz." Lucas said, "So the ship must be using a mains supply with a fifty hertz frequency."

"The same as ours." Reeves said.

"Exactly. Every human ship uses either a fifty or sixty hertz mains system. The Sissusk use about forty-seven hertz and the Ticik seventy-one." Lucas said, "But if this ship was using exactly fifty then—"

"Then it had to be one of our own." Reeves interrupted.

EPILOGUE

The Old Man smiled across his desk as Hayes was shown into his office while his grand daughter just stared at her.

“Good afternoon Jennifer.” he said, “Please take a seat.”

“You asked to see me.” Hayes replied as she sat down.

“Yes, I'd like to discuss this little matter regarding Captain Martins. Have you had chance to discuss what happened with Mister Stein?” the Old Man asked and Hayes hesitated.

“No.” she said, “he isn't taking my calls.”

“Such a pity.” the Old Man said.

“Hardly surprising though.” his granddaughter added, “Thanks to you the Commonwealth scanned our ship and a profile has been distributed to all their military units and via Interpol to every civilian space port in Commonwealth space.”

“To put it simply they are looking for the *Grey Dawn* Commander Hayes. They are looking for us.” the Old Man said.

“They don't have a clue who we are. They'll never find the *Grey Dawn*. Captain Martins is far too good for that.” Hayes said.

“I'm so glad you are so confident.” the Old Man told her, “Because if you are wrong and the Commonwealth threatens to discover what we are doing here then – well let's just say I'll find alternate employment for you. Something where you'll never be able to cause us more trouble again. Do you understand me Jennifer?”

“Yes. I understand.” Hayes replied, looking around and noting the positions of the two large guards in the room.

“Good. Now get out of my sight.” the Old Man said and Hayes got back up and walked towards the door, leaving the office. Then when the door closed behind her the Old Man and his granddaughter looked at one another and smiled.

“That went well.” his granddaughter said.

“Yes is it did. Things are progressing much faster than we anticipated. I think we should prepare to deal with Commander Hayes sooner than we planned for.” the Old Man replied.