

WARSPITE: THE REALISATION OF DREAMS

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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Plans are in effect on multiple fronts, the Commonwealth plans to send a task force into Sissusk space in the hope of discovering who engineered the first contact with the Ticik and Captain Reeves and the crew of the *Warspite* are selected to take the lead in this mission. At the same time Commander Hayes is coming under pressure to achieve her aim of provoking war between the Commonwealth and the Ticik and the Commonwealth mission offers her one last chance to do this. Finally Hayes' own superior is advancing a scheme of his own and taking advantage of the pressure being put on Hayes to do so...

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PROLOGUE.

"You asked to see me?" Hayes asked when a servant showed her into the office of the man whose support she had spent a long time cultivating. A career politician, George Stein held enough sway within the government and the military to provide Hayes with the resources she needed for her plans. However, the agreement had been based on Hayes being able to repay this with access to information and resources that she obtained as a result of this and so far there had been very little to show for what he had put in.

"Ah yes, do take a seat commander." Stein said, looking up briefly at her and he pointed to the chairs in front of his desk.

Hayes walked across the office towards these and as she did so she took in her surroundings, looking for anything that looked out of place compared to the last time she had been here. In recent months she had found it increasingly hard to make contact with Stein, being given an assortment of excuses by his underlings as to why he was not available to speak to her. Now that he had invited her to see in him person Hayes hoped that she would finally be able to justify herself to remind him of why it was in his best interests to continue to support her project but could not help but think that being here alone was a bad idea, especially considering that the pistol she had concealed under her jacket had been detected at the entrance to the building and confiscated despite her position. The two undoubtedly armed bodyguards standing just inside the door to Stein's office did nothing to reassure her that she was safe in coming here either.

"I'm glad you asked me here." she told Stein as she sat down, "I've been wanting to bring you up to date with-

"Shut up." Stein said abruptly and Hayes gasped, not used to being spoken to in such a manner,

"Commander do you remember what you promised me in exchange for my support?"

"Of course. In exchange for access to your resources I would provide you with everything we get from-" Hayes began.

"Yes, everything." Stein interrupted again, "So far, however I have received absolutely nothing in return for the considerable effort that I have gone to. Being able to champion the reverse engineering of the advanced tachyon gates found in Sissusk space would have been of great benefit to me and yet as I understand it you acted personally to prevent Doctor Horst from performing anything more than the briefest of studies into the technology. After you went over my head your superior sent that little bitch of a grand daughter of his to threaten me right here in this very office into dropping the matter. To make matters worse I am told that when the *Grey Dawn* returned bearing a complete copy of the alien computer virus we suspect has been depopulating worlds and then shipping the people off through those gates to who knows where you handed the data over the Old Man personally instead of bringing it here to me."

"I'm sorry about that but I didn't expect him to be at the dock when Martins returned. If I had disobeyed him then-

"I am not interested in your excuses commander. I brought you here for one reason and one reason alone. Failing to provide me with tangible benefits is one thing, but now our main route into the Commonwealth has been broken and my rivals are pointing the finger at me. If I could drop this project of yours right now then I would but even that would be a sign of weakness. Therefore, I am giving you one last chance commander. One chance to bring me something that can make up for everything that has been lost so far. Can you do that?" Stein said.

"Of course. Mister Vale is already in the advanced stages of planning our next move. I guarantee you'll get the results you want." Hayes replied.

"Very good. You may go now commander." Stein told her and Hayes nodded as she got to her feet and turned towards the doorway. She had got most of the way across the room when Stein called out to her, "Oh and commander?"

"Yes?" Hayes replied, looking back towards his desk again.

"Don't think that you'll be able to find yourself another supporter in the government. If you fail me again then I'll make certain that the blame for everything falls right on your shoulders. Do you understand me?"

"Call Vale." Hayes said out loud as her car exited the car park and she drove out into the street.

"Calling Vale." the car's computer responded as it connected with her phone to place the call to the man who had acted as Hayes' strategic analyst for more than a decade now.

"Commander. I thought you were in a meeting with Stein." a man's voice said when the call was answered.

"I was Enrico." Hayes replied, "Basically he just invited me to his office so that he could throw me out again. He's given us one last chance to impress him or he's pulling his support and threatening to make sure that no-one else will touch us with a ten metre pole. What do you have?"

"What do you mean, what do I have?" Vale asked.

"Come on Enrico. You know what I mean. I mean what do you have up your sleeve to get us out of this? I

need something that will get us guaranteed results quickly enough to convince Stein to keep backing us." Hayes answered and over the phone she heard Vale sigh.

"Right now there's nothing." he said, "Every scenario I run comes up empty. As far as we can tell the Sissusk are gone and the Ticik are too far away for us to engineer another chance meeting."

"Then come up with something new Enrico and do it quickly. I doubt that the consequences of what's happened will be limited to just me so it's your head on the block as well. Do you understand what that means for us both?"

"Yes, I understand." Vale replied, "I suppose there are still a few options I could look at but they'll take time. How much longer do we have?"

"Stein didn't say exactly. I don't think he wanted us to know how long we had to plan an escape if we decided to bolt. Just get working and let me know the moment you have something."

Captain Reeves, commanding officer of the Commonwealth heavy cruiser *Warspite* heard raised voices coming from the aft hangar as he walked towards it. A pair of enlisted crewmen stepped through the hatch just as Reeves neared it and they quickly jumped out his way and snapped to attention.

"As you were." Reeves told them and the crewmen hurried away while Reeves stepped through the hatchway leading to the hangar. Inside he saw Commander Bernard, the *Warspite's* chief engineer and fighter squadron leader Lieutenant Commander Shaw, the two officers whose voices Reeves had heard from the corridor outside. The two officers were standing with with a pair of the cruiser's marine complement who in turn had hold of two people kneeling in front of them. Reeves knew the moment that he saw them that these two kneeling individuals should not have been aboard his ship. Both wore close fitting spacesuits that were obviously not Commonwealth military issue and with their helmets removed it was easy to see the cybernetic implants fixed to their shaven heads. The technology to interface electronic devices with the human body had existed for centuries but no way had ever been found to make them fully secure against hacking and so few people with such implants would ever be granted the security clearance necessary for many government jobs, including in the Commonwealth armed forces. Even without seeing the marines holding the two strangers in custody Reeves would have known instantly that they were intruders.

"Captain on deck!" one of the hangar ground crew who, along with several fighter pilots and navigators were busy opening up inspection panels on the rows of fighters present in the hangar called out when he saw Reeves.

"Captain." Bernard said as he turned to face Reeves, "What brings you down here?"

"Oh, Lieutenant Commander Goldman thought it wise to let me know that our entire squadron of fighters has just been declared out of service and I thought I'd come down here and find out why in person. I take it that it has something to do with these two here." Reeves replied.

"What, these two saboteurs?" Shaw said angrily and she continued to glare at the two prisoners kneeling in front of her, "Kaz found them poking around in that ship over there and got a helmet in his face for his trouble."

"Is he okay?" Reeves asked, noticing that Shaw's navigator was not among any of the crew currently checking the fighters for damage.

"He's with Doctor Thundercloud. He was able to walk out of here unaided but that's no thanks to these two idiots." Shaw told him.

"Do you have any idea how they got aboard?" Reeves said.

"My people have found their life support packs inside one of the fighter launch tubes." Bernard replied, "They must have done an EVA all the way from the civilian sections of the station and came in while they were open for maintenance. Then they walked from the forward hangar here and attacked the fighters."

"And Kaz." Shaw added.

"He deserved what he got." one of the intruders said suddenly.

"Keep your mouth shut!" the marine behind her snapped, "The captain doesn't care what you have to say."

"Of course not. Luddites like him wouldn't. You see the future and you try to destroy it." the other intruder said.

"Ah, I think I understand. I think the EMP we used to disable all of the neural implants at Verne has come back to haunt us." Reeves said, looking at Bernard. A futurist society, the Verne had become infected with an alien computer virus that had even managed to take control of the Verne themselves thanks to the cybernetic implants in their brains.

"You two really are stupid aren't you? You don't have a clue what was going on at Verne." Shaw said, glaring at the two prisoners.

"How long will it take to get the fighters back in service?" Reeves asked.

"I can't say for certain captain. There may not be any damage to them at all but we need to go over every one of them to make sure. I'd say at least sixteen hours to fully inspect all their systems. Of course Lieutenant Commander Shaw has to-" Bernard responded before a crewman gave a shout from beside an intercom panel.

"Captain Reeves, Lieutenant Commander Goldman is asking for you. She says it's urgent." he called out and Reeves sighed.

"It never rains." he said, "Get on with checking out the fighters and call space dock security to come and take charge of the prisoners. Make sure they're told about anything you find."

"Yes captain." Bernard replied and Reeves made his way to the intercom panel, taking the handset from the crewman.

"Reeves." he said.

"Captain you need to get to the bridge now." Goldman told him.

"What's the emergency commander?" Reeves asked.

"It's easier if you just come to the bridge sir. You're really going to want to see this. I'm trying to get all of the senior crew together. This is really big." Goldman explained.

"Very well. Bernard and Shaw are here in the hangar with me, I'll bring them along." Reeves said before he put the handset back on its mounting.

The *Warspite's* bridge was located deep within the rear section of the ship and so was not far from the aft hangar and the three officers were soon there. Most of the ship's other senior officers were already present, their attention fixed on the main viewscreen at the front of the compartment. When Reeves and the others saw what was being shown on it they all froze.

"Oh my God." Shaw said as she stared at the video footage being played, "This isn't a joke is it?"

"Every news station is carrying it." Lieutenant Commander Thomas, the *Warspite's* chief navigator replied without taking his eyes off the screen.

The ships shown in the footage had a main structure that was semi-circular in shape with drive pods extending out from the midpoint of the straight edge that appeared to be the backs of the vessels from the way they were moving. However, which way, if any might be considered the top of the vessel was unclear from the footage available. There were more than a dozen ships visible, two of them much larger than the others while there were four more of an intermediate size while the rest were smaller still.

"Lieutenant Lucas what would be your assessment?" Reeves said, looking around to where the *Warspite's* intelligence officer sat at her station.

"We don't have an exact size for any of those ships yet captain." she pointed out, "But I'd say that the two main vessels must be at least light cruiser sized, possibly much bigger. That would give them four ships that could be frigates or destroyers and the rest lighter ships. Of course if the main two are the size of dreadnoughts then they could be escorted by light cruisers and the smaller ships could be the frigates and destroyers."

"Assuming that whoever built them designs their ship along those lines." Knight, the *Warspite's* first officer commented.

"What's going on?" a voice asked from the rear of the bridge as the ship's senior medical officer Doctor Thundercloud entered in the company of Shaw's navigator Lieutenant Mori and then both men came to a halt when Ash, the *Warspite's* chief helmsman pointed at the main screen.

"I think that book you wrote on alien biology just became out of date doctor." he said.

"Are they here in Gamma Pavonis? Who are they?" Thundercloud said.

"No, this footage is coming in from the Draco Sector. The Chi Draconis system so this footage is about two and a half hours old." Goldman replied.

"A lunar colony called Styx." Knight added, "Heat from a gas giant warms one of its moons enough to make it habitable."

"The system's two stars orbit too close to one another for the inner planets to maintain a suitable environment." Thomas added.

"You said this is on the news." Reeves said, "Is there audio to go with this?"

"Yes captain." Goldman said and she brought up another video feed that was running parallel with the footage of the alien craft. This was split into two parts, one of which showed a woman in a studio when the other featured a man standing aboard a spacecraft beside a viewport that had several other people clustered around holding binoculars. This suggested that the ship was relatively close to the alien craft in astronomical terms but that it was still too far away for them to be seen unaided.

"Although the alien ships have been broadcasting a repeating signal since dropping to sub light speeds just over an hour ago none of the attempts to establish either voice or video communication by any of the more than twenty ships and stations to have tried have yet been successful." the reporter aboard the spacecraft said, "So far this is being put down to an incompatibility between encoding methods. However, if as is currently assumed these ships are a response to the exploration drones launched following the relaunched SETI program detected signs of alien life in the Draco Sector then the aliens should be aware of how establish communication with us if they wished to." the reporter then paused and raised a hand to the side of his head where he wore an earpiece, "Err, I'm being told that we have been ordered to pull back from the alien ships and cease all attempts to establish contact. The three corvettes defending the colony moon of Styx have now been joined by a Commonwealth carrier group and these ships are moving to establish a containment zone to keep the alien craft away from the colony until their purpose in being here can be determined."

"Howard do you know how this carrier group was able to arrive so quickly? According to our information the carrier group that has arrived is based at Sigma Draconis, almost eight light years away. That puts them roughly a day's travel out and yet they managed to get here within an hour of the aliens' arrival."

"That's right Lori and so far there has been no official word from our captain. However, it does indicate that the Commonwealth military had advanced knowledge that they would be here." the male reporter said before

the people standing behind him became somewhat excitable, pointing through the window.

"It looks like something's happening there Howard." the female news anchor said.

"Yes, I'm being told that one of the destroyers from the Commonwealth carrier group has just performed a faster than light jump that places it between us and the alien ships and that its captain is repeating the order for us to withdraw. Our captain is telling me that he is unwilling to remain here."

It was at that point that Goldman noticed something on her console.

"Captain we've got company." she said, "Space dock control is telling me that eight ships just dropped out of FTL. Captain they're big."

"Show me." Reeves said as he rushed to the bridge's large central console. Located on the outer edge of the space controlled by the Commonwealth, the Gamma Pavonis system was in a vulnerable position, with the threat of attack from either humans opposed to the Commonwealth or one of the intelligent alien species that until the currently unfolding events in the Draco Sector more than fifty light years away were the only non-human space-faring species known by mankind to exist.

However, when Goldman copied the sensor feed she was getting from the space station orbiting the planet the sensor contacts were now also accompanied by transponder codes that identified the ships as a Commonwealth military force.

"Those are our ships captain." Lucas said from her position.

"Yes I can see that lieutenant, but what are they doing here?" Reeves said as he read the identities of the ships off the display, focusing his attention on the larger vessels, "The *Potomac* is a Lincoln-class battleship based at Delta Pavonis. She shouldn't be all the way out here."

"I take it that there was nothing on the schedule then." Ash said.

"Nothing." Reeves said, "Which is worrying. If there were going to be any heavy fleet operations then I ought to have been informed about them."

"Captain I'm getting a signal from the *Jericho*." Goldman said. The *Jericho* was an escort carrier also based at Centaur. Roughly the same size as the Essex-class *Warspite* the carrier served as the flagship of Admiral Mitchell, the officer commanding the local Commonwealth fleet forces.

"Put them through." Reeves said and he picked up a handset from a holder nearby, "*Warspite*. Captain Reeves." he said.

"Reeves it's Admiral Mitchell." the admiral's voice said.

"Yes admiral, how can I help you?" Reeves asked her.

"I assume that your crew have informed you about the ships that have just arrived in system?" Mitchell said.

"Yes admiral. We were watching the feed coming in from Chi Draconis when they arrived." Reeves told her.

"All very exciting, I know. But that will have to wait captain. I want to see you and your intelligence officer in the main briefing room aboard the *Jericho* as soon as soon as possible. The fleet is being deployed."

"Deployed? Where to?" Reeves asked.

"I'll explain at the briefing. This is all classified Reeves. Mitchell out." Mitchell said and then the channel went silent.

Reeves replaced the communication handset in its holder and then looked at Knight.

"Well commander," he said after a moment's pause, "I think I'm about to be informed." then he looked at Lucas instead, "You too lieutenant. The admiral wants us both aboard her ship as soon as possible."

Unsurprisingly for a fleet deployment briefing Reeves was not the only ship's captain ordered to meet with Admiral Mitchell aboard her flagship and as far as Reeves could tell the commanding officers of every other Commonwealth starship were present for the meeting. Other than the *Jericho*, the *Warspite* was the only ship stationed at Centaur to have an intelligence officer permanently assigned to it and so none of the other local captains were accompanied by anyone from their crew.

"Over there." Reeves told Lucas and he pointed to some vacant seats beside the captains of the two light cruisers also stationed at Centaur, Hale of the *Bayonet* and Bertarelli of the *Ceres*. The two officers from the *Warspite* then made their way across the room and sat down beside the other two captains with Reeves sitting beside Hale, "Any idea what's going on here?" he asked her but she shook her head.

"No, but the theories have already begun circulating. Some people are saying that we're going to launch a pre-emptive strike on the Caliphate before they can finish that assault cruiser they've been working on for the last year or so."

"Some of my crew are saying that Liberty's been attacked and we're to be the relief force." Bertarelli added. Liberty was a human controlled world that had been settled by people wanting to leave the Commonwealth behind. However, although the only nation on the planet was still not a Commonwealth member there was a force of Commonwealth troops on the planet following an attempt by the reptilian Sissusk to invade it not long after the Commonwealth first officially made contact with them. With the supposed fall of the Sissusk Empire the danger appeared to have subsided, of course, the Sissusk were not the only alien threat known to be at large in the Pavonis Sector and there were others that could have launched an attack as well.

It was then that another group of Commonwealth captains entered the briefing room but these were not people that Reeves or the other already present recognised and it was obvious that they were the captains of the ships that had just arrived from the fleet base at Delta Pavonis.

"Well they certainly brought out the big guns for the job." Reeves commented just before Admiral Mitchell herself appeared in the company of her intelligence officer Commander Park. Reeves knew Park well, he having been the *Warspite's* intelligence officer for several years before being promoted and transferred to the admiral's flagship.

"Thank you all for coming." Admiral Mitchell announced from the podium, "Even though our friends from Delta Pavonis arrived less than an hour ago I've already heard a few stories about what we're about to do and thankfully none of them have been true. So that you can all hear the truth I'm going to hand over Commander Park who will explain our mission to you all." and then she stepped back to allow Park to take the podium instead.

"I'd like to begin by telling you that what you are about to hear is classified and not to be shared with anyone other than the command staff of your respective ships. Our mission concerns this ship." Park said and on the large screen behind him an image of a starship appeared. This was small by modern human standards and none of the vessel's markings gave away what nation had built it, "I'm sure most of you have read the reports about it but for anyone who hasn't this is the ship that we think is related to how we came to encounter alien species with a level of technology to rival our own. This ship was seen trailing the *Warspite* when it led the incursion into Sissusk space and again last year at Verne. So far all our attempts to locate the origin of this ship have failed so now we're going to change our strategy and try to deliberately draw it out in the hope that we might be able to identify where it comes from."

"And that takes an entire fleet? Two fleets in fact." one of the captains present who Reeves recognised as Captain Sanchez of the scout ship *Pegasus*. Sanchez was known for speaking his mind and Reeves was not surprised that he had said what most of the people in the room were probably thinking.

"Most of our ships won't be involved in the hunt for this vessel Captain Sanchez, they will merely be the bait to draw it out." Park told him, "As I am sure you are all aware, since the task force led by the *Warspite* returned from Sissusk space there has been no contact at all with the Sissusk and it is currently assumed that their Empire was destroyed by the same alien computer virus unleashed on the independent human colony world of Verne. This means that the roughly twenty thousand Sissusk prisoners still being held by the Commonwealth after their abortive invasion of Liberty could be the only members of their species left and this has raised some difficult questions. We cannot keep them in captivity for the rest of their lives, let alone any of the offspring that they are already starting to produce. On the other hand no-one wants to share their planet with a new nation inhabited by a previously hostile species who could become hostile to us again.

"There is also the issue of the refugees brought back from Sissusk space. There are around two thousand Krawlek on Centaur and plans are progressing to enable them to create a nation of their own. However, they are still anxious to find out what happened to the rest of their species when the computer virus spread to their home world that the Sissusk occupied. More serious is the situation of the Fedrun. Only a few dozen of them have been brought back to Commonwealth territory and unless more survivors can be found the species could very well die out because of its limited gene pool. Publicly therefore, our mission will be to enter Sissusk space with the intention of determining whether there are any survivors from the Sissusk or any of their subject species and if there are to make contact with them. We will also be watching for any signs that the Ticik may have moved into territory once under Sissusk control. We know that the two species were at war before the Sissusk unleashed the computer virus and that if our first encounter with them at Phi Two Pavonis as well as information given by both Fedrun and Krawlek is anything to go by the Ticik may also be hostile towards us. That means that any additional information we can get on them is vital."

"Err, additional?" Reeves commented, "I wasn't aware that we had any real information on them at all. Other than that they tend to fire on any ship that enters what they consider to be their territory."

"Quite." Park said, "Although your later encounter with them at CPD seventy-five thirteen sixty-eight suggests that communication is possible."

"When we obviously outnumbered and out-gunned them." Reeves pointed out.

"That is why we brought in reinforcements Captain Reeves." Admiral Mitchell said and she extended a hand towards where the captains of the recently arrived battleships and their supporting vessels. Then she looked at Park and added, "Please continue commander."

"Of course admiral." Park said before he turned his attention back to the gathered starship captains, "The target ship has been identified twice so far, both times by the *Warspite* when it was deployed beyond Commonwealth territory. Our hope is that by sending a large task force to Sissusk space will tempt whoever controls that ship to send it out again. If they do then they'll find us waiting for them and we'll track it back to its base. To accomplish this one of our ships will detach from the main force just after we leave Gamma Pavonis. This ship will travel ahead of us to our intended destination within Sissusk space and lie in wait. If the target ship acts as it has done in the past then it will arrive shortly after us and wait until we leave before

jumping out of the system again. The ship separated from the rest of our force will watch for this and attempt to plot the target's destination. If it looks to be following us then the process should be repeated until it looks like it is returning to its home base, at which point its vector will be plotted and our hunting vessel will try to locate this."

"So who gets the job of hunting the target?" Sanchez asked and Reeves sighed.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." he whispered to Lucas.

"The ship has to be able to operate on its own for an extended period of time without resupply." Park said,

"So that rules out any of our usual scout craft and since it may come under fire if it does locate the enemy base it needs to have enough firepower to be able to deal with a serious threat on its own."

"I think you're right captain." Lucas said to Reeves quietly.

"The heavy cruiser *Warspite* has been chosen to act as the hunter vessel." Park said, confirming the suspicions of both Reeves and Lucas, "That ship not only has the right combination of speed, endurance and combat capability but also has a crew with a proven track record of operating beyond Commonwealth territory without back up."

Reeves and Lucas exchanged glances.

"I knew it." Reeves said.

Mitchell then got to her feet and Park stepped back from the podium to allow her to take his place.

"While the *Warspite* is hunting for the target vessel the rest of the fleet will make a genuine effort to carry out our publicly proclaimed mission. We will be looking for signs of survivors from any of the species that were part of the Sissusk Empire, including the Sissusk themselves. With this in mind we will be taking several members of the Fedrun, Krawlek and even Sissusk species along with us aboard the *Jericho*. Their job will be to help persuade any survivors we find that we are there in peace."

"Are you sure taking Sissusk along is a good idea admiral?" Bertarelli asked.

"The Sissusk will be kept confined until needed and even then they will be kept under guard." Mitchell said,

"As well as officers who can act as liaisons between us and whatever might be left of their empire we'll be taking along some of the technical staff captured at Liberty. We know that the Sissusk use the same sort of satellite systems as we do for interstellar communication. The hope is that their technicians will be able to help us patch into these and establish a line of communication between us and the Commonwealth without us needing to rely on courier ships and drones. All of them, liaison officers and technical crew, have been promised that they don't need to come back with us if they don't want to and that's a promise I'll be happy to keep. The more of them we can send back home the better. In addition to searching for survivors in the Sissusk Empire we will also be looking out for any signs of technology left behind by the alien computer virus. So far no-one in the Commonwealth has come close to figuring out how the tachyon gates we suspect are used to transport planetary populations work. However, the remains of the gate found near Verne suggest that the technology will remain even after a world is depopulated so there could be more physical evidence left behind for us to study."

"Stay clear of it though. Those gates go up with a bang." Reeves said out loud, remembering how one of the mysterious alien artefacts had self destructed when the *Warspite's* crew had attempted to study one.

Fortunately the study had been carried out using robots rather than living engineers and no lives had been lost.

"Thank you Captain Reeves. We will bear that in mind." Mitchell said, smiling at him, "Now there is one more small matter regarding the hunt for the target vessel. Whoever is operating the target ship clearly had knowledge of advanced alien species before the Commonwealth did and that means they could know about even more of them. They could even have access to alien technology unknown to us and that possibility has attracted attention. Captain Reeves, you'll be taking a passenger along with you as well."

2.

"How did the briefing go captain?" Knight asked when Reeves and Lucas returned to the *Warspite* and the cruiser's first officer met them just inside the airlock.

"About as well as can be expected." Reeves answered as they began to walk down the corridor towards the officers' quarters.

"We're being sent into deep space again." Lucas added, "Back to Sissusk territory."

"Sissusk territory? Does their empire even still exist?" Knight said.

"That's what the rest of the fleet will be looking to find out." Reeves told him.

"But not us?" Knight commented and Reeves looked around to make sure that they were alone in the corridor.

"Fleet command expects that ship that's been following us around for two years to show up again. She's tasked us with tracking it back to its base." he said quietly.

"Even with a mission pod filled with FTL capable drones that's asking a lot for one ship." Knight said, the pod he was referring to being one of the two mission adaptive modules that the *Warspite* carried. By swapping these the cruiser could be reconfigured within a day for a much wider variety of missions than it would otherwise have been capable of carrying out on its own.

"Are you going to tell him about our special guest?" Lucas asked.

"Special guest?" Knight said.

"We know that ship was built using human technology but given that whoever's operating it seemed to know all about the Ticik before we did we can't be sure that they don't know a whole lot more as well. We've been told to take along someone who wants to find out exactly what that is." Reeves said and when Knight just frowned he added, "We'll be taking on an avatar of Nexus."

Knight stopped in his tracks.

"Nexus?" he exclaimed. Nexus was known throughout the Commonwealth, the only example of a truly self aware artificial intelligence that had been created accidentally centuries earlier. Although it had come into existence on Earth as a free roaming program on the internet of the time, Nexus had later relocated to the otherwise uninhabited Luhman 16 system where it had established colonies on nine different worlds, all of which were under its total control as well as the defensive fleet it maintained. Legally Nexus had the status of a member nation in the Commonwealth though its interaction with humanity was largely limited to remote communication when its incredible problem solving and data processing abilities were needed. However, there were still occasions when face to face contact was needed and in those situations either a human would be able to travel to Luhman 16 to meet with Nexus or alternatively a robotic envoy, often known as an avatar, would be created by Nexus and sent where it was needed. Such instances were rare, however and Nexus remained as much of a mystery to most Commonwealth citizens as sentient aliens did.

"Yes, everything we've found out so far has been passed to Nexus for processing and it has decided to take a personal interest." Reeves told him.

"We're more interesting than those tachyon gates." Lucas added, "The bulk of the fleet will be trying to find out more about them as well as searching for any survivors from the Sissusk Empire."

"How soon do we ship out?" Knight said.

"The avatar is expected to arrive within the next eight hours and Admiral Mitchell wants us to get underway as soon as possible after that. I'm going to need to brief Commander Bernard and Lieutenant Commanders Goldman and Thomas. Oh and are our fighters operational yet?" Reeves said and Knight nodded.

"Thankfully yes. Those two futurists had written a computer virus that they thought would crash our operating systems. Along the way they included so many different traps and back up options that they made it so bloated that Commander Bernard's people found it about ten minutes after you left for the briefing. It's been purged from the one fighter they were able to upload it into and Shaw is satisfied that her planes are ready to go."

"Good. We might not need them at all but we can't leave without them." Reeves replied.

With the rest of the *Warspite's* command staff called to duties elsewhere on the ship it fell to Ash to oversee the preparations for departure being made on the bridge. Given that the cruiser was about to undertake a journey that would take it more than sixty light years beyond Commonwealth territory, more than twice the distance from Earth to Gamma Pavonis, every system needed to be checked to make sure that it would not fail and leave the cruiser stranded far from home.

"Commander Ash we've got more company. A ship just dropped out of FTL." one of the *Warspite's* sensor operators announced and Ash looked around.

"Centaur is a popular destination for commercial shipping. Can you tell me any more than that Cortez?" he asked and the young woman nodded.

"Yes commander. The ship's transponder identifies it as a courier. From Nexus." she said and Ash reached out to a nearby intercom handset and placed a call to Captain Reeves' quarters.

"Reeves." Reeves' voice said.

"Captain our passenger is on approach." Ash said.

"I'm picking up a signal. The courier is requesting permission to dock." the communications officer on duty said.

"They're requesting permission to dock captain." Ash told Reeves.

"Grant it. Then show the envoy to my quarters." Reeves said before he ended the call and Ash replaced the handset on its mounting.

"Give the ship permission to dock in the forward hangar. I'll go and meet the envoy there. Lieutenant Saunders, you have the bridge until I get back." Ash said and the communication officer nodded.

"Yes sir." he replied as Ash headed for the nearest exit from the bridge.

With the *Warspite's* bridge located towards the rear of the ship it required a walk of almost its entire eight hundred metre length to get to the forward hangar and by the time Ash got there the courier bringing the avatar from Nexus had already docked. The usual procedure for meeting someone arriving via one of the docking bays required both parties to wait while the hangar was pressurised before the internal airlock doors would be opened. Then the *Warspite's* crew could enter the hangar without spacesuits and the visitors could likewise disembark from their ship.

However, on this occasion as soon as the airlock door leading to the hangar was opened Ash found himself looking at a humanoid robot that was obviously not one of the *Warspite's* own complement standing just inside the hangar. While the basic structure of the robot was similar to that of the *Warspite's* more mundane machines it stood slightly taller and had a more slender appearance. This did not reflect any superiority in the technology used to manufacture the robot since Nexus shared Commonwealth technology, instead it reflected a difference in purpose. The humanoid robots used by the Commonwealth armed forces were intended to be capable of carrying out tough physical work and their structures needed to be able to support heavy loads. On the other hand the avatar of Nexus was intended to interact intellectually with humans and its design reflected this. Although the technology to create robots that appeared perfectly human did exist Nexus did not make use of it, preferring to create envoys that were immediately recognisable as mechanical instead.

"You are Lieutenant Commander Marcus Ash, senior helmsman of the Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite*?" the robot said, looking straight at Ash. It was not surprising that the robot would know any of this information, Ash's uniform clearly indicated his name and rank and since Nexus would have been briefed on the *Warspite's* crew assignments it was simply a matter of checking these details against the crew roster but it still confused Ash for a moment.

"Yes, that's right." he said after a brief hesitation, "I'm afraid that we haven't been told your name."

"I am an avatar of Nexus commander. Therefore, if necessary you may address me as Nexus. Though some humans prefer the term ambassador or avatar instead."

"Very well ambassador. If you'd like to come with me I'll show you to the captain's quarters." Ash said.

"As you say commander. Please lead the way." the avatar replied.

The robotic envoy walked alongside Ash rather than following behind him as someone unfamiliar with the cruiser's layout would and Ash realised that it probably had a detailed floor plan of the ship committed to memory.

"Here we are." Ash said when they reached the door labelled 'Captain Reeves' and he knocked twice before opening it, "Captain I have the ambassador for you." he said as he entered Reeves' quarters. This room doubled as an office for Reeves and Knight, Goldman, Bernard and Lucas were already inside discussing their upcoming mission.

"Ambassador, do come in." Reeves said, getting to his feet when the robot appeared in the doorway behind Ash, "Allow me to introduce my officers. This is Commander-" Reeves began, pointing to Knight before the envoy interrupted him.

"Commander Douglas Knight, executive officer. Commander Adam Bernard, chief engineer. Lieutenant Commander Denise Goldman, flight operations officer and Lieutenant Jessica Lucas, intelligence officer. Yes captain, I have already familiarised myself with the service records of your senior staff and the layout of this vessel."

"That's nice to know." Reeves said as he and Knight smiled at one another.

"What about your ship? Will it be staying aboard or will your pilot take it back to Nexus?" Bernard said.

"I am Nexus. As is the vessel that brought me here." the envoy replied.

"Are you saying that you flew the ship yourself?" Goldman asked.

"No, he's saying that like him the ship that brought him here is a representation of Nexus." Reeves said.

"That is correct Captain Reeves. All technology operated by Nexus is operated in such a way." the envoy said, nodding its head once.

"You're all exact copies?" Lucas commented and the envoy turned towards her.

"No. The total file size of the core Nexus program is too vast for many smaller systems to store and run in active memory. Therefore, smaller units feature only a small aspect of Nexus. However, by combining multiple units, myself and the courier that brought me here for example, a better representation becomes possible."

"I hate to ask," Bernard said, "but you won't be making use of our computer processing power will you?"

"No commander. Spreading the Nexus program beyond systems entirely under my control is something only to be done in an emergency. During the early years of my existence it became obvious that the uncontrolled spread of my program would cause great alarm among humans and was not worth the risk." the envoy said. "Which was exactly why you chose to isolate yourself in an uninhabited system as soon as the technology became available." Reeves commented and the envoy nodded once more.

"Correct captain. Now if I might be blunt I would like to know what arrangements have been made for my presence on the ship." it said.

"Of course. I've had both Bernard and Goldman arrange for quarters for you that are within easy reach of the engineering section." Reeves said

"This meeting was just drawing to a close, I could show you and make sure you have everything you need." Goldman added.

"Thank you lieutenant commander, that would be appreciated." the envoy responded.

"In that case since I've said everything I think I need to and we all have things to do before we leave I'll call this meeting to a close." Reeves said, "Goldman, as well as showing the ambassador to his quarters could you contact Lieutenant Commander Shaw and get her back to the ship, I believe she was called away."

"Yes captain, I'll get right right on it." Goldman replied.

When Shaw returned to the *Warspite* she encountered Lucas in a corridor on her way to the bridge as she was heading for her quarters to change back into her uniform before the ship got underway.

"You're late." Lucas commented.

"I know, I know. I got held up unexpectedly." Shaw replied, "Frankly the call couldn't have come at a worse time. Jack was right in the middle of it."

"Of what? Wait, do I want to know?" Lucas said and Shaw grinned as she held up her left hand to expose the ring now on her finger, "Oh my God! Lynn that's great news." Lucas exclaimed.

"I know. I hope this deployment doesn't last too long because I've got a lot to sort out when we get back." Shaw said.

"Just as long as you remember who all your loyal shipmates are when it comes to picking a maid of honour." Lucas said.

"Remember? I plan on making all of you suck up to me the entire deployment to try and get me to choose you." Shaw told her and Lucas smiled.

"Then I hope Goldman's ready for a dirty war because I'm taking no prisoners." Lucas said as she continued to head for the bridge.

"Nice of you to join us lieutenant." Knight said when Lucas arrived at the bridge and took her station.

"Sorry. Lieutenant Commander Shaw is back aboard by the way." Lucas replied.

"Yes we know." Goldman said, "We're getting ready to get underway. All systems are on line and we have clearance from traffic control captain." and Reeves nodded.

"In that case take us out Commander Ash. Is our course locked in?" he said.

"Course set for Epsilon Pavonis captain." Thomas replied.

"The last time we were there we ended up battling against a fleet of automated warships." Knight commented, "Think the place will be as welcoming a second time around?"

"I hope not." Reeves said, "Commander Ash I want you to follow the fleet commander's order to jump to FTL but drop us out again after half a light year. Then re-engage at full speed." he added.

"That should get us to the Sissusk home world about two and a half days before the rest of the fleet captain." Thomas said, quickly calculating the difference in travel times for the *Warspite's* top speed and that which the rest of the fleet would have to maintain in order to avoid leaving the supporting resupply ships and repair tenders behind. When the *Warspite* had last travelled into the territory controlled by the Sissusk Reeves had chosen to split his force up so that the faster cruisers would arrive before the assigned auxiliaries. However, by keeping the fleet together as a single unit Admiral Mitchell gave the *Warspite* the chance to pull ahead easily without it appearing that the fleet was moving deliberately slowly.

"Which will hopefully be enough time for us to take a quick look around and then find a good spot to watch for that scout ship turning up." Reeves said.

"All moorings cleared captain. Firing thrusters." Ash reported and the main screen at the front of the bridge showed the *Warspite* backing away from the massive space station orbiting Centaur where the Commonwealth's squadrons in the Gamma Pavonis system were based. As soon as the ship was clear of

the structure of the space station Ash fired its manoeuvring engines to turn it around so that it could take its place in the formation of ships preparing to travel to the home planet of the Sissusk and it was then that the intercom in front of Reeves and Knight sounded.

"Bridge." Knight said as he answered it.

"Bridge this is engineering." Bernard's voice responded, "All systems are set. You can jump to FTL whenever you want."

"Understood. Bridge out." Knight said before putting down the handset, "Captain engineering reports that we're all set to go to FTL."

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman please inform the flagship that we are ready." Reeves ordered and Goldman nodded as she activated the *Warspite's* ship to ship communications. Meanwhile Reeves watched as the multitude of warships from light vessels such as scouts and corvettes all the way up to the massive battleships that dwarfed even the eight hundred metre long *Warspite* that had been brought in to reinforce the fleet usually stationed at Centaur all moved into position, aligning themselves with the star Epsilon Pavonis around which orbited the home world of the Sissusk.

"The Jericho is signalling now captain." Goldman announced, "All ships to go to FTL at six light years per day at fifteen seventeen."

"That's ninety seconds." Knight said, checking the time.

"Hull charging captain. Deploying tachyons and standing by to jump." Ash said.

"Jump as ordered commander." Reeves ordered.

A rapid succession of flashes of light occurred when the time reached the one appointed by Admiral Mitchell for the fleet of ships to accelerate to faster than light speeds, having built up large masses of charged tachyons around their oppositely charged hulls so that the imaginary mass of the tachyons would be greater than the real mass of the ships themselves. Then when their main engines were fired the randomly moving tachyons all suddenly began to move in the same direction and the ships were dragged to faster than light speeds.

INTERLUDE.

Vale ran to the door of Hayes' office and rushed inside to find his superior sitting on the edge of her desk waiting for him.

"Do come in Enrico." she said.

"I'm glad I caught you." Vale replied.

"Only just. I'd already logged off the system so I hope you don't need my computer." Hayes said.

"No. Here, take a look at this." Vale said and he held out his tablet to her. Taking the device from him, Hayes looked at the screen and her eyes widened.

"An entire Commonwealth fleet heading for Sissusk space." she said and Vale nodded.

"Their mission is apparently to find out if there's anything left of the Sissusk Empire and contact any survivors." Vale said.

"This is just the opportunity we've been waiting for Enrico. Stein gave me one last chance to use Martins and the *Grey Dawn* and this is it." Hayes told him.

"The original plan?" Vale asked and Hayes nodded.

"Yes, the original plan. We know that the Ticik are sending ships into what was Sissusk space regularly now. Big ones as well, not just small patrols but entire battle groups. I want you to figure out the best way to enable Martins to get one of those battle groups in the same system as the Commonwealth fleet."

"It'll have to be a big one. The last time a Commonwealth task force encountered a Ticik patrol the Ticik didn't engage." Vale pointed out.

"Then either find one big enough to challenge this fleet or find away of getting the Ticik to bring their ships together to attack the Commonwealth. Alternatively find some way of getting the Commonwealth to fire first. Oh look, just do something. Where is Martins now?"

"The *Grey Dawn* is right here in orbit, but this information is already six days old. If he's going to get to Epsilon Pavonis ahead of this Commonwealth fleet then he needs to leave as soon as possible. It'll take an hour just for the order to reach him." Vale said.

"Then work quickly Enrico. Because this is our last shot at getting this right." Hayes replied.

"Of course commander." Vale said as Hayes returned his tablet to him and he turned and left the office, returning to his own work station several floors down in the building.

All the while he walked Vale considered how to get two powerful fleets of warships to not only meet in a single system more than forty light years away but also to make sure that they fired on one another, thus triggering a larger conflict that no matter what the end result would cripple the Commonwealth. The first objective Vale could think of had to be to arrange the meeting of the two fleets in sufficient numbers that a large scale engagement between them could even take place and then prompting the battle would have to follow that.

Vale was still puzzling over this when he reached his office and sat down. For inspiration he began to study the information available about the space that had been occupied by the Sissusk Empire. Since it had been overrun and depopulated by the robots built using technology gained from the mysterious alien computer virus it had been possible to send numerous drones into the area to survey it without fear of them being shot down by the Sissusk defences and this meant that Vale had a large amount of recent data to deal with. From what Vale could tell the destruction of the Sissusk Empire had been almost total. Of course there were handfuls of scattered survivors on several worlds as well as one primitive subject species that had been ignored by the robotic forces that had rounded up billions of sentient beings from more advanced species on dozens of worlds. There were also small numbers of the robotic forces left active, some of which had even tried firing on the patrols being sent ever deeper into Sissusk space by the mysterious Ticik, that species or possibly even the collection of species that was known only by their warships that aggressively defended any star system they called their own. Naturally enough the reaction of the Ticik to being fired on was to bring the maximum force possible to bear on the responsible ships and destroy them outright. There was also a suggestion that they had attempted to study one of the vast tachyon gates the robots had constructed to transport their captives to an as yet unknown destination. Their attempts appeared to have been just as unsuccessful as those of the Commonwealth to study a functional gate up close though and the structure had self destructed, taking with it a nearby Ticik warship, the wreckage of which had been detected by one of the exploration drones.

It was then that an idea occurred to Vale. The Commonwealth was in the process of studying a derelict alien tachyon gate in the system occupied by the independent colony of Verne but it was still far from understanding how the gates worked and it seemed likely that the Ticik were no further along in their research. Therefore, if Vale could figure out a way of suggesting to both factions that the other had somehow managed to activate a gate without it self destructing then the other was bound to come and investigate. Then if the Ticik stuck to their usual pattern of behaviour they would do whatever it took to prevent the

Commonwealth from gaining the advanced technology of the tachyon gates. Vale's own government had prohibited research into the alien gates, fearing that the large amount of tachyons they would inevitably use in their operation would attract the attention of the Commonwealth and while the reason for the ban offered a means to lure both the Commonwealth and Ticik to a gate it also meant that there had been no research carried out into how it might be possible to create the sudden burst of tachyons in the first place. Or at least no public research and no practical experimentation had been carried out but Vale knew of one person who was bound to have done some more discrete study.

"Call Doctor Angela Horst." he said and the communication system built into his desk activated.

"Calling Doctor Angela Horst." it responded and Vale waited while the call was placed.

"Horst." a woman's voice said and from the noise in the background Vale guessed that he had caught her driving home after finishing lecturing at her university for the day.

"Doctor Horst it's Vale." Vale said.

"Oh. What do you want?" Horst asked, sounding disappointed to be hearing his voice.

"Doctor I need to know about the research you've been carrying out on the alien tachyon gates found in the Sissusk Empire." Vale told her.

"You mean those technological marvels that could herald a new era of long range space travel if only I was allowed to try and reverse engineer the technology? Well I don't know anything Mister Vale. Your superior went very high up to make sure that Mister Stein and I were made aware of serious consequences if either of us tried to press the matter." Horst said.

"I also know that you were told that you could do whatever research you wanted as long as it remained purely theoretical and private." Vale pointed out.

"Which amounts to next to nothing in scientific terms. You're as much of an academic as I am Mister Vale, you should know that. Even if you do work for someone as devious as Jennifer Hayes. I'm not surprised she never married. She'd probably murder her husband on the wedding night just so she could steal the bedsheets from him." Horst said.

"Yes you're right Doctor. Not about Commander Hayes, but about me. I am like you and that's why I know that you will have been carrying out as much research into the gates as you could without violating the government ban on anything practical or public." Vale said.

Initially there was no reply but the background noise from within Horst's car told Vale that she had not terminated the call yet.

"This is urgent Doctor Horst. Captain Martins needs the information within the next few hours." Vale added.

"Okay I've got notes but I don't want to risk sending them electronically. Can you come by my house and I'll give them to you on a portable drive." Horst said.

"Very good doctor." Vale replied, "I'll be there in an hour."

Vale arrived at Horst's home just as she and her family were sitting down to eat and she took him to the private office she maintained there.

"There you go." Horst said as she set down a portable computer drive on her desk, "Of course it's all useless. The technology won't work."

"What do you mean it won't work? We know it works." Vale said, picking up the drive.

"Maybe for our mystery aliens it does but all that tells me is that they know about areas of tachyon physics we can't even imagine." Horst told him.

"I don't follow you doctor."

"The power Mister Vale, it's all a matter of power. The more you have the more tachyons you can produce in a given time using a particle inductor. All of the gates encountered so far have been built from the remains of starships that from what we know about them are not much more advanced, if they are more advanced at all than anything we can build. That means they should be limited to producing a similar amount of tachyons in any given time and therein lies the problem." Horst explained.

"They can't make enough to activate the gate and create a stream of tachyons that will carry a ship." Vale said, looking at the drive.

"Precisely. Take a pair of star systems that are close to one another. Five light years say and each of those systems has one of these gates in so that you can travel between them." Horst began, "Well it would take longer for the ships that make up all the gates we've seen so far to generate enough tachyons to fill a volume of space six and a half thousand metres across and five light years long than it would any ship wanting to make the journey to do it at sub light speed. I said right from the beginning that this mode of interstellar travel just wasn't efficient."

"Show me." Vale said and Horst sighed.

"Fine." she said, sitting down at her desk and activating her computer, "Don't believe me. After all I'm only the physicist you asked for scientific support. What could I know about tachyon physics that a strategic planner wouldn't?" then she brought up the file that showed her calculations and pointed to it, "There you are, that's

the maths if you want to refute it. All of it's on the drive I gave you so if you think you can find someone smarter than me you might want to ask them if the numbers are right."

"I trust you." Vale said, looking at the calculations on the screen. Horst was correct in pointing out that although both of them were regarded as the same sort of person by society they had chosen to follow different paths and Vale could not have derived any of the complicated tachyon and energy equations that he was looking at. However, seeing them already laid out for him he could tell that the energy requirements for the tachyon gates were many orders of magnitude greater than the best power sources known to humanity or any of the alien civilisations encountered so far.

"Then why ask to see this? Can't you just take what you have and leave me to eat with my husband and children? From that ring on your finger I thought you had a family of your own that are probably waiting for you." Horst said.

"My wife is very understanding. She appreciates the importance of my work. Perhaps your family should appreciate the importance of yours." Vale replied as he straightened up, "And although I may trust you Commander Hayes will want me to confirm that your figures are accurate. Now I can tell her that I have double checked them and she'll be satisfied."

Horst snorted.

"She's just desperate. She must know what people think of her and she's looking to cover up her personal failings with professional success that she can only make off our backs. You know that there was a time when people like her were considered no better than people like us. Now we have to answer to people like Jennifer Hayes, Stein and the old man." Horst said.

"Perhaps if our predecessors had taken more care in their work that would still be the way." Vale said and then he held up the portable drive, "Thank you for this doctor. I'll contact you again if I need anything more. "Yes Mister Vale, I'm sure you will." Horst responded.

Despite already being late home, Vale returned to his office to study the data Horst had supplied him. In particular he wanted to see what Horst had to say about the pulse of tachyons that seemed to accompany the operation of the gates. Horst had theorised that this was in fact a consequence of a gate being shut down. When this happened the stream of charged tachyons that connected it to whatever its destination had to go somewhere and without the gate to channel their flow properly they simply dispersed and given the massive mass involved that meant that the pulse would spread very far becoming too weak to detect. This presented a problem for Vale. Without being able to study a gate up close, Horst had been unable to give any idea of how one might be activated and according to all of the information available the gates were designed to self destruct if tampered with.

On the other hand because the pulse was a result of the system suddenly being shut down it did not appear to be affected by the electrical power system of the starships used to construct the gate as was the case with individual ships using their faster than light drives. In these cases the frequency of the mains electrical grid could be determined by monitoring how the field of tachyons around the ship behaved during the start up and power down of the drive. This gave Vale an idea. It was not necessary for the gate to be activated to create a powerful tachyon pulse, instead a simple collection of tachyon storage jars of the sort used by starships that lacked their own particle inductor but still needed to be able to travel or communicate at faster than light speeds used to keep a stock of tachyons aboard could be fixed to the gate before being opened simultaneously and their contents allowed to spread out. Even from within the same solar system this would give the appearance of the gate having emitted the resulting pulse as if it had just been activated and then shut down again. There was still one flaw in the plan though, at two hundred metres long the *Grey Dawn* could not possibly carry enough tachyon storage jars to make the plan work. Any pulse created by opening enough tachyon storage jars to fill every bit of available internal space aboard the ship would still be far too small to have come from the gate. The obvious solution would be to use a larger ship but that presented a new set of problems. Although Stein had good connections with the military he was unlikely to be able to convince them to send a cruiser or bigger ship that could carry enough tachyon storage jars to mimic the operation of a gate and a civilian transport would not be fast enough to reach Sissusk space before the Commonwealth fleet.

While attempting to think of a way of getting enough tachyon storage jars to the Epsilon Pavonis system to mimic the operation of one of the alien gates Vale brought up an image of the gate known to be in the system. When it had first been observed the gate had been incomplete, the robots operated by the alien artificial intelligence having not yet fully secured the system and been able to transport the population of the Sissusk home world from their planet. However, two later surveys done of the system by drone had revealed the completed gate and that was what Vale now looked at an image of. Although every gate so far encountered had been unique all of them fit a common profile and this followed that perfectly. The ring, in this case more than six thousand metre in diameter was obviously constructed from numerous Sissusk starships that had been connected together and their faster than light drives combined to function in unison

even though as Horst had determined this still did not provide enough power to propel a spacecraft over the distances it was believed to. However, this method of construction suddenly provided Vale with a flash of inspiration. Even ships that had their own particle inductors to create tachyons as they were needed tended to include a number of tachyon storage jars so that an emergency supply of tachyons could be kept just in case the particle inductor failed and this meant that there would be hundreds of them inside the gate itself. Some of these might still contain tachyons and those that did not could perhaps be removed and transported to the *Grey Dawn* where the scout ship's own particle inductor could be used to fill them. The jars themselves, regardless of how full they were, would need modifying so that they could all be shut down simultaneously but that was a minor issue. A more significant issue was going to be moving the jars back and forth between the gate and the *Grey Dawn* without the gate's defences deciding that it needed to self destruct.

"Conrad? You want to send Conrad's special forces unit along." Hayes said while she used the hand not holding her phone to clutch the towel she had wrapped around herself when it rang while she was in the shower, "Enrico you know there are standing orders against any of our personnel engaging Commonwealth forces directly. It could lead them right to us."

"Yes commander, I understand that but I don't plan on Conrad's team coming anywhere near anyone from the Commonwealth task force. His men have been trained for long range stealth boarding actions and that's the skill we need to make use of. So far whenever anyone has tried tampering with a gate it has self destructed. Conrad's men should be able to identify any security measures that are in place so that the tachyon storage jars can be removed. They should also be able to set the charges needed for the next phase of the plan." Vale explained.

"You mean shutting off all the jars in one go? Why not just use one big charge and get the gate to blow itself up? Won't that release all the tachyons as well?" Hayes asked.

"Yes commander. However, our plan stands a much greater chance of success if the gate is still intact when both forces are present in the system. That way each one will think the other was responsible and has control over the gate." Vale answered.

"Very well Enrico. Contact Martins and Conrad and tell them what to do. Also tell them that I might want them to make a few follow up flights to assess the results so they are better returning to the forward base instead of coming all the way back here. It'll save us four days on a round trip."

"Yes commander. I'll-" Vale began but Hayes just hung up on him and tossed her phone back onto the bed where she had left it earlier before returning to her shower.

B.

Alarms sounded around the *Warspite* as the ship approached the Epsilon Pavonis system at the end of the journey that had taken around nine and a half days to complete. Although nothing had been heard of the Sissusk for around two years the system was still considered hazardous territory. Even if the Sissusk were gone then there could still be forces controlled by the alien AI present or even a Ticik patrol. No matter what happened to be waiting for the *Warspite* when it arrived in the system, Reeves wanted to be sure that the ship was prepared to defend itself.

"Dropping to sub light in twenty seconds captain." Ash announced.

"Weapon status?" Knight called out.

"All conventional weapons armed and ready commander." one of the gunners to the left of the bridge responded.

"Hangar reports all fighters crewed and ready to launch." Goldman added.

"Ten seconds." Ash said.

"I want a sensor sweep as soon as we enter the system." Reeves said, "Passive only for now though. No sense advertising our presence more than necessary."

"You mean more than the tachyon burst when we drop out of FTL?" Knight commented.

"There's no way around that." Reeves said, "But if anyone else is in the system then I want to make it as difficult as possible for them to find us while we wait for Admiral Mitchell to get here with the fleet."

The *Warspite* lurched only slightly as the shell of tachyons around the vessel was suddenly scattered and the ship was once again dropped to sub light speeds. The star Epsilon Pavonis was still several light hours distant, Ash having brought the ship out of faster than light travel on the outer edge of the system but the planet Sissar, home world of the Sissusk was visible using the *Warspite's* optical sensors.

"Status?" Knight asked.

"All ship's systems functioning properly commander." Goldman responded.

"Looks like we're about three and a half light hours out from the star." Thomas added.

"Any sign of activity?" Reeves said.

"The tachyon satellites are present around the star captain but they don't appear to be active." Cortez reported.

"There are several thermal contacts that could be active ships captain." Lucas reported, "In fact there is something in orbit around Sissar itself."

"The AI?" Knight suggested, glancing at Reeves, "The last time we were here-"

"The last time we were here the AI had battleships waiting for us and we had a squadron of cruisers. Now we're on our own." Reeves interrupted.

"This looks too small for a battleship captain. In fact I'm not even sure that it's a warship of any kind.

Obviously I'm only getting passive readings that are more than three hours old but it's not moving the way a warship ought to." Lucas said.

Reeves nodded.

"Okay we can't just leave that ship there without knowing if it's going to give us away. We're going to make another jump. Lieutenant Commander Thomas can you plot a jump that will put us in the proximity of Sissar? Half a light second will do." he said.

"Simple captain. The planet's moons are out of our flight path so we can jump straight in." Thomas said before one of the sensor technicians looked up from his console.

"Captain I've got a large contact less than a light hour away." he said.

"How large?" Knight said.

"Massive. Well over six thousand metres across." the sensor technician answered.

"Captain I think it's the gateway." Goldman said as she checked the readings for herself, "Only it looks like the AI finished it off after we left."

"The gate's inactive captain." Lucas added, "No signs of any active power sources."

"I think we'll keep our distance just in case lieutenant." Reeves said, "We aren't here to study a gate and those things do have a habit of exploding at unfortunate moments."

"Like when someone pushes the wrong button?" Ash commented.

"Exactly." Reeves said, "Take us to Sissar if you would be so kind commander. Oh and someone inform Major Willis that we may be needing his marines."

"Course for Sissar plotted captain. We can jump whenever you want." Thomas announced.

"Execute jump Commander Ash." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain, hull charging. Jump in five. Four. Three. Two. One." Ash said, counting down before the *Warspite* lurched again as it accelerated to faster than light speed. Unlike the journey from Gamma Pavonis that had taken around ten days to complete, this trip lasted only seconds before the shell of tachyons around

the *Warspite* was dispersed once more and now the crew of the cruiser found themselves close enough to Sissusk that the shape of its continents could be made out clearly.

"Contact dead ahead captain." Cortez announced.

"Lock weapons." Knight ordered as a precaution.

"Lieutenant Lucas can you tell me what the ship is yet?" Reeves asked.

"I think it's a courier ship captain. The same as the smuggling vessel we captured and then used to send the Sissusk Emperor away on." Lucas answered.

"You think lieutenant? I'd like a definite answer before deciding whether or not to order it shot down." Reeves said and Lucas nodded.

"Definitely the same class of ship captain, only this one doesn't look to be in very good shape." she said.

"Power readings are fluctuating. I'd say she's having engine trouble. A lot of it." Goldman added, "We are close enough for a clear visual scan."

"Show me." Reeves said and he looked at the monitor on the console in front of him as Goldman sent him the feed from the *Warspite's* forward visual sensors. Sure enough this showed an image of a small Sissusk spacecraft, featuring the usual wedge shaped hull with side mounted engine pods and tapering rear section. Light could be seen coming from inside the vessel's cockpit and its running lights were active but other than that the ship appeared to be adrift.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman I want you to engage the computer translation program and attempt to make radio contact." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain." Goldman said before she activated the *Warspite's* ship to ship communications. Adjusting this to match the Sissusk communication protocols and loading the computer program that would automatically translate back and forth between English and the known Sissusk language took several seconds. Then Goldman began to transmit, "This is the Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite* calling the unidentified Sissusk vessel ahead. Please identify yourself. We mean no harm." Goldman then waited to see whether there would be any response but none came and so she tried again, "This is the Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite*. I say again, identify yourself." However, there was still no reply from the compact vessel.

"They can't respond or they won't respond. Take your pick." Thomas said.

"Any sign of activity aboard the ship?" Knight asked.

"Hard to tell commander. The energy signature is fluctuating. I think that the ship's drives are damaged and the pilot is trying to get them to work. I'm not picking up any tachyon activity though so it's strictly sub light for now." Cortez told him.

"We can't risk taking the *Warspite* in too close. That ship could be a trap." Reeves said, "Goldman, tell the hangar to launch the first two fighters from our squadron. They can move in closer and see if they can tell what's happening."

"Yes captain." Goldman said as she activated the intercom, "Hangar this is the bridge. Launch ready fighters one and two. Scramble. Scramble. Scramble."

"Okay Kaz we're up." Shaw said as their fighter was lowered into the launch tube and its wings folded downwards into their flight position.

"All systems set. Ready to launch." Mori responded from behind her.

"Control this is Archangel. Ready when you are." Shaw said.

"Confirmed Archangel. Launching now." a voice replied over the radio and all of a sudden the fighter was propelled forwards, accelerated steadily down the launch tube by powerful magnetic fields until it finally shot out from the front of the *Warspite* below the main forward hangar door, followed moments later by a second fighter from the other launch tube.

"Archangel to Lancer, form up on my wing. We're going in for a closer look." Shaw told the second pilot.

"Copy that Archangel. Do we have permission to engage?" he asked in reply.

"Negative Lancer. This is surveillance only until the *Warspite* says otherwise." Shaw ordered.

The two Commonwealth fighters sped towards the Sissusk vessel that was still more than a thousand kilometres away. However, accelerating at maximum power the two small attack craft crossed the distance in just a few minutes and as her fighter closed on the ship Shaw cut the power to her fighter's engines entirely to coast past it. At the same time she fired the smaller steering thrusters, pivoting the fighter constantly so that the Sissusk vessel remained in her forward field of view and thus within the firing arc of the two gauss cannons the fighter was armed with at all times.

"*Warspite* this is Archangel I think I see movement inside the cockpit." Shaw said when her fighter was positioned directly in front of the Sissusk courier with the cockpit viewport in full view and she fired her fighter's engines again so that the two craft had the same velocity and heading as one another. With the courier now just barely more than a hundred metres in front of Shaw's fighter she and Mori could both see clearly into the dimly lit cockpit of the courier where it appeared that someone was shining a flash light towards them, "There's someone aboard and I think they might be trying to signal to us."

“Just don't try asking us what they're trying to say.” Mori added.

Back aboard the *Warspite* Reeves and Knight looked at one another.

“It could still be a trap.” Knight said, “That ship could be filled with explosives.”

“If it was I think that they would have already triggered them.” Reeves said, shaking his head, “No, I think that ship is exactly what it looks like. It's in trouble and whoever is aboard it needs our help. Ash take us to five ten thousand metres from that ship. Goldman tell the hangar to deploy our workpods and bring that ship inside. Then have Major Willis take a team there to secure it.”

“Yes captain.” Goldman replied.

“You know captain,” Knight added, “one day that devout Christian charity of yours is going to land us in a lot of trouble.”

INTERLUDE.

"Hello Commander Kane." a female voice said as Kane entered his office that was located directly opposite Hayes' and he spun around to see a young woman sat on a couch located against one wall smiling up at him. Kane had locked his office door when he left at the end of the previous day and it had been locked when had arrived, suggesting that the young woman had been able to override his lock, enter his office and then lock the door again from the inside. None of this surprised Kane about this particular young woman though.

"Are you here alone?" he asked looking around his office for any sign of the woman's elderly grandfather or the bodyguards he invariably travelled with.

"Yes, my grandfather has a couple of questions he'd like you to answer and he thought you'd rather answer them here than at home."

"How very considerate of the old man." Kane said as he walked over to his desk and sat down behind it, "So what can I tell you?"

"Stein is on the verge of severing his support for Commander Hayes ." the young woman said and Kane grinned, "Yes, the news is all over the building. Jessop is overjoyed of course after the fiasco at Verne last year."

"Understandably. However, I am not here to discuss the potential for Hayes' fall from grace. I understand that the intelligence on which her attempt to stay in Stein's favour came from you." the young woman said.

"It came from my network, yes. Of course things aren't quite as reliable after the loss of the pipeline through Verne but Jennifer still gets to see the reports from my agents. Or rather Vale does. He is her personal strategic planner after all. For now at least. I'm thinking of making him an offer when she ends up scrubbing floors." Kane said and this time it was the young woman that smiled, "What's so amusing?" Kane asked.

"Nothing. My grandfather wants your opinion on the fleet that the Commonwealth is sending into Sissusk space. What are they looking for?"

"Survivors of that alien AI program that seems to have destroyed an entire Empire in about a year. That's what my spies are saying." Kane replied.

"Your spies are repeating what's in the Commonwealth press releases. Do you really believe that?" the young woman said and Kane hesitated.

"No, not really. We've been sending drones into what was Sissusk territory and the Commonwealth has as well. If all they wanted to find was survivors then they could send in a few cutters and heavy pickets and intensify their drone flights. That Nebula-class escort carrier leading their task force could do the job all by itself. Or the heavy cruiser they have based at Centaur. The *Warspite*. It's crew have considerable experience operating beyond Commonwealth territory and by equipping it with a pair of drone carrying modules it could sweep through the entire Sissusk Empire in a couple of months. Instead the Commonwealth has sent a battle group with enough firepower to seize an entire star system if it's not too heavily protected and then hold it against a major counter attack."

"So what do you think they want?" the young woman said.

"The gates." Kane replied, "It's the only thing I can think of that would justify that sort of investment of resources. The Commonwealth has people studying the derelict gate at CPD sixty-seven thirty-seven oh-three but it's a wreck. The gates in Sissusk space are new, intact and possibly still operational if someone can find away around their anti-tampering system. Which given a year of study of a derelict gate the Commonwealth might just have now."

The young woman nodded and got to her feet.

"Thank you for your assessment commander. I will be back if I have any more questions." she said and as she made her way towards the door Kane rushed over to get there before her and opened the door for her.

"Of course I am always available to help you or your grandfather." he said and he followed the young woman into the hallway so that he could watch her leave.

As the young woman walked away Kane saw Hayes round a corner and come walking towards him. She remained calm and avoided eye contact as she walked past but she smirked at Kane when she reached him and the young woman was out of sight.

"Something amusing you Jennifer?" Kane asked.

"Just wondering what you did to deserve having her come calling on you Alex." Hayes replied and Kane smiled back at her.

"Actually Jennifer she was here to ask about your last desperate attempt to keep your position." he said,

"Now if you don't mind I need to contact building security and have my office checked for monitoring or explosive devices."

After leaving the building where Kane's office was located the young woman drove out of the commercial and

administrative heart of the city and into one of the more upmarket residential areas. Here homes were surrounded by high walls and protected by the most advanced security systems as well as in many cases their own private security forces. She saw no guards when she reached the large house that was her destination but she knew that they were there if anyone was foolish enough to try and attack it and she opened the main gate by remote control from inside her car. Heading up the driveway she saw another car parked in front of the house that had a sticker in its window that identified as a vehicle belonging to a medical doctor. Rushing into the house the young woman hurried to the main lounge where she found an elderly man sat on a couch while a much younger man stood close by with a computer tablet in his hand. As was usual for the old man there were also two large bodyguards standing on opposite sides of the room, ready to respond to any attack but when the young woman came rushing into the room they ignored her.

"Grandfather! Are you okay?" she exclaimed.

"I'm fine my dear." the old man replied, "I just felt a little faint that's all and one of the staff called a doctor. Remind me to hire workers that don't panic as easily."

"Is he okay?" the young woman asked the doctor.

"Your grandfather is fine for a man of his age." the doctor replied.

"Of my age? You make it sound like I'm a hundred and twenty." the old man said, "I'm only in my eighties, I've not even hit my century yet. Now be off with you. I'm sure there are genuinely sick people out there who need your assistance."

"Of course. Although I would like to see you again soon to review your medication." the doctor said.

"Fine. Fine. I'll make an appointment some other time but right now just get out. I have the feeling that my granddaughter has important matters to discuss with me and if you stay to overhear them then I'll just have to have you killed before you leave." the old man said and at the mention of having the doctor killed both of the bodyguards drew pistols from concealed holsters, "Oh do put those away. I'd rather not have bullet holes in the walls or blood on the carpet." the old man snapped at them.

"I will wait to hear from you sir." the doctor said before he left the room.

"Good. Now that he's gone you can sit down beside me and tell me what Commander Kane had to say." the old man said and his granddaughter sat beside him on the couch, kicking off her shoes before lifting her feet up beside her and leaning against her grandfather while he put his arm around her.

"Kane thinks that the Commonwealth wants the tachyon gate that is in the Epsilon Pavonis system grandfather." the young woman said.

"Does he really?" the old man responded, "What a small minded thought."

"You don't agree with him?" the old man's granddaughter asked.

"No. The Commonwealth has an extensive team investigating the derelict gate in CPD sixty-seven thirty-seven oh-three. They don't need to risk going near a gate that could explode yet, they haven't come close to finishing with the one they already control. It's not like the Verne are going to try and take it off them."

"Then why send a fleet to the Sissusk home world? The Commonwealth claims it is hunting for survivors of the alien AI but Kane said that one ship could do that job."

"Yes it could my dear. Though I think the Commonwealth have gone hunting alright. Just not for survivors from the Sissusk."

"Then what grandfather? What are they hunting?"

The old man smiled.

"Us. They are hunting us. Ever since Jennifer Hayes arranged for the Canadians to send a ship to Phi-two Pavonis where it would encounter the Ticik she's had Lieutenant Commander Martins following every ship sent out beyond Commonwealth space to see if there is some way she can salvage her scheme to trigger a war between the Commonwealth and at least one of the neighbours it doesn't know it has. The Commonwealth knows this. They have a sensor profile of the *Grey Dawn* and can recognise it if they ever see it again. The fleet that they have sent out this time is supposed to be followed. If we could get hold of an accurate count from when that fleet left Gamma Pavonis to when it arrived in Epsilon Pavonis I'm sure that we'll find at least one ship not among the arrivals. Any that are missing will have gone to Epsilon Pavonis alright, but they won't have waited for the slower support ships to keep up. They were probably hoping to get there before the *Grey Dawn* could. They'll run silent and lie in wait, hoping to track the *Grey Dawn* back here."

"Do you think they'll manage that grandfather?" the young woman asked.

"I doubt it. Hayes has ordered the *Grey Dawn* to return to the base in the Eta Indi system instead of coming back here. If the Commonwealth tracks it anywhere it will be to Eta Indi. Of course the fallout from even that will be enough for our purposes and we need to be ready. When it becomes known that the Commonwealth is on its way to uncovering our activities heads will have to roll and all eyes will turn to Jennifer Hayes and those associated with her. We have to be ready to move against them all in one fell swoop to cover ourselves and we need to be the first to move or else we'll be right back where we started only now we'll have the Commonwealth breathing down our necks as well."

4.

The *Warspite* carried two small work pods, one man craft equipped with a variety of tools for carrying out repairs that were mounted on arms that also terminated in large grasping claws and these were used to take hold of the Sissusk courier ship by its engine pods.

"*Warspite* we are secure. I'm not picking up any dangerous levels of radiation so I'd say that it's safe to bring this thing aboard." Bernard transmitted from one of the pods when they were both securely clamped onto the courier. As soon as the engineer had heard that an alien ship was going to be brought aboard he had assigned himself to take part, eager to be able to study the ship even if it was a type he had already seen in much better condition. Unfortunately from his point of view every Sissusk ship capable of faster than light travel that had been taken intact had been taken from him before he could personally take it apart to see how every last part of it functioned.

"Understood commander. You are clear to return to the forward hangar." Goldman replied.

"Be ready to disengage fast if there's a problem commander." Shaw added from her nearby fighter, "We've got you covered if the lizards try anything."

"I hope that won't be necessary." Bernard said before he addressed the second engineer piloting the other work pod, "Okay Keller, let's get this ship inside where we can take a better look at it."

"Copy that commander. Firing thrusters." Keller responded.

Slowly the two workpods then moved the Sissusk courier into the *Warspite's* forward hangar bay, setting it down before backing away and landing themselves close by.

"This is Bernard. We're in. You can commence hangar pressurisation." Bernard transmitted from inside his workpod and immediately the outer hangar door began to close. As soon as this was done air was pumped back into the hangar before the inner air lock door opened and a unit of marines in body armour led by Major Willis, the commanding officer of the company stationed aboard the *Warspite* came rushing in accompanied by Knight who in this instance also wore an armoured vest over his uniform. Knight carried a sidearm in a holster while Willis and his marines carried a mix of bullpup automatic rifles and shotguns as well. In addition to this firepower one of the marines held in his hands the leash of the trained dog that ran alongside him excitedly as the team raced across the hangar towards the obviously damaged Sissusk ship. Behind this team a single robot from the *Warspite's* compliment of the humanoid machines followed. Since it was not possible for humans and Sissusk to speak one another's languages due to their radically different physiology this machine would be used to translate for them both.

As the team neared the courier the hatch to the rear of the ship suddenly opened with a 'hiss' and four Sissusk emerged from the vessel. Resembling ancient predators from Earth's history, none of the four were armed and each of them spread their arms out to their sides and dipped their bodies forwards in what was now known to be a Sissusk gesture of submission. The dog accompanying the marines leapt forwards and began to bark loudly at the aliens, the handler holding it back.

"Easy Thor." he said, bringing the dog to heel. Meanwhile Knight reached for the radio clipped to his body armour.

"Bridge this is Knight. Looks like we've got four Sissusk here." he transmitted before all of a sudden another three of the aliens appeared in the hatchway of the courier, only these were significantly smaller than the four already outside it, "No strike that bridge. We've got seven including children I think." Knight added.

"Do we stand down commander?" Willis asked, knowing that his men would be as uncomfortable with the idea of pointing their weapons at children as he was, even if they were aliens and Knight nodded.

"Lower your weapons." he said and the marines obeyed immediately.

It was at that moment that one of the adult Sissusk stood up straight and pointed back towards their ship as it hissed something in its own language.

"Heat." the robot stood behind the marines said, "Quickly. We need heat for the eggs."

"Oh great." Knight said as he reached for his radio again, "Bridge this is Knight. You're not going to believe this."

The infirmary aboard the *Warspite* was primarily intended to deal with the casualties of combat but there was also equipment for dealing with more mundane medical emergencies and this included an incubation chamber into which Doctor Thundercloud placed the three large eggs taken from the Sissusk courier while the adult aliens looked on. In turn the Sissusk were being watched closely by Willis and his marines while Knight sat across the infirmary from where he could see everything that was happening. With the eggs safely in the incubator Thundercloud then turned to address the adult Sissusk.

"As far as I can tell the eggs are still viable." he said, the robot standing between him and the aliens translating for him, "There have been some Sissusk born from the troops taken prisoner by the Commonwealth so we do have data to go on for the conditions required to make sure they hatch healthily."

One of the Sissusk then began to hiss and bark and the robot translated this into English for Thundercloud.

"What about us? Are we your prisoners now?" the machine said and then when a second of the Sissusk spoke the robot added, "You have us surrounded by armed soldiers after all."

"That will be up to the captain." Knight said, getting to his feet and approaching the Sissusk. It was at that moment that the door to the infirmary opened and Captain Reeves entered the room.

"Captain on deck." Willis said and the marines snapped to attention.

"At ease." Reeves said, "Now doctor, how are your new patients?" and he looked at the Sissusk.

"There are signs of malnutrition but not serious and scans of the eggs show that the embryos growing inside them are still alive. I haven't got around to asking how long they'd been in that ship for. Thundercloud replied.

"We found a lot of empty ration containers in the ship but no full ones. It looks like they'd exhausted their supplies." Willis added.

"Robot translate for me." Reeves ordered.

"Confirmed captain." the robot responded and when Reeves continued to speak it translated his words into the Sissusk language.

"My name is Captain Reeves and I am the commanding officer of this ship. I want to start by assuring you that you will be well treated while you are aboard my ship but I do expect your co-operation in return." he said.

"We are not traitors." one of the Sissusk hissed, the alien's words translated by the robot before another of the adult aliens pushed in front of the first and also spoke, "Forgive my mate lord. He was a military pilot before the machines attacked us." and then the first Sissusk growled only for his mate to growl back at him.

"I'm not interested in military secrets." Reeves said, "But I am interested in whether there are survivors on the surface of your planet."

"Some perhaps." another of the Sissusk answered, "I and my sister's family were able to hide away from the city when it was attacked. We had our children to think of so we did our best to stay out of sight when the machine patrols came near. Then five days ago we gave up waiting for rescue and made our way to the space port under cover of darkness. My sister's mate was a pilot and he found us a ship that we hoped would get us away from here but when we got into space something went wrong and we were stranded until you came along. We owe you our lives lord. The temperature was dropping all the time and our eggs would have died before much longer."

"So you haven't seen any other ships in the system then?" Reeves asked.

"No lord." the first female Sissusk answered just as the intercom buzzed and Thundercloud walked over and picked up the handset.

"Infirmary." he said.

"This is Bernard. The bridge told me that the captain was heading down to you. Is he there yet?" Bernard's voice asked.

"Yes, he's here." Thundercloud responded and he held the handset towards Reeves, "Commander Bernard for you captain." he said.

"Thank you." Reeves said as he walked over and took the intercom, "Reeves."

"Captain I've had a look at that Sissusk ship and I'd say that the occupants were lucky to have made it into a high enough orbit to stop themselves just plummeting back down to the planet." Bernard said.

"Was it attacked?" Reeves asked.

"No, it just looks like its well overdue for a service and the stress of getting from the ground into space blew out half the power grid." Bernard told him.

"How long to repair it?"

"Fully? Weeks." Bernard answered.

"You don't have weeks. What can you get done in a couple of hours?" Reeves said.

"I can restore power to the secondary systems and give them enough heat to keep them alive and keep the air recycling. Plus we can refill the oxygen and water storage tanks but without engines they aren't going anywhere captain." Bernard explained.

"They don't need to. Admiral Mitchell should be here in a few days and her fleet is bound to pick the ship up. Especially if you can give them power to operate a distress beacon." Reeves replied.

"That should be possible. It would just be sending static but the fleet would pick it up as soon as they dropped out of FTL." Bernard said.

"Then get to work commander. I want to be away from here in two hours." Reeves said and then he put the handset down and turned back towards the Sissusk, "That was my engineer." he said, the robot translating for him once more, "He says that he can restore enough power to your ship to keep you alive."

"What about the engines? If we cannot move we will die anyway." one of the male Sissusk replied.

"The engines would take too long to repair and my ship has to move away from here quickly." Reeves told the Sissusk and the pilot among them growled.

"You may as well execute us now." the robot translated.

"Or you could just wait aboard your ship for the fleet that is following us to arrive." Reeves said, "We'll make

sure you have enough provisions and my engineer will rig a beacon that our ships will detect as soon as they arrive in the system.” then he looked at Thundercloud, “I assume that those eggs can be moved.” he added and Thundercloud nodded.

“Yes captain, as long as they are kept warm enough they'll be fine.” he said.

“Very well, if you're satisfied that the Sissusk are fit enough to return to their ship once Bernard has made his repairs then we'll let them go and be on our way.” Reeves replied.

“Thermal readings indicate that the ship has power and I'm picking up the static in the seventy megahertz range captain.” Goldman announced while Reeves watched the Sissusk courier ship drift further away from the *Warspite*.

“Excellent. Commander Bernard did his job well. Admiral Mitchell will pick those Sissusk up when she gets here.” Reeves said.

“What about us? Are we set for our jump?” Knight asked and Thomas nodded.

“Yes commander. I've plotted a jump that will take us to the gas giant just beyond the asteroid belt our shadow hid close to the last time we were here.” he said, “Assuming they go for the same hiding place this time we'll be able to watch everything they do.”

“Good.” Reeves said and he activated the intercom, setting it to broadcast all over the ship, “All hands this is the captain, we are about to commence our next jump. As of the moment we come out of it I want this ship to run as silently as possible. Passive sensors will be used exclusively and no equipment that will radiate any energy outside the ship is to be engaged without permission from the bridge.” then he shut off the intercom and looked towards Ash, “Commander you may jump when ready.” he said.

“Yes captain, preparing for jump.” Ash replied as he turned the *Warspite* to face towards the gas giant that was the next planet out past Sissar in the Epsilon Pavonis system. Then moments later the ship lurched as it made another brief faster than light jump, this time emerging close to the gas giant that was their destination.

“Jump complete, reducing engines to minimum power and taking us into orbit.” Ash announced.

“Captain I'm picking up a tachyon wave.” Cortez announced, “Not large but close.”

“About the right size for a ship about two hundred metres long?” Knight asked and he looked at Lucas while she checked the data already recorded about their target from previous encounters.

“There signal is stronger than when we first observed the target.” she said, “But it's closing faster. Eight light years per day.”

“That's faster than us.” Thomas commented.

“ETA?” Reeves asked.

“About three hours if the stop in this system.” Cortez answered.

“That gives us plenty of time to hide then.” Reeves said, “Commander Ash make sure we are in the optimum position to observe the target and then shut down the main drives. Minimal thrusters only to maintain our orbit.”

The *Grey Dawn* dropped to sub-light speed less than half a million kilometres from the alien tachyon gate.

“Report.” Martins said from his command chair, “Is there any sign of what triggered that tachyon burst?”

“Negative captain.” the ship's sensor officer replied, “However, I am picking up a continuous signal coming from orbital space around Sissar.”

“Sissusk? Ticik? Or some sort of machine code perhaps?” Martins asked.

“None of them captain, it's just static.”

“Then ignore it.” Martins said, “What about the gate?”

“Intact but no activity. Exactly as expected.”

“Very good. Take us in closer. Hold at one hundred kilometres to begin with and then we'll move in closer once we're sure that it hasn't taken our presence as something that requires it to self destruct. Navigation I want a faster than light jump plotted so we can get at least a light hour away if that thing shows the slightest sign of being about to blow up in our faces.” Martins ordered.

“So we've arrived then.” a voice said from behind Martins and even without turning around he knew that it was Conrad, the commander of the special forces unit assigned to his vessel for this mission.

“Yes, you and your men might want to get suited up. That's your target.” Martins replied and he pointed to the monitor on his console that showed a magnified image of the seemingly lifeless tachyon gate.

“Weird looking thing.” Conrad commented as he looked at the image, noticing the different Sissusk ships that had been used in its construction. Conrad's expertise did not extend as far as being able to identify all of the individual type and classes of ship used but he could tell that there were many different ones, “Those guns aren't still live are they?” he asked, noticing a heavy turret mounted on one of the largest vessels used to construct the gate, “They could make mess of my men in an EVA if they are.”

“That particular weapon would reduce this entire ship to tiny bits of molten debris if it hit us.” Martins replied, “But no, we've not seen any indication that any part of the ships' systems are still operational other than the

minor energy readings we're getting from things running off batteries.”

“You mean like the tachyon storage jars?” Conrad commented and Martins nodded.

“Among other things, yes. Which reminds me. Helm fire up the particle inductor and start running off tachyons. Fill our reserves to maximum and be ready to start filling whatever Conrad brings us.” he said.

“And I'll go and get ready. Call us when we're at the gate.” Conrad added before he turned around and left the bridge leaving Martins focused on the image of the gate, knowing that the mysterious alien construction could suddenly self destruct at any moment.

“That vessel matches all the known parameters of the target vessel.” the envoy of Nexus said. The envoy stood with Reeves and Knight at the bridge's large central console and Reeves looked at Lucas.

“Lieutenant?” he said and she nodded.

“Agreed.” Lucas replied, “Even if it's a different ship it's the same class.”

“They don't seem to be too worried about keeping out of sight right now though.” Knight commented,

“Where's she heading?”

“It looks like she's on a course for the tachyon gate.” Thomas said, “At the speed we're seeing them at now we'll see them passing by it in about twenty minutes. Of course by then the information will already be about fifteen minutes old.”

“And if that is their destination?” Reeves asked.

“If their handling is anything like what we'd expect from a ship that size in our fleet to have then I'd say that slowing down would add on another five to ten minutes.” Thomas answered, “They'd already be slowing down. We just haven't seen it yet.”

“Do they have a death wish or something?” Ash said, “Those things go with a bang when tampered with.”

“The key phrase there Lieutenant Commander is 'when tampered with'.” the envoy said, “It may be their intention carry out a study from close range.”

“With our fleet on the way? Why get caught in the open like that?” Reeves pointed out.

“Admiral Mitchell is still more than forty hours away if she continues to keep her ships together and the fastest ships more than thirty if she opts to split them up and allow them all to proceed at their best speed.”

“That gives our target about a day to do whatever it wants before concealing itself again.” Knight said.

“What about emissions from the target?” Reeves asked.

“Just their engine flare captain.” Goldman replied, “We're not picking up any signs of communications or active scanning. I'd have expected them to have picked up the beacon from the Sissusk courier we took on board but they haven't made any effort to respond to it.”

“Not very friendly of them.” Lucas commented.

“Captain I'm getting some odd tachyon readings from that ship.” Cortez announced.

“Are they about to go back to FTL?” Knight suggested.

“Track their exit vector.” Reeves added.

“I don't think they're about to jump captain.” Cortez replied, “We're too far away to know if they're charging their hull yet but I'm not picking up any bleed from tachyons being added to it. This just looks like they're producing as many as they can to store.”

“That is most unusual behaviour.” the envoy of Nexus said, “It could indicate that there is some inefficiency in the design of their particle inductor that requires them to spend time producing enough to carry out a jump.”

“I'm not aware of any current models that have that limitation.” Knight commented, his background in tachyon physics that included holding some patents to do with faster than light drives providing him with knowledge of the various designs of particle inductor currently manufactured.

“You are correct Commander Knight.” the envoy responded, “However, your knowledge of the subject may be limited to designs produced within the Commonwealth during the last twenty to thirty years.”

“Our scans have proven that that ship uses Commonwealth technology.” Lucas pointed out.

“Only for its mains power grid that operates at fifty hertz.” the envoy responded, “However, given that the operators of the target vessel appear to have superior knowledge of advanced alien species to the Commonwealth in general it is not impossible that they have been able to procure a particle inductor from an alien species. Given that there are only a limited number of human nations that are capable of manufacturing particle inductors and all of them operate strict controls over who they are sold to it would provide a means of bypassing the usual security measures to construct a starship in secret.”

“All we can do for now is keep monitoring them.” Reeves said, “Keep us running silent and we'll see what their interest is in that gate.”

“Take us in slowly.” Martins said as the gate loomed in front of the *Grey Dawn*, just one hundred kilometres away, “How quickly can we get to FTL if we need to?”

“I've got the hull ionised already captain. I can get enough tachyons out to get us just past light speed in about three seconds.” the *Grey Dawn's* helmsman responded and Martins nodded.

“Okay. Sensors call out the moment that thing does anything. Helm don't wait for an order, just go to FTL if she does.” he said.

“What about the boarding party captain? We're putting a full squad of warriors and a couple of our own workers over there.” the *Grey Dawn's* navigator asked.

“Forget them.” Martins answered.

“Thanks for the reassurance.” Conrad said from the doorway at the rear of the bridge.

“A simple matter of practicality. If it comes down to a choice between losing my ship and its entire crew or just sacrificing you and your men then-” Martins began.

“Yes I understand. Just remember that Hayes will turn her back on you as easily as you're willing to abandon us if this doesn't work.” Conrad said.

“Unlike you Conrad, I don't work for Commander Hayes. I'm only here because of Mister Stein's involvement. An involvement that I have heard is coming to an end if this goes wrong. Hayes will have to find herself another scapegoat. Most likely that little man Vale. Now are you and your men ready for EVA?” Martins replied.

“Yes, we're ready. I want your scans of that thing on a tablet though. I'd rather know where the ways in are before we get there than run out of air crawling over the hull looking for a hole.” Conrad said and Martins looked towards the sensor operator.

“Give him what he wants ensign. The sooner we get this done the easier it will be to hide before the Commonwealth fleet arrives.” Martins said.

“Do you want to send a drone back to the relay station to let them know we're about to go aboard the gate captain?” the communication officer asked but this time Martins shook his head.

“No. we've only got a limited supply of the things. Wait until we've rigged the gate and are backing off. At least then we've got something worth reporting.” he said.

5.

The *Grey Dawn's* helmsman brought the ship to a relative halt compared to the orbital drift of the alien tachyon gate approximately one hundred metres away from the massive structure and moments later the air lock door on the side facing the ring slid open to permit Conrad and his team of troops in armoured spacesuits to exit the scout ship.

"This is Conrad. We're heading out now. I can see a tear in the hull of one of the ships from here." Conrad transmitted and without waiting for a response he jumped from the airlock into space towards the gate. Rather than just let his own momentum carry him across the gap between the *Grey Dawn* and the gate Conrad activated the propulsion pack on his back and let it accelerate him towards his target. Meanwhile behind him a line that kept him tethered to the *Grey Dawn* unravelled from a drum on his waist. About half way across to the gate Conrad shut off his propulsion pack briefly and then fired its braking thrusters to slow him down, not wanting to crash into the gate at anything more than a very low speed. Finally at the last moment he used the propulsion pack again to align himself correctly so that he landed feet first on the gate, his legs bending at the knee to cushion the impact.

"I'm over." he transmitted as he unhooked the cable reel from his belt, "Follow me over as soon as I give the word." and then he fixed the reel to the ring so that the *Grey Dawn* was now tethered to it, jamming the reel so that no more cable would unravel. With this connection made the next person to exit the *Grey Dawn's* airlock did not need to use a propulsion pack to cross the space between the ship and the gate, instead all he needed to do was clip himself to the line and then drag himself across. While his men as well as a pair of technicians from the *Grey Dawn* were following Conrad looked through the hole in the hull he was standing on, using the lights mounted on his helmet to illuminate the interior which was otherwise in total darkness, "Looks like a cargo hold." he said, climbing through the hole into a large open compartment that still had several crates floating inside in the zero gravity, "I'm heading for the rear of the ship. Track my beacon." "Not the rear Conrad." Martins responded from the *Grey Dawn*, "Sissusk ships have their power core amidships. You want to get to the lower decks to find the tachyon storage jars."

"Understood, I'm on my way down now." Conrad said, leaving the hold and looking along the darkened corridor to try and find a way down to the lower decks of the ship.

"Captain I think we might have something here." Cortez announced.

"Put it on the console petty officer." Reeves told her and Cortez passed the readings from her sensors to the central console.

"What's that?" Knight said when he saw the small energy signature.

"It appears to be the operation of some kind of propulsion pack." the envoy of Nexus replied.

"So someone's doing a spacewalk over to the gate." Reeves said, "Question is why? They must know that those things self destruct if tampered with from watching us."

"Maybe they already know more about them than us." Knight suggested.

"There's a scary thought. People who obviously aren't friendly towards us with access to that level of technology." Thomas commented.

"It is unlikely that they have sufficient knowledge of the gate technology to be able to use it. More likely they regard the physical structure of the gate itself as useful for some purpose." the envoy said.

"Any idea what?" Reeves asked.

"Unfortunately not captain. The worst case scenario would be that they at least think themselves to have a means to use the power output of the gate as a weapon of some kind." the envoy said.

"Admiral Mitchell's fleet is going to be in orbit around Sissar." Goldman pointed out, "A particle beam would take hours to reach there and even if they did hit one of our ships the rest would be alerted and scatter. They'd only get one shot."

"Unless the particle beam is tachyon enhanced." Knight pointed out.

"A heavy tachyon laser." Reeves said, "A beam of electrons wrapped in a tachyon shell. They're still theoretical."

"Correct captain. Although stabilised faster than light particle beams can be formed the advantage of their speed is countered by the limited range before the ionised nature of the beam causes total diffusion. Thus the spread of radar works but the focus of a heavy tachyon laser does not. Yet." the envoy said, "Therefore, although possible this is an unlikely answer. However, whatever their plan is, I believe that it still relies upon tachyons. That would then tie into why their vessel's particle inductor appears to have been operating continuously since they arrived in the system. They require a large imaginary mass to carry out their plan."

"Well an attack is out of the question." Reeves said, looking at the readouts coming from the *Warspite's* sensors, "Their hull is charged so even if we could jump in close enough to try and disable them they could escape in seconds. Even if they stayed put long enough for us to knock out their engines They might fry their

navigation system before Major Willis could secure it.”

“So we stick with the original plan?” Knight asked and Reeves nodded.

“They have to head back to their base sooner or later and when they do I want to be right behind them.” he said.

“And if they do have some plan to destroy the fleet? What then captain?” Goldman asked.

“Then we hope that our position gives us the chance to warn them. I'm not sacrificing the fleet for our mission.” Reeves answered.

The technicians from the *Grey Dawn* were easily able to detach the empty tachyon storage jars from their mounting while Conrad and his men continued to explore the ships that made up the gate for more of the devices. Some of the tachyon storage jars they came across still contained tachyons, their independent power cells still functional and these were left in place. The only modifications made to these was the addition of small explosive charges. The contents of the jars could not be affected by explosives but without the magnetic fields to contain them the tachyons would instantly disperse and the most practical way to cause every magnetic field to fail simultaneously was to destroy the magnetic field generators with explosives.

Once removed from the Sissusk ships, the empty tachyon storage jars were moved across to the *Grey Dawn* where two more technicians and one of Conrad's men were standing by inside the ship's cargo hold.

Between them they made sure that the power cells were adequately charged to maintain the magnetic field for as long as they were expected to be required to operate, filled the tachyon storage jars from the ship's supply and finally the special forces soldier fitted an explosive charge before they were returned to the gate. However, although they had been taken from inside the derelict Sissusk starships when they were returned the freshly filled tachyon jars were instead simply secured to the outside hull of the starship that Conrad had first landed on. What mattered was not where the tachyons came from, but the amount of them that could be released and it was this that concerned Martins.

“Lieutenant Hogan, how far towards our target are we?” he asked the *Grey Dawn's* chief engineer while the man oversaw the process of filling the tachyon storage jars.

“On schedule captain.” Hogan replied, “However, that is mainly due to the number of full jars that Conrad and his men have found aboard the ship in the ring which has exceeded the number I based my calculations on.”

“That's good isn't it?” Martins said.

“Only if the pattern continues. If on the other hand the number drops to what I had expected then we will fall behind.” Hogan told him.

“How far behind?” Martins said, frowning, “I thought all of this was calculated before we got here. Calculations are your speciality after all.”

“It was captain. The particle inductor this ship is equipped with is capable of turning the elemental particles we gather into tachyons at a rate of one hundred thousand tonnes magnitude per hour. That means we can create more than four and a half million tonnes over the two days we have available.” Hogan said.

“Yes Hogan. I don't need to be a thinker like you to carry out a bit of basic multiplication.” Martins interrupted, “Just tell me what the damn problem is.”

“The problem is that moving the empty tachyon storage jars from the Sissusk ships is taking longer than anticipated. Obviously Conrad's men have to take care not to disturb anything that could be interpreted by the gate's control system as a threat and trigger its self destruct mechanism but their progress in removing the empty jars and getting them over here is slow. Perhaps if I could send more of our crew to help then-” Hogan explained before Marin interrupted him again.

“Do it.” he said, “Go yourself if you have to but leave me enough people to operate the *Grey Dawn* long enough to get her back to the forward operating base if we have to get out of here in a hurry.”

“Of course captain. I will get suited up.” Hogan replied and then there was a chiming sound from the intercom that prompted another engineer to pick it up.

“There's a message for you captain.” the engineer said and he held out the handset.

Nodding Martins told hold of the handset and held it to his head.

“Martins.” he said.

“Captain I think we've hit the jackpot.” Conrad's voice responded, his transmission from inside the gate being relayed to the *Grey Dawn's* engineering section.

“Explain.” Martins said.

“We've found what looks like a tachyon tanker, a big one. I'd say about the size of a cruiser and at least ninety percent of the tachyon storage jars are full. There must be the equivalent of a few million tonnes here. Even better all the jars are being powered from a central battery reserve. Just one charge will release it all.” Conrad told him and Martins smiled.

“Have the workers that went over there with you confirm that. Then run it by Lieutenant Hogan to see if that is enough for our purposes. If it is then get back here as soon as possible. I don't see the point in hanging

around in the open for a minute longer than necessary. Martins out.” he told Conrad before he returned the handset to its cradle and turned back towards Hogan, “Lieutenant Hogan we may just have caught the break we needed.” he added.

“Come in.” Reeves said, looking up from his computer terminal when someone knocked at the door of his quarters.

“I’m not disturbing you am I captain?” Shaw asked as she opened the door and peered around it.

“No, not at all.” Reeves said, “What can I do for you?”

Shaw closed the door behind her and then sat down on the other side of his desk.

“I have a favour to ask captain. A personal one and I know it’s big but-” Shaw began, nervous about making a personal request of her commanding officer.

“Just ask me lieutenant commander.” Reeves interrupted.

“Will you marry me captain?” she said and Reeves stared at her, “Sorry, that came out wrong. I was wondering whether you’d perform the ceremony here on the *Warspite*.”

“In the hangar in front of your fighters?” Reeves commented and Shaw nodded.

“Yes captain.” she said.

“I’m not actually ordained, you know. You’d want my brother or my father for that and they’re both back in Yorkshire.” Reeves said, “And the old tale about captains being able to conduct civil weddings is a myth.”

“Oh I was going to hire a civil registrar to make it official but I was hoping that you’d carry out the ceremony. Since my dad died years ago I’ve asked Ash to give me away and having you carry out the ceremony would mean a lot to me.”

“In that case I’d be proud to lieutenant commander.” Reeves said and Shaw smiled.

“Thank you captain. That’s one less thing to worry about.” she said, “I’ve been listing everything I need to do and it just keeps getting longer.”

“My daughter said the same. Don’t try to do everything though. If you need help then make sure you ask.” Reeves replied.

“I’ve already had an offer of help from the marines.” Shaw said.

“I hate to think.” Reeves replied.

“Several of them suggested that they’d make it worth my while if I selected my maid of honour by having Goldman and Lucas wrestle for the honour.” Shaw added, “The worst thing is that so far that’s the best solution for the question I have.”

“You’ll still need to clear using the *Warspite* for the ceremony with Admiral Mitchell. I’ll support you of course.”

Reeves said before the intercom sounded, “One moment.” he added as he reached for the handset, “Reeves.”

“Captain it’s Bernard. There’s something odd going on at the gate that I think you should see.” Bernard told him.

“Where are you?” Reeves asked.

“Engineering.”

“Meet me on the bridge.” Reeves said before he put the handset back and looked at Shaw, “I think we’ll have to continue this another time.” he told her.

“Of course captain.” Shaw replied as they both got to their feet.

Reeves reached the bridge just after Bernard and found him at the central console with Knight and the envoy studying the sensor feeds from the tachyon gate.

“What’s going on?” Reeves asked.

“It looks like they’re moving tachyon storage jars back and forth captain.” Knight said.

“They’ve carried on running their particle inductor at what we’re guessing is full power since they got to the gate and we’ve seen them moving Sissusk jars back and forth.” Bernard added.

“The reference to operating their particle inductor is only a theory captain. We have no precise data about its capability.” the envoy said and Reeves smiled at Bernard.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” he commented, “So does anyone have any idea what they want with all these tachyons?”

“That’s where things get really weird. Check this out.” Bernard said and he called up a heavily magnified image of a section of the gate. The significant distance involved limited the detail that could be picked up but it was obvious that there were numerous objects that using one of the space suited figures nearby for scale were about the height of a man clustered together against the structure of the gate.

“What the heck are those?” Reeves said.

“Those are Sissusk tachyon storage jars captain.” Knight said.

“Full ones we think.” Bernard added.

“So these are waiting to be put back inside the gate then?” Reeves said.

“If that’s what they’re intending then they’re taking their time about it captain. We’ve seen them remove them from multiple locations around the gate, move them across to their ship where we think they fill them up and

then move all of them back across to the gate but that's it. They just leave them clustered together right there."

"What sort of quantity are we talking about here?" Reeves said.

"That little collection represents about a hundred thousand tonnes of imaginary mass." Bernard told him.

"That's not enough to push us faster than light but it's still a lot." Reeves said, "Could they have a problem with their particle inductor and be trying to build up a reserve to use for a trip home?"

"I thought that at first but the quantity is just far too big. We've got pretty good readings about the mass of that ship and it comes in at under ten thousand tonnes. There's no need for the quantity we're seeing here for their own use."

"Then it has to be connected to the fleet. At the rate they're going what sort of mass will they have by the time Admiral Mitchell gets here?" Reeves said.

"That depends on whether the target vessel is willing to remain out in the open when the fleet arrives captain, an event that we must conclude they have accurate information about the timing of." the envoy pointed out.

"Let's assume they aren't." Reeves said.

"In that case they have two choices. They can move to the most logical hiding place here at sub light speed," the envoy began and it pointed to an asteroid shown on the console readout that was several hundred metres across, "in which case if their performance is comparable to our own vessels of that size they will have to depart in no more than four hours to reach it. If they keep up the rate of transfer we have seen so far then I estimate that they would add a further seventy thousand tonnes of tachyons. Although I expect that they can produce far more than that. The limiting factor seems to be their ability to carry out the transportation of the jars themselves. Alternatively they could leave using their own FTL capability. That would enable them to remain in place a further twenty hours and add more than three hundred thousand tonnes of imaginary mass."

"Captain the tachyon activity of the target is changing." Cortez announced suddenly.

"Send it to us." Reeves ordered and a new window appeared on the console in front of him that showed a shell of tachyons forming around the ship they were watching. This was at odds with the other sensor data that still appeared to show the crew working to move the tachyon storage jars back and forth between the ship and gate but that could be explained by the time lag of electromagnetic and gravitational sensors that were limited to information gathering at the speed of light unlike the much faster tachyon based sensors.

"They're about to jump." Knight said.

"Keep a lock on them as long as possible. I want their exit vector." Reeves ordered.

"Tracking." Goldman said and then she frowned, "Captain it looks like they're turning towards us."

"They can't know we're here. We're running silent." Thomas said.

"They're jumping." Cortez said and she watched the *Grey Dawn* suddenly accelerate to faster than light speed before the smaller ship decelerated just as rapidly, "Wait, it was just a short range jump."

"Where are they now?" Reeves asked.

"Not far from here relatively. About two light minutes away where they're sheltered by an asteroid from detection from Sissar orbit." Goldman answered.

"So whatever they intend to do with all those tachyons they think they have enough." Knight said.

"Yes but we still don't know what that is." Reeves pointed out.

"Jump complete captain. We're right where you requested." the *Grey Dawn's* helmsman announced as the shell of tachyons around the ship was dispersed.

"Excellent. Position us so we can see around the asteroid. I want to know the moment the Commonwealth fleet arrives." Martins ordered.

"Yes captain." the helmsman replied, using the ship's manoeuvring thrusters to gently reposition the *Grey Dawn* so that its passive sensor receptors could receive data clearly from Sissar, "In position now captain."

"Good. Communications I want you to load a copy of our log into a drone and send it back to the base in the Eta Indi system. Tell them to relay it back home."

"Yes captain. Flight time by drone to Eta Indi is just over one hundred and forty-seven hours." the communication officer responded and Martins nodded, knowing that the direct transmission that the base in Eta Indi could make would then reach Hayes around an hour, about half a day faster than if he had ordered a drone that was limited to travelling seven light years per day sent directly back to her.

"Captain I'm picking up more tachyon activity." Cortez said.

"Are they jumping again already?" Goldman asked.

"I don't think so. The readings aren't strong enough." Cortez replied.

"Captain I think they're despatching a drone." Lucas added as she studied the readings as well.

"Confirmed captain." Goldman said in agreement, "I've got a small object accelerating away from the primary target."

"Track it." Reeves ordered, "I don't care if we sue their exit vector or that of a drone, I just want to know where they come from."

"Confirmed. Target locked and tracking." Goldman said before the drone shot out of the system faster than light.

"Did you get it?" Knight asked, looking at Goldman.

"Yes sir." she responded, "Vector logged."

"Running it through navigation now." Thomas added and he smiled when the *Warspite's* navigation computer rapidly gave him the destination that the drone would reach if it continued on its current heading, "Eta Indi. Distance just under forty-three light years."

"Isn't it pretty far from Earth?" Lucas asked.

"Just under eighty light years." Thomas replied.

"Seventy eight point eight." the envoy of nexus added.

"Which even though it's much closer to Earth than we are now still puts it way beyond The Fringe." Knight said.

"Yet everything we know about that ship suggests that it was built by humans." Ash pointed out.

"One of the lost colony expeditions perhaps captain?" Goldman suggested. Although humanity was known to have established colonies on almost two hundred planets other than Earth there were many independent attempts to establish colonies that had not been heard of since their departure from the well charted Core Worlds and Outer Colonies regions that represented all the star systems within about thirty light years of Earth. Some of these missing expeditions had only intended to go as far as the partially charted Fringe that extended up to sixty light years from Earth but there were others that had intended to push on even further, including one that was now known to have made it to Sissusk space where its occupants and their descendants were enslaved.

"If that's the case then they've managed something that has escaped every other independent colony so far and been able to manufacture their own particle inductors." Thomas pointed out.

"I don't suppose that you'd have any information about colony missions close to the Indus Sector would you ambassador?" Reeves asked, looking at the nearby envoy.

"One moment please captain. I am communing with my vessel. It holds superior navigational data to myself." the envoy said.

"Sure. Go ahead." Reeves replied.

"I have the information now." the envoy added after a few seconds' pause, "Other than those that were undertaken by members of the Commonwealth there have been sixty-three independent colonial expeditions mounted in the Indus, Grus, Microscopium, Octans, Telescopium and Tucana sectors that remain unaccounted for. Forty-five of these took place within a decade of the end of the Genex War when the formation of a standing unified military by the Commonwealth prompted a number of theories that sovereign national governments would be replaced by a single governing body of a type attempted unsuccessfully on several previous occasions. Given that they intended to leave charted space behind no flight plans were filed and no investigations were undertaken when they failed to maintain contact. However, although no flight plans were filed cargo manifests were logged in accordance with Commonwealth shipping laws."

"And you have copies of those?" Goldman asked.

"Yes. All data concerning human travel beyond settled space was deemed potentially relevant to this mission and acquired prior to my departure from the primary Nexus complex in the Luhman sixteen system." the envoy answered, "None of the expeditions gave any indication that they were taking the necessary equipment to manufacture particle inductors with them. Indeed, the same export restrictions that apply on this technology now also applied when each of them left."

"All the more reason for them not to have declared it." Ash commented.

"I think that the disappearance of the equipment would have been noticed by now commander." Reeves pointed out and then he looked back at the envoy of Nexus, "So ambassador if I have this straight then there could be the descendants of more than sixty shiploads of colonists who may hold a dislike for the Commonwealth lurking within reasonable travel range of Eta Indi but quite how they managed to build their own FTL capable ships is a mystery. Am I right?"

"Yes captain, that correctly describes the limited information that we have available." the envoy said.

"And how long until that drone gets where we think it's going?" Reeves asked.

"The drone left at a speed of seven light years per day captain. So about six days if its speed remains constant." Goldman said.

"We could get there ahead of it." Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Yes we could. On the other hand the captain of that other ship might be being particularly paranoid and have sent his drone on an evasive course. I'd hate to spend five days getting to Eta Indi."

"Five point four eight at the *Warspite's* maximum speed captain." the envoy corrected him.

"Whatever. That's a significant round trip if we're wrong and we can't leave without our target seeing us. Even

if we're right they might be faster than us and be able to get back to their base ahead of us and warn them that we're on our way. No, we'll stay here and keep an eye on them instead. Besides which we may need to warn Admiral Mitchell about whatever it is they've been up to with that gate." Reeves responded.

6.

The fleet commanded by Admiral Mitchell arrived in the Epsilon Pavonis system just as it was scheduled to two days after the *Warspite*, a series of bright flashes of light over a period of just over a minute heralding the arrival of the warships. The crews of the ships already knew the formation the fleet needed to be in and they repositioned themselves without needing any orders from the *Jericho*.

"All ships present admiral. We've got our battleships forming up either side of us. Smaller vessels taking point." the *Jericho*'s flight operations officer announced.

"Any sign of hostile ships? Or the *Warspite*?" Mitchell asked.

"There's no sign of the *Warspite*'s transponder." the operations officer replied.

"I would hope not. They are supposed to be running silent after all." Mitchell said, "But what about the ship itself?"

"Nothing admiral. Wherever the *Warspite* is she's keeping out of sight."

"Good. Now what about hostile ships?" Mitchell said.

"There are several derelicts in the system but the only active signals we're picking up is coming from a small vessel in a high orbit around Sissar itself."

"Are they trying to communicate with us?" Mitchell asked.

"I don't think so Admiral. It's a wide spectrum broadcast that looks more like static. If anything I'd say that it was just an attempt to attract attention to the ship sending it."

"So an improvised distress beacon?" Mitchell said.

"It appears so."

"What sort of ship are we talking about?" Mitchell asked and she looked towards Park.

"It looks like a Sissusk courier ship admiral." he answered, "Thermal readings indicate that she has power but there's no sign of drive activity. I think she's adrift."

Mitchell looked at her fleet tactical display and tapped the icon of the nearest capital ship to the disabled courier, bringing up its details on another monitor that identified the ship as the stealth destroyer *Elegance*. The *Elegance* was designed as a hunter of other warships, with multiple forward facing medium missile tubes along the front face of its triangular hull that was shaped to make it as hard to detect as possible. It was also fitted with a pair of light turrets for defence against attack craft and missiles if it should happen to be detected and this meant that it was capable of destroying the courier without wasting any of its missiles if it did turn out to be a trap.

"Signal the *Elegance*." Mitchell ordered, "Tell them that they are to investigate that courier and if they can they are to recover it. It may be damaged but we might still be able to learn something from it."

"Yes admiral." the operations officer said, "There is something else as well. This." and he brought up an image of the alien tachyon gate on the bridge's main screen.

"So that's one of the gates." Park said.

"What's its location?" Mitchell added.

"About two light hours out admiral." the operations officer said.

"Perhaps we ought to take a closer look." Park suggested and Mitchell nodded.

"Launch control I want a surveillance drone programmed to approach the gate and run a sensor sweep of the surface. No wait, two sweeps. The first is to be passive data acquisition only then switch to active scanning for the second. All data to be beamed back as its recorded. If that thing decides its going to blow up then I don't want to lose anything."

"Yes admiral, launching drone now." another of the command staff responded.

"Okay now if there's nothing more I want our scouts deployed in a low orbit over Sissar. Tell them to search for any signs of activity on the planet. I don't care if it's on land, sea or air just get our ships doing something that makes it look like we have a real purpose for being here."

"How many ships?" Martins asked when he was told of the arrival of the Commonwealth fleet.

"It's hard to tell captain. They arrived together and their tachyon fields dispersed at the same time. In a couple of hours we'll get passive EM readings and I should be able to get you an accurate count then." the sensor operator told him.

"Your best guess ensign." Martins said.

"Perhaps sixty ships." the ensign replied.

"That just about fits with what we were told to expect." Martins said, "According to our intelligence there ought to be a Ticik battle group within ten light years. I think it's time we let them know that there's someone here." and he reached out and pressed the button on his console that had been configured to trigger the explosive charges set on the tachyon storage jars at the alien gate.

Aside from a message that red 'Transmission sent' appearing on the display in front of Martins nothing

happened and he leant back in his seat.

"Now I suppose we wait for that to get to the gate." he said.

The explosive charges fitted to the Sissusk tachyon storage jars at the gate did not need to be powerful enough to destroy the jars, only shut off the power that maintained their magnetic fields so that the contents could escape en masse in a single moment. Indeed, if the charges were too powerful then it was quite possible that whatever control system ran the gate itself would perceive the linked explosions as an attack and respond as other gates had done when tampered with and self destruct. This would not affect the release of the tachyons that would escape in any case but it would mean that there would be less incentive for the Ticik to attack the Commonwealth fleet in the system. The limited explosive yield of the charges meant that when they exploded there were no massive heat flares that would be easily detectable by thermal imagers, instead the tiny charges cut through the cables supplying power to the tachyon storage jars and all of a sudden the equivalent of several million tonnes of tachyons were released across the Epsilon Pavonis system in one go. Although both the visual and thermal effects of the explosions were not minimal but would also take hours to reach anyone with equipment sensitive to detect it the release of this quantity of tachyons another matter within a fraction of a second all of the functioning ships in the system had detected the massive wave of them.

"Captain we've got a massive tachyon signature from the gate. It's off the charts." Cortez announced.

"Is it active?" Knight asked.

"All crew to action stations. We've no idea what might come through that thing." Reeves ordered.

"Captain the tachyons came from the gate but it isn't active." Lucas announced, "There was one concentrated burst but that's it. I'd say that someone just opened a whole bunch of tachyon storage jars. A few thousand of them."

"Why the hell would anyone do that?" Thomas asked.

"We released one to cover our retreat from the Ticik." Reeves said, recalling the *Warspite's* first encounter with an alien warship.

"Is the target ship still in position?" Knight said.

"We're still reading it on our EM sensors but the information is about twenty minutes old." Goldman said, "we didn't pick up any abnormal tachyon readings from it before the blast but we still can't see through all this static properly."

"Cancel my battle stations order but maintain silent running." Reeves said, "If that ship is still out there then I don't want to give ourselves away."

"And if it isn't?" Ash asked.

"Then we couldn't track a vector through all that static anyway." Knight said.

"There is no sound reason for the target vessel to depart yet." the envoy from Nexus said as it continued to sift through the data coming in from the *Warspite's* sensors, "The fleet it came to observe has only just arrived and if that was an attack then it was a spectacularly unsuccessful one. We are significantly closer to the tachyon gate than Admiral Mitchell and her ships and we suffered no damage. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the fleet would have been damaged either."

"Maybe not, but I bet it caught their attention." Reeves replied.

"Hangar reports all fighters manned and ready for launch admiral." one of the *Jericho's* flight co-ordinators announced.

"Drone doors open. Ready to deploy." another added.

"Fleet is at action stations admiral. Awaiting the order to engage." a communication officer called out.

"Yes but engage what exactly?" Mitchell said and she looked at Park as he hurriedly studied the available data on the sudden release of tachyons from the direction of the alien gateway.

"It wasn't a fleet." he said after a few moments, "I'm not seeing any of the residual tachyon emissions that we'd expect. That burst came from the gate itself but its all quiet now."

"A fault in the gate perhaps?" Mitchell said.

"Perhaps. From what little we know about the gate the mass involved was nothing like what would be needed for proper activation though." Park said.

"This isn't something we can ignore. I want our scouts and support vessels to stay in orbit around Sissar and the *Elegance* is to continue with rescue operations of that courier. Once it's done then it's to take up a defensive position along with the *Spectre* and the *Assurance* to protect the ships we're leaving behind. The rest of the fleet is to set a course for the tachyon gate and come to point zero five c at twenty gees. That should give us plenty of time to see if anything else is going on there while we get in closer."

"You don't want to take us to FTL admiral?" the ship's navigator asked.

"No commander." Mitchell told the woman, "All that tachyon static could have been intended to mask something and I don't want us adding to it by carrying out a fleet wide jump. Launch control I want our drones

left on full alert standby. Hangars are to stand down seventy-five percent of our fighters. Keep two squadrons on alert at a time and rotate every two hours. If this is a trap then I want to be able to get fighters out there as quickly as possible.”

“Course laid in for the gate admiral. Accelerating now.” the helmsman announced and on the bridge's main screen the engines of the other ships in the fleet flared into life as the fleet began to accelerate away from Sissar.

The release of tachyons from the storage jars was not limited to the Epsilon Pavonis system. The trillions of particles continued to spread out at hundreds of thousands of times the speed of light and it took them less than an hour to reach the closest of Epsilon Pavonis' neighbouring star systems. These systems had been stripped clean of their inhabitants just as efficiently as the home world of the Sissusk had been but they were not entirely empty. The Commonwealth was not the only neighbour of the aggressive reptilian species that was interested in finding out exactly how an empire that spanned dozens of star systems had been brought to its knees so rapidly and the mysterious Ticik now patrolled the former Sissusk systems close to their territory heavily, themselves spreading out further with each month in search of answers. One such patrol, a squadron based around three of their two kilometre long dreadnoughts of the type that the *Warspite* had battled unsuccessfully in the Phi 2 Pavonis system two and a half years earlier was present in one of these neighbouring systems and as soon as the tachyon wave reached it these ships turned towards the source of this unusually strong wave and in rapid succession they engaged their faster than light drives.

INTERLUDE.

Vale was at his desk when the message arrived from the relay station. It was encrypted and it took his computer several seconds to decode it before he could read it. As soon as he saw what the message contained he snatched up the nearby telephone and placed a call to Hayes' office.

"Yes Enrico, what is it? I've got one of Stein's little minions on the other line." her voice said before Vale could speak.

"Commander we've just received a message from Lieutenant Commander Martins. He says that Conrad's team found a large stockpile of tachyonic matter inside the ring and they've laid their charges. If their figures are correct then when they're triggered it will set off a blast of tachyons that will be impossible to miss fifty light years away." Vale told her.

"Enrico you're a life saver and your timing is perfect. That is just what I need right now. Forward me that message will you? I'm going to rub it in the face of a minion." Hayes replied before she suddenly hung up on him.

Vale sighed as he put the phone down and then turned back to his computer, forwarding the decrypted message to Hayes as she had requested. Meanwhile in her office Hayes had switched back to the external line where she was speaking to a female member of Stein's staff.

"Miss Hayes. It is Miss isn't it?" the woman said when she realised that she was no longer on hold and Hayes snarled at the obvious intention to insult her over her marital status.

"Commander." Hayes replied, "I know it is often hard for those who have never served in a military capacity to understand but the correct way for you to address me is by my rank. Perhaps I should speak with Mister Stein directly instead."

"And as I have told you Commander Hayes," the woman said, placing the emphasis on the word 'commander', "Mister Stein is busy and instructed me to contact you with regards to an update. As you know the services of our fleet assets are in high demand and the *Grey Dawn* is not on indefinite assignment to you."

"The *Grey Dawn* is mine for the duration of its current assignment." Hayes said sternly and it was at that moment she noticed the message forwarded by Vale appear in her system, "A mission that is progressing ahead of schedule in fact."

"Ah, then I may tell Mister Stein that the *Grey Dawn* will be available soon then." the woman said.

"You may tell him no such thing. You aren't cleared for any information regarding the mission and if you ask me to provide any then I will report this conversation as a security violation. I'm sure that given your position as a member of Mister Stein's staff will ensure that the issue is concluded quickly, though I can't imagine how it would look on Stein's record that he employed someone as tactless as you. Now put me through to Stein before I call our counter intelligence unit instead. I'm sure they're bored enough to leap at the chance to do some actual work." Hayes replied.

Stein's assistant was obviously intimidated by the threat and moments later Hayes heard Stein's voice.

"I asked my assistant to get an update Hayes. I'm trying to get ready for a meeting with Secretary LeClair himself. I just need to know when the *Grey Dawn* will be back, I've no interest in hearing your excuses in person."

"Who's making excuses?" Hayes said, "As it happens I have just received confirmation from Lieutenant Commander Martins aboard the *Grey Dawn* who has confirmed that he is prepared to lure a Ticik battle group to the Epsilon Pavonis system to engage the Commonwealth."

"The Commonwealth fleet has arrived?" Stein asked.

"By now most probably, yes. Of course the drone that delivered this message to our forward operating base was despatched several days ago. In fact Martins has probably already triggered off the tachyon pulse. Mark my words Mister Stein the Commonwealth will be at war with the Ticik very shortly."

"For your sake commander, they had better be." Stein hissed before he hung up the phone.

Hayes put her own phone down as well and paused to consider her position. She was confident that Martins would successfully be able to lure a Ticik fleet into the Epsilon Pavonis system while a Commonwealth force was also present and it was extremely likely that the two fleets would come to blows there was still the possibility that this would not escalate into a full scale war because the Commonwealth fleet would withdraw before the Ticik determined it to represent a significant threat and that the Commonwealth itself would ignore another military defeat as it had done when the *Warspite* fled under fire from a solitary dreadnought.

Reluctantly Hayes decided that she still needed help to be sure that the two governments would end up at war with one another. She knew that it was not possible to try and influence the Ticik, nobody knew anything about their society beyond the rumoured biological caste system it maintained and apart their habit of firing on anything that they considered to be a threat to the planets they laid claim to they had no interaction with other species. Therefore, the covert action to ensure that war was declared would have to be directed

against the Commonwealth and for Hayes that meant approaching someone who had no interest in seeing her succeed.

Getting out of her chair Hayes exited her office and walked across the hallway to Kane's office door and knocked on it.

"Alex can I have a word with you?" she called out and when there was no immediate reply she knocked again.

"Oh come in you're just going to keep knocking anyway Jennifer." Kane's voice called out and Hayes entered his office.

"Alex I need to ask for your help with something." she said as she walked over to his desk and sat down.

"Help? From me? My word you must be desperate Jennifer. Tell me what's happened. Has Martins managed to arrive in entirely the wrong star system or have you inadvertently led the Commonwealth to an ancient alien library packed full of knowledge that they can use against us?"

"Oh shut up Alex!" Hayes snapped.

"Goodbye Jennifer. Don't let the door hit you on the ass on your way out." Kane said and Hayes sighed.

"I'm sorry Alex. Look my plan is going well. So well that for all I know the Commonwealth and the Ticik are already hurling nukes at one another but I want to be certain that they go to war. For that I need someone who can influence public opinion in the Commonwealth and that's you." she said.

"Jennifer just in case you've forgotten we're still rebuilding our lines of communication into the Commonwealth now that Verne's in chaos. Not to mention our route into the Canadian government that your plan exposed." Kane said.

"Do you think I don't know all that Alex? But I also know that you still have agents working in the Commonwealth that you use to stir up trouble and I want you to get them to do something." Hayes said.

"What Jennifer?"

"Instead of whipping up anti-military sentiment I want you to start organising protests calling for war with the Ticik. Make sure that the Commonwealth pushes back after the Ticik attack at the Sissusk home world." Hayes said.

"I see. You want me to make your plan work for you. What exactly do I get out of it?" Kane asked, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms.

"How about being known for bringing the Commonwealth to its knees Alex? Doesn't that tempt you?" Hayes asked.

"I don't know Jennifer. It just sounds to me like it's far more likely that you'll hog all the credit after I've done all the work."

"All the work? Alex I've been working on this for more than five years. Studying both Commonwealth and Ticik deployment patterns. Organising that Canadian scout ship. All of it was me. All I'm asking you to do is send a couple of messages." Hayes protested.

"Actually I think it was Vale that did the work for you. You just bossed him around." Kane said and then he smiled.

"What?" Hayes said when she saw this expression on his face.

"I think I just thought of what you could offer me Jennifer." Kane told her.

"Go on." she said.

"Vale. I want him transferred to my staff." Kane told her.

"You're kidding. Vale is-" Hayes began.

"Indispensable? Jennifer you asked what I wanted and what I want is the best strategic analyst in our division. I tell you what, if you can't bear to be separate from him then I'll even offer you a position as well." Kane said and Hayes scowled at the suggestion she would work for him.

"Fine. You can take Enrico." she said before she jabbed her finger towards him, "But don't think that you're getting him before the Commonwealth goes to war and don't think that I'll ever be saluting you or calling you 'sir.' There's more chance that you'll arrive to work to find me naked on your desk."

"Please Jennifer, I'm a married man." Kane said with a smile, "I don't need your sexual favours. Now if you don't mind I have other work to get to. Of course I'll get word to my agents in the Commonwealth that they need to start demanding military action against the Ticik."

Hayes frowned at the implication that she was seriously offering to sleep with Kane before she smiled and without speaking she got back to her feet and exited Kane's office, closing the door behind her.

"Ass hole." she muttered to herself as she returned to her own office and then sat back behind her desk, picking up the telephone and placing a call to Vale, "Enrico it's me." she said when he answered.

"Yes commander?" he said.

"Enrico I want you copy Commander Kane in on reports from the Grey Dawn." Hayes told him.

"Commander Kane? Is he going to be overseeing the project?" Vale asked.

"No, but I've asked him to help out to make sure that the citizens of every government in the Commonwealth are demanding a declaration of war. It's been more than a century since they fought a full scale war and I

want to be certain that they haven't forgotten how to do it." Hayes explained.

"Of course. I'll set up a distribution list. Is there anything else?"

Hayes hesitated, wondering whether to tell Vale about the terms of her agreement with Kane.

"Yes, there is one more thing Enrico." she said, "Kane might want to discuss you working for him."

"I understand commander. I'll turn him down of course." Vale replied.

"No Enrico, it's already agreed. When the Commonwealth goes to war this project ends and you'll be working for Commander Kane instead from then on. That was his price for agreeing to help." Hayes explained.

"As you wish commander." Vale said and Hayes frowned.

"Is that it?" she said, irritated that it did not seem to bother Vale that his services were being traded behind his back.

"It is not my place to contradict you commander." he said, "You and Commander Kane are the leaders here."

"That's very understanding of you Enrico." Hayes said and then she put the phone down before adding, "Ass hole."

7.

"Captain I've got something here." Cortez announced.

"What?" Reeves asked, looking at where the Grey Dawn continued to be shown on the main console.

"I don't see any activity." Knight added.

"It's not the target captain, I'm picking up an incoming tachyon signal. A big one, probably multiple ships unless it's something much bigger than we've seen so far." Cortez answered.

"Maybe there are some Sissusk ships still operating after all." Thomas suggested.

"I hope so." Reeves said.

"You hope it's Sissusk?" Lucas said, confused, "They might not be too happy to find us here. Or Admiral Mitchell's ships for that matter."

"I believe that Captain Reeves is referring to the other logical alternative Lieutenant Lucas." the envoy of Nexus said, "If it is not the Sissusk then the chances are high that it is a force operated by the alien AI that overthrew them."

"Any indication that the target is reacting to this?" Knight asked.

"No, there's no unusual tachyon activity from the target commander." Goldman told him.

"Range and speed?" Reeves said.

"Now at half a light year, closing at about six and a half light years per day." Cortez said.

"Captain that's the estimated top speed for larger Ticik warships. Like the dreadnought we faced at Phi two Pavonis." Lucas said.

"And they'll be here in a little under two hours." Thomas pointed out.

Reeves looked at the clock at the front of the bridge that showed the time by which all the Warspite's operations were scheduled. Displaying its time using a standard twenty-four hour clock it currently showed that it was shortly before midday.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman unless that fleet changes velocity I want us brought to battle stations at thirteen-thirty hours. That should give us plenty of time to prepare. If it is a Ticik fleet and they run an active scan when they get here then they may well find us, silent running or not."

"Captain Reeves I do not think that it is a co-incidence that this fleet is approaching now." the envoy said and Reeves looked at the robot.

"You think they already knew we were here?" he said.

"No captain. In fact if my theory is correct then they still do not know we are here. They are coming to investigate what they think is the activation of one of the alien tachyon gates." the envoy said.

"The tachyon storage jars, that's why our target rigged them all to open at the same time. They knew the Ticik were nearby and wanted to draw them in." Knight said.

"Damn. It's Phi two Pavonis all over again." Reeves said, "What's our fleet doing?"

"Holding steady captain. They'll be at the gate in four hours." Goldman responded.

"They can't have missed it. It's too big. We just won't have noticed them redeploying to meet the threat." Knight said and Reeves nodded in agreement.

"I know. Hopefully the Ticik will be as willing to just stand off as the last time we encountered them. Of course that relied on them being heavily outnumbered and out gunned to start with." he said, "I want Lieutenant Commander Shaw and Lieutenant Mori up here on the double. Whether or not this is a Ticik fleet it might still be hostile and I don't intend to just sit back and watch while the rest of the fleet fights without us. I want firing solutions plotted for any ship that enters the system and we're going to find a way we can get our fighters out there without giving ourselves away to the target or whoever it that's heading for us."

Knowing that there were unidentified starships approaching the Epsilon Pavonis system the fleet commanded by Admiral Mitchell began to adjust its formation, the ships organising themselves so that the flagship *Jericho* was protected by the battleships and cruisers while the smaller destroyers stood ready to accelerate rapidly and unleash their missiles at vulnerable targets while frigates protected them from any missiles fired back against them. Meanwhile the smaller warships filled the gaps between these groups, ready to lend their support wherever it was needed. For now there were no further launches of fighters or drones though, the tiny attack craft carried only a limited amount of fuel and life support so they were all recalled to their base ships so that they could be deployed fully fuelled and loaded if the unidentified ships proved themselves to be hostile when they arrived in the system.

"All ships in position now admiral. Estimated arrival of unidentified vessels now one point seven hours." the *Jericho*'s flight operations officer announced.

"Any more on what we're facing here Commander Park?" Mitchell asked but Park shook his head.

"Sorry admiral. The closing speed indicates Ticik ships but I can't guarantee anything. Like we did coming here whoever this is could be deliberately holding back on their top speed to avoid leaving ships behind." he

said.

"Assume it is the Ticik. What are we likely to be facing?"

"At least one dreadnought admiral. That would account for the speed but there could possibly be up to a dozen of them from the size of the wave we're looking at." Park answered, "The size and make up of the other ships will depend on just how many dreadnoughts there are. More dreadnoughts obviously means fewer smaller vessels in support."

"Admiral they are in tadar range. We could use an active pulse to-" the operations officer began.

"No commander." Mitchell interrupted, "We don't know exactly where the *Warspite* or the target ship are located and an active tadar pulse might just illuminate the *Warspite* for the target. I want our passive tachyon detectors kept focused on that wave. Look for any variations that might tell us what we're facing here. Make sure our communications are set for communicating with both Ticik and Sissusk ships, that includes running a message through the translation system that can be sent as soon as they arrive. Let them know that we're here for peaceful purposes and want to talk."

"If it is the Ticik then talk would be a novelty admiral." Park pointed out.

"I know but even if they just ignore us I'll be satisfied." Mitchell replied.

"Admiral we don't have information on any Ticik languages." the operations officer pointed out.

"I know that commander but by all accounts the Ticik know the Sissusk language so just send that translation twice."

"Yes admiral." the operations officer responded.

Launching a fighter from a warship like the *Warspite* was supposed to be a simple process. The fighter would be magnetically accelerated along one of the two launch tubes and then once clear of the ship would engage its own propulsion system. However, both parts of this process presented problems to a ship that was supposed to be running silent. Firstly the powerful magnetic pulse used to propel the fighter down the launch tube would not necessarily be fully concealed by the shielded structure of the *Warspite* and secondly the engine flare of the fighter would be easily detectable to even the most basic of passive optical and thermal sensors and this meant that an alternative means of getting the *Warspite's* fighters into space had to be found.

"I don't see any way we can use the launch tubes. At least not in the time available." Mori said as he and Shaw discussed the problem with Reeves and Knight on the bridge.

"There's something you could do if you had more time?" Knight asked.

"A pneumatic launch system." Shaw said.

"Exactly." Mori agreed, "It's old fashioned, ancient in fact but it would work. Problem is that I don't see Commander Bernard and his people being able to make one in an hour and a half."

"And the fighters have way too much inertia for us to just use the decompression of the tubes to drag them out, even if we crank up the pressure." Shaw added.

"I'd suggest launching direct from the hangars but we'd still have an issue with the engine flare. Even cutting the power before we get out into space is going to leave enough of a residual thermal signature to show up on any sensors that are even half as good as ours." Mori said.

"You're confident about getting up a decent launch speed direct from the hangars though?" Reeves asked and Shaw and Mori exchanged glances.

"It'll be pretty slow compared to coming out a tube unless we use enough engine power to fill the hangar with our back blast." Mori said.

"Anything's better than nothing though. We'd still be going fast enough to get away from the *Warspite*." Shaw replied, "But what about our heat signature?"

"We could launch you in the *Warspite's* shadow." Reeves said and he pointed to the icon on the main console that represented the *Grey Dawn*, "Right now the target is pretty much dead ahead of us. That means that if we launch you out of the aft hangar you could coast in our shadow while your engines cooled down and until you're far enough away that you won't look like you launched from us."

"Could work." Mori said.

"The timing's going to have to be precise though. Plus we can't wait until a few minutes before those ships arrive. If we're going to put a decent distance between us and the *Warspite* before powering up fully then we need go right now."

Reeves nodded.

"Then go." he said, "Goldman tell the hangar crews to get all our fighters into the aft hangar and ready to launch from there. All fighter crews need to get suited up and into their ships." then he looked back at Shaw and Mori and added, "Good hunting."

The two fighter crew rushed from the bridge and directly towards the *Warspite's* aft hangar. Rather than the hangar itself they hurried into the compartment where their flight suits were stored and they began to change into them. They were soon joined by the rest of their squadron and once all twelve crews were prepared they

made their way into the hangar itself together. In here their fighters had been moved as far back in the hangar as possible, their wings still folded up vertically in their storage position instead of laid out horizontally as they would be if they were loaded into a launching tube. This enabled all twelve of the fighters to be lined up in just two staggered rows rather than the six it would have taken otherwise and gave them all more room for their take off run.

"Three gees for two and a half seconds." Mori said as he and Shaw were strapping themselves into their fighter.

"That's not going to get us out very fast." Shaw replied.

"Maybe not, but coasting for half an hour still ought to get us more than a hundred kilometres from the *Warspite*. Then we'll be over the planetary horizon and we ought to be able to start up our own engines at half power. Hopefully the heat corona around the planet shouldn't be too noticeable by then as long as we don't go full burn."

Shaw then activated her fighter's communications to address the rest of her squadron.

"Okay boys," she said, "launch with a three gee burn for two and a half seconds and then we'll coast for thirty minutes. If all goes well we'll go to a continuous one gee burn and hope we don't attract any attention."

The fighter's canopy then lowered over Shaw and Mori, and around them the ground crew hurriedly evacuated the hangar while the other fighters were also being sealed. Once this was done the hangar could be decompressed and the large rear door opened.

"All systems green." Mori said.

"Archangel to *Warspite*, are we clear for launch?" Shaw transmitted.

"Confirmed Archangel." Goldman's voice responded, "Scramble. Scramble. Scramble."

Starting with the front row of fighters, the squadron accelerated out of the hangar under their own power and then immediately cut their engines to drift. This left them moving at well under a hundred metres per second, a speed so slow that in terms of space combat it was considered practically stationary. Even in the early years of air combat before humans had even managed to leave the Earth's atmosphere fighters moving at such a speed were slow enough that they could be targeted with their basic armament without the need for any electronic aiming systems with reasonable accuracy. Now in the days of interstellar travel the squadron was an easy target for any vessel armed with a directed energy weapon that managed to detect it. Thanks to the squadron's reliance on its pilots to judge when to start their fighters' engines the formation that they emerged in was irregular but no attempt could be made to even it out in case they were detected by the *Grey Dawn*. The only change that was made was that now they were more widely spaced apart the wings of the fighters could be extended into their horizontal flight configuration while they continued to coast away from the *Warspite*.

"Oh crap." Shaw exclaimed suddenly.

"What's wrong?" Mori asked, looking frantically at the instrument panel in front of him as he tried to find out what was wrong with their fighter, "All systems look operational."

"They are Kaz." Shaw replied, "It's just that I left my tablet back on the *Warspite*. I've got half an hour to kill and I could have used that to simulate different wedding dress designs."

Knowing that a powerful Ticik fleet was approaching the Epsilon Pavonis system, Martins was unwilling to leave the bridge and so he ate a ration a bar at his station while he watched the Ticik fleet's progress on his console. Every now and again he also checked the progress of the Commonwealth fleet making its way towards the gateway at sub light speed. Of more concern to him than the fleet though was the drone that it had sent on ahead towards the gate. If this got close enough to detect the tachyon storage jars still attached to the outside then the Commonwealth fleet's officers may be able to deduce how the tachyon pulse was created and in that case they would instantly know that someone else was in the system with them.

"What's the ETA of the Ticik?" he asked.

"Now fourteen minutes captain." the sensor operator responded.

"And how soon will that drone reach the gate?" Martins added.

"Sixteen minutes captain. The Commonwealth fleet is—"

"I'm not worried about the fleet. I just don't want that drone alerting them to what we did." Martins interrupted,

"Two minutes could make all the difference. With any luck the Ticik will spot the drone and shoot it down before it can get close to the gate."

Martins continued to watch the readouts from the *Grey Dawn*'s passive tachyon detector. This picked up the stray charged tachyons that happened to break loose from the approaching ships and thus could travel much faster than the ships themselves and alert anyone with a suitable detector to their approach. Had there only been one or two smaller vessels approaching it would have been difficult to track their approach but the fact that the tachyon readings were so strong made Martins confident that the intelligence reports about the Ticik strength in the neighbouring systems was correct and that a large force would soon arrive in the system. There had been no signs of active scanning from the Ticik themselves and without that they would have no

way of knowing exactly what waited for them in the system and this meant that the presence of the Commonwealth fleet would probably come as something of a surprise to them. Martins hoped that this surprise would cause the Ticik to rush their decision making and open fire. A delay might mean that the two fleets would instead just face off against one another until they realised that the gate had not been activated and depart. The Ticik were close enough now that it was possible to project where they would arrive with a fair degree of certainty and Martins was relieved to see that their course appeared to bring them close to the gate. However, they could still either drop to sub light speed early or overshoot and end up millions of kilometres on the far side of the gate where they would be unable to prevent the Commonwealth drone from getting close. Unfortunately all Martins could do now was watch and wait to see what happened. "Tachyon surge detected captain. The Ticik are dropping to sub light. Range sixteen light minutes." the sensor operator announced suddenly as the Ticik ships finally arrived in the system and Martins breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that they were now not only located between the *Grey Dawn* and the gate but also perfectly positioned to cut off the Commonwealth drone as well as the fleet following behind it.

As soon as the tachyons that had been wrapped around the Ticik ships fully dispersed one of the dreadnoughts that formed the core of their fleet emitted an active tadar pulse to scan the system in real time and the reflections from the Ticiks' own ships provided the Commonwealth fleet with more information about the strength of the newly arrived fleet before the light and heat of its ships had chance to reach them.

"Admiral I'm reading eight, I say again eight Ticik dreadnoughts." Park announced, "If the details from the Sissusk database are correct then they also have four light cruisers and twenty ships that are either frigates or destroyers. Range is about three light minutes so I should be able to give you an accurate readings on those last ten ships very soon."

"Okay they've scanned us. Return the favour, activate radar and lidar. Let them know that we know they're here." Admiral Mitchell ordered.

"What about the *Warspite*?" Commander Leyton, the *Jericho*'s first officer asked and she glanced at Mitchell. "Hopefully they're either hidden well enough to avoid being noticed or far enough from the target that they'll be able to move out of the way before they're lit up." Mitchell replied, "But I want that data and it would look suspicious if we didn't try scanning the Ticik. Engage active sensors as ordered."

While the Commonwealth fleet continued on its course towards the alien tachyon gate the Ticik moved to place themselves between them. The drone sent to investigate the gate was far ahead of the fleet and the Ticik did not ignore this despite its small size. Instead one of the dreadnoughts turned one of its heavy X-ray laser turrets towards the small craft and fired. Ordinarily such powerful turrets would not be used against attack craft but in this case the weapon was ideally suited, the speed of the beam making it easy to aim whole the drone was on a steady course while the high power of the strike meaning that just a single hit was enough to destroy the drone utterly despite the considerable distance between the dreadnought and the drone. At the same time as the X-ray laser fired hangars were opened on the Ticik ships and their numbers were suddenly reinforced by the gunships they carried.

"Energy spike." one of the *Jericho*'s sensor operators exclaimed when they saw the unmistakable energy signature of an X-ray laser firing.

"The drone's been destroyed." Leyton added.

"Picking up multiple launches." another sensor operator called out.

"Deploy countermeasures." Admiral Mitchell ordered.

"They aren't missiles." Park told her as he compared the sensor readings to his intelligence database, "The Ticik are deploying gunships but they don't seem to be attempting to lock onto us yet."

"They just shot down our drone commander. I'm not going to bet the fleet on them being reasonable. Send to all ships, launch all ready craft but do not engage until ordered." Mitchell responded and immediately all of the flight controllers on the bridge began issuing launch orders to the fighter squadrons the *Jericho* carried while its drones were ejected from their launchers. This was repeated across the fleet, with the space around the Commonwealth ships becoming filled with squadrons of drones, single seat interceptors and two man space superiority fighters. None of the vessels that made up the fleet possessed the larger hangars needed to maintain heavier bombers so individually these attack craft would stand almost no chance of inflicting serious damage against a target as big as a Ticik dreadnought but working together they could still overwhelm the defences of one.

"All attack craft deployed admiral. Fleet maintaining defensive posture." the flight operations officer announced and Mitchell nodded.

"Has there been any response to our message Commander Turner?" she asked.

"No admiral. The message was sent as soon as they dropped out of FTL but there's not been any answer." Turner answered.

"That's not unusual for Ticik admiral." Park pointed out.

"Not that we have much to go on in that regard." Leyton commented.

"I know but I want to be certain about this. Send the message again. Ask them to move aside while we investigate the gate." Mitchell said.

"Admiral it's possible that the Ticik are the cause of what happened to the gate." Leyton suggested, "Their presence in the system could be to evaluate how what happened when we detected the tachyon wave from it."

"Admiral I'm picking up another launch from one of their destroyers." a sensor operator exclaimed suddenly and Park looked at his console.

"It's a missile." he said.

"I thought you said they weren't locking onto us." Leyton replied.

"It's not heading for us admiral, the missile is heading for the gate."

"If the gate is hit it could trigger the self destruct." Mitchell said, "Weapons, can we intercept that missile before it hits?"

"Negative admiral. The Ticik fleet is still two light minutes ahead of us and three from the gate. We're too far away to engage with an energy weapon and a missile would never catch up in time, even if the Ticik didn't shoot it down." one of the Jericho's gunners responded. The *Jericho* itself carried only a light defensive armament but its gunnery crews were familiar with the capabilities of the more powerful weapons carried by other ships in the fleet.

"That missile will hit in about twenty-five minutes." Park said.

"Then keep sending that message Turner. Maybe we can get them to abort the missile." Mitchell said.

"And if they don't?" Turner asked and Mitchell sighed.

"I'm not going to start a war over one of those gates but I still want to know what happened to it. If the gate blows then we'll turn aside but until then we keep going." she said.

"Should we summon the ships we left at Sissar?" Leyton asked.

"No, not yet. Leave them to keep searching the surface. If our target is out there then we need to look like we're still interested in the planet. They can join us at FTL if we need them. Or least I hope they'll be able to." Mitchell answered

While the Commonwealth and Ticik fleets headed towards one another the *Warspite's* crew watched from the orbit of the gas giant. From this position they could see both fleets and also the Grey Dawn where it also monitored the two fleets. Only the *Warspite's* own squadron of fighters was currently out of sight, currently circling around the gas giant using its gravity to assist them in getting into a position from where they hoped to be able to assist the Commonwealth fleet if it was forced to engage the Ticik. This positioning also gave the *Warspite* a perfect view of the Ticik missile now speeding towards the inert tachyon gate.

"There's nothing we can do to shoot that thing down is there?" Ash said.

"We might be able to launch a missile of our own but it would give us away." Knight responded.

"There's no point anyway." Reeves pointed out, "The Ticik probably think that Admiral Mitchell's fleet caused the tachyon pulse from the gate and I wouldn't be surprised if she thought the same about them. They think they're destroying whatever it is we have there and she thinks they're covering up what they have."

"Whereas in reality no one knows a damned thing." Thomas added.

"What about the target Commander Goldman? Are they showing any signs of activity?" Reeves asked, looking towards Goldman's station from his own seat and she shook her head.

"No captain. They're holding position and staying quiet, just like us." she said.

"Waiting for the shooting to start." Thomas said.

"It already has." Ash commented, pointing towards the main screen that showed an image of the Ticik missile in a window overlaid on the tactical display, "Let's not forget that drone either."

"A drone is just a machine." Knight said and then he looked at the envoy of Nexus that was still stood at the central console, "No offence ambassador."

"None taken Commander Knight. I am as different to a drone as you are to a galago." the envoy said and Knight frowned.

"It's a type of monkey. Also known as a bush baby." Reeves whispered to him.

"Oh, right." Knight said.

"Captain," Lucas said suddenly as she looked up from her console, "I think that one of those Ticik dreadnoughts could be the same ship we encountered at Phi-two Pavonis."

"Are you certain lieutenant?" Reeves asked.

"Not one hundred percent sir, but we did manage to get a good profile of the ship at the time and the readings we're getting of the way its engines are burning are an exact match. Five of the other dreadnoughts are the same class but each has a slightly different energy signature." she answered.

"How do you think they'll react if they spot us?" Knight said, looking at Reeves, "If we can identify them then they might be able to identify us in return."

"And we did kind of fire off a nuclear missile at them. That's bound to annoy them. It would annoy me." Ash

said.

"What's this 'we'?" Thomas said, "That was the captain and Commander Knight. I've never fired a nuclear missile at anyone."

"I want a firing solution for that dreadnought." Reeves said, "Stick with passive sensors and assume a simultaneous six round volley. If we do have to engage then frankly I'd like to get some payback for them forcing us to retreat."

"Aye captain." one of the *Warspite's* gunners responded cheerfully, "Plotting firing solution for tubes one through six." then he looked around and added, "Unless you want me to use—"

"No crewman," Reeves interrupted, "we won't be using nuclear weapons today. At least not yet. The admiral does not like it."

"Captain the fleets will be in effective engagement range in about eight minutes." Goldman said, "Are we going to engage?"

"We've got the perfect angle. We can put missiles into their engine flare." Thomas said.

"Hold fire for the time being. I want to see what our target does first. Lieutenant Commander Shaw and her squadron can engage if she deems fit but that's going to be the extent of our involvement for now." Reeves replied.

"One minute to effective engagement range." Turner announced.

"And the missile?" Commander Leyton asked.

"Still running true. Estimated impact in twenty five seconds." Turner said and Mitchell sighed.

"And by now we won't know if they aborted until after we're in engagement range." she said.

"Active sensor sweeps detected. The Ticik are locking weapons." one of the *Jericho's* sensor operators called out suddenly.

"Picking up thermal flares. Multiple launches detected." another added.

"They must be intending to update the missiles with the locks after launch." Leyton said.

"Oh hell." Mitchell said, "This is it people, the Ticik aren't interested in talking and if we try to retreat now they'll cut us to pieces. Send to fleet, engage targets as they come to bear. Fire at will."

The Commonwealth fleet's four battleships were the first to open fire with salvos from the heavy turrets each vessel mounted. The captains of the one and a half kilometre long warships had already picked out their targets, two of the Ticik dreadnoughts so that each of them would be caught by fire from two of the Commonwealth battleships while the rest of the fleet was locking their missile targeting systems on the alien vessels. The neutral particle beams were capable of penetrating thick layers of protective shielding, heating the armour and producing ionisation effects that disrupted nearby electronics as long as the beam remained in contact with the target and the hulls of the two dreadnoughts glowed where they were hit.

This was insufficient to stop the Ticik from returning fire, however and the six dreadnoughts that mounted heavy X-ray laser turrets now unleashed them on the Commonwealth fleet. They did not target the battleships firing at them though. Instead their fire was focused on the smaller frigates and destroyers that had formed up ahead of the battleships to form a protective screen and several of the vessel were rocked by explosions. Only the reduction in energy caused by the extreme range that the two fleets were currently engaging one another at prevented them from being utterly destroyed by these blasts but the crippled Commonwealth ships still began to drop back as their crews rushed to deal with the damage and casualties caused.

The next vessels to join the engagement were the Commonwealth's frigates. These ships had been spread out towards the front of the fleet's formation where the multiple free electron beam laser turrets that they were armed with could act to shoot down the incoming Ticik missiles and they began firing on these as soon as they came within range, not wanting to let the powerful explosive warheads reach their own targets. The number of missiles in the Ticiks' initial volley was easily enough to destroy all of the Commonwealth's cruisers and battleships if they all managed to hit but there were enough frigates that not one of them got through the defensive fire intact. Some of the missiles broke apart while other went out of control as their guidance or manoeuvring systems were hit or simply exploded prematurely when their warheads suffered damage. Meanwhile the Commonwealth ships had by now also locked onto the Ticik vessels and they responded in kind with a volley of missiles themselves.

While the two fleets tested one another with volleys of missiles the first solitary missile fired by the Ticik continued to fly towards the tachyon gate where it impacted against the hull of what had once been a Sissusk heavy frigate. The explosion of the warhead would have been enough to totally demolish the heavy frigate while it had been in use as a warship and now that it was part of the larger gate its structure was still torn to pieces. In addition to this the shock wave of the blast passed from the frigate into the ships it had been attached to in creating the ring, causing yet more damage and all of this was enough to trigger the gate's emergency protocols. Sensing that it was under attack the gate's control system acted to ensure that no-one would be able to study its technology and engaged its self destruct, triggering overloads in reactors

all around the gate and the entire six kilometre wide structure vanished a single brilliant flash of light.

B.

"It's started." Martins said out loud to no-one in particular, smiling as he watched the telltale signs of weapon fire being exchanged by the Commonwealth and Ticik fleets and saw the tachyon gate destroyed. Already he could see that some of the ships on both sides had suffered damage and neither of them looked to be trying to disengage. This meant that the battle could only escalate as the fleets came closer and more of their weapons came within range of one another.

"Their attack craft are engaging one another captain." the *Grey Dawn's* sensor operator said and Martins zoomed his display in on the space between the two fleet where the almost crablike Ticik gunships were now close enough to the Commonwealth fighters, interceptors and drones for them to engage one another. The Ticik craft were larger and better armed but they were heavily outnumbered. Reliant on command signals from manned Commonwealth ships, the drones were slower to react to how the Ticik gunships moved and thus made easier targets but it did not take long for the Ticik determine that although the Commonwealth pilots would happily use the drones as bait, letting the Ticik target and attack them if it meant that a manned fighter or interceptor could get into a favourable position to attack.

"No-one's pulling out from this now." Martins said, "Whichever side tried would sacrifice their attack craft. The Commonwealth might be willing to throw away their drones but they won't abandon their pilots. I can see their skips hanging back as search and rescue ships for anyone that ejects."

"Maybe the Ticik are willing to sacrifice their gunships captain. It's not like we know how they think." the *Grey Dawn's* navigator pointed out.

"Never mind that now. We've done everything we came here to do. Even if the shooting stopped now both sides will have taken casualties and that's what Commander Hayes wanted. Is our course for Eta Indi set?" Martins asked.

"Yes captain. But are you sure that you want to make a direct jump?" the navigator asked.

"We're too small and too far from the action for anyone to be paying any attention to what we do now. Even if we are spotted then both sides will just assume that we're a scout ship from the other one. Helm take us out of here." Martins ordered.

"Captain I'm picking up increased tachyon activity from the target. She's getting ready to jump." Cortez announced.

"Increased thermal output as well." another of the sensor operator added, "Looks like she's turning."

"In the direction of Eta Indi." the envoy of Nexus commented.

"Let's see if that's where they head for then." Reeves replied.

"Tachyons have already reached a high enough level for them to jump captain." Goldman said before the *Grey Dawn* suddenly accelerated to faster than light speed. The scout still appeared to be right where it had been watching events unfold from on the *Warspite's* sensors that were limited to detection at the speed of light and Reeves knew that it would do for around a minute yet but the cruiser's tachyon detector allowed the command crew to watch as the ship left the Epsilon Pavonis system at high speed.

"Exit vector confirmed. They're heading for Eta Indi captain." Thomas said, having tracked the *Grey Dawn* as it left the system, "Do we follow?"

"No. I'm not leaving our fighters behind, even if there are other ships out there that they could dock with. Plus I think Admiral Mitchell could do with our help. Load everything we've learnt about the target ship into a courier drone and launch it back to Gamma Pavonis. The Commonwealth will know what we know regardless of what happens next here. Sensors go to active tracking. Confirm that firing solution I asked for and launch our missiles when ready." Reeves ordered.

"I'm picking up heat flares from the *Warspite*. She's launching missiles." Mori said and Shaw checked her fighter's rear sensor display. Sure enough this showed the tell tale heat blooms from the missile system mounted along the cruiser's upper hull of missiles being fired and looking upwards through the cockpit canopy she saw what looked like a single point of light streaking across the star field. This point widened and split apart as the missiles continued running, each of the weapons following a slightly different path to make shooting them down more difficult than if they all remained so close together that not only would a defensive battery have little need to move to engage each one in turn but there was also the chance that destroying a single missile would trigger its warhead and create an explosion powerful enough to destroy the rest in one go as well.

"Okay boys the shooting's started." Shaw announced to her squadron. I don't see any of those damned crabs around just yet but that's not to say that the Ticik won't have any of them waiting for us so stay in formation and watch your wingman. No-one goes off alone unless I say so. Now let's go hunting."

The engines of the twelve fighters all flared brightly as they accelerated towards the unsuspecting Ticik

warships from within the cone towards the rear of the ships where the energy emissions from their own engines interfered with their sensors in the hope that this would prevent them from being detected. The *Warspite* did not remain stationary either, moving from behind the Ticik fleet while its missiles were still closing on the targeted dreadnought to take up a position where the cruiser's fixed guns and turrets would be better placed to engage them, its squadron of combat drones deploying and forming a screen in front of the cruiser at the same time. However, the six heavy missiles accelerated more rapidly than either the *Warspite* or its fighters and drones and they were soon so close to the Ticik that even with the disruption caused by their own energy wake they could not fail to detect them.

The Ticik dreadnought targeted by the missiles immediately brought some of its light defensive turrets to bear on the missiles and a hail of rapidly fired projectiles flew towards them. The slow speed of the projectiles compared to a directed energy weapon made them less accurate over the distance between the dreadnought and the missiles, especially as the missiles were not following a straight course but the sheer number of projectiles made it inevitable that some of them would hit their targets and there was a brief flash of light as one of them exploded in a short lived ball of fire.

Moments later the first of the missiles to reach the dreadnought struck one of its aft drive units and there was a large explosion from inside the ship. The damage was not enough to destroy the massive two-kilometre long vessel however, but it did begin to fall back compared to the other ships as it found itself unable to keep up with the pace of their acceleration. Four missiles still remained from the *Warspite*'s salvo and although the dreadnought's defences continued firing a second missile evaded the storm of projectiles and hit the shallow dome like structure that was mounted on what was generally held to be the upper part of the cylindrically shaped dreadnought. The effect of this was dramatic and the dreadnought abruptly ceased all acceleration and firing, even its defence turrets ceased trying to intercept the last of the *Warspite*'s missiles and all three slammed into the dreadnought's superstructure, inflicting even more damage.

"Contacts heading this way." Mori said from behind Shaw as she watched the Ticik dreadnought burn.

"Have they seen us?" she responded.

"Hard to tell. I'm not picking up any targeting sweeps but there are definitely gunships breaking off from the main squadrons. They could just be after the *Warspite*. They sure as hell know she's out there now." Mori said.

"Then let's see if we stop them getting there." Shaw said before she addressed the rest of the squadron, "Okay boys this is it. If they want the *Warspite* then they're going to have to get past us first."

Reeves smiled when he saw the Ticik dreadnought break up.

"They aren't invincible." he said.

"No, but it looks like we've got their attention now captain." Goldman said, "Looks like we've got four ships breaking out of formation and turning towards us."

"I see them." Lucas added, "Three destroyers and a frigate."

"The frigate as escort and the destroyers for the kill." Knight said..

"Weapons stand by for incoming missiles. All light turrets to fire at will." he said.

"Kill the frigate?" Knight asked and Reeves nodded.

"X-ray lasers and neutral beam cannons are to target that frigate. If we can kill it then it will make hitting those destroyers easier." he said, "I want locks on the destroyers so we can fire as soon as the frigate is dealt with. Prepare two missiles per target."

"That's a kill." Park exclaimed when the Ticik dreadnought exploded.

"Not by us though." Leyton said.

"No. Captain Reeves must have brought the *Warspite* out of hiding which means that the target vessel is probably gone." Mitchell said as she checked the tactical display again, "Contact our ships in orbit around Sissar. I want all the combat vessels up here supporting us as soon as possible. The tenders and our supply transports can stay where they are but they should be ready to jump if the Ticik get past us or have anything up their sleeves.

"Admiral there's something I think you should see." Park said and he brought up an image of the now destroyed dreadnought on Mitchell's display. This showed part of an explosion towards the rear of the ship on the upper hull.

"Looks like a missile hit." she said as she looked at the image.

"It is. There was another hit a few seconds earlier and three more after this one but I think that this is what killed the ship." Park told her.

"A weak point? That dome?"

"Yes admiral, as soon as the missile hit the dreadnought seemed to shut down. It could represent the command and control section of the ship." Park said and Mitchell frowned.

"What, right there where everyone can see it?" she said, knowing that human capital ships as well as the

only Sissusk vessel examined so far all placed their bridges towards the centre of the ship where it was far better protected from attack.

"Yes admiral. The other Ticik ships also have similar structures mounted on them." Park said and Mitchell smiled.

"Pass this on to the rest of the fleet. Let's see what happens if we try targeting those domes specifically." she said.

"That's got to be one of the stupidest things I've ever heard." Ash said out loud when Lucas pointed out to the *Warspite's* bridge crew that the missile hit to the dreadnought's dome appeared to have inflicted critical damage.

"Nevertheless, I concur with Lieutenant Lucas' assessment." the envoy of Nexus said, "That dome does appear to represent a vulnerable point on the Ticik vessels. It is also present on all their capital ships, including those heading towards us now."

"A target?" Knight suggested.

"It's worth a try. Weapons how long until that frigate is close enough to engage with the main guns?" Reeves responded.

"About twenty seconds captain." a gunner replied.

"We've also got gunships closing, eighteen of them." Goldman pointed out.

"For now leave them to our drones and Lieutenant Commander Shaw's squadron.

"Picking up launches from the destroyers." Cortez announced, "We've got four missiles inbound."

"Weapons?" Knight asked.

"Responding. Gauss cannons firing now. Free electron beam lasers will engage in when targets come within effective range in ten seconds." a gunner replied.

"They're gauging our defences." Reeves said, "They fired those missiles to judge our reaction time."

"I'm picking up a second wave of launches. Eight missiles." Cortez said.

"A pretty impressive test." Knight said.

"Helm make sure to keep the maximum number of turrets facing those destroyers." Reeves said.

"Aye captain. But that means bringing the nose down and taking us off target." Ash pointed out.

"We'll worry about that later Commander Ash. For now focus on getting us within engagement range without being hit. Bring the nose up again when we're ready to attack that frigate." Reeves replied.

"Yes captain. Lowering the nose now." Ash said and he pushed forward on his flight controls.

Bringing the nose of the *Warspite* down presented the upper hull surface towards the oncoming Ticik warships. Technically this gave them one of the largest target areas to fire at but it also meant that six of the ship's light turrets as well as both medium X-ray lasers could be used to fire at the incoming missiles. Ash also increased the power to the *Warspite's* engines, forcing the missiles to turn harder and thus burn up more fuel. The chances that they would run out before hitting the *Warspite* were slim but possible and also the greater heat generated by the missiles' engines made them easier to track and target.

As expected the first wave of four missiles was easily shot down before the *Warspite's* turrets turned towards the next eight that were closing rapidly and this presented Reeves with a sudden choice to make.

"Enemy frigate now within effect range of the main guns captain." Goldman announced.

"Target the frigate or keep after the missiles?" Knight added.

"The frigate." Reeves said, "Those destroyers can keep shooting more missiles at us and we need to get rid of the frigate. Helm hard turn towards the frigate. Weapons fire as soon as the enemy target is in our field of fire."

Ash pulled back on the flight controls sharply to turn the *Warspite* towards the Ticik frigate. Armed only with light and medium guns that were still out of effective range of the *Warspite*, the alien warship had yet to open fire but its weapons stood a high chance of being able to intercept any missile fired at the more deadly destroyers. Therefore, it had to be destroyed before the *Warspite* could turn its attention to the greater threat.

As the *Warspite's* main guns swung upwards with the ship the gunner operating them watched his targeting display carefully. Even moving at near the speed of light there would be a slight delay between his firing the neutral particle beam cannons mounted along either side of the *Warspite's* hull and the frigate being struck and his targeting system took into account the movement of both the *Warspite* and the frigate as it fed him information.

"Main guns firing." he called out when the frigate was positioned in the centre of his targeting display and the twin beams of energy erupted from the massive cannons. Because of the angle at which the *Warspite* faced the Ticik frigate the dome that was believed to be a weak point of the aliens' starship designs and so the gunner instead aimed the beams as centrally as he could. Both beams hit the Ticik frigate and its hull glowed brightly as two holes each several metres across were melted through it. The frigate's responded by rolling out of the beams' path and although this did prevent them from burning too deeply inside it also spread damage across a larger area of the ship. This additional damage was limited to the outer hull but any

exposed system was vulnerable and two of the ship's turrets were blasted away without having fired a single shot at the *Warspite* or its missiles.

However, as the *Warspite* had turned towards the frigate its defensive fire had been disrupted and this allowed two of the Ticik missiles to slip through and reach the ship. Both of these struck the drone hangar module fixed under the starboard side of the ship and two explosions filled the module with fire. In turn these ignited the fuel stored in the module for the drones and in a massive secondary blast the entire module was torn open.

"Damage report!" Knight yelled as alarms sounded on the bridge.

"We've lost one of the mission modules." Goldman responded, "I'm also picking up decompression alarms amidships. Looks like we've lost some seals."

"Make sure the affected sections are evacuated and isolated. Deploy Major Willis' marines to make sure everyone gets out of there." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain and I've got Commander Bernard on the intercom." Goldman replied and both Reeves and Knight switched the headsets they were wearing to the intercom.

"Reeves." Reeves said.

"Captain that explosion has damaged our engines. All aft drives are fine but the forward ones on the inner starboard mount are showing as off line. Deceleration is going to be down by fifty percent and our manoeuvrability is going to be reduced until I can fix it." Bernard reported.

"And how long will that take?" Knight asked.

"That depends. If its just control lines, which I think it is right now, then I should be able to get full functionality back in about two or three hours." Bernard answered.

"And if it isn't?" Reeves said.

"Then that means the drives themselves are damaged and we'll probably need to dry dock to fix them properly. At the very least we're going to need one of those tenders." Bernard said.

"Do what you can commander. We'll try and keep the enemy from hitting us with any more missiles." Reeves said.

"Thanks captain. That will make my job a whole lot easier. Engineering out."

"The *Warspite's* hit!" one of Shaw's pilots exclaimed and both Shaw and Mori turned their heads towards the cruiser. The distance towards their base ship was so great that it was little more than another spec of light against the star field but even so it was their instinct to try and see it for themselves.

"Kaz can you tell how bad it is?" Shaw asked and Mori turned back to his console, checking the fighter's sensors to if they could tell him exactly how much damage had been inflicted.

"Looks like one of the modules has gone." he said and Shaw breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank God. Those are likely to have been unmanned.

"But full of fuel. There could be secondary damage." Mori pointed out.

"Then let's hope that it didn't spread too far." Shaw said as she too looked back at her flight console and saw that her squadron was now closing in on the force of Ticik gunships heading for the *Warspite*," In the meantime let's take some heat from them. All ships light up your active sensors. Lock weapons and fire at will."

Just moments after the fighters of Shaw's squadron activated their active radar and lidar systems the Ticik gunships detected their presence and immediately identified them as a potential threat. With the *Warspite's* drones ahead of them, the gunships could not all turn towards the fighter squadron without leaving their flank exposed but they could not afford to ignore the threat either and so the gunships split into two equal groups, one continuing towards the *Warspite* while the other moved to take on the fighters.

"I've got eight contacts incoming." Mori told Shaw.

"Okay we've got them outnumbered but remember that those things pack a punch." Shaw broadcast to her squadron.

"I've got a lock. Firing." one of her pilots responded and a missile dropped from the weapon bay of a fighter and accelerated towards a Ticik gunship that was flying ahead of the rest. Obviously realising that it was under attack the gunship rolled to the side but the missile turned to follow and the gunship instead responded with a burst of fire from one of its turret mounted cannons. The projectiles struck the missile and it exploded in mid flight but there was more to follow. The fighter that had launched the missile had not turned away after the launch and as the gap between fighter and gunship narrowed the pilot fired the twin gauss cannons his craft carried either side of his cockpit. These clipped the Ticik gunship and although it was not destroyed outright its roll continued in an uncontrolled fashion, trailing fire behind it.

"Okay that's one down. Kaz where is the closest bandit?" Shaw asked.

"Two degrees to port and five up. Range six thousand kilometres." Mori told her and as Shaw turned her fighter the heads up display in her helmet identified the position of the Ticik gunships for her. It was obvious that the gunship was flying directly towards their fighter and Shaw did not intend to let it be the first to get a

weapons lock. Even though the range was long for dogfighting Shaw squeezed the triggers built into her flight controls and fired her gauss cannons. Just as Shaw had expected the gunship detected the discharge of the gauss cannons from the magnetic pulse and just as she had hoped it broke off from its direct run to avoid the magnetically accelerated projectiles. Although the gunship was agile Shaw's fighter was even more so and with the two craft now on course to pass by one another at close range she spun her fighter so that it continued moving in the same direction only sideways now, just in time to be able to fire another burst from her gauss cannons right in front of the gunship so that it flew right into them and holes were punched in its hull all along its length until one of the projectiles struck something volatile and the gunship exploded. "Scratch one more." Shaw said.

While the Ticik destroyer squadron was launching its attack on the *Warspite* and the gunship group was duelling with the cruiser's fighters and drones the bulk of the Ticik fleet continued to head for the main Commonwealth fleet. Even while the fleets remained far apart both sides launched limited missile strikes against the other but these were ineffective. The number of missiles usable from long range was too few and the frigates deployed to protect both fleets simply shot them down. This left just the heavy guns mounted on the Commonwealth battleships and monitors and Ticik dreadnoughts to trade fire while the distance was closed. As was fitting for a carrier that was intended to transport large numbers of attack craft but that had little firepower of its own to speak of, the *Jericho* was located towards the rear of the Commonwealth fleet where it was protected by the four more heavily armed battleships, receiving constant updates from all of the ships in the fleet as fast as their communications would allow.

"This is no good. We need to do more damage." Mitchell said as she watched the tactical display. After damaging a few of the fleets frigates and destroyers the Ticik capital ships had switched their fire against the Commonwealth's battleships. Thanks to the combination of extreme range and their heavily armoured hulls all four of them were still operational but the damage was building up and if it continued then inevitably some of them would be forced to disengage, "Order all destroyers and cruisers to prepare a missile salvo."

"Admiral most of those ships have only medium rated missiles. They can't accelerate the same as our heavier ones." Park pointed out.

"I know that commander but they might just create enough of a distraction that more of our heavy missiles will get through." Mitchell replied.

"Yes admiral." Park said, smiling as he saw the logic behind the admiral's idea.

Just seconds later every missile armed warship in the Commonwealth fleet opened fire, sending a swarm of guided weapons towards the opposing Ticik fleet. As had happened before the Ticik warships, in particular their frigates opened fire on the missiles but they did not have the time to be able to pick out the heavier missiles from the smaller ones and while the medium missiles from the ordinary destroyers were being shot down easily the majority of the heavier missiles made it through the defensive fire this time and slammed into the Ticik ships.

Worst hit among these was a destroyer that was hit in its own missile magazine and the ammunition stored there detonated, ripping the entire ship apart from the inside. The Ticik then responded in kind, launching a swarm of missiles back towards the Commonwealth fleet. However, with three of their destroyers currently chasing after the *Warspite* they had significantly fewer missile armed ships to call on while the Commonwealth fleet had more frigates to protect itself as well as a number of lighter warships that could also act as anti-missile platforms and the vast majority of the salvo was shot down short of their targets. One of the heavy missiles still made it to its target though and it blew a heavy turret from one of the four battleships.

"Admiral the *Galaxy* is reporting that they've lost their number two main turret." Turner told Mitchell.

"Damn." the admiral said softly before the flight operations officer continued.

"And it looks like the Ticik fleet is veering off." he added.

"Any signs of them pulling out?" Mitchell asked.

"Negative admiral. They are just changing heading and formation." Turner answered and Mitchell checked the tactical display again. This showed the Ticik switching from their initial formation that placed its dreadnoughts in a side by side arrangement to one that organised them into two rows one behind the other and it was obvious to Mitchell what they were planning.

"They're going to pass us by and deliver a broadside right into us." she said, "Order our cruisers to steer hard to port and cut them off and change our formation to a vertical one so we aren't trying to fire through one another."

"Capping the 'T'?" Leyton said, referring the ancient naval manoeuvre in which gun armed warships would block an enemy column and concentrate their fire on the vessel at the front.

"It's worth a try." Mitchell answered.

As ordered the six Commonwealth light cruisers all turned sharply and accelerated so that they would cross the path that the Ticik dreadnoughts now appeared to be taking, then turning so that they were sliding sideways and would have their main guns facing towards the Ticik as they passed in front of them. Being

light cruisers these ships lacked the forward firing heavy guns or heavy missiles of the *Warspite* but between them the six ships could muster a large amount of firepower and with the Ticik closing rapidly their medium guns and missiles were now in range of the enemy. One after another the Commonwealth light cruisers opened fire on the lead dreadnought from in front of it, unleashing the full power of their main guns, turrets and missile launchers. Some of the crews attempted to aim their fire at the vulnerable dome on top of the dreadnought but even those weapons that did strike it failed to inflict enough damage to render the ship inoperable. Most of their fire was directed more centrally, however and this was more effective. The cylindrical hull of the dreadnought mounted four massive drive units at both ends and firing from in front of the ship gave the Commonwealth cruisers a clear line of sight to the forward drives. Struck by a mix of X-ray lasers, magnetically accelerated projectiles and explosive missiles, two of the drive units exploded and the entire forward section of the ship was briefly turned into an inferno before all of the oxygen available to sustain the blaze was consumed. By this time the dreadnought had lost four of its heavy turrets though and after firing one last blast from its own aft drives that pushed the ship aside there was a series of small explosions around the shaft that connected the dome to the dreadnought's main cylinder and the dome was suddenly fired away from the rest of the ship, a series of blasts from thrusters mounted on the rim of the dome steering it into the path of the next dreadnought where it then clamped itself to the hull of the second ship. While the Commonwealth light cruisers were firing on the lead dreadnought it and the other gun armed dreadnoughts had been firing their heavy X-ray lasers to the side, taking aim at one of the Commonwealth battleships and now one of these large vessels was burning in several places while its crew raced to contain the blazes. Two of the Ticik dreadnoughts were of a different class though and in place of the heavy gun turrets mounting X-ray lasers these were armed with multiple banks of heavy missile launchers. Requiring no direct line of sight between launcher and target as long as accurate targeting data could be relayed to them from another source, these two vessels opened fire on the Commonwealth light cruisers. The missiles initially sped directly outwards all around the two missile dreadnoughts before they angled forwards and accelerated rapidly towards the light cruisers. As soon as the missiles were detected the cruisers switched the fire from their lighter turrets to try and intercept them but the sheer number of them combined with the limited response time available from the missiles having been fired from a relatively short range meant that some of the missiles inevitably got through the defensive fire.

Both the *Bayonet* and *Ceres* from the Gamma Pavonis fleet were hit by one missile each, the *Bayonet* being struck directly on its prow where its main guns were destroyed and flight launch tubes taken out of action while the *Ceres* was instead struck amidships and a large explosion tore open several decks of the ship. More serious though was the damage inflicted on the light cruiser *Rod of Iron* from the ships deployed from the fleet base at Delta Pavonis. This ship was struck by four missiles in rapid succession, the first blowing away two of its turrets and leaving a sudden gap in its defensive fire that the remaining three missiles were able to pass through before any other weapons could be realigned to cover the gap. One of these blew the drive pod from the tip of one of the cruiser's wings while the other two struck the main hull about half way along the ship in rapid succession where the combined explosive power tore the *Rod of Iron* in half.

The Ticik dreadnoughts were not the only vessels to be engaging the Commonwealth fleet though and at the same time as the larger Ticik warships were unleashing a continuous broadside on the Commonwealth battleships the other Ticik vessels found targets of their own. Having been monitoring the Commonwealth fleet communications since they first detected the human ships the Ticik had identified the *Jericho* as the Commonwealth's flagship in the system by the sheer volume of communication running to and from it and so several of their ships targeted the carrier specifically. By moving past the Commonwealth fleet instead of meeting it head on meant that the *Jericho* could not hide behind the four larger battleships and a trio of Ticik destroyers led by a light cruiser suddenly broke away from their main formation and accelerated towards the carrier.

"Admiral we've got incoming." Turner called out, "Four enemy ships on an intercept course for us now. They're locking on."

"Weapons, ready turrets for defensive fire." Leyton ordered.

"Order the *Solar Flare* and *Sea of Fate* to engage them. Take out that cruiser and the destroyers will be an easy target." Mitchell added. She had picked those two ships specifically, both heavy destroyers from Delta Pavonis they carried fewer missiles than ordinary destroyers but those that it did carry were more powerful, being the same as those carried by the *Warspite* and the fleet's battleships. This meant that even a single hit had a greater chance of crippling the Ticik light cruiser and the two heavy destroyers began to lock their targeting systems on the alien vessel.

As soon as they had achieved a firing solution the two Commonwealth ships launched their missiles, firing three of them apiece to try and overwhelm the Ticik defences that were already acting to shoot down lighter missiles being fired at them by other Commonwealth ships as the opportunity arose. As hoped the number of missiles being fired at the Ticik light cruisers proved too much for the defences it and the accompanying destroyers could muster between them and four of the six missiles found their target. The effect of this was

devastating as the third missile smashed through a section of hull already damaged by the first missile impact and struck one of the ship's fusion reactors, creating a massive secondary explosion that consumed the entire ship in a blast of expanding plasma.

With only limited defensive firepower and too far from their main formation to be able to count on covering fire from other ships, the Ticik destroyers were now vulnerable to missile attack and the Commonwealth destroyers took advantage of this by launching a furious missile barrage that blew all three ships apart in rapid succession. However, this was not before the three Ticik craft were able to launch their own missiles, firing as many as they could while they were still able as if they knew that they were now on a suicide mission. Even after the destroyers that had launched them became nothing but debris tumbling through space their missiles continued under their own guidance towards the *Jericho* and the carrier responded by firing its turret mounted weapons at them. While Nebula-class escort carriers such as the *Jericho* lacked significant offensive firepower, instead relying on the squadrons of fighters and drones that they carried to attack enemy vessels, they did carry a considerable number of light turrets for close in protection from missiles or enemy attack craft and these took a heavy toll on the incoming missiles. Despite the high volume of defensive fire from the *Jericho*'s turrets a number of the missiles still made it through, smashing into the hull of the ship before exploding.

The main hangar bay that dominated the internal volume of the *Jericho* became an inferno as fuel and explosive munitions meant for the carrier's attack craft burned while other impacts destroyed turrets and tore open the hull in numerous places. One of the missiles hit an already damaged section and penetrated deep into the ship before it exploded close to the carrier's main bridge and there was a rush of air as it was opened to space.

The hole was less than half a metre across but this was still enough to create a strong enough rush of air that unsecured objects were hurled across the bridge towards it and either blown out into space or becoming caught up in the twisted metal between the bridge and outer hull. Fortunately the rush of air was not strong enough to drag any of the command crew, even those not strapped into their seats out into space but it was obvious that the bridge was not going to remain habitable for long.

"Hull breach! We need to evacuate." Leyton shouted at the top of her voice over the sound of escaping air, "Admiral we need to-" and then she suddenly stopped when she turned to her side and saw Admiral Mitchell slumped forwards in her chair, a jagged metal spike protruding through her chest.

"We have to help the admiral." Turner said as he released his harness and holding onto whatever came to hand he rushed to Mitchell's side and pressed a hand to the side of her neck, feeling for a pulse.

"We're too late. Even if she wasn't already dead we'd never get that spike out of her in time. Now move! Everyone out." Leyton ordered.

An alarm sounding inside the cockpit of Shaw's fighter alerted her and Mori to one of the Ticik gunships locking onto them.

"Where the hell is the bastard Kaz?" Shaw snapped as she looked around.

"Aft quarter low." Mori responded, checking the sensor readouts in front of him.

"Hold on to your lunch." Shaw said and she fired the fighters engines to flip its tail upwards over its nose, leaving the craft travelling backwards and upside down compared to its previous orientation. From this angle Shaw's helmet display picked out the Ticik gunship easily and she fired a rapid burst from her gauss cannons that clipped the underside of the gunship, damaging one of its own cannons and forcing it to break off. However, as the gunship turned Shaw also turned her own fighter to track it and fired again before it could bring any of its own weapons to bear on her. This time she put a burst of magnetically accelerated projectiles right through the centre of the craft and she saw a flash of orange light ahead of her as it exploded.

The Ticik frigate turned sharply as Ash brought the *Warspite's* prow around to face it, the alien vessel doing its best to keep out of the firing arc of the cruiser's main guns. In doing this though Reeves noticed that a gap had opened up between the frigate and the destroyers that it was protecting.

"Helm, take us through that gap between the frigate and the destroyers. Make sure we have the upper hull aligned to the destroyers. Weapons, launch missiles as soon as we're between them." he ordered.

"Yes captain. Going full burn." Ash replied and even from within the bridge the sound of the *Warspite's* engines roaring could be heard as the ship accelerated as rapidly as Ash could make it.

"They can't shoot down our missiles if we're in the way?" Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Exactly." he said.

"Have you considered that they'll be able to shoot at us though?" Knight said.

"Not for long though hopefully." Reeves said, "Weapons I want the ventral turrets to engage the frigate as we pass. We might be able to do some damage to that as well."

The Ticik warships saw the *Warspite* accelerate and it was obvious that the cruiser would pass through the middle of their formation. Seeking to stop this from happening the alien vessels all turned towards the gap and began to adjust their speed to try and close it. However, they were too far apart and the *Warspite* was closing too fast for them to complete this manoeuvre and the heavy cruiser sped between them with its weapons firing. Three missiles burst from their launchers simultaneously and raced towards the Ticik destroyer and now that these ships were in the shadow of the *Warspite* their accompanying frigate was unable to provide them with covering fire. They were not entirely helpless though and although like any destroyer they were armed primarily with missiles for hunting warships they did each mount a pair of light turrets for their own protection. The positioning of these meant that only one turret per destroyer could fire on the missiles now closing on them rapidly and the short range between the *Warspite* and the destroyers gave them little warning but they fired anyway.

For two of the destroyers their defensive fire and the countermeasures they tried to use proved utterly ineffective and the *Warspite's* heavy missiles struck them both in rapid succession, the explosions turning both ships into burning wrecks. The third vessel was luckier though and its defensive turret shot down the incoming missile before it could hit the destroyer. The Ticik frigate was also able to avoid destruction by the *Warspite's* weapons. Despite the range being short the cruiser's four ventral turrets lacked the firepower to destroy the ship in the short time that they were able to target the frigate before it had sped past. The combination of free-electron beam lasers and gauss cannons was still enough to inflict some damage though and as the *Warspite* flew onwards it left behind it a frigate that had lost its main forward gun before being able to use it against the cruiser.

"Captain these readings just don't make sense." Lucas said once the *Warspite* had completed its attack run and Ash was turning the ship back around towards the two remaining Ticik warships they faced.

"What do you mean lieutenant?" Reeves asked.

"Well we've holed all the Ticik ships sent against us but our sensor don't seem to be reading any atmospheric venting from any of them." Lucas said.

"Could they decompress their ships prior to going into battle?" Goldman suggested.

"That would be awkward." Knight said, "The crew would have to wear space suits at pretty much all times just in case they were attacked."

"Plus it's not like venting air is enough to overcome the inertia of something the size of a capital ship so they can't be worried about that." Thomas added.

"Perhaps this tells us something about the biology of the Ticik." the emissary of Nexus said, "If they are capable of surviving in a vacuum then-"

"We can worry about how they're put together later. For now I'd like to take their ships apart." Reeves said,

"Helm, bring us around and give us another attack run. I want both Ticik ships to pass by on our dorsal side. Weapons fire main guns and all turrets as targets present themselves."

"Admiral I've got the *Jericho* signalling." a communications officer aboard the Lincoln-class battleship *Ashford's Fury* announced and Rear Admiral Kim Sung-ho looked around.

"Put them through." he ordered before adding, "*Jericho* this is Admiral Kim. State your orders."

"Admiral this is Commander Leyton aboard the *Jericho*. Our ship is crippled and Admiral Mitchell is dead. You're next in the chain of command so the fleet is yours."

Kim paused for a moment and nodded.

"Understood *Jericho*. We'll try to keep them off your back while you make repairs. What is the state of your hangars?" he asked.

"Out of commission. We can't control our drones any more either so I'm sending you the command authorisation to take them over. When this is over we're probably going to have to find alternative hangar space for our fighters." Leyton said.

"Very well." Kim said before he looked at his flight operations officer, "Lieutenant South I need to address the fleet." he said and when South nodded he continued, "This is Rear Admiral Kim aboard the *Ashford's Fury*. Admiral Mitchell is dead and therefore I am taking command of the fleet. Stand by for new instructions." then he checked the tactical display in front of him, zooming the image out to give him a better view of the whole engagement area. He could see the isolated combat going on close to the nearby gas giant but the *Warspite* did not appear to be in need of support for the time being. Meanwhile the six remaining Ticik dreadnoughts were continuing to target the Commonwealth's battleships and Kim decided immediately that these needed to be the focus of his attention. With fires still raging aboard the *Potomac*, Kim could practically call on only three battleships including his own and the *Galaxy* was missing one of its four main turrets. However, this still left him with a significant amount of firepower among his squadron and he decided to make the most of it.

"Signal the *Galaxy* and the *Vengeful*, I want them to form up in line astern with a fifty kilometre spacing and accelerate with us on a six gee burn directly towards the rear of the enemy dreadnought formation. We'll pass behind and engage their rearguard directly. Order the frigates *Clarion Call* and *Intrepid* to accompany us and provide covering fire. That's a missile dreadnought we're targeting and it can't help but notice us coming. Have all monitors clear us a path, I don't want any enemy destroyers getting in our way."

As ordered the five warships all turned towards the Ticik and the turrets on the battleships all turned to direct their fire on the missile dreadnought bringing up the rear of the Ticik formation. While the battleships and their frigate escorts were accelerating towards the Ticik at a rate that would soon incapacitate a crew not protected by an artificial gravity field the four monitors that were a part of the Commonwealth fleet began targeting the smaller destroyers that lay between them and the dreadnoughts at the heart of the Ticik fleet. These light warships were little more than gun platforms, built around a powerful primary weapon that gave them the ability to strike at targets many times their size from long range and they now directed this firepower towards the destroyers that were blocking the path of the charging battleships. Three of the monitors were armed with X-ray lasers that struck directly at the destroyers, focusing on a single ship and burning deep holes into its hull until its reactor core was compromised and the ship vanished in a brilliant flash of light as it was enveloped by escaping plasma. The fourth monitor, the *Copperhead*, was armed with a heavy missile system and the small size of the ship meant that it could only carry a limited amount of ammunition. All but two of its missiles had already been fired at the Ticik and now the *Copperhead* fired both of these remaining weapons at a single Ticik destroyer. The first of these missiles was hit by a burst of projectile fire from the destroyer and it exploded but the thermal flare and debris that this created masked the second missile just long enough for it to slip past the destroyer's defences and strike it at the base of the dome structure. The explosion destroyed this structure entirely and as had happened to other Ticik warships damaged in this way the destroyer suddenly became lifeless, drifting forwards through space without using its engines or weapons at all.

The combined fire from the monitors opened up enough of a gap in the Ticik formation that the three Commonwealth battle ships were able to target the missile dreadnought easily, the *Clarion Call* and *Intrepid* shooting down most of the missiles being fired at them while their own light turrets and countermeasures dealt with the rest.

"Open fire!" Admiral Kim snapped the moment that his tactical display showed that the missile dreadnought was now within firing range of his battleship's four heavy turrets and these unleashed their neutral particle beams at the alien vessel. Following behind the *Ashford's Fury*, the *Galaxy* and *Vengeful* also opened fire and the neutral particle beams were joined by fire from the battleships' X-ray lasers as they came close enough for their medium turrets to also come within range. The combined fire of the three battleships, even given the loss of a heavy turret suffered by the *Galaxy* was more than enough to tear through the heavily armoured hull of the dreadnought and the ship was rocked by explosions along its entire length as drive units and magazines filled with explosives were hit. With one side of the ship now ablaze the dome section on the

upper hull ejected and flew towards a nearby light cruiser. However, before it could get to the other vessel the main hull suddenly exploded and the fleeing dome was caught within the blast radius. The shrapnel hurled out by the explosion tore through the dome and it began to tumble before it collided with a piece of debris from the main hull that was twice its size and it was smashed to pieces.

“Main guns firing.” one of the *Warspite*'s gunners called out as the final destroyer facing the cruiser came within the neutral particle beam cannons' firing arc. The beams hit the forward section of the destroyer where one of its missile banks was located. Luckily for the destroyer most of the missiles in this particular bank had already been expended and the few that detonated while still in their launchers did little additional damage. However, both the destroyer and the accompanying frigate did then both make sharp turns and begin to accelerate away from the *Warspite*.

“Captain I'm picking up increased tachyon signatures from both ships.” Cortez said.

“Their magnetic signatures are increasing as well.” Goldman added, “Captain they're getting ready to go to FTL.”

“What about the rest of their fleet?” Knight asked.

“We're picking up tachyon activity from them all.” Cortez replied.

“Enemy gunships are disengaging from our fighters and drones as well.” another sensor operator said.

“They're pulling out.” Thomas said.

“Could it be a tactical jump? Just a few light minutes to regroup?” Reeves said.

“Unlikely captain. These readings are strong. Much stronger than needed to make a quick local jump.” Goldman replied.

“Contact Shaw.” Reeves said.

“Archangel this is *Warspite*. Respond.” Goldman transmitted.

“*Warspite* this is Archangel. Enemy is pulling back. We are pursuing.” Shaw responded after a few seconds' delay.

“Negative Archangel.” Reeves said, “It looks like the entire Ticik fleet is pulling out. What's your status?”

“We took out five of them for two of our own captain. I've got transponder fixes on both cockpits though so we need the S and R birds out here fast.”

“Tell the hangar to get the rescue shuttle out there.” Knight ordered and Goldman nodded while Reeves replied to Shaw.

“Good work Archangel. Fall back to the *Warspite*.” Reeves said.

“Yes captain. We're on our way back now. Archangel out.” Shaw told him.

“Captain, Admiral Kim is broadcasting.” one of the communication officers announced.

“Put him through.” Reeves ordered.

“All ships this is Rear Admiral Kim. It appears that the Ticik are falling back and intend to jump to FTL. Do not pursue. I say again do not pursue. All ships are to regroup and stand by for orders.” the admiral announced.

Looking at the tactical display in front of him Reeves saw the icons representing the Ticik gunship squadrons accelerating rapidly to catch up with the capital ships that were now all on headings that took them away from the Commonwealth fleet. The Ticik had not stopped firing entirely though and their destroyers continued to launch missiles at the Commonwealth ships. However, these were being launched without targets locked into their guidance system and as long as the Commonwealth vessels remained far enough away that the missiles' onboard targeting systems could not acquire them they flew on harmlessly. A handful of the missiles did manage to acquire targets but the defensive fire from the Commonwealth fleet was so overwhelming that even these were easily shot down before hitting the ships they had locked onto.

Destroying or damaging the Commonwealth ships was not the intention of the missiles though, instead they were intended by the Ticik to be just a deterrent to pursuit while their ships withdrew far enough to be able to recover their surviving gunships before engaging their faster than light drives and escape the system.

Rear Admiral Kim gathered his fleet's senior officers in the formal dining room aboard the *Ashford's Fury*, bringing together the commanding officers of every ship of at least cruiser size as well as the envoy of Nexus and the representatives of the three alien races that had been brought along by Admiral Mitchell, supposedly to help liaise with any survivors of any of them that were encountered. With the Sissusk still not entirely trusted Admiral Kim also had a fire team drawn from his ship's marine compliment present to watch them. Very few humans had encountered intelligent aliens and Reeves noticed that a lot of the officers from the ships based at Delta Pavonis as well as some from Gamma Pavonis who had not encountered any of the Sissusk prisoners before kept glancing in their direction.

“What now admiral?” Captain Hale of the *Bayonet* asked when they were all sat around the table and Kim sighed.

“We may have driven the Ticik off for now but we can't be certain that they won't be back. That's why I've had the fleet deploy in a defensive formation away from Sissar. If the Ticik do return then I don't want our

manoeuvring or targeting disrupted by the gravity well of a planet.”

One of the Sissusk officers then began to hiss and the translation device on the table in front of him translated these hisses into English.

“What about my people? We know some managed to survive on Sissar. There could be more.” the device spoke.

“Not necessarily all Sissusk either. Many slaves were brought here.” the Fedrun representative added. Despite being another reptilian species the physiology of the Fedrun was close enough to human that they could just about manage to speak human languages and so no translation device was necessary. The same could not be said for the avian Krawlek, however and when one of them squawked another device was needed to turn their speech into English.

“Yes, we were enslaved on Sissar. Many more of our people were there.” it said.

“That will depend very much on what Captain Reeves has to say to us.” Kim said and he looked towards where Reeves sat with the envoy of Nexus stood just behind him.

“We located the target ship and tracked its movements. It was them that rigged it so that it looked like the gate emitted tachyons by the way.” Reeves said.

“How?” Leyton asked, frowning.

“The synchronised release of tachyons from storage jars.” the envoy of Nexus told her and Reeves nodded.

“Unfortunately we couldn’t warn you without breaking communication silence and giving ourselves away to the target.” he added.

“What about the target?” Kim said, “I take it that it withdrew?”

“Yes. It pulled out just after the shooting started. That’s when we could get involved.” Reeves said.

“The exit vector of both the target vessel and a drone despatched earlier were tracked and a destination calculated.” the envoy of Nexus added.

“Where?” Kim replied.

“Most likely the Eta Indi system.” Reeves told him.

“The Indus sector. That’s pretty far.” Leyton commented.

“Closer than Gamma Pavonis.” Captain Bertarelli of the *Ceres* pointed out.

“Is the *Warspite* still FTL capable?” Kim said.

“It will be soon according to my last update admiral. We lost half our courier drones but we’ve plenty left in the other hangar.” Reeves answered.

“In that case I want you to continue with the mission. Proceed to Eta Indi and see what’s there. The rest of the fleet will remain here to conduct repair operations and our scouts will survey the surrounding systems for signs of the Ticik regrouping or any survivors of the alien AI.” Kim said.

“And if we find something?” Reeves asked.

“I’ll leave that up to your judgement captain. Obviously you should at least send a drone back to Gamma Pavonis to let them know if you find anything but whether or not you engage any targets is up to you. Assess the tactical situation and take whatever action you deem necessary to determine the identity of the ship that you tracked.” Kim said.

Returning to the *Warspite*, Reeves made his way to the starboard side of the cruiser’s main fuselage where he found Bernard commanding an engineering team carrying out repairs to the systems damaged during the battle.

“I thought I’d find you here.” Reeves said when he saw Bernard with a tablet in his hand.

“The ship won’t repair itself captain, even with our robots to help out.” Bernard replied.

“But we will be ready for FTL travel soon, yes?” Reeves asked.

“Yes captain. There was a significant hull breach that would have stopped us from ionising it sufficiently to push us over the complex mass limit needed for FTL but that should be sorted within six hours. Then all that’s left is the damage to minor internal systems.”

“Okay, so how long will that take to repair and can you do it while we’re underway?” Reeves said and Bernard paused to consider the work he was doing.

“I’d say another twelve hours if we can do it here.” he said.

“And if we’re underway at FTL?”

“Ah, now that will make it a bit more complicated. Though I take it that we have a long trip ahead of us.

Following that scout or heading back to Centaur?” Bernard asked in response.

“Following the scout. Both the drone it launched and the ship itself headed for Eta Indi so that’s where we’re going.” Reeves told him.

“Alone? Or with the rest of the fleet?”

“No, alone. Admiral Kim wants the fleet to be able to repair itself before getting under way again and he’s going to survey the surrounding systems for survivors as well as signs of more Ticik activity.” Reeves said and Bernard sighed, “Something wrong commander?”

"Yes captain. From what little we know about the Ticik they attack anything they consider a threat or an intruder. They drove us off at Phi-two Pavonis but here we trashed three of their dreadnoughts plus several smaller capital ships. Do you think that means we'll be seen as a threat now?"

"It's possible. Mind you we are fifty light years from Gamma Pavonis so they may decide that we're too far away to be worth bothering with. I need to go and let the crew know what we're doing. Keep me up to date with repairs." Reeves said before he turned around and walked away.

When Reeves reached the *Warspite's* bridge he found Knight at the central console with Goldman, the pair of them discussing the ongoing repairs to the ship and the organisational changes needed to accommodate the additional fighters that had been taken on to make up for the loss of the *Jericho's* hangar space.

"Captain, how was Admiral Kim?" Knight asked.

"Keen for us to complete our mission." Reeves answered and he looked at Thomas, "Lieutenant Commander Thomas I want a course plotting for Eta Indi that will bring us out on the edge of the system."

"Yes captain. Will six light hours out do?" Thomas replied and Reeves nodded.

"That should be suitable commander." he said.

"So we're heading off into the Indus Sector then?" Goldman commented.

"Alone?" Knight added and Reeves nodded again.

"Yes. The admiral wants to repair the fleet without delaying our mission. Oh and he's also going to be exploring the surrounding systems just in case there are survivors to be rescued." Reeves said as he picked up an intercom handset, setting it to a public address mode, "Lieutenant Commander Shaw to the bridge." then as he put the handset down again he looked at Goldman, "So what is our combat status?" he asked.

"Good captain. We fired nine missiles in total but we should be able to replenish those from the stores aboard the *Lord Hoffer*. We've also taken on enough of the *Jericho's* drones to make up for our losses as well as a number of fighters and interceptors." Goldman told him.

"The fighters are what I wanted to talk to Shaw about." Reeves replied.

"Talk to me about what?" Shaw asked as she entered the bridge and walked up to the central console.

"I wanted to know about the extra fighters we've taken on." Reeves said and Shaw sighed, "Is there a problem commander?" Reeves added.

"Yes, that's just it." Shaw said.

"You're rank?" Knight said.

"I'm a lieutenant commander and the harpy from the *Jericho* is a full commander. It's bad enough that things are so crowded that the transfer corridor between the forward and aft hangars are being used to store ships that won't fit in them but now I've got this commander who is throwing her weight around and ordering both hangars to be reorganised. I left Kaz down there trying to explain to her how we do things but she wasn't listening to me so I don't think a lieutenant's say so is going to make any difference." Shaw replied.

"No-one's run anything by me." Goldman said.

"Probably because you're just a humble lieutenant commander like me. According to her we don't have the wealth of experience with fighter operations that a wing commander from a dedicated carrier has." Shaw said and Reeves frowned as he picked up the intercom handset again.

"Major Willis?" he said.

"Willis? I thought you were going to summon this O'Neil." Knight said.

"I am." Reeves said.

"Willis." the marine's voice said on the other end of the intercom.

"Major would you kindly head down to the aft hangar where you will find an officer from the *Jericho* called Commander O'Neil. I want her escorting to the bridge immediately. That last point is very important major. Immediately." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain." Willis replied before Reeves put the intercom down again and he looked around.

"Ash, Thomas, join us here if you would." he said and the two officer got up to join the others at the central console so that when Willis entered the bridge in the company of two other armed marines and a woman in a flight suit with commander's rank markings. The woman stood at attention opposite Reeves and saluted while he continued to look down at the central console, ignoring her deliberately.

"Commander Erin O'Neil reporting as ordered captain." O'Neil said eventually and Reeves looked up at her.

"Commander." he said, "I understand you have decided to make some changes to the *Warspite*."

"Yes captain. My experience in fighter operations aboard the *Jericho*-"

"This is not the *Jericho* Commander O'Neil." Reeves interrupted calmly, "The organisation of our fighter squadron is the responsibility of Lieutenant Commander Shaw and Lieutenant Commander Goldman."

"With respect captain I outrank-" O'Neil began before Reeves interrupted her again.

"Commander O'Neil!" he snapped, and she flinched, "You have a simple choice to make. Either obey my orders or I will have Major Willis and his men place you under arrest on a charge of mutiny."

O'Neil's eyes widened at the threat of arrest, aware that a charge of mutiny could result in her execution.

"Captain I apologise. I assumed-" she said.

"Don't assume anything commander. If you have a suggestion then put it to Lieutenant Commander Shaw, despite your rank she has command of the fighter forces aboard the *Warspite*. Now exactly how many do we have Shaw?"

"We've taken on seven superiority fighters from the *Jericho* as well as eight interceptors." Shaw responded.

"In that case I think the best thing is to keep our remaining fighters as one unit, those from the *Jericho* as another and the interceptors can form their own squadron. Lieutenant Commander Shaw you will be in command of the wing overall."

"That hangar's going to be pretty crowded." Knight said, thinking about the *Warspite* carrying more than twice its intended number of attack craft.

"I'm sure that we'll manage." Reeves replied, "Now for those of you who weren't here earlier on we have been ordered to the Eta Indi system, "Thomas how long will that take us at maximum speed?"

"About five and a half days captain." Thomas responded.

"Good, that means we can be there in under a week. Goldman I want you to contact the *Lord Hoffer* and arrange for our missiles to be reloaded. Tell them we'll need extra munitions for the addition fighters we're carrying as well. We ship out in thirty-six hours so you have that long to get everything done."

Eta Indi contained no planets or moons that were habitable for humans without environmental protection and so it made an excellent location for an outpost that needed to remain hidden. Only during the early decades of humanity's interstellar exploration had such systems been colonised and even then it was only to use them as a stepping stone to be able to reach better colony sites using the relatively slow and short ranged vessels of the era. Even the lack of habitable worlds of habitable worlds was not considered sufficient security for the secret base though and to provide further protection against being detected it had been built almost entirely underground with only a handful of essential hatches and communication and sensor antennas present on the surface of the barren and airless moon on which it had been built.

Docking at the outpost required the *Grey Dawn* to set down on a surface landing area that although flat had been painted with a disruptive pattern to make it blend in more with the surrounding terrain before taxiing into an underground hangar that held a number of the outpost's own auxiliary craft. None of these other ships present were combat craft, instead they were intended purely to provide the outpost with logistical support and were dedicated to either resource gathering or repair of the equipment present in the system. In addition not one was capable of faster than light travel to ensure that they would not be detected from outside the system because of their tachyon emissions.

"So what now?" Conrad asked as Martins was leaving the *Grey Dawn's* bridge and the two men met in the corridor outside.

"Now I go and send my report back home. Then with any luck we'll be able to follow it and get away from this worthless lump of rock." Martins replied.

"Yeah, I get that but while we're waiting for those tachyons to make it to Sanctuary and back what do you want me and my men to do?" Conrad said.

"Just keep an eye on the ship. The crew are going to check its systems but I want to make sure that when we leave we don't have any stowaways aboard." Martins told him.

"You think someone will try?"

"Around here? Yes I do." Martins said before he stepped around Conrad and carried on towards the *Grey Dawn's* airlock.

The outpost's subsurface command centre possessed no windows but every wall was lined with monitors that showed images of different parts of the Eta Indi system as Martins entered it and made his way towards its commanding officer, a colonel with a name badge on his uniform that read Edison. Like most of the rest of the outpost crew the commanding officer had something of a dishevelled appearance compared to Martins in his clean, white uniform.

"Back again lieutenant commander?" Edison said.

"Back and with good news at long last colonel." Martins said, smiling as he held up a compact tablet, "I need my report sending back home via your tachyon link."

Edison took the tablet and looked at the display. The message itself was encrypted but by necessity the delivery information was easily readable and he frowned when he saw this.

"Is something wrong with the message colonel?" Martins said when he saw this.

"It's the recipient. Normally when we relay messages for you they are heading for the Intelligence Bureau but this one is-"

"I know. I have my orders and they are to make sure that my report gets to that individual first." Martins said, "That's not a problem is it colonel?"

"Of course not. I don't suppose I could tempt you to put in a good word for me as well while I do this?" Edison asked jokingly.

"What's the matter colonel? Are you getting bored of the luxurious accommodation and unspoiled views?" Martins responded.

"About five minutes after I got here. Since then I've spent six years exiled out here without any hope of promotion or even just getting back home." Edison told him.

"So you didn't request this command then?" Martins asked. He already knew the answer to his question, the base in the Eta Indi system was so secret that only a few people knew of its existence and communication was limited to keep it that way. This left the crew of the outpost isolated and it was widely known in military circles that assignment to it was a dead end in career terms. However, whether he knew the question was rhetorical or not, Edison still chose to answer it.

"No I did not. Look around you. No-one wants to serve here but most us have to face the fact that staying back home would have been a bad idea unless spending the rest of you life as a mindless drone sweeping floors and scrubbing bathrooms sounds appealing." he said and Martins' thoughts immediately turned to considering who it was that Colonel Edison might have crossed to make spending the rest of his service in such a remote place.

"I could mention how helpful you've been when I get back to Sanctuary." Martins said, thinking that the suggestion would make the colonel view him more favourably even though he had no intention of risking his own career by speaking up for someone who had already obviously fallen from favour. Equally he had no intention of telling Edison that though, the colonel could quite easily delay the departure of the *Grey Dawn* from the outpost for various reasons and Martins was eager to get away from the isolated system as quickly as possible.

"It's done." Edison said, handing the tablet back to Martins, "Your message is in our buffer and will be sent within the next ten minutes unless we pick up anything entering the system that might detect the transmission. The signal should take about an hour to reach Sanctuary. But given that our tachyon receiver satellites around Eta Indi itself can't send FTL signals themselves it will take at least six for a reply if it gets sent right away."

"Thank you colonel. I'll be waiting on the *Grey Dawn* if you could patch the reply through to me there when it arrives." Martins said before he turned and left the command centre to return to his ship.

Back in the hangar Martins found several of his crew in the process of returning the drone they had used to send their initial message to the outpost to its mounting in the *Grey Dawn's* dorsal hull, four of them stood on top of the scout and guiding the crane operator who was moving the ten metre long drone into position. Meanwhile Conrad and his men were stood beneath the ship, blocking access to it through any of the open hatchways including those for the landing gear that could be used to get aboard by someone determined to stow away.

"All done?" Conrad said as Martins walked up to the stairs leading to one of the *Grey Dawn's* air locks.

"The message is sent. With any luck we'll get a reply in about seven hours. If you need me before then I'll be in my quarters catching up on my sleep." Martins replied before he began to climb the stairs and went back inside the *Grey Dawn*.

Martins did just as he had told Conrad and made his way to his quarters where he went to bed, falling asleep until he was woken by the intercom.

"What is it?" he asked when he answered the call.

"Captain the outpost just relayed a message for you." the ship's communication officer said, "It's marked classified."

Martins reached for his tablet that was on the desk close to his bed and checked the time. Then he smiled when he saw that it was about seven and a half hours since he had submitted his report to be sent.

"Put it through to my tablet." he said before putting the intercom handset back on its mount. Moments later the tablet showed that it had received a message in simple text format and Martins opened it.

MESSAGE RECEIVED.

RETURN TO BASE IMMEDIATELY AND REPORT TO ME ON ARRIVAL WITH CONRAD. THERE IS SOMETHING THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE.
WELL DONE LIEUTENANT COMMANDER.

Martins smiled when he saw this and he turned off the tablet before tossing it onto his bed while he got up and dressed before picking up the intercom handset again and setting it to address the entire ship.

"All hands this is the captain. We have been ordered to return to base immediately. All hands secure for launch." he announced.

Dropping to sub light speed six light hours from the star at the centre of the Eta Indi was equivalent to entering the Sol system beyond the orbit of the dwarf planet Pluto. The *Warspite* had also appeared far enough away from the orbital plane of the planets in the system that none of them or the star they orbited created a blind spot where other planetary bodies could be hiding unless they were orbiting very close to something else in the system. Not knowing exactly what would be waiting for them in the system, Reeves had his crew at full alert when they dropped to sub light speed and as soon as they were able they began to scan the system.

"I'm not reading anything that looks like a habitable planet captain." Goldman said, "There are planets though, the usual mix of rocky, gas giant and frozen but none have anything close to an atmosphere that you could breathe."

"How many?" Reeves asked.

"Six major planets. Three rocky, two gas giants and one frozen gas giant. Plus at least four minor planets that are all further out from us. The closest to us is the frozen gas giant at three light hours." Goldman answered.

"No signs of tachyon activity either captain. If anyone is in the system then they aren't travelling or communicating at faster than light speeds." Cortez added.

"I am picking up a repeating radio pulse on our EM detectors captain." another of the sensor technicians said.

"A communication signal?" Knight asked and he looked at Lucas.

"I don't think so commander." she replied as she compared the signal to her database of communication protocols, "There's no encoding that I can see, just plain regular pulses. They're pretty weak as well. If anything I'd say that what we're picking up is reflections from an active radar."

"Source?" Reeves said.

"Within the subsystem of one of the gas giants. Range fourteen light hours." Lucas responded.

"So someone was here using an active radar fourteen hours ago." Knight commented.

"And they could be here still." Reeves said in agreement, "Lieutenant Commander Thomas I want the most efficient route plotting to take us to each of the major planets in turn. We're going to have to study them all one at a time."

"Are we going to use FTL captain?" Thomas asked and Reeves nodded.

"We'll have to unless we want to spend the next few months here." he said, "If anyone in the system does have a tachyon detector then they'll probably have already picked us up anyway."

"Captain I believe that I have identified the presence of a tachyon communication system orbiting the star." the envoy of Nexus suddenly announced.

"I don't see it." Goldman said.

"Me either." Lucas added, "There are no signs of any artificial satellites anywhere in the system so far."

"Captain if I might use the main screen?" the envoy asked.

"Go ahead." Reeves replied and the envoy used the main screen to show an image of a asteroid that was obviously orbiting close to the star Eta Indi.

"It's a rock." Ash said.

"Correct Lieutenant Commander Ash. This is a typical nickel-iron asteroid twenty-five point six metres in length and up to eighteen in diameter that can be found in almost any system surveyed so far. As is this." the envoy replied and it split the main screen in two to show a second asteroid in a close orbit around the star.

"I don't see the relevance ambassador." Reeves said.

"Would it help if told you that both those asteroids are orbiting at a distance of exactly nought point five light minutes? Their orbits are also synchronous with their rotation so that the same side always faces the star."

"That's too much of a coincidence to be natural." Thomas said.

"But perfect if someone built tachyon receivers on them and put them in place to receiving interstellar communication." Knight added, "Having the same side facing the star even lets them be solar powered without covering the entire asteroid in panels that would show up on any scan."

"Obviously just two is insufficient for a communication system but using Eta Indi as an axis the angle between their positions is ninety degrees. Therefore there could be two further asteroids located where the star shields them from our sensors at this range."

"Petty officer Cortez, can you focus our tachyon detectors on one of those asteroids and check for tachyon activity again?" Reeves said and Cortez nodded.

"Yes captain." she replied before then shaking her head, "I'm sorry captain, I'm not picking anything up."

"It could be shielded." Knight suggested, "We might not pick up the magnetic field against the star's energy output."

"Or alternatively they might not be able to transmit faster than light. There's no reason why they shouldn't send a more traditional laser or radio transmission after receiving a message to wherever their main base is in the system." Reeve added.

"Should we go in for a closer look captain?" Ash asked.

"Not yet lieutenant commander." Reeves asked, "We'll focus on searching for the base itself first. But I do want us to be ready to take out the equipment on those asteroids if necessary. Weapons prepare firing solutions against the two visible asteroids and for two hypothetical ones occupying positions on the other side of the star in equal orbits at ninety degree spacing."

"What do we have Crawford?" Edison asked when he came rushing into the command centre after being alerted to an unidentified ship entering the system.

"A single ship colonel." the watch officer replied, "We picked it up about twenty minutes before it dropped out of FTL. It came in on the same vector the *Grey Dawn* did from Epsilon Pavonis."

"That idiot Martins!" Edison snapped, "He's led them right to us. What about us?"

"Comparing where the ship dropped from FTL to a matching time frame in our logs there are no emissions that we've put out that should be detectable based on how long it would take them to reach that location."

Crawford answered, "The problem is going to be our mining ships. We've got four of them out at the moment and two have been in shadow so we don't know if they lit up their drives at times when the intruder would be able to detect the thermal flare."

"So we know what we're facing?"

"Not yet sir. The ship entered the system at a speed of seven point eight light years per day so that suggests

that it's a Commonwealth ship rather than a Ticik one. Nothing they have that we know of moves that fast. From that speed and the strength of the tachyon wave when they dropped out of FTL we can guess that its a capital ship of about cruiser size."

"So we're facing a cruiser or an escort carrier. That doesn't sound too bad. Our own defences should be able to take care of one ship that size even if it is a carrier filled with fighters. The trick is going to be making sure that they don't get word out of our presence here. We're too far from the nearest Commonwealth or neutral planet for them to get a direct signal out but they might be able to send a drone."

"Colonel, even if they followed the *Grey Dawn* here they might not know about us yet and if we can keep it that way they might decide that Martins made a fake jump to throw off pursuit and leave." Crawford suggested.

"I hope so because even though I think we can handle that ship on its own we won't come out of a straight fight unhurt and calling for back up will give us away in an instant." Edison said.

"Your orders colonel?" Crawford asked.

"Put the outpost on lock down. Don't try sending any signals to our mining ships though unless you can get them on a tight beam laser while that Commonwealth ship is in the shadow of something and get them back here under minimal power only. Other than that let them stay out until they are scheduled to return and let them land under communications silence." Edison ordered.

It was not until the *Warspite* performed another FTL jump to take it close to the outermost of the six major planets in the system, the frozen gas giant that the outpost's sensors picked up anything else from the ship, detecting the surge of tachyons at each end of its jump but this did nothing to help the crew identify the ship until several hours later when they were finally able to get a visual image of the ship. Having dropped to sub light speed so far from the centre of the system the *Warspite* reflected little light from its dull grey hull but after being processed by the outpost's image enhancing systems a more detailed image became available and a sensor technician called out to Edison.

"Colonel we have an ID on the intruder." he announced and both Edison and Crawford came over to see what he had found.

"Show us." Edison ordered and the technician brought up the enhanced image from the sensors as well as a file image showing a heavy cruiser like the *Warspite* from different angles.

"She's an Essex-class heavy cruiser sir." the technician said.

"What information do we have on the deployment of Essex-class ships?" Edison said, looking around to another of the command staff.

"Both English Royal Space Force ships are based in the Sol system and haven't left the Core Worlds since being commissioned." the other technician answered.

"Yes that's obvious enough but what about the ships in Commonwealth service" Edison said.

"We know of nineteen of them colonel. The closest ones to our location are the *Iron Duke* stationed at Zeta Tucanae and the *Warspite* at Gamma Pavonis. Colonel both ships are listed as being part of the Commonwealth's strategic strike force." the technician told him.

"Then that ship is likely to be nuclear capable." Crawford said, "The warheads from one missile could split this moon in two."

"Yes and incinerate everyone at this outpost. I want all our surface defences double checked, we can't afford to let any of their missiles through." Edison ordered.

"What about the outer defence perimeter colonel?" another of the technicians in the room asked and Edison sighed.

"Leave them." he said, "If we send crews out to check on them they could give away our position." then he looked at Crawford and added, "You know it's bad enough being stuck out here without the useless workers who are supposed to be capable of running this base."

"Perhaps we should have our warrior contingent put on standby colonel." Crawford suggested, "If the enemy ship does attack then it might try and land marines."

"Do it." Edison agreed, "Our pilots as well. If it becomes apparent that we've been detected then I want our squadrons ready to launch as soon as possible."

"Yes colonel. I'll see to it right now." Crawford replied.

"Captain I think I have something." Goldman said.

"What is it?" Reeves asked in reply.

"A brief thermal flare just after we dropped back out of FTL coming from close to the fifth planet, the outer gas giant." Goldman said.

"The target ship?" Knight suggested.

"I don't think so commander." Lucas said, "The drive profile is wrong. I think we're looking at something smaller and with less engine power. A civilian ship perhaps."

"A civilian ship way out here? This gets curiouser and curiouser." Reeves said.

"Especially if we're not picking up a transponder from the ship." Knight added and he looked at Lucas, "I don't suppose that the drive profile matches anything else that we have on file does it?"

"I'm checking now commander but so far nothing comes close." Lucas said.

"So an unidentified light warship comes to a system way beyond human space where someone has gone to great lengths to make it look uninhabited and there just happens to be an unidentified commercial vessel here as well." Reeves said, "We definitely have the right place I think."

"Captain the distance to the sensor contact suggests that the engine burn took place just prior to our arrival in the system." the envoy of Nexus said as it studied the sensor data as well on the central console, "It appears to have been intended to take the ship into orbit around the fifth planet itself."

"Can you calculate where that orbit will put it now ambassador?" Knight asked.

"Assuming that the ship has not carried out any further course corrections, yes commander. Though I will need to study the motion of the planet's moons to evaluate the influence their gravity may have on a ship in orbit." the envoy replied.

"Then please do so ambassador. Commander Thomas I want a jump plotting that will take us into orbit around the fifth planet as well, positioned as closely to where the ambassador indicates that the unidentified ship will be. Perhaps its crew can help us out with an explanation of what's going on in this system." Reeves ordered.

INTERLUDE.

The door to Hayes' office opened suddenly and a pair of armed and uniformed men entered without asking permission.

"What is the meaning of this?" Hayes demanded as she studied the unit markings on their uniforms, hoping that they would belong to a unit she would be familiar enough with that she could try and threaten the two warriors with being reported to a superior she could name.

"Mister Stein has ordered us to take you to him." one of the men said, glaring at Hayes.

This concerned Hayes. There was nothing good that she could picture that would require Stein to have her brought to him under guard but there also did not seem to be a way that she could avoid it and so she decided to co-operate with the pair.

"Then why didn't you say so in the first place?" she said, smiling as she got to her feet and walked around her desk. One of the warriors then grabbed hold of Hayes by her arm before both of them began to lead her out of her office.

Reaching the parking lot beneath the building Hayes saw that Vale had also been detained and was being ordered into a vehicle with blacked out windows, one of three such vehicles that were parked in a row. The warriors escorting Hayes took her to the same vehicle as Vale and then came to a halt.

"Inside. Put your seatbelt on." one told her, pointing into the back of the vehicle where Vale already sat.

Obediently Hayes got into the vehicle, sitting down next to Vale and she fastened her seatbelt.

"Happy now?" she asked but instead of replying the warrior just slammed the door shut.

This left Hayes and Vale alone, a barrier of blacked out glass separating them from the driver of the vehicle and the pair looked at one another. The outer windows were only blacked out from the outside and Hayes and Vale then watched as the warriors who had brought them here made their way to the vehicles in front and behind the one they now sat in and got into them.

"Did they tell you what they want commander?" Vale asked.

"Only that it was Stein that sent them." Hayes answered, "I take it they didn't tell you anything then?"

"No. They just marched into my office and said that I was to go with them." Vale said.

"And I bet you did without asking any questions, didn't you Enrico."

"Of course. What else should I have done?" Vale said and Hayes sighed.

"I'd suggest that you try being more assertive Enrico but we both know that's beyond people like you. That's why people like me are in charge." she said before the vehicle's engine started and all three began to drive off. The moment that they drove out of the parking lot onto the street sirens began to sound from all three vehicles, clearing traffic out of the way of the convoy as it sped through the city to the main government building where Stein had his office. The three vehicles pulled up outside the front of the building instead of heading for its parking lot and the two security officers stood waiting on the pavement opened up the door of the vehicle.

"Come with us." one of them said.

"Looks like we're heading for his office at least." Hayes whispered to Vale as they both were escorted inside the building and to the elevator.

"Why is that god?" Vale asked.

"Because I don't think that Stein would have anyone shot in his office. It would make a mess of the carpet." Hayes replied.

"That is not a sound reason for assuming we are safe." Vale said as they got out of the elevator and were then led up to the nearby door to Stein's office.

"Go right in. Mister Stein is expecting you." the receptionist said as the guards who had escorted Hayes and Vale came to a halt.

"Well? Didn't you hear her?" one of the guards added as Hayes and Vale stopped outside the door, "Go on in. Mister Stein is expecting you."

"Here goes." Hayes said and she opened the door to Stein's office.

As soon as the door opened she saw Martins in his white fleet uniform as well as Conrad in his combat fatigues. Then she also saw that Horst was standing behind Stein's desk with Stein himself.

"Ah Jennifer, do come in." Stein said, smiling and he waved Hayes and Vale into the room, "As you can see the *Grey Dawn* has returned and Lieutenant Commander Martins and Sergeant Conrad have been able to join us."

"Strange that I wasn't informed about their return." Hayes said and she looked accusingly at Vale, "Then again I did order them to remain at Eta Indi until instructed otherwise."

"Oh Vale had no idea either Jennifer." Stein said, "I ordered Lieutenant Commander Martins to send his final report directly to me so that I could evaluate it without it being put through anyone else's filter first. Now drink with us." and he picked up a pair of empty glasses that he handed to Hayes and Vale.

"We're celebrating then?" Vale said as he took a glass.

"Of course we are. The war has started." Horst replied.

"The Commonwealth hasn't actually declared war on the Ticik yet and the Ticik haven't launched an invasion of Commonwealth space yet but one or the other is just a matter of time now." Stein said.

"Then you were able to lure the Ticik to Epsilon Pavonis?" Vale asked, looking at Martins.

"Lured them in and watched them both start hurling missiles at one another." Martins replied, "Of course the Commonwealth ships sent out the usual stuff about being on a peaceful mission and wanting to talk but the Ticik just did their communicating with weapons fire."

"So who won the fight?" Hayes asked.

"I don't know. I ordered the *Grey Dawn* out of there while the two fleets were too busy with one another to notice a scout escaping." Martins said,

"Does it even matter? Who ever lost will be looking for payback." Conrad commented.

"And when war is declared the Commonwealth will be too busy trying to defend its borders to worry about us researching those tachyon gates." Horst added.

"I wondered why you were looking so happy Doctor Horst." Hayes said.

"Doctor Horst will go down in history as the lead researcher on the project that gave us that technology."

Stein said, "While you and I Commander Hayes will be known for bringing down the Commonwealth. Both good reasons to celebrate in style I think." and he reached down into a large desk drawer and took out a bottle.

"Is that real Champagne?" Horst asked.

"It is." Stein replied, "Brought to Sanctuary secretly by my grandfather. There were six bottles originally and this is one of only two that are left. After this there will be just one."

"Worth a fortune if you sold it." Martins commented.

"Then how would I toast our victory after the war lieutenant commander?" Stein replied.

"Who knows, maybe after the war we'll be able to plunder a few more for you." Conrad said and then he smiled as he added, "I wouldn't mind seeing Earth for myself."

"Perhaps that can be arranged sergeant." Stein said and then there was a sudden 'pop!' as he opened the Champagne bottle and the cork flew off at high speed, "In the mean time let's drink to our success." and he began to pour out the Champagne into the glasses he had handed around.

"Over dramatic don't you think grandfather?" the old man's granddaughter asked as they both watched surveillance footage of Hayes and Vale being taken from the vehicle they had been driven in to the entrance of the government office building.

"Let Stein have his little games." the old man replied, "He thinks he's just achieved the downfall of the Commonwealth and is probably already planning his campaign to become the next Secretary."

"Do you think there will be a war between the Commonwealth and the Ticik grandfather?" his granddaughter said.

"That depends on how quickly we are able to move against Hayes and her associates. If we can deal with them quickly enough then I'm sure that Commander Kane will conveniently forget about his deal with Hayes to stir up calls for war within the Commonwealth. On the other hand if he gets the chance then I think war is a very real possibility. For now I think we can still count on the Ticik to ignore the Commonwealth, it is far from what we suspect the limits of their territory to be after all. However, public calls for action in the Commonwealth could lead to more ships being sent towards Ticik space and each time that happens the odds of the Ticik deciding to track them back to Commonwealth territory and strike back increase. Then there will be war." the old man explained.

"Then we need to move quickly grandfather."

"Yes my dear, yes we do." the old man said, nodding in reply, "Unfortunately although we can prepare to strike we can't make a move yet. For that we are unfortunately entirely dependent on the competence of the Commonwealth and their starship crews."

“Colonel we may have a problem here.” Crawford called out as he watched the outpost's sensor readouts, focusing on the information still being gathered about the *Warspite*. The flow of data was necessarily limited by keeping to the use of passive sensors only but still a more detailed profile of the cruiser was being built up.

“What's wrong?” Edison asked when he hurried over to see what was happening and Crawford pointed at one of the sensor displays.

“We just picked up a tachyon surge. It looks like that Commonwealth ship jumped to FTL.” he said.

“Jumped? Where did it go?” Edison said, checking the other sensor displays instinctively.

“That's the point sir, we don't know. We picked up the flash of tachyons when the ship first jumped and lost surplus imaginary mass that wasn't fixed properly but then we lost it. It could be that it withdrew from the system and we just didn't register any rogue tachyons after it jumped. But it could also have just made a micro jump that took it outside our field of view.” Crawford told him.

“That could mean they know where we are and deliberately jumped into a blind spot.” Edison said.

“My thoughts exactly colonel.” Crawford agreed, “Perhaps we should think about calling this in.”

Edison considered this for a few moments. Reporting the presence of the Commonwealth cruiser in the Eta Indi system meant using the outpost's tachyon transmitter and that meant breaking the blackout Edison had imposed on its operations to prevent detection. If the ship really had left or alternatively if it had somehow already managed to locate the outpost then this would not matter but if it was just a coincidence that the ship had jumped into a sensor blind spot somewhere in the system then sending a transmission risked giving away the location of the outpost.

“No. Maintain communication silence.” he ordered, “Unless you detect a tachyon trail leading out of the system big enough to be from a cruiser or we go forty-eight hours without picking up anything then I'm going to assume that it is still in the system. Only after that will we risk a transmission to let home know what happened. Now what's our situation with the mining ships?”

“Two are still out there colonel. We've been able to contact one of them via laser communication but its still some way out and now running silent so it probably won't be able to get back here for at least four days. The *Edwin Cane* is out of our line of sight so we can't make contact.” Crawford said.

“Then let's just hope that the Commonwealth ship didn't see it either.” Edison commented.

In addition to dozens of moons the gas giant was surrounded by a system of rings made up of ice crystals varying from almost microscopic in size up to those that were several metres across. The *Warspite* dropped back to sub light speed after just a few seconds travelling faster than light when it was less than a thousand kilometres inside the orbit of the innermost ring and immediately began to search the surrounding area for signs of the ship they had detected.

“If the vessel maintained its course then it should have entered orbit at this altitude and would be dead ahead of us.” the envoy of Nexus said.

“Nothing's showing up on sensors captain. Perhaps if we could use active scanning we might find something.” Goldman said.

“Do it.” Reeves said, “Single radar and lidar pulse.”

The *Warspite* then emitted a single pulse from each of its lidar and radar systems. Most of the energy from these pulses was promptly lost into empty space, while the limited returns from the side of the ship closest to the gas giant revealed nothing but clouds of thick gas with no significant solid objects for thousands of metres down.

On the other hand the reflected energy from the direction of the rings was massive, providing snapshot of a large part of the innermost ring. This comprised tens of thousands of distinct objects and the *Warspite's* sensor operators immediately set to work trying to sift through the data for anything that looked artificial. They were not the only ones with access to the data though and while they were still establishing where one lump of ice ended and another began the envoy of Nexus spoke up again.

“Captain Reeves I believe that I have located the vessel.” it said.

“Where?” Knight asked.

“Two thousand kilometres off our port side, well within the ice ring.” the envoy said.

“I see it.” Goldman added and she brought up an image on the main screen that was taken from the *Warspite's* passive optical sensors, zooming in on the unidentified ship.

Although it was partially hidden by the chunks of ice that made up the ring there was a section of a spacecraft protruding from behind one of the mid sized pieces. At first this was difficult to make out in the poor light this far from Eta Indi itself but as Goldman applied a process of image intensification to it, the outline became much clearer. What was visible of the ship showed it to have a core made up of at least two

hexagonal sections connected end to end while drive pods were connected to two of these at the visible end and other equipment modules were fixed to other surfaces. This entire structure was then surrounded by a box shaped framework that mounted what were obviously steering thrusters connected to the central section via thick and armoured fuel and control lines.

"I can't get a match in our database captain." Lucas said, "Whoever made that ship, they didn't register the design with any Commonwealth member."

"We are definitely in the right system." Reeves muttered.

"Are they just hiding from us or do you think that they're inside the ring for another reason?" Knight said, glancing at Reeves.

"Well the ship doesn't look like its got atmospheric capability so the rings would be an obvious hiding place if they picked up our tachyon emissions when we got here, but I think we need a closer look." Reeves commented and he looked at Goldman, "Lieutenant Commander I want a pair of fighters launching. Tell them to go silent as soon as they can and circle around the ring to make a pass by that ship from above and below. If we can see more of it then maybe we can get a better idea of what they're doing here."

Conditions aboard the industrial mining ship *Edwin Cane* were extremely cramped and in the bridge located on top of the foremost of the hull modules there was only room for half a dozen people sat at the single row of consoles and the helmsman located at the very front looking out through the transparent canopy. Of more interest to the crew though was the data being collected by their ship's sensors. Being just a civilian mining ship, the *Edwin Cane's* sensors were designed to be able to let it travel through space while avoiding collisions and to analyse potential sources of the minerals that it sought. This meant that they were not optimised for tracking a warship while simultaneously trying to avoid being detected by it and the feed from the passive thermal imaging sensors was patchy at best.

"What was that?" the ship's captain asked, leaning over the shoulder of one of his crewmen to monitor the sensor feed for himself when he saw a brief flash some distance ahead of the *Warspite*.

"I think it could have been an engine flare captain." the technician responded.

"But it was in front of the ship. Have they fired a missile at us?" the captain asked.

"If they have then it went dark again just after the engine ignited." the technician replied.

"Who are they anyway?" the captain said.

"Sir perhaps we should just try making a run for it." the helmsman suggested, "I can keep the ring between us."

"No they'll see us. That may not be one of our ships but I'd put money on it being a warship. If we lead them back to base do you think that Colonel Edison will hesitate to hold his fire just because we're in the way?" the captain replied, "We'll keep monitoring it and hope it just goes away."

After briefly using her fighter's main drive to perform a sharp turn, adjusting both heading and speed that overcame the magnetically induced forward motion immediately after launching from the *Warspite* Shaw let the craft coast beneath the gas giant's ring as it headed towards the unidentified spacecraft.

"Picking anything up Kaz?" she asked.

"Not yet." Mori replied from behind her, "Wait, hang on. I've got a slight thermal signature. Something out there is putting out heat. Not much but it's there. It looks pretty spread out though."

"If it's coming from the ship then maybe it's heating up some of the ice." Shaw suggested, "Give me a bearing to the centre of the reading."

"Turn five degree port." Mori said and Shaw fired the fighter's lateral thrusters to push the ship sideways, altering its heading enough to take it in the direction Mori had indicated, "That's it. Target ahead, should be above us."

Shaw fired the fighter's thrusters again, lifting the nose of the craft upwards without changing its heading. This meant that as the fighter drifted beneath the unidentified ship its forward facing gun cameras were able to record detailed footage of the vessel.

"I see no signs of weapons, not even any point defences. Doesn't look like a warship to me." she said as the fighter drifted by their target. The unidentified ship was several kilometres above the fighter and Shaw studied the magnified image on the display in front of her. This revealed the full length of the ship and also all of the equipment fixed to the exterior of the hull, "More like a mining ship. Do those long things clamped to the hull look like in flight scoops to you Kaz?" Shaw asked as she focused on the two flared openings at the end of the equipment modules mounted facing the fighter.

"Yes. The ship obviously can't enter an atmosphere without dropping like a brick so it must be for picking up debris in space. In fact I'd say small ice crystals from within these belts would be a good bet." Mori suggested.

"And then they use electrolysis to break that down into hydrogen and oxygen. I bet those blisters all over the hull are gas tanks. If they've got solar power to run the electrolysis then they could just coast through a ring

picking up ice and convert it without expending any significant power on their own behalf." Shaw said. "Very efficient." Mori added while the mining ship disappeared from view as the fighter continued to drift onwards.

"Okay I'm not waiting for us to get to the edge of the ring, I'm taking taking us through it." Shaw said and then using manoeuvring thrusters alone she guided the fighter up through the ring, avoiding the chunks of ice that made it up until the craft emerged from the far side back into empty space. She then steered the fighter back towards the *Warspite* so that it would pass over the mining ship again and permit more data to be gathered. This also required the fighter to be flipped over so that once again the ring appeared above it and Shaw angled it so that the gun cameras would again be angled to capture footage of the mining ship.

Passing over the top of the mining ship on this pass, Shaw and Mori saw the cockpit module mounted to the hull along the ship's longest axis and Shaw noticed the transparent canopy.

"Oh crap." she exclaimed, "We just went right past a window. Do you think they saw us?"

"I doubt it. We're twenty metres long and we just passed by three kilometres away without running lights.

There's not enough light out here for them to have got a good look at us unless they caught us on a camera as well and they could just as easily have done that on our first pass." Mori replied.

"Oh great. Way to put my mind at ease Kaz. I hope you're more supportive to your wife when she needs it than that. You know if I start getting cold feet before my wedding I'm not coming to you for support." Shaw said.

Letting the fighter continue to drift towards the *Warspite*, Shaw fired its thrusters again at the last moment to align it with the cruiser's forward hangar. Given the need for strict communication silence this had been opened as soon as the fighter had launched and Shaw did not need to contact the ship for permission to land, instead flying straight into the hangar and setting her fighter down while watched from the control room set into the wall opposite the large exterior door. Only when the exterior door closed did Shaw break communication silence, using the fighter's short range communications to tap into the *Warspite*'s local network.

"Tower this is Archangel are you ready for upload? We've got plenty of footage of the target." she said.

"Confirmed Archangel. You may transfer your data when ready." the controller responded.

"Okay Kaz, you're up." Shaw said, glancing over her shoulder.

"Tower this is Yokai. Starting upload now." Mori said as he connected the fighter's computer with the network aboard the *Warspite* and began the process of transferring all the sensor data and camera footage that had been captured of the mining ship.

"The upload is coming through now captain." Goldman announced and Reeves looked at her from the central console where he, Knight and Bernard stood together with the envoy of Nexus studying the growing amount of data being gathered about the Eta Indi system in their hunt for the base they suspected was hidden somewhere in it.

"Let's see it then." he said and two additional windows opened up on the central console's display. One of these showed the gun camera footage from the fighter, repeatedly playing the two sections of video during which the mining ship was visible before returning to the beginning while the other window showed a virtual model of the ship constructed from the combined data from the fighter's other passive sensors.

"That is definitely not a Commonwealth ship." Lucas said from her console, "It matches nothing in our database."

"It is reminiscent of the old Gatherer-class mineral processing vessels." the envoy of Nexus said.

"Gatherer-class?" Bernard responded, "Those came into service before the Genex War. About a hundred and fifty years ago."

"Correct Commander Bernard. The first such vessel was commissioned one hundred and thirty-six years ago and was intended as a basic sub light resource gathering ship to support larger facilities. They were commonly included as part of the standard equipment aboard colony ships so that supplies could be gathered as soon as the ships reached their destination. The design is still considered to have been highly successful." the envoy said.

"Well the Gatherer-class is long since obsolete. Like a lot of ships that predate true artificial gravity some were upgraded after the war but they didn't change that much." Bernard said.

"Correct again Commander Bernard. This vessel appears to have been designed to draw on the features that made the original Gatherer-class a success." the envoy said.

"They're gathering fuel and air if you ask me." Shaw announced as she and Mori entered the bridge, still wearing their flight suits.

"Well done lieutenant commander." Reeves responded, "This is invaluable data."

"Too bad it doesn't tell us where its base is though." Shaw commented.

"It has to be in this system though. I can't see anything on it that looks like part of a tachyon-ion drive." Knight said, studying the virtual model closely.

"That's what I thought as well." Mori added, "If it's going to be able to carry enough gas to be worthwhile then there just isn't going to be enough room for an FTL drive as well."

"I doubt it would be true FTL anyway. More likely tachyon storage jars and if the ship has artificial gravity then it's going to need singularity jars for gravitons as well." Bernard said.

"So it's limited to running at sub light speed." Reeves said and then he looked at his chief engineer, "Commander Bernard, would you say that the engines on that ship are enough to be able to outrun a skip at sub light speed?" he asked.

"Not a chance." Bernard replied, shaking his head.

"You want to capture it?" Shaw said and Reeves nodded.

"It may eventually make a break for its base but that could take time we may not have, but I'm willing to bet that if we can take that ship intact then its flight recorder and navigation system could point the way directly to the base. Not to mention that we might be able to get some answers from the crew themselves."

"That looks like an access port." Bernard said, zooming in on the virtual model and pointing to a hatchway located about a third of the way along the hull from the mining ship's prow.

"If it is based on the Gatherer-class then the internal layout could be similar as well." Reeves said,

"Lieutenant Lucas do you have a deck plan for the Gatherer-class?"

"I'm sorry captain, that class isn't listed in my database." she replied.

"There is no need to worry Captain Reeves." the envoy of Nexus added, "My vessel carries detailed design schematics for every spacecraft constructed by humanity going back to the first sub light colony ships designed to settle the nearest systems to Sol."

"You planned for this?" Knight asked and the envoy looked at him.

"Since it was confirmed that the unidentified vessel trailing the *Warspite* when it moved beyond Commonwealth territory was of human origin the possibility of one of the missing independent colony missions being responsible had to be considered and that opened up the possibility that more familiar human vessels could be encountered. Therefore, all relevant information was copied from my central core commander." the envoy answered.

"I don't suppose anyone's considered the possibility that that thing could be a Q-ship have they?" Thomas asked suddenly. The term Q-ship went back to the ancient ocean going navies of Earth when warships were disguised as civilian vessels to combat threats to commercial shipping. The point of this was two-fold. Firstly the element of surprise provided by an apparently unarmed target suddenly opening fire could enable a warship to damage or destroy an attacker before they even released they were under attack, while on the other hand the knowledge that Q-ships were operating in an area could deter attacks on civilian ships by raiders who would not know if they were the hunter or the prey in any encounter.

"Why bother with a Q-ship out here?" Ash asked, "Those things only work on established shipping routes."

"It could still make a nasty mess of a skip if it was." Goldman pointed out.

"I don't think that they spotted us out there captain." Shaw said, "Going in silent should let a marine unit get close enough to board her. Of course sending along a couple of fighters as escort would help as well."

"No, I don't want the ship damaging. We could destroy the very information that we're after." Reeves replied as he picked up the intercom handset and spoke into it, "Major Willis report to the bridge. Willis to the bridge." he said, his voice playing over the *Warspite*'s public address system, "Let's get the opinion of a professional." he added as he put down the intercom handset.

"You asked to see me Captain King?" one of the *Edwin Cane*'s crewmen said when he entered the mining ship's bridge. The man was significantly larger than any of the flight crew and where his sleeves were rolled up his arms could be seen to be covered in tattoos that included military unit badges from his days serving in the military.

"Yes Crewman Crowe. I want you to see this." the captain said, beckoning the crewman towards the console he was stand beside and Crowe made his way along the cramped room, ducking repeatedly to avoid striking his head against the numerous obstacles in his way.

"The Commonwealth ship I take it." Crowe said when he reached Captain King and saw the image of the *Warspite* on the console's displays.

"Yes. Even though you were dismissed from service, you are the only warrior among my crew so I wanted your advice on how to protect ourselves from it." King told him but Crowe just looked towards the ship's helmsman.

"I was just an infantryman. He served with our fleet. He can better advise you on space combat captain." he said.

"Yes and Cooper has told me that we cannot outrun the Commonwealth ship and we cannot withstand even a single hit from one of its lightest turrets. If they decide to destroy us then we will all die very quickly. What I want is some way of keeping control of this ship if the Commonwealth captain decides to try and capture us intact."

Crowe snorted.

"A ship that size will carry at least a company of troops. There are less than twenty of us aboard the *Edwin Cane* and as you pointed out yourself I am the only warrior among a crew of workers."

"We have some weapons." one of the bridge crew pointed out and he looked to where an unmarked locker was mounted to the wall at the rear of the mining ship's bridge.

"Let me see them." Crowe said.

With too little room for King to squeeze past the muscular crewman he instead just took the key to the arms locker from his pocket and handed it to Crowe. The crewman then made his way back along the bridge and used the key to open the locker, revealing the weapons that were inside. As was to be expected on a civilian ship crewed almost entirely by people with no aptitude for personal combat the selection of weapons was extremely limited, there were no automatic weapons, no weapons capable of firing armour piercing ammunition and no grenades. Instead there were just four pistols that were limited to semi-automatic operation and a pair of pump action shotguns. The stock of ammunition for all of these was also limited, with just one box of rounds each for pistols and shotguns. This gave each shotgun ten rounds of ammunition, enough for two loadings of their tubular magazines but did not even provide enough pistol rounds to fully load a single magazine for all four pistols.

"If the Commonwealth sends marines in powered armour then all of these are useless." Crowe said.

"Do you think they would?" King asked but Crowe could only shrug.

"Ask someone from military intelligence whether that class of ship is likely to carry heavy infantry aboard it." he replied, "But if they have only light or enhanced infantry then perhaps we can slow them down long enough for us to escape."

"But what about the Commonwealth ship's weapons?" King reminded him.

"They are soft like you captain." Crowe replied, "They won't fire on us while their own troops are aboard. As soon as we are boarded we should head for the outpost. They can send help. All we need to do is hold this compartment, the main computer and engineering. Since the main computer is right through this door then holding it will also hold here."

King nodded.

"Very well. Distribute the weapons to the crewmen you think should have them." he told Crowe.

"There's one more thing captain." Crowe replied.

"Yes?" King asked.

"All of the crew should suit up."

"Spacesuits? Why?"

"Because the Commonwealth marines might not decide to come in through an air lock. They could use a breaching charge to blow through the hull. If they do that then they'll decompress whatever section of the ship they breach and we'll lose more atmosphere every time they open a hatch. Secondly even if they don't then they're likely to use stun grenades to clear out the ship. Being in spacesuits will help protect against the blast."

"Very well. I'll see to it that spacesuits are distributed to the entire crew. Now take the weapons and do what you can." King ordered.

"How reliable are these plans?" Willis asked as he studied a tablet on which the envoy of Nexus had placed detailed deck plans of a standard Gatherer-class mining ship.

"They are accurate for a standard Gatherer-class vessel Major Willis. Their accuracy compared to the target vessel is unknown." the envoy replied.

"They seem to match the general arrangement from Lieutenant Commander Shaw's reconnaissance sortie." Knight added and Willis shrugged.

"Better than nothing I suppose." he said, "What are my exact orders captain?"

"I want the vessel intact and as many of the crew alive for questioning as possible." Reeves told him.

"And if it comes down to one or the other?" Willis said and Reeves sighed.

"The ship. It does appear to be a civilian vessel but if the crew resist then you may treat them as enemy combatants and are free to use whatever force is needed to take the ship." he answered.

"Short of wrecking it beyond my ability to recover data from its computer or course." Bernard added.

"I thought wrecking things was the default action for marines." Shaw commented and the officers around the console smiled.

"I'll try and persuade my men to leave something behind." Willis said.

"So what are your initial thoughts major?" Reeves asked.

"Two squads ought to be enough if these plans are close to what we're dealing with." Willis said, looking at the tablet again, "One squad will head for the bridge and the other for engineering. Once those are secured each squad will split into fire teams. One from each squad will stay with their objective and the others will secure the rest of the ship."

"So a single skip will be enough to transport the assault team." Knight said.

"Yes. I'd like to perform an EVA from the skip to the target if possible but if we're spotted then we may have to make hard contact with the target." Willis said. The other officers immediately knew what he meant by 'hard contact', he was telling them that if the mining ship attempted to escape then the only way to get the marine strike force aboard would be to ram it with the skip, securing the two ships to one another with magnetic clamps while the marines forced an entry to the mining ship with a shaped charge.

"What entry method will you use?" Bernard asked.

"If we can get there using an EVA then we'll try and override the airlock." Willis replied.

"With breaching charges you could get closer to both your objectives." Mori suggested.

"Yes but who knows what we'll damage doing that?" Willis pointed out, "A breaching charge will be a last resort."

"Do you want fighter support?" Shaw asked but Willis shook his head.

"Thanks for the offer commander but each extra ship we send is one extra that might get spotted. We should be in range of the *Warspite's* X-ray lasers there if we need fire support." he said.

"You did hear what I said about not destroying the entire ship didn't you major?" Reeves commented, knowing that an X-ray laser powerful enough to damage even the largest of warships would demolish a small civilian vessel like the mining ship.

"Last resort only captain. I promise." Willis said.

"Very well major. Prepare your men." Reeves ordered.

The *Warspite* carried two skips, armed shuttles designed to carry boarding parties of marines. Up to a platoon of marines could be carried aboard each one although when filled to capacity the craft would get rather cramped. As well as being equipped with powerful engines and weapons for their own protection, skips were also capable of clamping themselves to a target vessel's hull so that the troops it carried could move from one ship to the other without the need for spacesuits.

On this occasion though the two squads of marines that Willis commanded all wore armoured spacesuits that featured rigid plates not only to cover their heads and torsos but also their limbs. The plates on their arms and legs were not as resilient as their helmets or chest plates, but they would stop low velocity rounds and fragments. Each suit was also equipped with a propulsion pack that used compressed gas to steer the wearer. This method of propulsion was not as powerful as more conventional rocket based propulsion units but it did have the advantage of stealth, producing no thermal signature that could be detected.

Given that the intention was to take the mining ship intact the weapons issued to the marine boarding party had been selected to limit any collateral damage. In place of their standard issue rifles most carried personal defence weapons that fired ten millimetre pistol ammunition from forty round magazines mounted on top of the weapons, while one man from each fire team carried an automatic shotgun instead. In addition to these every man carried several stun grenades strapped to his spacesuit that would produce a bright flash and loud bang that would disorientate any unprotected crew members in the same compartment. There were eighteen marines in the passenger compartment of the skip, two squads of eight enlisted men plus Willis and a junior marine officer to act as his second in command.

"Are the men ready Lieutenant Chandola?" Willis asked the other officer as he sat down.

"Yes sir. Both squads present and correct." Chandola replied and Willis activated the radio built into his spacesuit to put him in contact with the pilot sat in the separate cockpit of the skip.

"Everyone's aboard. You may launch when ready." he said.

"Confirmed Major Willis. Commencing launch procedure now." the pilot responded.

The marines now had to wait while the *Warspite's* forward hangar was decompressed and the external door opened before the skip took off from the deck and gently accelerated out of the cruiser into space. The skip's drives were powerful enough to enable it to fly from the *Warspite* to the mining ship in just a few minutes, but the need to approach the target vessel unnoticed meant that it had to use minimal acceleration for the pilot to get it heading for the mining ship before coasting towards it just as Shaw had done in her fighter previously. Waiting in the skip's passenger compartment Willis heard the voice of the pilot through his radio counting down the time until they would reach the point at which the assault team would be expected to disembark if all went to plan.

"Five minutes." the pilot announced and as soon as he did Willis addressed his men.

"Seal your suits and stand by." he ordered and the marines all lowered their visors, switching from breathing the air inside the skip to that stored in their spacesuits. Once their suits were sealed the marines got to their feet and turned to face the exterior hatch with Willis and Chandola moving to stand beside it.

"Two minutes." the pilot said and there was the sound of the skip's thrusters firing to decelerate the craft as it neared the mining ship. This sound became quieter when Willis began the process of decompressing the passenger compartment, removing the air so that the only path for the sound was through the structure of the skip itself.

"On station." the pilot said finally as the skip came to a halt, "Range to target is one thousand metres dead ahead. No signs of activity."

"Understood. Opening outer hatch now." Willis responded as he reached for the hatch controls. Then when it slid open to reveal nothing but empty space outside he turned to his men, "Go." he ordered.

Moving in pairs, the marines simply stepped out of the hatch into space and then began to pull themselves over the top of the skip from where they could see the mining ship that they were expected to capture. Just as the pilot of the skip had indicated there were no signs of life from the mining ship and it would have been easy to believe that it was a derelict. Pushing away from the skip, the marines began to drift towards the mining ship and it was then that they fired their propulsion packs' thrusters to increase their speed. The marines maintained strict radio silence while they made their way from the skip to the mining ship, each man knowing when he needed to decelerate so that when they landed on the hull of their target they would not produce a loud 'bang' on the inside that would warn the crew of their arrival. It was then that the marines disposed of their propulsion packs, knowing that once they entered the mining ship the bulky devices would be a significant hindrance and then they began to pull themselves across the hull towards the hatch that had been designated as their entry point.

Willis tried the hatch and as expected he found it sealed so he backed away and waved another marine closer. This marine was equipped with an electronic lock pick and he was soon able to override the air lock

so that the marines could enter the ship. There was only enough room inside for six of them at a time and with Willis leading the way the first group pulled themselves into the ship.

"That's it captain." one of the *Edwin Cane's* command crew said, "The air lock has been opened. We're being boarded."

"What about the craft that brought them here? Is it on any of our sensors?" King asked.

"No captain, all we're reading are the rings." the sensor operator responded.

"There has to be a shuttle of some sort out there somewhere. If it's a skip then it could fire on us when we make a break for it, even with their marines aboard. Helm give them three minutes to get aboard and then engage main engines, but whatever you do keep us in the ring as long as possible. We may need the cover from a skip or any fighters that may be lurking out there. As soon as we're out of eclipse warn the outpost that we have been boarded. Use wide band broadcast though, not a tight beam just case the Commonwealth is able to trace it." the captain ordered and then he activated the intercom, "Engineering this is the bridge. The enemy are here. Stand by to repel boarders."

As soon as Willis and his team of marines stepped out of the airlock into the passageway inside the mining ship he signalled to the other marine outside the ship.

"Next six." he said simply, closing the inner door so that the next batch of six marines could open the outer one and enter the airlock. The process of pressurising the air lock had taken less than a minute and it took the same amount of time to decompress it again before the outer door could be opened and the next six marines enter the ship. In the mean time the marines already aboard positioned themselves to cover the passageway that led from the airlock just in case any of the crew came by. Willis stayed by the airlock itself and checked the deck plans he had been provided with, comparing them with the layout of the ship in the immediate area. The first thing that he noticed though, something that occurred to him first when his men entered the airlock and that had not been mentioned on any of the deck plans was that the mining ship had artificial gravity, something that had not existed in its truest form when the Gatherer-class was first introduced. This had allowed the builders of this ship to change the vessel's orientation by ninety degrees, with the decks running along the longest axis of the ship instead of being stacked up so that acceleration would create gravity. However, the lack of doors either side of the passageway before it ended in one that appeared to run the length of the ship suggested that the layout of the compartments could still be the same. When the airlock opened behind him Willis looked around him and saw Chandola leading the next group of marines into the ship.

"The ship has artificial gravity." Chandola said.

"Yes lieutenant. Though the deck plan we've been given might still be reasonably accurate. I'm going to take first squad now and head for the bridge and computer core. As soon as all of second squad are in I want you to take them aft and secure engineering." Willis told him and Chandola nodded his head.

"Yes major." he replied.

"First squad with me." Willis ordered and accompanied by eight other marines he began to advance along the passageway towards the junction at the end. It was as they were about half way there that all of a sudden they felt the mining ship vibrate as its engines were fired.

"We're under way." Chandola exclaimed, recognising the cause of the vibration as acceleration that went otherwise unnoticed thanks to the artificial gravity field.

"Corporal Hill, are you in the airlock?" Willis transmitted, wanting to find out whether the unexpected acceleration had caused the final group of marines to be flung from the hull of the ship before they could get aboard.

"Yes major. We were just able to get inside before the ship started moving. Hepworth was just getting in and we had to grab hold of him but the thrust doesn't seem to be that strong. I'm guessing that the crew are limiting their speed inside the ring." Hill responded.

"Good. Get through the airlock as quickly as you can and then Lieutenant Chandola will lead you to engineering." Willis told the corporal as he began to advance again and when he reached the junction he peered around it to see if there was anyone waiting around the corner. The corridor was lifeless though and Willis checked his tablet again, just to be certain that he was leading his men the right way now that the entire ship appeared twisted, "This way." he told his men, leading them towards the front of the ship. There was a hatch blocking the corridor several metres ahead and Willis positioned himself beside it with his hand on the lever to open it. He then waited while one of his men plucked a stun grenade from his chest and armed it, nodding as soon as the pin was out.

"Ready." the marine said and Willis opened the door just enough for the marine to be able to toss the grenade through into the next compartment before he slammed it shut again and waited for the sound of the explosion.

"Go!" he yelled when he heard the muffled 'boom' and he pulled the door open again so that the marine

squad could rush through with their weapons held ready only to find that the compartment had been empty anyway.

“Crowe was right. They are using grenades to clear their way.” King said when he heard the distant explosion and he nervously glanced down at the pistol he had taken for himself from the arms locker. This had limited the crewmen he had assigned to defend the computer core just outside the bridge to just one pistol and a shotgun but he had liked the idea of leaving the bridge crew without any weapons at all even less. He knew how the weapon worked but as a mundane worker he had no formal combat training, nor did any of the rest of his crew other than the few hints that Crowe had given them. Even the helmsman who had previously served aboard a military vessel had not occupied a position where being taught to use a firearm was required and in any case he was needed to fly the ship. King knew that their only real chance of escape was if reinforcements from the outpost were able to reach the *Edwin Cane* in time, “How long until we clear the shadow of the planet?” he asked, looking around at the helmsman.

“Eighteen minutes until we have line of sight to the outpost captain.” the helmsman told him, “If we could leave the ring then-”

“No, we have to stay in the ring. It's the only protection we have from that skip that's following us.” King interrupted. As soon as the *Edwin Cane* had begun to accelerate the *Warspite's* skip had moved to follow it, enabling the crew of the mining ship to detect it and scan it in enough detail to tell that they were dealing with an armed vessel rather than a mundane shuttle. Now the helmsman was having to fly a course around the larger lumps of ice that made up the ring.

Another dull 'boom' then told the command crew that the Commonwealth marines had just cleared another compartment and the relative loudness of the sound told them that they were getting closer.

The deck plans provided by the envoy of Nexus had been sufficiently accurate so far to guide Willis and his men through the mining ship to the hatch that, if the plans continued to be correct, led to the main computer core and beyond that the ship's bridge. So far every compartment both squads of the marine boarding party had passed through on their way here had been empty and only the use of artificial gravity that would be unnecessary in a robotic vessel and the presence of sleeping quarters and a galley that had seen obvious use recently indicated that the ship carried any crew at all instead of being fully automated. Willis paused when he saw the hatch up ahead and he looked at his men, holding up his tablet.

“This is it.” he said, “According to these plans the main computer is in a compartment right behind that hatch and the bridge is beyond that. If they are planning to defend this ship at all then this is where they'll do it.”

Advancing to the hatch Willis put his hand on the lever and waited while a marine prepared another stun grenade. Meanwhile the rest of the squad raised their personal defence weapons, ready to charge through the hatchway as soon as it was open. However, when Willis tried to move the lever it remained stuck fast and the hatch would not open, “Charge.” he said and as he took a step back from the hatch one of the squad of marines slung his personal defence weapon over his shoulder and began to unravel a thick, flexible length of plastic from a bag on his hip.

The plastic was a pre-packaged explosive charge that had an adhesive surface along one side and the marine cut a length of it that matched the height of the hatch. The explosive inside the plastic was a shaped charge designed to direct its force towards the side coated with the adhesive, enabling it to be used to cut through a toughened surface rapidly and with the minimum of risk to those standing behind it. The marines still backed away from the hatch however, aiming their weapons towards it after the demolition expert from the squad had fitted a detonator and moved out of their line of fire.

“Charge set and armed major.” the marine reported, holding up his detonator.

“Stand to.” Willis said and the marine squad braced themselves for the explosion, “Blow it.”

The sound of the explosion was muffled enough by the spacesuits worn by the marines that they were not stunned by the blast and they watched as the hatch was cut in half. The half of the hatch that was no longer supported by its hinges promptly dropped to the floor, landing with a 'bang' while the other half of the hatch swung open and this was accompanied by the booming of a shotgun blast from the room beyond that struck one of the marines and knocked him backwards.

“Man down!” another marine yelled as the squad opened fire, each man firing several rounds rapidly through the open hatchway.

“Cease fire.” Willis ordered, not wanting to risk damage to the equipment inside the computer room,

“Hartman?” he added and the fallen marine raised a hand clenched into a fist.

“I'm fine.” he responded, gasping for breath, “It hit my chest plate. Nothing got through and my suit seems intact.”

Then there was the sudden sound of a pistol shot as someone inside the computer room fired out at the marines.

“Grenade.” Willis ordered and the marine closest to the now open hatchway tossed a stun grenade through

into the room. This detonated a few seconds later and Willis began to dash forwards, "Go!" As Willis reached the hatchway he saw the crewman armed with a shotgun lean over a control panel and he saw immediately that the man was wearing a spacesuit that would have protected him from the worst effects of the stun grenade. Willis dived for cover just as the shotgun was fired again and the blast fired by the crewman passed over him. Two more shotgun blasts followed almost immediately but these both came from behind Willis as the marine armed with such a weapon returned fire and the crewman's spacesuit visor cracked from the impact of the pellets. The toughened material of the visor remained intact but being hit by the shotgun blasts was enough to make the crewman drop his weapon and bring his hands up instinctively to cover it. Willis took advantage of this to fire three rounds in rapid succession, each of which hit the crewman in his chest where the fabric of his spacesuit offered no protection against projectiles.

Even as the crewman fell dead though the second man appeared from behind another console to fire at the marines, pulling the trigger of his pistol repeatedly until it was empty and the weapon locked open. The crewman then stared at his weapon dumbfounded and not knowing what to do next. Not knowing that he had no more ammunition, the marines outside the hatch used what they thought was the brief moment of hesitation before he reloaded to fire again and there was a brief roar as one of them fired a limited burst from his personal defence weapon that sent the crewman toppling sideways.

The marines then dashed into the computer room, checking every possible hiding place for any other armed crewmen that might be waiting to leap out and ambush them.

"Is anyone hurt?" Willis asked as he got back to his feet.

"No major." the squad leader responded, "Those two amateurs didn't have anything that could get through our armour."

"Where the hell did they get these from anyway?" Willis then said as he bent down to pick up the shotgun from the floor. Like the vast majority of firearms the shotgun had information about its origin and the type of ammunition engraved on it but although the ammunition was a standard type that had been used with shotguns since before the days of space travel, the overall design and name of the maker was not familiar to Willis.

"Beats me major." the squad leader replied while he inspected the markings on the pistol. In the case of this weapon neither the maker's information or the calibre were a type that he was aware of and Willis was equally stumped when the sergeant held the weapon out for him to see.

"Make sure these get bagged. Captain Reeves is going to want to see them." Willis said and then he looked towards the closed hatchway that was the only other exit from the room other than the hatch the marines had entered through, "Okay since this looks like the computer room that must be the bridge." and one of the marine squad moved towards it with his weapon raised, "Walker, wait." Willis ordered and the marine halted.

"You want to blow the door?" the sergeant asked and Willis nodded inside his helmet.

"That will give them less warning that we're coming." he said and the sergeant turned to the squad's demolition expert.

"Do it." he said.

When the shooting outside the bridge stopped King knew that it was only a matter of time before the Commonwealth marines attempted to gain access to the bridge. On Crowe's advice he had made sure that the hatch was jammed shut by having a metal bar wedged against the opening lever. However, he knew that a similar method had been used to jam the door to the computer room and it was clear that it had been insufficient to keep the marines out of there so he drew his pistol and pulled back the slide. Annoyingly he remembered only when he heard a clattering sound that he had already loaded a round into the chamber and pulling back the slide ejected this onto the floor. With so few bullets available to him King got out of his chair and knelt down to try and find the ejected round and it was then that he realised that the other three members of the command crew were all watching him.

"Carry on with your work." he told them, "How long until we can send for help?"

"Ten minutes now captain." the helmsman just had the time to say before there was an explosion and the bridge's hatchway was suddenly cut in half. One half flew inwards and in the narrow confines of the bridge it struck the *Edwin Cane's* communications officer with enough force to crush him against his console.

"Commonwealth marines!" Willis yelled from outside the bridge, "Throw out any weapons you have and give yourselves up"

What happened next did not go anything like King had hoped his defence of the bridge would go. Pointing his pistol toward the now open hatchway he fired a single shot without hesitation, but he did so just as the ship's sensor operator had got out of his chair to see if the communications officer was still alive and King's first bullet hit him in his life support pack. The bullet passed right through this, tumbling as it bounced off the contents and then entered the sensor operator right through his spine. The screaming made King hesitate but the marines in the computer room did not and they returned fire, sending several rapid bursts from personal defence weapons and shotgun blasts into the bridge.

With nowhere to go to King was caught in the open and hit several times before he fell. More bullets flew past him and a number of these hit the back of the chair the helmsman was sat in, passing right through this and killing him almost instantly. A number of the projectiles fired made it as far as the transparent canopy at the front of the bridge but fortunately this was made of toughened material and although they created visible chips on the interior none of them penetrated the canopy and a sudden decompression was avoided.

The injured sensor operator was still screaming as the marines entered the bridge and one of them rushed to make sure that he was not a threat, checking that the man was unarmed before inspecting his injuries.

"Clear." another marine who had run to the front of the bridge, confirming that both the captain and helmsman were dead.

"What about him?" Willis asked the marine checking on the injured sensor operator.

"It looks bad major." the marine replied, "I think there's a lot of bleeding. We need to get him out of his suit."

"Do it. Captain Reeves wants someone to answer questions." Willis told him and then he looked towards the marine at the front of the bridge, "Can you do anything to slow us down?" he asked and the marine studied the console.

"I think so." the marine responded, pulling the dead helmsman from his chair and taking his place. Then as the marine was testing his ability to control the mining ship Willis activated the radio built into his spacesuit.

"Lieutenant Chandola, what is your status?" he asked.

"We're just on our way through the scoop system compartment towards engineering major. No hostile contacts yet." Chandola responded.

"My team has taken the bridge." Willis told him, "I'm going to start searching for any more crew members that might be hiding anywhere else. Be advised that the crew appear to be in spacesuits so stun grenades are going to be limited in their effectiveness. They don't appear to have much in the way of weapons though. We've only encountered two with pistols and one with a shotgun. Don't take any chances though. They might be keeping the more powerful stuff in engineering."

Being the only one of the *Edwin Cane's* crew with the mindset of a soldier, Crowe had taken control of engineering. Initially the chief engineer had objected but he backed down quickly when pressured by Crowe. Like King, Crowe had ordered that both of the hatches leading to engineering be jammed shut to force the Commonwealth boarding party to force their way in and Crowe was making sure that when they did they would find this section of the ship as hard to take control of as possible. Although Crowe had the instincts for combat he lacked the technical knowledge of the mining ship that the other members of the crew now under his command possessed and so he relied on their expertise to help him plan his defence.

Having had significant warning about the threat of being boarded by Commonwealth forces, Crowe had had plenty of time to get the *Edwin Cane's* engineering team to improvise more weapons to assist in their defence. Many of these were just tools such as crowbars or wrenches that when wielded correctly could be used as close combat weapons but there was also a single improvised flamethrower that was fed from a pair of compressed gas cylinders. This weapon was bulky and not very mobile and so combined with the limited ammunition capacity available for it Crowe had taken great care in positioning it. Using flame based weapons of any sort aboard a spacecraft was fraught with danger but in the absence of more practical weapons the crew members under his command would have to make do with whatever they could make in the time available. Meanwhile Crowe himself had made sure to arm himself with the sole shotgun available, reasoning that it was the most effective weapon and as such he should have control of it. In addition to this he had also retrieved the one weapon of his own that he had aboard, a combat knife that he had been able to keep after being dismissed from the military and this was now tucked into his belt. As a final precaution he also made sure that as he positioned himself to be able to cover the hatch into the engineering section he was close enough to the flamethrower crew that consisted of a pair of the ship's workers to be able to tell them when to use their weapon, guessing that left to their own devices the workers would likely just use it as soon as the hatch opened and rapidly exhaust the supply of fuel.

Only one member of the crew in engineering would not be part of the defence, a man known only by the name Julian. All that was known to the rest of the crew about this man was that he had once held a position of responsibility but like most of the other personnel in the system had fallen foul of a superior, only his fall from grace had been much higher than that of most others. Now rather than an intelligent man capable of leading others he was a simple minded fool who was assigned only the most menial of tasks. Even less capable of fighting than the rest of the crew, Crowe had ordered him as far back from the hatch as possible while the others waited for the arrival of the Commonwealth marines.

The first indication that the marines had arrived came when someone attempted to open one of the two hatches by using the normal lever and moments later the same occurred at the second.

"This is it." Crowe called out, "They'll probably blow both at the same time so get ready." and he pointed his shotgun towards one of them while the two engineers armed with pistols took aim at the other.

For a while nothing happened and all the engineering crew could do was wait, but all of a sudden there were

two simultaneous explosions as the marines outside engineering blasted their way through both hatches simultaneously.

Crowe frowned when he heard a pair of pistol shots, knowing that the two pistol armed crew members had just opened fire prematurely and each wasted one of their precious bullets. As expected there was a clattering sound as the marines hurled stun grenades into the engineering section and the crew took cover, trusting in their helmets to protect them from the worst effects of the shock wave. Only Julian was not protected against the grenades but he was considered expendable and none of the crew even looked towards the corner where he sat before the grenades went off in rapid succession.

Crowe had warned the engineering crew that this was the moment the Commonwealth marines would chose to storm the compartment and sure enough as he looked towards the nearest hatch again he saw a man in an armoured spacesuit with Commonwealth markings leap through. Crowe's shotgun boomed as he opened fire. Normally he would aim for the chest of an opponent but in this case he knew that the marine's chest was one of the most heavily protected points on his body and so Crowe aimed lower, hoping to hit the knee joint of his target so that he would instead be painfully incapacitated and left unable to take any further part in the assault. Crowe's aim was good and the marine fell forwards, dropping his weapon as he fell and it skidded across the floor to where the *Edwin Cane's* chief engineer was hiding.

"Grab it!" Crowe yelled but the engineer had already realised that this was the thing to do and he dived out of cover and grabbed the weapon before firing it towards the next marine to come through the hatch. The PDW was set to fire a limited three round burst and it ceased fire after the third shot, two of which hit the marine but failed to penetrate his armour and the chief engineer looked down at it as he wondered why it had stopped working, "Shoot it again." Crowe called out to him at the same time as he fired a second blast from his shotgun towards the hatch. However, his instruction came just a few moments too late and a Commonwealth marine fired a burst back at the chief engineer and he was hit repeatedly.

Crowe now saw that four marines had entered through the hatch including the one he had already shot he was watching and he decided that this was a good enough number to justify using the flame thrower and he slapped the operator on the shoulder.

"Light them up." he ordered and with the muzzle of his improvised weapon already aimed in the right direction the gunner opened the fuel valve to create a jet of burning gas that engulfed the four marines. The armoured spacesuits that the marines wore were flame resistant and because the flame thrower used gas rather than a liquid that could stick to them they did not catch fire. However, the intense heat did force the marines to back away in search of somewhere that the flames could not reach them, dragging them injured comrade along with them.

Using the flamethrower called attention to the existence of the weapon and Chandola, who had entered the compartment through the other hatch turned to face it. So far his team had been shot at only with pistols that had proven ineffective against their armour and he did not want to come under fire from the flamethrower as well.

"Take that thing out!" he snapped, switching his weapon to fully automatic and emptying the PDW's magazine.

Crowe rolled out of the way of the hail of projectiles before coming to a halt and firing his shotgun again. This blast took another marine off his feet but he immediately began to pulled himself back up again. On the other hand the two engineers manning the flamethrower were hit by multiple rounds each and they both fell dead on the spot as bullets continued to impact around them. Crowe fired his shotgun again, letting off two blasts in rapid succession directed at Chandola and the marine officer fell backwards.

"Go!" Chandola then shouted at another marine that stopped to check on him, waving the man onwards as he tried to recover his breath and the marine advanced towards Crowe with his PDW raised.

The marine heading for Crowe was not the only one to be advancing through the engineering compartment, with the exception of the injured marine the rest of the squad were now spreading out and as they came closer to where the *Edwin Cane's* crew were waiting the workers leapt out at them, wielding their improvised weapons and swinging them at the marines. However, apart from Crowe the crew of the *Edwin Cane* lacked the necessary aggression to strike quickly and effectively and almost half were cut down by gunfire from the marines the moment they emerged from their hiding places.

On the other hand Crowe knew when to attack and when to retreat and with a marine obviously heading right for him he dived behind a nearby console and plucked his knife from his belt while abandoning the shotgun. The marine fired his PDW as Crowe moved but the shots passed right by him without any of them hitting him.

Behind the console, out of sight of the marine there was a shallow drop where it was possible to get under the grating on which it was mounted and Crowe continued to roll over the edge of this, enabling him to crawl under the floor while the marine advanced above him oblivious to where he had gone. The marine leapt around the console with his PDW aimed downwards, ready to fire at Crowe had he still been there but with him gone all the marine could do was search for where he might have gone to. Meanwhile Crowe was able

to reach another spot where he could get back up to the level of the console and after checking that none of the *Warspite's* marines were looking in his direction he cautiously and silently crawled back out from under the floor.

The marine gave up searching for Crowe and was about to move on when all of a sudden the sole warrior aboard the *Edwin Cane* leapt on him from behind with his knife in his hand and using his free hand to reach around and grab hold of the marine's personal defence weapon. Despite being taken by surprise the marine turned and tried to pull his weapon free from Crowe's grip but he found himself unable to do so, Crowe being much stronger than he had expected. While the marine was distracted with trying to regain control of his weapon Crowe thrust his knife under his chest plate, pushing the blade up into his heart and killing him instantly. Then at the same time as he pulled his knife free Crowe also ripped the PDW from the marine's dead hands. Crowe dropped into a crouching position as he aimed the weapon and then squeezed the trigger, sending a sustained burst of bullets into another marine. Most of the ten millimetre pistol rounds were deflected by the marine's armour but several struck the gaps where the shaped composite plates could not cover his joints without limiting his movement and he collapsed in a heap.

However, Crowe could see that he was fighting a losing battle for control of the *Edwin Cane's* engineering compartment. All but three of the workers were dead while Justin was still huddled in the corner, ignored for now by the Commonwealth marines because he did not appear to be a threat. Crowe knew that if Justin was captured by the Commonwealth then the same process that had turned him into the person he now was would also mean that he would not be able to offer any resistance when questioned and would undoubtedly tell the Commonwealth everything that he knew. Justin was not party to any highly restricted information that Crowe knew of but he still presented a security risk and so he turned around and took aim at the cowering man, squeezing the trigger of his stolen weapon to fire a short burst at him. Justin's body jerked under each impact before he collapsed and it was only then that Crowe ceased fire.

In turning his back on the Commonwealth marines Crowe made himself vulnerable though and he felt the impact of several rounds on the life support pack on his back. One of these pierced the pack's oxygen cylinder and there was a sudden jet of escaping gas. Although the *Edwin Cane* was still fully pressurised Crowe was now in danger of suffocating inside his suit as the breathable air escaped, leaving him in an airtight suit without fresh oxygen and because his visor was fixed in place he was forced to use valuable seconds releasing the seals on his helmet so that he could remove it. Then the moment that his helmet dropped to the floor by his feet another shot rang out and Crowe was hit in the back of his head and he slumped forwards.

"Major Willis do you read me?" Chandola's voice asked over the radio and Willis came to a halt.

"Loud and clear lieutenant. Go ahead." he responded.

"Engineering is secure major, but we have casualties. The crew obviously had time to prepare for us. Plus one of them seemed to have military training." Chandola told him.

"Did you take any prisoners?" Willis asked.

"Sorry major, none of them even tried to surrender. One odd thing though, there was one crewman who did nothing throughout the battle but he was shot by his own side before we could get to him." Chandola answered.

"Okay lieutenant, keep all your men where they are. Bag the bodies and check them for anything useful. My team will finish the sweep of the ship and then we'll let the *Warspite* know that it's secure."

Ordinarily when the *Warspite's* marine contingent undertook a boarding operation they used cameras mounted on their helmets to keep the cruiser's command crew up to date with the progress of the operation in real time. However, because of the requirement to maintain communications silence there was no such feed for this mission and all the crew could do was wait. Although there was no direct feed from the boarding party, the *Warspite's* sensor crews had been monitoring the mining ship using the ship's passive sensors.

This meant that they had seen the ship begin to accelerate when Willis and his strike force had first entered the ship and then seen it cut its speed shortly after when Willis took the bridge. It was not until Willis eventually made contact that they were able to find out exactly what had happened.

"Captain I've got Major Willis on the line." Goldman announced when his signal was relayed by the skip pilot. "Put him through." Reeves replied as he and Knight both put on headsets to speak with Willis, "Major, is the target secure?" Reeves asked.

"Secure and intact captain." Willis answered after a brief delay caused by the need to relay the signal from the *Warspite* via the skip and then wait for the same to be done in reverse.

"What about the crew?" Knight added.

"All dead I'm afraid. They'd concentrated themselves in the key areas we needed to take and there wasn't the chance to get any to surrender. Most of them didn't seem like they had any real combat experience but we've still got a couple of casualties." Willis said, "Oh there was one odd thing captain. The only member of the crew that acted like a professional soldier decided to kill one of his own people. I'd say that they really didn't want us getting to him."

"Very well major. I'm sending over an engineering team. They'll make sure that the ship is safe and start getting us access to the computer. Then maybe we'll find out what's going on in this system. In the mean time I want you send the bodies of the crew back here so that Doctor Thundercloud can examine them, especially the one killed by his own side. Maybe there's still something about him that we can learn from his body. *Warspite* out." Reeves told Willis.

"Captain Reeves," the envoy of Nexus said, looking up from the central console, "I should accompany your engineering team."

Reeves frowned as he looked at the machine.

"Ambassador I'm responsible for your safety and I would be remiss in my duty if I sent you over there. We don't know enough about that ship to guarantee that it's safe."

"Captain even though I am self aware, you should not think about me in entirely human terms. All my experiences here have already been duplicated aboard my ship and as long as I am able to maintain a link to it then nothing will be lost. This body is merely a construct to house a part of my consciousness, it is not a unique entity." the envoy said.

Reeves and Knight looked at one another.

"Well I don't consider myself as expendable as the ambassador does but I suppose you'll be wanting me to lead this little expedition won't you?" Knight said.

"Yes but don't go taking any chances. If it looks like that ship is unsafe then get everyone out of there right away, including the ambassador no matter how expendable he thinks he is."

An ordinary shuttle was used to transfer Knight and the envoy of Nexus along with an six-strong engineering team led by Bernard to the mining ship. Unlike when Willis and his marines had boarded the ship, the shuttle was able to dock directly with it and Willis was waiting just inside the air lock when they arrived. Willis still wore his armoured spacesuit but with the fighting over he had removed his helmet and this now hung by his side.

"Welcome to the mining ship *Edwin Cane*." Willis said when the air lock door opened.

"You know the name of the ship?" Bernard asked.

"Yes but that's about all commander. We found it stencilled on some of the uniforms. Apart from using the flight controls to stop the ship though, we didn't touch anything before you got here." Willis told him.

"Major Willis, can you direct me to the main computer? Hopefully I will be able to access it easily." the envoy of Nexus said.

"I think I ought to join you ambassador. Commander Bernard should be able to keep an eye on things in engineering." Knight added and Willis nodded.

"Sure. I'll take you there myself." Willis said before looking at another marine that was stood behind him, "You escort Commander Bernard and his team to engineering. Then make sure all these bodies get loaded onto the shuttle. Doctor Thundercloud wants to examine them."

Willis escorted Knight and the envoy of Nexus to the *Edwin Cane's* computer room and the envoy immediately began to inspect each of the consoles.

"Interesting." the envoy said.

"What is?" Knight asked.

"I cannot identify the source of a single component used in the construction of this computer." the envoy responded.

"But how is that possible?" Willis asked, "That would mean that nothing came from the Commonwealth wouldn't it? Even independent colonies use Commonwealth standard components for spacecraft, it's cheaper."

"There are a few that boast of their efforts to rid themselves of that reliance Major Willis." the envoy pointed out, "However, this would appear to be the first example of anyone achieving it."

"So you can't identify where this ship was made?" Knight asked.

"Not for the time being commander, no. However, given time I may be able to determine the point at which the technology of the makers of this vessel diverged from that of the Commonwealth." the envoy answered, "More import for now though is for me to gain access to the main computer and I think that this is the best place to manage that." and the envoy walked over to where there was a small socket built into one of the room's many consoles. Despite the origin of the room's equipment being a mystery to the envoy the socket still appeared to be a standard type and the envoy reached out towards it, extending a probe from its forearm that matched the appearance of the socket.

"So what do you think ambassador?" Knight asked.

"This is interesting. Even the operating system is non-standard. It appears to be a variation on a more common system but as if an earlier version was subject to parallel development." the envoy explained.

"Are you saying you don't know how to work it?" Willis said.

"I can explore the file organisation quite easily. The layout is highly ordered and logical. Understanding how some of the files are intended to be used is a different matter though and make take some time and experimentation."

"Get on with it then." Knight said before remembering that he was not addressing a subordinate, "Err, if you don't mind ambassador." but the envoy did not respond so Knight reached for the radio clipped to his chest.

"Bernard are you in engineering yet?" he transmitted.

"We just got there," Bernard replied, "and if you don't mind me saying this is weird. Nothing here looks like it should. I mean I can tell roughly what stuff is by looking at it but I doubt that anything more than screws would be compatible with anything aboard the *Warspite*."

"That's just what the ambassador just told me about the main computer. Even the operating system isn't standard. He suggested that it was the result of parallel development." Knight told him.

"That figures. Perhaps if we can figure out when the divergence applied we might be able to narrow down who's responsible." Bernard suggested.

"Good idea. See if you can find that out." Knight said before releasing his radio.

"So what do we do now commander?" Willis asked.

"Well since my field of speciality is tachyon physics and so far there have been no indications that this ship is in any way FTL capable I suppose we just wait to see what Commander Bernard and the ambassador can come up with." Knight answered.

Knight and Willis did not have to wait long though, the envoy of Nexus soon finding what it was looking for.

"I have isolated the flight recorder." the machine said without turning around.

"That was quick." Willis commented.

"Are you certain?" Knight added, "If everything's non-standard-

The operating system and hardware are non-standard but the way in which the data held in the files is of the standard format used since the earliest days of human computer technology. Program specific data files are not wholly readable without a clearer understanding of the formatting used but the flight log holds its data as plain text with specific characters used to separate variables that are identifiable by column headings. There are numerous gaps in the log that indicate periods of time when this ship was inactive, presumably while docked at a base within this system. If we take just the most recent section of the data and work backwards then it should be possible to determine where that base is located."

"Can we get that file to the *Warspite*?" Knight asked.

"We can. I have already scanned it for any signs of malicious code but it has come up clean. I recommend that test be repeated before the file is loaded into active memory aboard the *Warspite* though. There could be security precautions in place within the file that are based on the environment in which it is being run." the envoy said and Knight nodded as he reached for his radio again.

"I need a link to the *Warspite*." he told the pilot waiting in the shuttle that had brought him to the mining ship.

"Collister." Edison said as he entered the outpost's technical section and one of the technical staff turned away from the console he had been studying.

"How may I help you colonel?" Collister responded and then he glanced back at the console for a moment, "If

you are concerned about our emission levels then I can assure you that-

"No, I'm sure that your workers have been quite efficient in keeping us hidden from the Commonwealth.

However, I do not want to rely solely on remaining hidden for protection." Edison interrupted.

"Yes, I understand that you ordered our security force to be on alert colonel. My staff have assured me that all of our surface defences and attack craft are prepared for immediate use if the Commonwealth attack us." Collister replied.

"I want another option Engineer Collister. What is the status of the *Silent Knife*?" Edison asked.

"Our sloop is in working order colonel, but the *Silent Knife's* weapon systems are no match for a Commonwealth heavy cruiser, nor is it agile enough to engage a squadron of fighters or drones." Collister said.

"That may be but with no patrols scheduled to visit us for several weeks it is the only FTL capable craft available to us. I don't intend to use it to attack the Commonwealth ship. I intend to use it to escape from them if necessary. I need to know how soon the ship can be ready for launch." Edison told him.

"The ship's engines are currently shut down. If I lend say a dozen of my workers to the crew then we should be able to have the ship ready to take off within five minutes notice in under two hours. But colonel, the *Silent Knife* will hold no more than thirty passengers. We have many times that many people here."

"Yes, I understand that. The *Silent Knife* will carry only a few of us to safety." Edison agreed.

"What about the rest of the crew colonel?" Collister asked.

"That is something else I wanted to discuss with you. The Commonwealth cannot be allowed to capture this facility intact or take any of its crew prisoner. How long will it take to rig our reactors to overload and destroy this outpost?"

Collister paused to think.

"The safety systems will need to be manually disconnected and the alerts bypassed colonel. That will take time and require the use of all of my staff. I won't be able to provide any to help with the preparations aboard the *Silent Knife*." he said eventually and Edison nodded.

"I understand. Have your people concentrate on the reactors. If the *Silent Knife* is not prepared by the time you have finished then send them extra help at that point. Keep me up to date with your progress." he ordered.

"Yes colonel. We will begin immediately." Collister replied.

"A flight log?" Reeves said when Knight told him what had been found and he looked at Thomas at the same time as the navigator looked around at him, "Think you can handle a flight log commander?" he asked.

"Shouldn't be too much of a problem captain. It might take a while to compare the details to the geography of this system though. We've not had much chance to map it yet."

"Just do your best commander." Reeves said before returning to the conversation with Knight, "Send us the file. Thomas will try to backtrack the mining ship's course." he said, "Now how is Commander Bernard doing?"

"It's pretty slow going so far captain. Everything here is just a little bit different to what we're used to. Engines look like engines but they are engines that obviously weren't built in the Commonwealth. The singularity jars used to store the gravitons for use in the artificial gravity system are especially weird. Bernard thinks that they are completely different to anything made in the Commonwealth. That would put the point at which the technology of whoever made this ship diverged from our own some time before the development of true artificial gravity."

"That means during the Genex War at the latest." Goldman pointed out, "How could a society remain unknown to us for more than a hundred years?"

"Maybe they used the war as cover for their departure from the Commonwealth." Ash suggested, "Who'd notice one more ship being destroyed when the Genex were hijacking hundreds of them from us?"

"Every ship taken by the Genex was accounted for within a decade of it ending." Lucas said.

"And they never managed to build any FTL capable ships of their own that someone else could have used." Thomas added.

"How they remained hidden will be dealt with later." Reeves said, "For now we'll concentrate on following the trail of evidence we have available. Commander Thomas please begin backtracking the data from the flight log."

When the bodies of the crew of the *Edwin Cane* arrived aboard the *Warspite* they were taken straight to the ship's infirmary where Doctor Thundercloud was waiting for them. Rather than rush into carrying out a detailed medical examination on the corpses one at a time he instead drew a sample of blood from each corpse so that they could be tested as a batch.

"Do you know which of these is the man who was killed by his own side?" Thundercloud asked the marines who had delivered the bodies to him.

"This one right here doc." one of them replied, patting Justin's nearby corpse and Thundercloud nodded as he turned to a nearby medical orderly.

"In that case leave him out here and put the rest in cold storage for now. I'll start my examination of him while we wait for the results of the blood tests." he said.

"Yes doctor." the orderly replied and while Thundercloud went to fetch his instruments the orderly and the marines began to move the other bodies into the ship's morgue.

The first stage of the examination Thundercloud carried out was a simple visual inspection of the corpse and the moment that its clothing was cut free he made a shocking discovery about the body. At some point in the past the man now lying dead on the examination table had been emasculated, with his reproductive organs removed entirely. There were of course some perfectly innocent reasons why such a procedure might have taken place, though in the Commonwealth the technology existed to grow replacement organs for anyone who lost parts of their body to disease or injury. This suggested that either the man came from a nation where such treatment was not available or that what had been done to him was done for something other than medical need. Given the evidence of such radical surgery having taken place Thundercloud decided that a deeper scan was needed quickly.

"Nurse I want the body scanner bringing on line. I need to see inside this man right now." Thundercloud called out.

"Yes doctor." one of the nursing staff responded and she dashed over to one of the infirmary's scanners while Thundercloud and an orderly lifted the body onto a trolley and wheeled it over to the scanner. There they lifted the body again to get it onto the scanner bed and then stepped back as the scanner's cover lowered itself shut.

"Commence scan nurse." Thundercloud said when the door was sealed, isolating the body inside from all outside influences.

"Scan beginning doctor." the nurse replied and inside the scanner a line of blue light began to move slowly across the body to show the progress of the scan. This began at the dead man's head and worked its way down his body, slowly generating an image on a screen above the scanner.

"Wait, zoom in there." Thundercloud said, pointing to the screen before the scan had even reached the dead man's neck and the nurse magnified the partial image currently available. This image was dominated by the scan taken of the dead man's brain. Being dead there was no electrical activity to be detected and there were no foreign objects detected inside his skull, but it was obvious that his brain was not what would be considered normal for a human being. The scan was able to detect the different density of scar tissue at numerous points inside the man's brain as well as showing up where small holes had been opened up in his skull to allow the surgical instruments to penetrate it. In some places the skull was empty where small parts of the brain had been removed entirely.

"Someone opened up his skull." the nurse said in shock at the damage she could see and Thundercloud nodded.

"Look at where the surgery was targeting as well." he said, "Those are areas of the brain associated with personality and emotion. On the other hand all of the motor control areas have been left untouched."

"Could he have had tumours removed doctor?" the nurse suggested.

"I doubt it. Look, there's a section of scar tissue leading down into the brain where some sort of instrument has penetrated it but there is no damage beyond the end of that. If an internal tumour had been present then I would expect to see damage to the surrounding areas where it pressed against them. This looks to me like someone wanted to make serious changes to the way this man behaved while keeping him physically sound." Thundercloud replied, "Let's see if the scan picks up anything else." and the nurse nodded, restoring the display to its default setting as the scan continued to progress down the corpse.

Thundercloud saw nothing out of the ordinary as the scan moved over the dead man's chest but as it got lower he noticed something else missing from the body

"This man has no appendix either." Thundercloud commented, "Pause the scan again please nurse and show me that area." the nurse nodded and the image now zoomed in on the dead man's abdomen, showing his intestines, "I don't like this." Thundercloud said as he looked at the image and then he turned around to where another nurse was sat by the blood testing station, "Are those test results ready yet?" he called out.

"The first are just coming through now doctor." the nurse replied and Thundercloud hurried across the infirmary to join her.

The blood test was not only able to determine the basic blood type of a person but also check for blood born pathogens and test for DNA and gene structure. As soon as the first results became available Thundercloud scrolled straight to the DNA and genetic test result section, looking for key areas of difference to the baseline for human readings.

"Good God." he said, his eyes widening when he saw the exact results of the test.

"Doctor should I-" the nurse began but Thundercloud ignored her, instead rushing to the nearest intercom and picking up the handset.

"Bridge this is the infirmary. I need to speak to Captain Reeves." he said.

"Reeves here." the captain's voice responded moments later.

"Captain I need you down here in the infirmary immediately. We have a problem. A very big problem." Thundercloud told him.

"Is there a risk of infection from the bodies doctor?" Reeve asked.

"No captain. It's easier if you just come down here. I really think that you need to see this for yourself." Thundercloud said.

"Very well doctor. I'm on my way." Reeves said.

It took just a few minutes for Reeves to make the trip from the bridge to the infirmary but in that time Thundercloud was able to transfer some of the data from the blood tests as well as the body scan to a computer tablet that he was holding when Reeves entered.

"You asked to see me doctor." he said.

"Yes captain, please take a look at this." Thundercloud responded, nodding as he handed the tablet to Reeves.

"What am I looking at?" Reeves said as he looked at the tablet that was currently set to show the body scan of the dead man's abdomen.

"That's what's inside our corpse 's abdomen captain. It shows his intestines quite clearly but what's interesting is what it doesn't show. This man has no appendix." Thundercloud told him.

"A scan of me would show the same doctor. I had mine removed when I was eight." Reeves commented.

"Yes, it's on your records. However, if I were to conduct a scan of you then I'd still be able to find the evidence that the organ was there at one point. The medical profession is very good at removing surface scars but removing them from inside people is considered somewhat extravagant. Yet this man has no appendix and no internal scar tissue. That means he never had one." Thundercloud explained and Reeves stared at him.

"I don't like where this conversation is going doctor. I hope you have some serious evidence for any claims you're about to make." he said and Thundercloud reached out, swiping the tablet display to change the image to the results of the DNA and genetic analysis carried out on the dead man in the scanner.

"The results are conclusive captain." he said, "Our John Doe's genetic structure does not match that of a baseline human. It has been modified and those modifications were carried out prior to conception. He was born this way. He's a Genex. In fact every body brought back off that mining ship is a Genex."

"Doctor that man over there does not look a hundred years old. Nor did Major Willis indicate that his troops faced a crew of geriatrics aboard the mining ship. Check your results again because the last of the Genex died almost a century ago in a nursing home on Sutek. They say he spent his last years looking out of a window and playing chess with anyone that would sit with him for a while."

"I have checked the results captain. It looks like he wasn't the last one after all. To make matters worse I've checked the specific modifications to the genetic structure of the bodies and we don't just have a bunch of workers that managed to survive. The larger man, the one the marines say put up a proper fight was a warrior and the man in the scanner was a leader. If they still exist then I hate to think of the consequences." Thundercloud said.

"Yes, the consequences of having a bunch of paranoid megalomaniacs running around space with an army of super soldiers at their command." Reeves said, "There must be some other explanation doctor. Could someone have recreated the Genex?"

"You mean used the same research into designer babies and super soldiers?"

"Yes, exactly. The genie was let out of the bottle when people starting paying to play God and make so-called perfect babies. Only they weren't as perfect as advertised." Reeves said.

"If we were dealing with just thinkers and warriors then I might be able to agree with that captain. Maybe even the leader. Ordinary people made the thinkers and then the thinkers made the warriors when they felt threatened. All the research on how to edit the human genetic code to achieve those results still exists but we've got workers and a leader here as well. Leaders came about when the thinkers and warriors interbred so they could be possible but for workers you need to add unmodified humans into the mix. The DNA profiles of the workers from the mining ship suggest that two of them were first cousins but none of the others were closely related. That means that someone would have to have created a lot of new Genex in a short space of time without anyone noticing and yet still have them interbreeding with ordinary humans." Thundercloud explained, "There's something more as well captain." he added and Reeves sighed.

"Are you going to tell me that you've found proof of the shape shifting infiltrator caste all the conspiracy nuts talked about when people were wondering whether all the Genex really were dead?" Reeves asked and Thundercloud smiled.

"No captain. Thankfully I'm not going to start spouting anything like that. However, the leader's body shows signs of extreme surgical procedures for which there is no obvious medical need for."

"Such as?" Reeves asked.

"For a start he's been surgically castrated. But more significant is the evidence of multiple brain surgeries. Captain, I seriously doubt that this individual was the sort of monster we used to hearing about Genex leaders being. In fact I expect he could do little more than the most basic of tasks. If we'd been able to take him alive I doubt he would have put up any resistance to being questioned. He'd probably tell us everything he knew as soon as we asked." Thundercloud said.

"That explains why his crew mates shot him." Reeves agreed as he considered what to do next, "Very well doctor I want you to continue your examinations of all the bodies. When you are done I want two sets of tissue samples taken from each of them and prepared to be shipped out. In addition it may be necessary to pack up two of the corpses for shipping as well."

"Shipping?" Thundercloud said, "Captain I'm a doctor not a postman. There are regulations about the handling of corpses and those include Genex ones."

"Doctor the Commonwealth has to be told that the Genex still exist and it currently looks like they have been manipulating us for several years at least, but the *Warspite* can't leave the system until we have found the base that the Genex must have here. If we do then they might be able to evacuate it before we can get back with reinforcements and we'll lose whatever might be inside. That means we need to send messenger drones back to Admiral Kim and Centaur. Now the cargo space aboard a drone is very limited but I still want to be able to send back physical evidence in each of them and that includes sending back bodies for analysis and there should just about be enough room to allow that to be done."

"Very well captain, I'll check with engineering about how much room is available." Thundercloud replied.

"Carry on doctor." Reeves said, handing the tablet back to Thundercloud and then he started to walk towards the exit from the infirmary, pausing when he opened the door just long enough to turn around and add, "I will have to look into whether or not you owe everyone on the ship a round of drinks for blaming the Genex though doctor. I'm not sure if there is an exception clause for being right."

INTERLUDE.

“Thank you for letting me know.” the old man said, nodding as he spoke on the telephone from his lounge at home, “I’m sure it’s nothing but I’ll see to it that we are ready to investigate more closely if this issue continues.” and then he put the telephone down and smiled.

“Good news grandfather?” his granddaughter asked from beside him on the couch.

“The outpost in the Eta Indi system has missed a scheduled check in.” the old man replied, “It could be a technical fault of course. But it could also mean that the commanding officer of the base has decided to impose a communications blackout.”

“As is standard procedure if an unidentified vessel enters the system? A Commonwealth scout ship for example.” his grand daughter suggested.

“Precisely and if one Commonwealth ship managed to follow Lieutenant Commander Martins back to Eta Indi then more will come after them. Our presence in that system is now untenable and that represents another set back to our operations thanks to Commander Hayes and her associates. Even if the Commonwealth does go to war with the Ticik our own government cannot overlook the consequences of a security breach of this magnitude. Whether or not the Commonwealth is able to uncover who we are from what is in that system their gaze will be turned our way and it is only a matter of time no before they find their way to Sanctuary itself.” the old man said.

“So what do we do now?” his granddaughter asked.

“We get ready to strike. Commander Hayes and her associates need to be dealt with by us or we will lose the opportunity we have been waiting for.” the old man answered.

“You don’t think we will be able to find a more suitable candidate?”

“No. It has to be Hayes and it has to be us that is seen to take her down. Thankfully right now all of her associates are here on Sanctuary. That will make dealing with them all so much easier. After that no-one will ask questions when she suddenly vanishes. She will just be another leader that overreached themselves and paid the ultimate price for failure. After that we can move onto the next stage of our plan.”

14.

"So what did Doctor Thundercloud have to say captain?" Goldman asked when Reeves returned to the bridge but he did not reply right away, "Captain are you okay?" Goldman added as several of the bridge crew looked towards him, curious about his silence.

"I'm fine." he replied, "Doctor Thundercloud has uncovered serious information about our opponents though."

"Captain as the *Warspite's* intelligence officer surely I should be informed if-" Lucas began.

"I think everyone needs to be told this lieutenant." Reeves interrupted and he picked up his headset.

Simultaneously with putting this on he set the intercom in front of him to broadcast to the entire ship before he began to speak, "Now hear this, this is the captain." he announced, "I have just consulted with Doctor Thundercloud regarding the bodies of the crewmen brought back from the mining ship our marines boarded. The doctor has performed tests on the bodies that include DNA and genetic profiling. I feel obliged to inform you all that these tests show conclusively that the crew of the mining ship were in fact Genex."

As soon as Reeves said this everyone on the bridge looked up from their consoles and towards him.

"Captain are you serious?" Thomas asked but Reeves ignored him to continue with his announcement.

"This discovery makes it all the more important that we discover exactly what is going on in this system. No formal cease fire or surrender was ever signed by the Genex at the end of the war they launched against the Commonwealth, they instead apparently choosing mass suicide by triggering their stockpile of nuclear weapons before our forces could invade Langley. This means that technically we are still at war and I intend for this vessel to act under those conditions. Obviously we have a duty to warn the Commonwealth of what we have found here but the *Warspite* cannot withdraw. If it does the Genex may once again be able to slip through our fingers and escape. Therefore, evidence of what we have found here will be loaded aboard two courier drones. One of these will send word back to Admiral Kim while the other will return home to Centaur to warn the Commonwealth directly. I am sure that both the admiral and the Commonwealth will seek to reinforce us but it will take almost two weeks for the first reinforcements to reach us and until then we must carry on alone. I have commanded this ship in battle against both human and alien foes and I know that I can count on you all to perform your jobs to the best of your abilities. All I ask now is that you continue to do so. Reeves out." he said before shutting down the intercom.

"The Genex? Really captain?" Goldman said.

"How the hell did they get out here?" Ash added.

"Maybe they always had more colonies that we knew about during the war." Lucas suggested.

"Lieutenant Commander Shaw is calling captain." Goldman said and Reeves nodded.

"Yes commander?" he said as he activated the intercom.

"Captain is what you just said about the Genex true? People are freaking out down here in the hangar." Shaw said.

"I'm afraid so commander. Doctor Thundercloud showed me the evidence. There is no doubt." Reeves told her.

"Holy crap. I mean I've heard all the wacko conspiracy theories but I never believed any of them." Shaw replied.

"Didn't we all? Now will your pilots be ready to fly commander?" Reeves asked.

"Ready and willing captain. I'm sure the same goes for the new guys. We've got a reputation to live up to after all. Everyone knows it was our fighter forces that really ran rings around the Genex at the end of the war. Literally." Shaw answered.

"Very good commander. Carry on." Reeves said and then he shut off the intercom.

"Commander!" Willis exclaimed as he burst into the *Edwin Cane's* engineering section, "Have you heard about the crew of this ship?"

"Only that they are all dead major." Bernard replied without looking away from the open engine access panel he was peering inside.

"They're Genex." Willis said, rushing up to the engineer and Bernard smiled.

"Why thank you very much major. I'll have a double Cognac." he said.

"Well Jim Thundercloud is paying. He's the one that ran the tests." Willis said and Bernard stared at him.

"This isn't a joke?" he said and the rest of the engineering team at work in the room also stopped what they were doing.

"No commander." Willis said, shaking his head, "Word's all over the *Warspite* already and Lieutenant Trent sent word via the skip to me."

Bernard looked around the room.

"That would explain the divergence." he said, "The Genex develop their technology in parallel with us after the war but starting from almost the same point." then he jumped up and down, "Unfortunately they seem to

have developed true artificial gravity as well as faster than light capability. I guess there won't be any reruns of the Gliese two-oh-five." he commented, referring to a space battle that took place during the Genex War when a small Anglo-French Commonwealth force equipped with what was then state of the art artificial gravity technology attacked a much more powerful Genex fleet but was able to destroy it by tricking the Genex admiral into splitting his force to match the divided Commonwealth ships. Once both fleets were divided the Commonwealth commanding officer was able to concentrate his own ships and overwhelm the isolated Genex vessels. Both Reeves and Bernard had had relatives who served in the Anglo-French squadron and they marked the anniversary of the battle each year.

"It also explains why the crew were so inept at defending their own ship. Most of them were just workers without any real aggressive instincts. There was just the one warrior bred for combat." Willis added.

"Does commander Knight know?" Bernard asked.

"I was just up the corridor when I heard. I came straight here." Willis replied and Bernard reached for his radio.

"Commander Knight this is Bernard." he transmitted.

"Knight here. Go ahead."

"How are things going with the computer core?" Bernard said.

"Slowly. The ambassador has found the ship's log files but nearly everything seems to be production figures for the oxygen and hydrogen they were gathering. There are hardly any notes about crew discipline or any mention of star systems other than this one so far." Knight told him.

"Well there could be a good reason for that. The crew were Genex." Bernard said.

"You know the rules Bernard. A round of drinks for the crew." Knight replied.

"Check with the *Warspite*. I'm sure they'll confirm it." Bernard suggested.

"Captain I think I have a point of origin for the mining ship." Thomas announced.

"Show me. On the central console." Reeves responded and he got up from his seat and walked to the central console where Thomas joined him and called up a diagram showing part of the Eta Indi system.

"We're here, around this gas giant captain," Thomas said, pointing to part of the display where symbols appeared to represent both the *Warspite* and the nearby *Edwin Cane*, "and this line shows the course followed by the mining ship during its current flight." and then Thomas added a red line to the display that showed the flight path of the *Edwin Cane*. This terminated in the space around the same gas giant but there was nothing at that point on the map.

"What's there?" Reeves asked.

"Right now nothing but if I add in the orbital motion our sensors have recorded then we get this at the time of the mining ship's launch." Thomas said and at his command the moons orbiting the gas giant began to move backwards, heading back to the point where the *Edwin Cane*'s flight began and when they stopped the red line now terminated at one of the moons.

"The fifth moon." Reeves said and he looked at Goldman, "Lieutenant Commander Goldman, what can you tell me about that moon?" he asked.

"It's a rock." she replied, "Looks quite rich in heavy metal deposits but nothing spectacular. It also has a magnetosphere."

"All of which would help mask the presence of a base of some sort." Thomas pointed out and Reeves nodded, "There's one more thing as well captain ." Thomas added.

"What?" Reeves asked.

"There are four smaller moons orbiting around that moon in turn sir. All of them at exactly the same distance from it and equally spaced out." Thomas told him and Reeves smiled as Thomas called up a small window showing the gas giant's fifth moon and the four much smaller objects circling it.

"Just like the asteroids around the system's sun." he said and Tomas nodded.

"Exactly." he agreed.

"Where is that moon right now?" Reeves asked.

"On the far side of the planet captain. About one hundred and forty degrees out from our current position." Thomas said and Reeves looked at the diagram shown on the console, picturing the current position of the moon where the Genex could have their base in the system.

"Lieutenant Lucas, what sort of weapons could be mounted on those four smaller moons?" he asked.

"You think they're defensive?" Thomas said.

"Yes. They're too close in to be any use for communication, though I wouldn't be surprised if there were more satellites or relay stations disguised as lumps of rock floating around in this system." Reeves answered.

"Each of the four sub moons is approximately six hundred metres across captain." Lucas said.

"Light cruiser sized." Ash commented.

"That's big enough for a big fusion reactor and several heavy gun batteries or hundreds of missiles." Lucas continued.

"Too much for us to go toe to toe with and stand a reasonable chance of success. Even if they are in fixed positions while we're a mobile target." Reeves said before one of the communications officers spoke up. "Captain I've got Commander Knight calling from the mining ship." he said and Reeves picked up a handset. "Go ahead Knight." he said. "Captain what's all this I'm hearing about Genex?" Knight asked. "So word has reached you has it?" Reeves said. "So it is true." Knight responded. "Yes commander, I'm afraid so. Doctor Thundercloud showed me his test results. The crew of that mining ship were all Genex so it looks like they weren't wiped out after all." Reeves said, "However, Thomas appears to have located where the Genex are basing themselves in this system. I want everyone back over here as soon as possible to help plan our assault." Reeves told him. "Understood captain. We're on our way. Knight out." Knight said before the channel went dead. "So we are going to attack?" Goldman asked. "Yes commander, we are." Reeves replied. "And what about the satellite defences captain?" Lucas asked and Reeves looked at her. "I guess I'll just have to pray for another miracle lieutenant." he said.

When Knight returned to the *Warspite* with Bernard, Willis and the envoy of Nexus they all made their way directly to the bridge where Reeves, Thomas, Shaw, Mori and Lucas were gathered around the central console studying all of the information available on the gas giant's fifth moon and its own four moons. "So that's their base?" Knight asked as he joined the other officers by the central console and looked at the image of the moon.

"According to the flight log you recovered from the mining ship it is." Thomas said.

"Do we have any sensor readings that confirm that?" Bernard asked.

"No commander. Like the mining ship the base has been operating in the dark. Zero emissions." Lucas answered.

"The moon is on the far side of the planet right now though." Thomas added, "We don't know what they're up to right now."

"That of course also means they don't know what we're up to and they won't be aware that we've captured their mining ship." Reeves said.

"Sounds like you're planning on using that to get us into their base." Willis said and Lucas nodded.

"There are four smaller moons orbiting the Genex base that look like they could be defence stations." she said, pointing out each of the four small moons, "We don't know what they are capable of but they are big enough to mount significant firepower."

"The problem is that we also have no idea about what is inside the Genex base." Reeves continued, "It could be little more than a refuelling base with a minimal staff but it could also be manned by an entire division of Genex warriors."

"Well that mining ship isn't an assault ship captain." Willis said, "I can probably get my entire company aboard it but rapid deployment is going to be impossible. Taking off again is also going to be an issue if we have to retreat under fire."

"The plan we have so far will allow the *Warspite* to provide cover for any withdrawal." Reeves said, "We're going to time our attack so that we come over the planetary horizon when only two of the defence stations can fire directly at us and we'll attack them using the main guns."

"Captain might I recommend a multi-directional attack?" the envoy of Nexus said and Mori looked at the machine.

"Our fighters don't have the level of firepower we're likely to need to attack those defence bases." he said, "If they have any point defences, which seems highly likely then they'll cut us to pieces."

"Actually I was suggesting a missile strike that takes advantage of the planet we are orbiting." the envoy replied.

"We've done something like that before using combat drones to target the missiles but we'll need ours to defend the *Warspite* and courier drones aren't equipped to serve as guidance relays." Reeves said.

"They do not need to captain." the envoy replied, "Supposing you launched two volleys of missiles from a point behind the gas giant we are orbiting that is directly opposite the target moon. These volleys would be fired into orbits that take them over the planet's poles on ballistic flight paths while the *Warspite* moves around the planet under power. If timed correctly the *Warspite* will reach the other side of the planet as the missiles are also coming over the planetary horizon and because they will not be under power they may not be detected by the Genex sensors."

"I get it. Then we power up the missiles and send them updated targeting information directly." Bernard said, smiling and nodding, "Captain, that could work. Especially if we can keep the Genex occupied and so focused on us that they won't be able to react if we light up the missiles at the last moment."

"But how many missiles?" Thomas asked.

"Forty." Reeves said without hesitating.

"Half our conventional complement captain?" Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Yes. We don't know the exact composition of those moons so I want to be sure." he said.

"Ten missiles each will split those moons wide open." Shaw commented.

"That primary moon is less than five hundred kilometres across." Willis commented, reading the moon's size off the console display, "We've got enough nukes aboard to split that in half as well and save us the trouble of raiding the base."

"No, if we do that then we'll probably lose all of the intelligence that the base houses." Reeves pointed out, "I doubt this is the only Genex settlement in existence and the information on where the others are is likely down there on that moon."

"Plus fleet command probably won't be too happy about you using nuclear weapons for the third time in as many years." Knight commented and the officers gathered around the table smiled.

"Major Willis your orders are to take your marines in the captured mining ship and land them on that moon. If you can get right into the Genex base then so much the better but be prepared to have to cross the lunar surface and force an entry. The *Warspite* will provide what fire support we can with our gauss cannons. We can't take the risk that you'll only be facing poorly armed workers again so you may equip your men with as much firepower as they can carry. I don't want you facing off against heavy infantry with nothing more than shotguns and PDWs." Reeves continued, "Leave two squads aboard the *Warspite*. If you need evacuating then we'll send them down in your dropships to cover your retreat."

"Captain I think I should go in with the marines." Lucas said suddenly and Reeves, Knight and Willis all stared at the short statured woman, "If we want to gather intelligence then I should be there to collect it in person. If the base turns out to be too heavily defended for our marines to secure then this is going to be just a hit and run raid and there won't be time for me to go in later."

"What do you think Major Willis?" Reeves asked.

"We've done it before. She came with us to that Sissusk colony a couple of years back and she handled herself pretty well. I can detail a fire team to keep an eye on her." Willis replied.

"In that case I'm approving your request to join the assault force Lieutenant Lucas."

"What about our attack craft wing captain?" Shaw asked.

"How have you organised your ships?" Reeves asked.

"Three squadrons." Shaw replied, "I'm commanding our own ten remaining fighters. I've put that bitch O'Neil in charge of the seven fighters we inherited from the *Jericho* and a lieutenant called James is commanding the eight interceptors."

"Adding in our attack drones and that gives us just over three dozen attack craft in four squadrons." Knight commented.

"The Genex base might be protected by attack craft of its own. We'll keep our ships close for protection until we find out. If the Genex don't have any of their own then our ships can provide close support for the marines and try to pick off weapon emplacements on the moon itself." Reeves said. Then he looked towards the gunnery stations, "Do we still have firing solutions for the asteroids in close orbit of the system's star?" he asked.

"Yes captain. We can fire whenever you want but we're six and a half light minutes out so it will take about eight and a half hours for the missiles to reach their targets." one of the gunners responded.

"That will have to do. When we commence our attack I want a further eight missiles firing at those asteroids. Two per target." Reeves said.

"That limits us to thirty-two missiles for attacking the moon itself captain." Knight pointed out.

"I know but a moon isn't going anywhere and there are no signs of warships in the system. Our gauss cannons should be adequate for space to surface bombardment." Reeves replied and then he looked around the console at the gathered officers, "So does anyone have any questions what they're doing?" he asked but the only response was a few shaken heads, "Good. In that case let's get on with this. Major Willis prepare your men. Lieutenant Lucas you better get suited up and draw a weapon as well. Lieutenant Commander Shaw I want your fighter wing ready to launch as soon as possible."

The mission adaptive module that housed almost a hundred FTL capable courier drones provided direct access to the drones so that they could be inspected and if necessary repaired but this space was limited and carrying self contained refrigeration units large enough to hold a human body was difficult, needing the units to be turned carefully to avoid them getting stuck on the walkways. Given the weight of these, they were each carried by a pair of the *Warspite's* robots while Bernard and Thundercloud looked on. The cargo compartments of the drones were large enough to hold the refrigeration units with room to spare though and once they had been inserted Bernard stepped forwards to connect the drone's superior power supply to the refrigeration unit to take the place of its batteries.

"How long will these take to reach their destinations?" Thundercloud asked.

"Err, you'll have to check with Thomas about exact distances to Epsilon and Gamma Pavonis but it should be about six days to Epsilon Pavonis and a week to Gamma Pavonis." Bernard replied, "Why?"

"Oh I was just wondering how long it would be before everything goes crazy across the Commonwealth because an enemy we thought we'd beaten a hundred years ago has been running rings around us an infiltrating our governments all this time. How long before the first mob kills someone they falsely accuse of being a Genex?" Thundercloud said.

"This isn't your fault James." Bernard said, placing a hand on Thundercloud's shoulder, "If you want to blame someone then blame those idiots who decided to ignore the laws on genetically modifying embryos for non-medical purposes hundreds of years ago just so their kids could be smarter and well behaved."

"Yes and look how they turned out." Thundercloud commented, "But that's not what's bothering me. I'm just worried that people are going to start paying attention to all of the conspiracy theories about the Genex that there have been since the war supposedly ended."

"You mean about them creating a caste of shape shifters to sabotage the Commonwealth?" Bernard asked and Thundercloud nodded.

"They did manage to infiltrate the Canadian government after all." he said.

"Yes but they did that via companies on Verne and the Verne collaborated with them before and during the war. They didn't need any shape shifters to do that." Bernard pointed out.

"Okay so maybe that's not a good example. But for a hundred years even the claim that the Genex still existed was a conspiracy theory and now we know that they do. So how many more of the conspiracy theories are real?" Thundercloud said.

"That's something for national security agencies to worry about." Bernard replied, "Now these freezers are both hooked up and these drones are ready to go. Are you happy that the bodies will survive the trip?"

"Yes, the temperature profiles look stable. Just as long as these drones get to where they are going as quickly as you've said Admiral Kim should be thawing out a dead Genex in under a week."

"Good. Then let's go tell the captain that we can start the attack."

At the same time as Bernard and Thundercloud were preparing the *Warspite's* courier drones for launch Willis was transferring the bulk of his marine company to the *Edwin Cane*. The marines still wore armoured spacesuits just in case they had to cross the moon's surface to gain access to the Genex base but this time they were much more heavily armed. Every marine was equipped with at least a rifle and several grenades of various types. Willis and his men had also plundered the *Warspite's* armouries for as many support weapons as they could find and every squad of troops included at least one machine gun and a grenade launcher that could be mounted beneath the barrel of a rifle. In addition to these weapons issued at the squad level the four platoons that made up the company could also call upon heavy machine guns, shoulder fired missile launchers and man portable anti-vehicle lasers. For fighting against light infantry such as themselves, these powerful weapons could have been considered excessive but if the Genex did have units equipped with powered armour to protect their base then the Commonwealth marines would need the extra firepower they offered.

Fitting almost a hundred and twenty fully equipped marines aboard a ship designed for a crew of less than twenty was not easy though and every available bit of space was used to either store some piece of equipment or provide a marine with somewhere to sit down while the *Edwin Cane* made its way around the gas giant to the moon where the Genex base was located. This made it difficult for Willis to make his way through the ship to the bridge after he had completed his inspection of the marines aboard the ship and he had to pause frequently while one or more of them got out of his way. When he finally got to his destination he found two people already in the compartment, neither of them marines. The first of these was Lucas who sat at the *Edwin Cane's* communications panel while one of the *Warspite's* helmsmen sat in the pilot's seat at the very front. There were several marine pilots aboard the *Warspite* but their area of expertise was flying much smaller craft such as skips and dropships. Therefore, a fleet pilot had been assigned to fly the *Edwin Cane* instead. Despite neither being infantrymen like Willis and his marines both Lucas and the helmsman wore armoured spacesuits as well and they each had a standard bullpup assault rifle secured close by their seats.

"How does it look out there major?" Lucas asked and Willis smiled at her.

"I think it's what the inside of an actual can of whupass looks like." he said, "How are things set in here?"

"Well I've managed to adjust the communications to match the frequencies the *Warspite* uses just in case we need to radio for help and I believe that Lieutenant Gregory has figured out how to make us go." Lucas said.

"Is that so lieutenant?" Willis asked as he walked past Lucas and headed for the seat immediately behind the helm station.

"Yes major." Gregory replied, "I doubt this ship has the same level of thrust as the *Warspite* but she'll fly in the same way."

"Probably best not to run her at full power anyway." Willis commented as he sat down and then he glanced over his shoulder at Lucas, "How much do we know about approaching the base?" he asked.

"Next to nothing." she admitted, "The ambassador from Nexus didn't get as far as studying communication logs for any codewords we're supposed to send. Not that they'd accept a transmission from me anyway. All the crew were male so I'd be obvious as a fake. Instead we're hoping that the base will just open up its doors and let us in so that they can maintain radio silence."

"And if they don't then we'll find out how easy this thing is to set down on rough ground." Gregory added.

"*Edwin Cane* this is *Warspite*. What is your status?" Goldman's voice asked over the communication system and Lucas looked at Willis.

"Tell them we're all set." he told her and she activated the mining ship's transmitter.

"*Warspite* this is the *Edwin Cane*. We are ready to depart." Lucas responded.

"*Edwin Cane* this is Captain Reeves," Reeves' voice announced, "good hunting. *Warspite* out." and then the channel went dead.

"Okay that's it. Helm take us out." Willis ordered.

"Major we should limit our speed." Lucas suggested, "Make it look like we're trying to stay hidden from the *Warspite*." and Willis nodded.

"What she said." he told Gregory and then as the helmsman fired the mining ship's engines he looked at Lucas again and added, "I suppose they teach you that on the command officer course do they?"

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"The *Edwin Cane* is underway captain." Goldman announced as the mining ship moved off, still remaining with the gas giant's rings.

"Weapons are the firing solutions for the missiles calculated?" Reeves asked.

"Yes captain. The missiles will manoeuvre into low orbit and then shut down until we reactivate them." one of the gunners answered.

"In that case fire missiles one through forty." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain. Missiles away." the gunner responded and from the launching tubes set into the *Warspite's* dorsal hull forty of the cruiser's heavy missiles emerged. Moments after launch the missiles' main engines fired. Half of the missiles continued heading upwards relative to the *Warspite's* orientation, steering closer to the gas giant and entering orbit before their engines shut down once again and they began to drift using the planet's gravitational pull to carry them over its pole. Meanwhile the other twenty missiles turned to face in the opposite direction before accelerating downwards past the *Warspite* once more. Then they too manoeuvred themselves into a polar orbit only heading for the other pole compared to the first set of missiles.

"All missiles now in polar orbits captain. Twenty north, twenty south." the gunner announced.

"Commander Ash please reverse our heading and take us around the planet in the opposite direction to the *Edwin Cane*. Lieutenant Commander Goldman instruct the hangars to launch all fighters. Deploy attack drones as well. Diamond formation centred on us." Reeves ordered.

"Course laid in captain. Engines firing." Ash responded as he spun the *Warspite* before firing the cruiser's main engines while at the same time Goldman relayed the captain's order to launch all of the fighters currently aboard the *Warspite*.

With the *Warspite* carrying far more attack craft than it was intended to, not all of them could be launched through the cruiser's two forward facing launch tubes and instead these were reserved for the *Warspite's* own ten remaining fighters. Meanwhile the other superiority fighters taken on from the *Jericho* flew straight out of the aft hangar bay while the lighter single seat interceptors launched from the forward hangar instead. Each group of attack craft organised themselves into separate formations before the two squadrons of superiority fighters took up positions off the *Warspite's* wings and the interceptors beneath the cruiser. At the same time the twelve combat drones in the *Warspite's* dorsal launcher burst out and were directed to take up a position above the cruiser's rear hull where they would not obstruct the missile launchers positioned further forwards.

"How long until we have the Genex base in sight?" Knight asked.

"It should be coming over the horizon in about three hours at our current speed." Thomas answered, "About half an hour behind our marines."

"The missiles should also clear the planetary horizon ahead of us by about ten minutes commander." the gunner who had launched the missiles added, "The one heading over the north pole will be slightly ahead of those to the south."

"Keep our sensors in passive only modes." Reeves ordered, "I don't want any reflections from active sensors giving away our own missiles. Make sure our fighters know to do that as well. We'll switch to active scanning only after our missiles have ignited their engines again. Weapons I want all guns ready to fire as soon as we have a line of sight to a target. This attack depends on taking the Genex by surprise and I don't want to waste one moment of that."

Colonel Edison took another sip of the coffee he was using to help him stay awake. As long as the *Warspite* remained in the Eta Indi system his outpost at risk of discovery and he did not want to have to answer for any failures that might happen while he was not available to take personal command. Thankfully his subordinates also held this opinion and not one of them wanted to provide any of their peers with the opportunity to blame them for any mistakes. Therefore, whenever Edison wanted up to date information he could count on them to have it ready for him.

"Colonel Edison please report to command centre." a voice announced over the public address system and Edison frowned.

"Damn it." he muttered. Had the coffee been colder he might have chanced gulping it all down but it was still hot and so he just placed the cup on top of the dispensing machine and hurried to the command centre.

"What is it?" he asked, immediately seeing Crawford and a second officer called North both standing together in the middle of the command centre.

"We've picked up an approaching ship colonel." North said, pointing to one of the command centre's larger monitors.

"The Commonwealth cruiser?" Edison said.

"It looks like the *Edwin Cane*." Crawford answered, "She's staying in the rings and keeping her power output low."

"Maybe she saw the Commonwealth cruiser and managed to sneak away." North suggested.

"So why drag me in here?" Edison said.

"We wanted to know what you wanted us to do. Shall we challenge the ship?" Crawford asked and Edison immediately saw what the two officers were up to. Neither of them wanted to be the one to allow a ship that had not been positively identified through the defence perimeter but nor did either of them want to take responsibility for breaking the communications silence that Edison had ordered and risking exposing the outpost's location to the Commonwealth warship still in the system.

"Send a message using the laser transmitter. Tell them that we are still operating in the dark to avoid detection and that they are to dock using visual guide only. Then make sure that the hangar is opened for them. What's their ETA?"

"Most likely between one and two hours depending on what acceleration they use." Crawford answered after double checking the information on a nearby console.

"And are there any signs of that Commonwealth cruiser yet?" Edison said.

"Nothing yet sir. If the behaviour of the *Edwin Cane* is anything to go by then it's quite possible that it is somewhere on the far side of the planet we are orbiting." North replied.

"We could launch a drone." Crawford suggested, "Program it to orbit the planet once and record everything it finds."

"And if the Commonwealth spot it then they'll shoot it down and they'll know we're around while we won't have gained any useful information." North added and Crawford glared at him angrily for exposing the flaws in his idea.

"I want our drones holding back to defend us just in case we do come under attack anyway." Edison said, "As soon as the *Edwin Cane* arrives then I want its captain in here to tell us everything he saw. If he did spot that cruiser then maybe we'll be able to get more information about it. Now let me know when the *Edwin Cane* is ten minutes out. Until then I need some rest." and then, without waiting for a reply from either of his subordinates Edison turned around and walked out of the command centre.

"Target sighted major." Gregory announced when the moon on which the Genex outpost was constructed came into view and Willis instinctively turned his chair to face forwards so that he could look out through the bridge's viewport and try to catch a glimpse of it. However, at this distance to the naked eye the moon was little more than a tiny blob that was barely noticeable against the star field behind it while the four smaller moons that orbited it in turn were still invisible.

"You need to use your console." Lucas told him, smiling.

"Okay, we can't all be fancy fleet officers." he replied as he turned back to his console and stared at the controls and frowned, "Now how do I do that?" he asked.

"Let me." Lucas said, getting out of her seat and walking over to where Willis sat and she leant past him to bring up an image of the moon, "There it is." she added.

"Doesn't look like much." he said. The fifth moon of the gas giant was less than twenty kilometres across, meaning that it did not have enough mass to force it into a spherical shape and instead it was more of a flat, tapering ovoid locked into a synchronous orbit around its parent planet so that it constantly appeared to be pointing away from it.

"No. Whatever's down there is well hidden. It's a shame we don't have an ADEL system on this ship. If we could put a laser on the target and use it to listen in on any audio activity that would confirm whether or not the moon was being used as a base." Lucas said in agreement and using the acronym for audio detection by laser, a system that monitored the disruption caused to a focused low power laser by the vibration of whatever object it was aimed at. This provided a means by which sound could be detected even across the vacuum of space. Then Lucas noticed a light flashing on her own console, "Looks like they're signalling us." she said and she rushed back to her seat.

"Just remember to let me do any talking." Willis reminded her and Lucas nodded as she sat down.

"It's a comm laser signal." she said, "Putting it on speaking."

"Edwin Cane this is Eta Indi control." a calm sounding voice said, "Be advised that we are still operating under blackout conditions. You are to approach and land using visual instruction only. Do not attempt to make contact. Do not break radio silence and do not engage active sensors. Upon arrival Colonel Edison wants to see your commanding officer immediately. End of message. Control out."

Lucas looked at Willis and smiled.

"Looks like they're welcoming us in." she said and then she turned to Gregory, "Lieutenant Gregory can you see any indication of where we're supposed to go now?" she asked.

"Not yet." he answered, "My guess is that we will have to be right on top of the moon before we see anything and that could be a problem."

"How so?" Willis said.

"Well if I can't see the enemy base then I can't fly towards it and if we fly in the wrong direction it could give the game away that I'm not the real pilot of this ship." Gregory explained.

"I might be able to get us a fix on where that laser came from." Lucas said, "Hopefully the hangar we're supposed to be heading for won't be too far away from that." then after checking the instruments in front of her she added, "Okay try this. Bring the nose up two degrees and steer port point six degrees. That will aim us straight for their beam emitter. Then just look out for whatever these visual instructions they told us about are."

"Got it, steering two by point six. Maintaining current speed." Gregory said.

"How long until we get there?" Willis asked.

"Err, if I do a three-gee deceleration before we dock then I can get us there in just over an hour. That seems to be about the limit for this ship's engines under the load we're carrying now." Gregory answered.

"If the *Warspite* is moving on schedule then it will be in sight before that. The same with our missiles." Lucas added.

"Then let's just hope that they shoot straight enough that we don't get caught in the crossfire." Willis said.

"Target dead ahead now captain." Goldman announced as the *Warspite* came around the planetary horizon with its escort of attack craft still arranged around it so that they formed a wall in space with the heavy cruiser at its centre.

"What about our marines and missiles?" Knight asked.

"I'm reading the ship carrying our marines on the far side of the enemy base but I can't pick up our missiles. There's no debris to suggest that they've been shot down so they are probably still just too cold to pick up." Goldman replied.

"Weapons update our firing solutions for those defensive moons and send the data to our missiles. All other weapons fire when targets present themselves." Reeves ordered.

"Firing solutions updated captain. Transferring targeting data now." one of the gunners announced.

"I've got thermal flares. Twenty above and twenty below." the sensor operator responsible for monitoring the *Warspite's* thermal detectors said as the orbiting missiles received their new instructions and their main engines ignited, propelling them towards the four small moons orbiting the fifth moon of the gas giant.

"Those are our missiles." Knight said.

"Weapons launch missiles targeted at the asteroids in near orbit around the star. Sensors, engage full active sensors. I want to know exactly what we're facing. Lieutenant Commander Goldman, please launch our courier drones." Reeves ordered and another cluster of missiles burst out of their dorsal launchers and angled themselves towards the star at the heart of the Eta Indi system, accelerating rapidly towards it. These were followed by the two drones that had had the Genex tissue samples and bodies loaded into them flying from the remaining missiles adaptive module. These turned to leave the system and moments later they vanished as they accelerated to faster than light speed and sped off with their vital cargo to alert the Commonwealth to what was happening in the Eta Indi system.

"Captain we've got one of the smaller moons right in front of us." Ash called out, "In range of the main guns."

"Fire main guns. No specific target necessary. Just see what happens when we hit it." Reeves ordered.

Immediately the *Warspite's* two neutral particle beam cannons fired at the small moon and the surface glowed where it was hit as the beams bored their way down into it. This was followed moments later by a flash and an expanding orange glow as the fuel stored in a battery of missiles within the moon was hit and ignited.

Edison cursed his bad luck as he ran from his quarters to the command centre. With the *Edwin Cane* still more than ten minutes out he had taken the risk of getting some rest and now it had caused him to be absent from the command centre when the Commonwealth cruiser revealed itself again. To make matters worse before he could get there alarms began to sound across the outpost that indicated that they were under attack.

"What's going on?" he demanded as he rushed into the command centre.

"The Commonwealth is attacking. We've got missiles closing from two directions and Defence Post Charlie has been hit by a directed energy weapon." Crawford replied, "We've also detected missile launches that appear to be aimed at our communication satellites. From their rate of acceleration and flight path I don't think that there's anything we can do about them. Our lighter missiles can accelerate faster but they don't have enough fuel to be able to reach them before running out."

"And what about us?" Edison asked.

"I've ordered all weapons armed but we haven't been able to get a lock yet." North answered.

"We're also picking up attack craft. More than an Essex-class should be able to carry normally but far fewer than if it was fitted with a hangar module. Colonel we should consider the possibility that there is another

Commonwealth ship in the system that we haven't seen yet, possibly a heavy picket. That would explain the additional attack craft." Crawford added.

"Then where is it now? If the Commonwealth had two ships here then the second one would be right there with their cruiser where it could protect a picket." Edison pointed out.

"Colonel there were also two tachyon signatures that were probably drones leaving the system." North said, smiling at the rapid dismissal of Crawford's explanation of why they were detecting an abnormal number of attack craft accompanying the *Warspite*.

"They're alerting the Commonwealth." Edison said, "Comms, I want command alerted to our situation immediately. Maybe there's a patrol close enough to help if they do bring in reinforcements. Go to active scanning and for damnation's sake someone shoot back at that cruiser!"

Despite the damage already done to the moon designated as Defence Post Charlie, it still had a number of missile silos beneath its surface that were intact and four large missiles burst out of these towards the *Warspite*. Responding to the launch of these weapons the *Warspite's* turrets began to track their approach while Ash adjusted the cruiser's heading to line up the main guns on the newly revealed silos before they fired again and there was another explosion.

It was then that a barrage of fire erupted from three of the four of the smaller moons as the defensive turrets mounted on their surfaces opened fire at the incoming missiles. The only exception was Defence Post Charlie, its targeting system having been damaged by the initial particle beam attacks and now its automated turrets could not co-ordinate with one another properly and this allowed the missiles heading for the moon to slam into it unopposed. Each missile exploded on impact with the moon and created a large crater in its surface. There were several large secondary blasts following the second impact and as these continued the third missile struck the moon. The combination of the subsurface explosions and the impact of yet another heavy missile was too much for the small moon to bear and the entire thing shattered. There were still seven missiles heading towards this moon and the cloud of debris thrown outwards in all directions created a barrier that three of them flew right into before exploding without causing any further damage. However, the remaining four missiles had their targeting data updated in sufficient time that they were able to turn away and move closer the moon where the Genex outpost was located. There were more defensive turrets on the surface of this moon and they opened fire at the approaching missiles, shooting down another of them but the last three missiles were able to make use of the moon's gravity to slingshot themselves around it and then each of them turned towards a different one of the three other small moons and the defence posts built into them.

The missiles heading for each of these moons came under fire from their defensive batteries as soon as they came within effective firing range. The moons were defended by more than a dozen light beam turrets each and these fired repeatedly at the oncoming missiles. However, the missiles were designed to evade enemy fire by varying their acceleration during the final stage of flight to confuse tracking software and so although many of the missiles were shot down some of them inevitably got through and struck their targets. The first missile to strike a defended moon buried itself in the surface without exploding. This had been too close to another missile that had been hit and destroyed and the shrapnel produced had in turn damaged its warhead. It was only when a second missile hit the moon, striking close by that the first also exploded and the combined blast ripped away half of the small moon to reveal the large fusion reactor at its heart.

The third moon was the only one of the four to escape without being struck by any of the missiles aimed at it. The defensive batteries intercepted all but two of the initial waves of missiles and both of these were caught up in the destruction of the others, sending them wildly out of control so that one slammed into an empty part of the gas giant's moon and exploded without causing any damage to the outpost and the second spiralled off towards the gas giant itself before eventually being swallowed up by the massive planet. Only the missile that had been diverted after the destruction of Defence Post Charlie came close to hitting the third moon by skimming around the gas giant's moon close enough that it almost evaded the third moon's defence batteries before one of them was able to turn fast enough to target the missile and a single blast struck it head on, detonating the warhead well out of range of the moon.

The fourth of the small moons where the outpost's defences were concentrated did not fare anywhere near as well as the third. Its targeting system became confused after the destruction of the first missile heading towards it and the small cloud of debris was enough to prevent it from tracking any of the other four missiles that had passed over the gas giant's northern pole before all of them crashed into the moon and exploded in rapid succession. This fragmented one half of the moon before the missile that had just circled around the gas giant's moon struck the now exposed sub surface systems and the plasma at the core of the fusion reactor lost containment and was released in a giant ball of light that vaporised what remained of the moon entirely.

While the *Warspite's* missile attack was taking a toll on the Genex defence system the four missiles launched from Defence Post Charlie prior to its destruction continued to speed towards the cruiser. These missiles

were larger than the weapons carried by the *Warspite*, in part this was to give them bigger warheads but it also allowed them to carry their own countermeasures that they deployed when the Commonwealth cruiser began to fire at them with its turrets. The first blast that came from one of the dorsally mounted X-ray lasers hit a missile before the countermeasures could be deployed and it exploded far short of the *Warspite* but immediately after the three remaining missiles ejected clouds of chaff and flares to try and confuse the cruiser's targeting system.

"Captain we still have three incoming missiles." Goldman said.

"Helm steer hard to starboard. Force the missiles to turn. That should get rid of their countermeasures." Reeves ordered.

"Turning hard starboard." Ash repeated as he fired the *Warspite's* engines to make the course correction. With the countermeasures released by the Genex missiles moving unpowered along ballistic paths they continued to head in the same direction while the three missiles themselves fired their own manoeuvring engines to maintain their course towards the *Warspite* and as soon as they emerged from the clouds of chaff and flares they became vulnerable once more.

"All turrets fire." Knight ordered when he saw the first of the missiles suddenly show up clearly.

The three missiles had each targeted the *Warspite* in a slightly different way. One of them locked onto the cruiser's main drives, being guided in by the heat being emitted by them. The second simply aimed itself for the centre of the cruiser's sensor profile and the third aimed for the prow where the forward hangar and launch tubes were located. The first two missiles were both hit by the *Warspite's* defensive fire. One of them exploded when its warhead was hit directly while the second broke in half and the two pieces tumbled away from one another. The final missile was the only one to hit the *Warspite*, hitting the side of the forward section where the muzzle of one of the cruiser's twin neutral beam cannons was located.

"Captain we've lost the port side main gun." one of the *Warspite's* gunners exclaimed as alarms sounded to warn of explosive decompression in some of the ship's forward sections.

"Is the main beam initiator still operational?" Knight asked.

"Yes commander." the gunner responded.

"Then we still have the starboard cannon." Knight added, looking at Reeves.

"What is the status of the enemy moons?" Reeves said.

"Two are entirely destroyed and one is heavily damaged captain." Goldman responded, "There's still one untouched though and I can't be sure what the capability of the damaged moon is."

"Captain I'm picking up a tachyon signal from the primary target." Cortez then announced, "Looks like a transmission."

"Can you tell where it's being sent to?" Reeves said.

"Towards the Microscopium or Sagittarius sectors. Could be to either of them or in the northern sector of Indus." Cortez said.

"A call for help?" Knight suggested.

"I hope so. That would mean that they are worried about us." Reeves replied.

"Captain radar and thermal imaging are picking up multiple launches from the primary target moon." Goldman said.

"More missiles?" Reeves asked.

"I don't think so captain. I think they're scrambling attack craft. A lot of them." Goldman answered.

Although the outpost had been on high alert since the *Warspite* was first detected in the system, it was not possible to keep all of the five squadrons of manned fighters on permanent stand by and rather than launching piecemeal the three squadrons of fighters and two of interceptors waited until they were all manned and ready before moving into launch position. With space being far less limited than it was aboard a starship the outpost was equipped with enough launching tubes for its manned attack craft to be able to launch a full squadron at once and so to launch the five squadrons one after another took less than five minutes. The manned craft were joined by a further six squadrons of attack drones that were launched en masse from a launcher located not far from the launch tubes used for the manned attack craft and together all of these craft formed one large cloud that headed towards the *Warspite* and its accompanying attack craft that were now outnumbered by more than three to one.

These launches were observed by Lucas aboard the *Edwin Cane* as well as aboard the *Warspite* and she turned to Willis when she saw how many there were.

"This is bad major." she said, "The Genex just launched a massive wave of attack craft. About a hundred and thirty of them according to these readings."

"Damn." Willis hissed, "I bet they aren't limited by a lack of artificial gravity any more either."

"They certainly aren't accelerating as if they are. They're pushing eighteen gees. That's less than our fighters can manage but only by a couple of gees and way more than a human body can withstand." Lucas replied, "I am picking up a lot of EM emissions though. Far more than command and control to just fighter squadron

leaders would need. I think there are drones, a lot of drones in the mix.”

“All of them?” Willis asked but Lucas shrugged.

“I can’t tell. Possibly but I wouldn’t want to bet on it.” she said, “The communication between the surface and the attack craft all appears to be coming from one place. If we could do something to knock that out then perhaps it would help even out the odds for the *Warspite*.”

“You do know that this crate doesn’t have any weapons on it at all, don’t you?” Gregory commented from the front of the bridge.

“Sure we do.” Willis said, “We’ve got almost an entire marine company aboard with all the weapons that entails.” then he looked at Lucas and asked, “Do you think our anti-armour missiles will be enough to knock out their transmitter?”

“Possibly though I don’t know exactly what it’s made of. However, I am pretty sure that it won’t react well to having a hundred metre long mining ship fly right through it.” Lucas said and then both she and Willis turned to look at Gregory.

“Hey, hold on a moment.” he said, “I thought I was just supposed to try and land this thing in their hangar. Nobody said anything about crashing it into anything.”

“It’ll just be a little bump, that’s all. You won’t even have to stop and exchange insurance details I promise.” Willis said.

“There’s no such thing as a little bump when it comes to spacecraft. Any collision can burst an air seal and given how crowded this ship is right now we could end up with only a few minutes of breathable air left in it.” Gregory replied.

“Everyone’s suited up. That gives us plenty of time to get to somewhere with an atmosphere.” Willis pointed out and Gregory sighed.

“Okay I’ll aim for the transmitter. But even if we get down in one piece there’s no guarantee that we’ll be able to lift off again afterwards so you better hope the *Warspite* can send down someone to pick us up.”

While Genex workers could not fill the role of infantry, they could still follow orders in combat situations and they made adequate crew members for warships or military outposts as long as they were properly led. Therefore, under the watchful eyes of Edison and his subordinate officers the outpost’s technicians continued to work efficiently at their posts as the battle progressed. Towards the end of the war between the Commonwealth and the Genex, the Commonwealth had developed a clear technological edge but despite the limited resources available after the war Genex thinkers had been able to make up for at least most of the Commonwealth’s development and now part of Edison wanted to see how much of a difference this would make. There had been some battles when superior Genex forces like the one he now commanded had been easily outmanoeuvred by smaller Commonwealth ones and destroyed. Now though he was confident that he had not only enough firepower at his disposal to destroy the *Warspite*, even with the loss of half of the outpost’s orbiting defence posts, he also did not need to worry about the quality of his forces being hopelessly outclassed.

The one drawback that Edison could see was time. Given that the *Warspite* had despatched a pair of drones he had to be aware of the possibility that more Commonwealth ships could be waiting close by.

“Sir the *Edwin Cane* is on approach.” a nearby worker said and Edison had to suddenly think about what to do about the unarmed mining ship.

“Let it in.” he ordered, “Open the hangar.”

“Yes colonel.” the technician said but then he looked up from his console, “Colonel the *Edwin Cane* is not on course for the hangar.” he added.

“What do you mean?” Edison demanded.

“The *Edwin Cane* is currently heading towards our main transmission antenna. If the ship doesn’t turn or pull up then it will collide with the antenna.” the worker told him.

“Let me see.” Edison exclaimed, rushing to look over the worker’s shoulder. Looking at the outpost’s lidar display he saw the blip representing the approaching mining ship and the line that indicated its current projected course. This indicated that the ship would impact the surface of the moon just after crashing through the antenna array that was used not only to communicate with other ships in the system and the Genex command structure beyond it but also to control the squadrons of drones currently heading towards the *Warspite*, “Get me the *Edwin Cane*.” Edison ordered.

“Colonel the *Edwin Cane* is not responding.” another worker responded.

“If that ship hits our antenna then we’ll lose all control of the drones.” Crawford said.

“Colonel we need to shoot it down.” North added and Edison nodded.

“Do it.” he replied.

“Weapons, target the *Edwin Cane*.” North ordered.

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On the surface of the moon outside the outpost several of the defensive turrets turned to track the rapidly approaching *Edwin Cane* and the outpost's sensors began to target the ship.

"We're being targeted." Lucas said.

"Is this the intercom?" Willis asked, pointing at part of the console in front of him and Lucas nodded. Then he reached out to activate the intercom so that he could address all of the marines aboard the *Edwin Cane*, "Now hear this we are under fire. Secure your suits and prepare for explosive decompression."

Each of the officers in the bridge lowered the visors of their space suit helmets, sealing them shut and checking that they were secure before switching on their internal air supply. While they did this the outpost continued to target the *Edwin Cane* and there was a flash of light that was accompanied by a sudden lurching as the ship was hit, prompting alarms to sound throughout it. The beam from the defence turret burned through the relatively lightweight civilian hull of the *Edwin Cane* near the back of the ship, and the engineering section was suddenly filled with short lived flames that then died as the air was blown out through the entry and exit holes created in the hull by the beam. Fortunately for the marines aboard the ship engineering had been judged to be too risky to use to house the troops just in case they disturbed something important to the operation of the ship and so none of them were inside when the beam cut through the ship.

"We're hit!" Lucas exclaimed, "Engineering is gone."

"I've lost main drive control." Gregory added as the console in front of him showed multiple warning lights.

"Can you at least get us down in one piece?" Willis asked.

"I think so. But hang on because here comes that antenna." Gregory responded as the antenna array loomed ahead of the ship.

The *Edwin Cane* struck the antenna array about two thirds of the way up. The first part of the mining ship to hit the array was the frame that surrounded it and this buckled before breaking. However, the main hull of the mining ship was far more durable than the structure of the antenna array and now it was the antenna that gave way, being bent sharply at the same time as its base was ripped out of the moon's surface. The *Edwin Cane* turned and rolled as the impact slowed the ship before it dived nose first into the surface of the moon and the forward section that housed the reverse thrust drives and forward sensor and communication antennas buckled and was crushed. Meanwhile inside the ship all of the occupants were hurled forwards, the artificial gravity field unable to compensate for the sudden drop in velocity as the ship's power faltered and then failed entirely. The *Edwin Cane* continued to slide along the surface of the moon, hurling debris upwards that thanks to the extremely low gravity field continued to fly off into space rather than falling back to the surface.

"Captain I think the *Edwin Cane* just crash landed." Goldman said when she saw the mining ship impact on the moon's surface.

"Crashed? Are you sure?" Reeves asked.

"Yes captain, we're reading a massive ejection of debris from the surface. It can only have come from a crash." Goldman replied and then she frowned and added, "There's something more captain. The strength of the EM emissions from the Genex base has just collapsed. We're still reading the regular pulses from their sensors but their communications seemed to have stopped entirely."

"What's the status of their drones?" Knight asked.

"Still heading towards us under constant thrust along with the rest of the Genex attack craft." Goldman answered.

"Still following their last instructions perhaps?" Knight suggested, looking at Reeves.

"I hope so." Reeves said, nodding in agreement, "Lieutenant Commander Goldman order our fighters to engage the enemy. I want our drones to make a straight pass through one of their squadrons and see how they react."

"Break and engage." Shaw ordered, broadcasting the instruction to the entire wing of attack craft from the *Warspite* and in an instant the tiny craft went from matching their speed and heading with the cruiser to accelerating towards the oncoming Genex squadrons at maximum power.

The drones and interceptors immediately began to pull away, accelerating almost as fast as the *Warspite's* missiles were capable of. The interceptors fired first, launching missiles towards one of the squadrons of Genex fighters that forced them to turn aside to try and evade the attack. The interceptors then stopped their acceleration and turned as they continued to follow the same flight path so that they could stay facing their targets and they backed up their missile attack with bursts of fire from the gauss cannons mounted beneath their fuselages.

At the same time as the interceptors were attacking the squadron of manned fighters, the *Warspite's* drone

squadron raced towards the drones launched from the Genex outpost. With the Genex built machines maintaining a constant course and acceleration it was an easy matter for the targeting systems aboard the *Warspite's* drones to track them and they opened fire with their own gauss cannons. The Genex drones failed to react to this attack and the first volley of projectiles fired at them cut an entire squadron to pieces while the other Genex drones still continued along their path.

"Those drones are uncontrolled." Mori said as he studied the fighter's sensor readings, "They don't even have a default defensive program that they can use to evade us."

Shaw grinned and activated her communication system again.

"All ships enemy drones appear inactive. I repeat enemy drones appear inactive. Don't ignore them, we don't know if the Genex have got a back up transmitter, but don't waste any missiles on them either. Feel free to take a shot with your cannons if you get one though." she broadcast. Shaw then spotted the two squadrons of Genex interceptors pulling ahead of the larger fighters and she targeted one of these craft with her fighter's sensors.

Towards the end of the Genex War, when the Commonwealth had introduced true artificial gravity in their ships, the pilots of Genex attack craft had suddenly found themselves badly outclassed. Commonwealth pilots were able to make manoeuvres in their fighters and interceptors with ease that would cause Genex pilots to black out. In the years following the war the Genex had been able to partially make up for this deficiency but their technology still lagged behind that of the Commonwealth and as the two forces of attack craft engaged one another this showed. Although the Genex now possessed artificial gravity for their ships as well it, along with other aspects of technology was not as advanced as that found aboard Commonwealth craft. This gave Shaw's squadrons an advantage in both speed and handling that made up in part for the superior numbers of the Genex. This advantage was not as overwhelming as it had been during the war though and the Commonwealth pilots still needed to take care and be alert for Genex craft moving into an attack position.

"They're locking on." Mori warned her.

"Same here." Shaw said just as she released a missile from one of her fighter's weapons bays.

"Incoming." Mori exclaimed, detecting a Genex missile being fired at them.

"I'm breaking off." Shaw responded, rolling the fighter out of the missile's current path and trusting in her own missile's internal guidance system to keep it on target. The Genex missile turned to follow Shaw's fighter and Shaw continued to turn, "Kaz can you do anything about that missile?" she said.

"I'm trying." he said, "Our ECM isn't doing a damned thing about the lock though."

"Ready countermeasures. Deploy them as soon as you can." Shaw told him.

"On it." Mori responded, "Try taking us to port."

Shaw turned the fighter as sharply as she could, cutting its forward momentum to head in a completely different direction and forcing the Genex missile to burn more fuel as it followed the manoeuvre. The missile was still closing though and Mori released a pair of the fighter's countermeasures. These exploded between the fighter and the missile, releasing a cloud of carbon chaff as well as a hot burning flare. This was enough to confuse the missile for a few seconds, diverting it away from Shaw's fighter while she spun the craft around to face towards it. Locking onto the missile just as it turned back towards her fighter she fired a rapid burst from her gauss cannons and the missile exploded.

"Our attack craft are engaging the enemy captain." Goldman announced, "Enemy drones not reacting."

"They're still outnumbered." Knight pointed out and Reeves nodded.

"Weapons I want all free-electron beam lasers to provide support to our fighters as long as we aren't under missile attack. All other weapons are to target the remaining lunar weapon emplacements and provide fire support to our marines as requested." he ordered.

"Goldman, what is the state of our marines?" Knight asked.

"*Warspite* calling Major Willis, what is your status?" Goldman's voiced asked as her signal was relayed from the large radio set carried by one of the marine communication technicians to Willis' spacesuit radio.

"We're down safely. Sort of." he responded, "The *Edwin Cane* is a write off but we made it without any casualties. Lieutenant Gregory deserves the credit for that. We're going to need a lift when we're done here."

"Understood major. Let us know when you require extraction. *Warspite* out." Goldman said and then the channel went dead.

Having just disembarked from the wrecked *Edwin Cane*, Willis looked around, surveying the terrain of the moon and hunting for a way into the Genex base that he knew had to be close by. Behind him his company of marines were also disembarking from the mining ship, bounding across the surface of the moon in the ultra low gravity to establish a perimeter while the rest of the company were following them onto the surface. The most obvious sign of the Genex outpost was the destroyed antenna array and from the point where this had been ripped free of the lunar surface Willis could see a jet of vapour escaping and spreading out before

it dissipated in the vacuum of space. However, although this indicated that the antenna was connected to the interior of the outpost somehow there was no indication of an airlock being present at that location and so Willis continued to search.

Willis knew that the Genex would have provided a means for them to be able to access the antenna array and make repairs if necessary and with this in mind he started his search by inspecting the various mounds in the surface closest to the array using a set of electronic binoculars held up to the visor of his spacesuit helmet. These enabled him to detect a large hatchway set into the side of one of the larger mounds and he pointed towards it.

"Looks like there's an entrance over that way." he broadcast to his troops, "Let's move marines."

"Do we have any external communication at all?" Edison asked as the workers at the row of consoles in front of him hurried to determine the extent of the damage caused when the *Edwin Cane* crashed.

"All radio and tachyon transmission systems are down colonel." one of them responded, "We still have the laser though."

"The laser? What are we supposed to do with that? Transmit orders to one drone at a time?" Edison snapped.

"Colonel the drones do not have receivers for laser communication." a worker commented, failing to realise that Edison's comment was not intended to be taken seriously.

"Colonel there is activity on the surface!" Crawford suddenly called out, "There are Commonwealth troops disembarking from the wreck of the *Edwin Cane*."

Edison spun around on the spot.

"What? How many of them?" he demanded.

"So far perhaps fifty but there are still more of them coming out. They look to be unloading heavy weapons as well." Crawford replied.

"They must have come from that cruiser. There could be up to two companies of marines aboard." North added.

"I doubt they could fit two full companies aboard the *Edwin Cane*, colonel." Crawford said.

"Alert our garrison. Secure all entry points in that area and get troops out onto the surface to deal with them." Edison ordered.

Because the outpost was not considered likely to come under heavy attack the Genex warriors stationed there consisted purely of light infantry like the Commonwealth marines now landed on the surface. This meant that they lacked the exoskeletons that would enable them to move quicker and lift heavier loads and none of them wore powered armour that would provide them with almost total protection from small arms. However, three platoons of the Genex warriors acting as the outpost's security garrison had already been in spacesuits ready to deploy to the moon's surface but this had been in expectation of Commonwealth marines staging a conventional assault from the *Warspite* rather than infiltrating the defence perimeter using a stolen mining ship and this meant that the warriors in space suits were not positioned ideally to respond to this landing. The leader caste Genex commanding each platoon of warriors did not hesitate to order their troops into action though, any delay could allow a rival to gain the advantage and so the platoons each exited the outpost through the nearest airlock and began to make their way towards the Commonwealth troops separately.

One of these platoons had been stationed in a hangar not far from the antenna and they bounded quickly across the lunar surface until they reached an area of higher ground that allowed them to look down at the Commonwealth marines. Without waiting for specific instructions the first Genex warriors to reach the high ground, a machine gun team, threw themselves to the ground and deployed their weapon before opening fire on the Commonwealth marines below.

Two marines fell immediately, one of them dead while the other clamped a hand over the puncture in his space suit. The suits were designed to be self sealing but the process was not perfect and another marine rushed to his aide with an emergency patch.

"Contact right!" Willis broadcast when the marines fell and he saw the impacts of bullets on the surface of the moon. Turning in the direction the bullets had come from Willis saw the Genex warriors taking their places along the high ground and he immediately dropped to his knees and returned fire.

Behind Willis Lucas also attempted to take up a firing position but she lacked the marines' training in extremely low gravity environments she tripped and bounced across the surface of the moon, rolling until another marine caught her and helped her up.

"There you go lieutenant." he said to her.

"Thanks." she replied before she aimed her own rifle towards the Genex and fired a rapid burst towards them.

Willis knew that the company needed cover to be able to reach the outpost airlock but with no atmosphere on the moon to sustain a smokescreen he knew that a different method would have to be used to obscure

the line of fire of the Genex warriors. To achieve this he plucked a stun grenade from his assault vest and tossed the armed weapon towards the Genex. The throw was not powerful enough to land the grenade among the Genex and it landed roughly halfway between the two opposing forces before it exploded. The blast caused dust and debris from the lunar surface to fly upwards and in the low gravity it formed a cloud that obscured the Commonwealth marines from the Genex warriors.

"Get one of those HMGs set up for when the cloud clears." Willis ordered, "Everyone else get moving for that airlock."

The bulk of the marine force then began to run towards the airlock once more, with injured marines being helped along by those who were not while behind them a team of four anchored the tripod of a heavy machine gun to the surface and then mounted the weapon on top of it so that as the cloud of debris settled down again they were ready to fire. The fifteen millimetre rounds fired by the tripod mounted weapon were powerful enough to punch right through body armour and wherever the rounds instead struck the surface they produced enough of a shock wave that they created more small short-lived clouds of debris.

Reaching the outer door of the airlock Willis waved forward a technical team and a marine immediately inspected the control panel.

"It's sealed." the marine said, "This'll take a few seconds." and he began to work quickly to override the lock mechanism until the doors began to slide apart, "Open sesame!" he exclaimed.

Given that the air lock was intended to allow technicians from the outpost to access and repair the communications antenna array it had to be large enough to permit replacement parts to be carried out onto the surface and damaged ones to be brought back inside the outpost for repair. This meant that the airlock was large enough for an entire platoon of marines to enter at once and Willis led the first one inside.

"Get that door closed up again and get charges set." he ordered.

"Why not just open the interior door the same way as the exterior one?" Lucas asked as she entered the airlock behind him.

"Because then that would expose us all to any fire from the other side." Willis told her, "We'll blow a hole across the door that leaves us with some cover and then fit a temporary patch across that so the outer door can be opened again without de-pressurising the entire base."

While a pair of marine demolition experts began to fit shaped charges to the inner airlock door the rest of the platoon moved to the sides so that when the charges were triggered they would not be visible from inside the outpost and at the far end of the airlock the marine technician who had opened the exterior door now closed it behind them.

"Charges set major." one of the marine demolition experts reported.

"Exterior door sealed." the technician added.

"Okay everyone stand by." Willis ordered and then he nodded to the demolition expert, signalling for him to trigger the shaped charges.

The explosion blew a wide hole in the inner doors, leaving about half at each side for the marines to remain hidden behind. Willis then leant around the edge of the hole and peered out into the corridor beyond the airlock. Although the Genex had yet to be able to deploy a sizeable force to defend this entrance to the outpost he could still see several warriors positioned behind cargo containers that had been used to form an improvised barrier and Willis quickly ducked back out of sight when they fired towards the airlock with their rifles.

"Launcher." he ordered simply and a nearby marine armed with a grenade launcher mounted beneath the barrel of his rifle pointed his weapon around the edge of the door and fired it down the passageway.

The grenade bounced off the wall just ahead of the improvised barrier and was deflected downwards so that it landed just behind it before exploding. Immediately upon hearing the sound of the explosion Willis leant around the door again and saw that the barrier was now wrecked, the contents of the crates scattered across the floor while the bodies of the Genex warriors lay sprawled behind it.

"Clear. Let's get this hole patched up." he announced and then he activated his radio, "Lieutenant Chandola what's your situation out there?" he transmitted to the officer still on the surface outside.

"Still under fire major. The Genex are bringing up reinforcements. They don't have the heavy weapons we do but their numbers are increasing. We're still taking casualties as well and we need to get them inside so a corpsman can take a look at them." Chandola responded.

"Well get ready because we've broken in. We'll be opening up the door again in a couple of minutes. Get the injured inside first. If you need fire support then contact the *Warspite*." Willis ordered.

"Enemy fighters at twenty thousand kilometres." Goldman announced, "Looks like they're circling around to try and surround our ships."

"Are they in position for our turrets to target them?" Knight asked.

"Yes commander. Our dorsal turrets can all fire on the enemy craft." Goldman answered.

"Engage with light turrets only. I want the X-ray lasers kept targeted on the moon's defences." Reeves

ordered.

"Yes captain, weapons firing." a gunner responded as the *Warspite's* dorsally mounted free-electron beam laser turrets swung around to target the Genex attack craft. The first blast from these weapons blew a Genex fighter apart with the crew unable to eject. This alerted the Genex pilots to the threat posed by the *Warspite* and the squadron leader ordered his squadron to abandon their attempt to trap the Commonwealth attack craft and instead split up into pairs and scatter while they hunted for targets of opportunity. This order did not come in time to prevent another fighter being destroyed by fire from the *Warspite* but after that their evasive manoeuvring enabled them to avoid the following blasts from the cruiser's turrets.

"Captain we're receiving communication from the surface. Marine Lieutenant Sanders is requesting fire support for number three platoon." Goldman said.

"Do we have targeting data?" Knight said.

"The lieutenant indicates that his men are designating a target. The lieutenant is requesting three round at equal intervals between two marked points." Goldman replied.

"Confirmed." a gunner added, "Target acquired. Gauss cannon ready to fire."

"Fire gauss cannons. Three rounds." Reeves said and one of the two gauss cannons mounted beneath the *Warspite's* forward section fired three rounds in rapid succession towards the Genex moon. The marines on the lunar surface were using laser emitters built into the sighting units of their rifles to mark two points at the ends of the Genex lines and the first and last of the magnetically accelerated projectiles were aimed directly at these two points while the second was aimed at a point midway between them. All three projectiles hit the surface of the moon directly on target and the force of the impacts hurled debris and bodies up into space.

"Incoming missiles." a sensor technician exclaimed as the damaged defence post fired another pair of missiles towards the *Warspite*.

"Switch turrets to defensive fire." Knight ordered.

"Helm can you bring us around to face that moon?" Reeves said, "Ideally so that we have a clear shot into the damaged side."

"We'll have to move around the primary target to get that angle captain." Ash replied.

"That'll put us on the far side of one of the debris fields to our attack craft captain." Thomas pointed out as he checked the course required to take the *Warspite* around the gas giant's moon far enough to target the already damaged defence post.

"What if we head past our attack crafts' current position on the way?" Reeves asked.

"That will mean we'd either have to make a sharp about turn or pass by the operational defence moon captain." Thomas told him, "The Genex will get an easier shot at us in either case."

Reeves considered the options for a moment. He did not want to take unnecessary risks with the *Warspite* and the lives of the hundreds of people aboard the heavy cruiser but equally he did not want to abandon the pilots of the fighters and interceptors currently duelling with the still more numerous Genex attack craft.

"I want a course that allows us to link up with our fighters." he said, "We'll circle around the Genex base and engage the undamaged moon head on. Weapons I want a five missile salvo ready to fire on that moon as soon as possible to be followed by a ten missile salvo shortly after. We'll hold our fire until we have a direct line of sight. Sensors are to plot the positions of the enemy defence batteries and gauss cannons are to suppress them. Then the second wave can follow once the defences are knocked out. The main gun is to fire in support of the missile strike as well. Goldman warn our fighters that we are coming and that they are to join up with us for our run. I also want our courier drones preparing for launch on my command."

"It may take some time to get them fuelled with tachyons captain." Goldman pointed out.

"They don't need to go to FTL commander." he told her, "Just keep two in reserve in case we need them and have the rest ready to deploy."

"Yes captain." Goldman responded.

"Moving to intercept fighter squadrons." Ash added as he turned the *Warspite* away from the gas giant's moon and headed for the Commonwealth attack craft instead.

As the two missiles fired from the Genex moon promptly turned to follow the cruiser one of them was struck by a blast from one of the *Warspite's* turrets. The hit was to the rear section of the missile and damaged its drive section, reducing its ability to turn to almost none and the two missiles began to split up as they turned at different rates. Now that only the undamaged missile was able to match the *Warspite's* turn the cruiser's gunners concentrated their fire on this one and even though it released a cloud of countermeasures to try and protect itself the barrage of laser fire sliced the warhead and guidance system from the rest of the missile. Freed from the immediate threat of the Genex missiles the *Warspite's* turrets then all turned towards the attack craft ahead of the ship instead and again began to target any Genex craft they were able to get a clear shot at.

"Disengage and fall back to the *Warspite*." Shaw ordered the Commonwealth attack craft pilots. Turning her fighter she then saw a Genex interceptor fly through her field of fire and she instinctively fired a missile at the

craft. The Genex pilot had too little chance to carry out any evasive manoeuvres and the missiles flew straight into the craft's cockpit, killing the pilot and destroying the interceptor.

The Commonwealth fighters and interceptors began to break off their attacks on their Genex opponents, heading towards the approaching *Warspite*. In response the Genex turned to follow, hoping to catch the Commonwealth craft from behind where they were most vulnerable. Their advantage was short lived though and although the Commonwealth craft were heading away from the Genex their pilots turned their craft around in mid flight without changing their headings, leaving them travelling backwards through space and still able to target the Genex. The addition of more fire support from the *Warspite* itself also limited the opportunities for the Genex pilots to attack the Commonwealth attack craft. Unless they continued to change their course and speed the free-electron beam lasers carried by the *Warspite* could easily pick them off before they even knew that they were under attack. The result of this so far was that even though the Genex attack craft squadrons had possessed a numerical advantage over their Commonwealth opposition even after the destruction of the outpost's antenna array and they had been able to shoot down a number of the Commonwealth craft their own losses meant that the numbers were now approaching even. Fighters and interceptors were not intended to attack capital ships, their weapons lacking the firepower to do serious damage in one go and they were relatively easy targets for the *Warspite*'s light turrets. Therefore, rather than waste the lives of pilots chasing after the Commonwealth attack craft the commander of the Genex craft ordered his ships to pull back to where they could be protected by the defensive turrets on the gas giant's moon and its two remaining defence posts.

"Damn it!" Edison hissed as he watched the attack craft disengaging on a sensor screen. With the outpost's communications array destroyed there was no way for him to give orders directly to them. Instead limited communication was being maintained using the radio aboard a short range shuttle in one of the outpost's hangars that in turn communicated with the command centre using the outpost's intercom system. Then he turned towards Crawford and North, "At least tell me we've got their marines contained." he said.

"They're all still in section four, level one. Captain Fowler is setting up a perimeter sir." North replied, "He says he'll have them surrounded in ten minutes but they're bringing in more troops and his men might not be able to keep them trapped in that section for long. They have explosives and could easily blast through into level two if they wanted."

"How many men do we have on level two?" Edison asked.

"Just one platoon colonel." Crawford told him, "Captain Fowler says he doesn't want to send any more men down there and risk weakening his defences on level one. We've also got another platoon out on the surface that managed to avoid the Commonwealth bombardment but it'll take time for them to get back inside."

Edison then walked over to a nearby intercom handset and picked it up.

"Engineer Collister this is Colonel Edison." he said into the handset.

"Collister here." the engineer responded, Edison the only one able to hear him.

"Collister what is the status of the preparations I requested?" Edison asked.

"I have set up a command in the base's computer operating system that will override all the safety systems on the main fusion reactor and lock the fuel input system fully open. This should lead to a catastrophic overload between fifteen and twenty-five minutes following the issuing of the command."

"That sounds like a long time. Can it be cancelled?" Edison said, glancing at his subordinates and wondering whether they suspected what he was planning. He was especially concerned that they might guess that he had made no specific plans for them to be aboard the *Silent Knife* when he used the ship to escape. That would make it easier for Edison to blame them if the outpost fell to the Commonwealth.

"No colonel. Part of the program initiates a system wide reformat. This will erase the control program and jam the fuel input in its open state. The command can only be executed from the main computer core though. That is why the delay is necessary. I estimate that getting from the core to the *Silent Knife* will take four minutes. Then at least six are needed for the ship to prepare for take off and get outside where its faster than light drive can be engaged. As it is our margin of error is no more than fifteen minutes."

"Colonel!" Crawford suddenly called out, "The Commonwealth cruiser appears to be on a heading for Defence Post Alpha."

"I have to go." Edison told Collister and he returned the intercom handset to its mounting before turning back towards Crawford and North, "What is Alpha's status?" he asked.

"Undamaged and with its missile batteries at full capacity." North answered and Edison smiled.

"Then we have them. They'll wait until they have a clear shot at the moon before launching another missile volley. I want the defence post ready to launch its entire missile complement in one go before they can." he said.

"But colonel that leaves nothing in reserve." Crawford pointed out.

"We don't need anything in reserve." North said, "That many missiles from point blank range will easily overwhelm their defences."

"Exactly. Now get a firing solution plotted to match when the Commonwealth cruiser will move out of eclipse and be visible to Defence Post Alpha. Make sure our attack craft don't get in the way either. Make sure they stay out of the cruiser's line of sight." Edison ordered then he watched while the staff in the command centre ordered the outpost's attack craft squadrons to use the moon for cover while others readied the vast arsenal of missiles stored at the defence post for launch.

"The enemy moon will be in sight in five seconds captain." Thomas said, monitoring the *Warspite's* progress closely.

"Missiles ready for launch captain." a gunner added.

"Hold fire until I give the word." Reeves ordered, "What's the status of our courier drones?"

"Ready to launch captain." Goldman answered.

"There it is." Knight said as the undamaged moon appeared around the larger one on which the Genex outpost was built.

"Standby to launch drones ahead of us." Reeves said.

"Captain the Genex have locked on. We have launches from the target." Cortez called out.

"How many?" Knight asked.

"Eighty." Cortez replied.

"Turrets fire." Knight ordered.

"Belay that." Reeves said, "Deploy drones. Grid pattern ahead with fifty metre spacing. Helm constant speed. Let the drones get ahead of us."

"I should have known." Knight commented, "You're using them as a screen." and Reeves nodded.

"All those extra radar and thermal signatures ought to screw up their targeting." he replied, "Weapons target any missile that gets through our drones."

"Drones deploying captain." Goldman said as the courier drones still held inside the *Warspite's* remaining mission adaptive module all launched at once and then formed themselves into a rectangular pattern in front of the cruiser. With the *Warspite* now coasting around the moon and the drones' engines still burning the remotely controlled craft easily pulled ahead of the cruiser.

The guidance systems of the missiles were suddenly presented with a multitude of radar, lidar and thermal imaging contacts. The missiles were able to tell that these newly acquired contacts were not the vessel they had been targeted at but the options for getting around them were limited. The drones were spread out over a wide area whereas the missiles were much more tightly packed together. Some of the missiles located on the outer edges of the cluster began to turn to try and get around this wall but their movements were not co-ordinated and a number of them collided with one another, resulting in explosions that destroyed more than a quarter of them. The rest of the missiles attempted to weave in between the drones to get at the *Warspite* but as they drew closer to the formation the drones began to close ranks and the gaps between them reduced. Unable to get through the reduced gaps, more of the missiles instead either collided with the drones or came so close that their proximity fuses were triggered and their warheads detonated automatically. In turn the result of so many explosions so close together produced a massive expanding cloud of shrapnel that ripped apart both missiles and drones until only a handful remained. The drones were now so scattered that they were no longer capable of forming an effective barrier against the Genex missiles but of the original eighty missiles now only nine were left flying towards the *Warspite*.

"Fire all turrets." Knight ordered and the cruiser's light and medium turrets began firing at the rapidly closing missiles, once again triggering their defences and causing them to deploy their countermeasures.

"Launch first missile volley. Sensors, I want exact positions for the enemy defences plotting." Reeves ordered while the Genex missiles were still closing in on the ship and five more of the *Warspite's* missiles burst out of their launchers and angled themselves towards the small moon orbiting the Genex outpost. The Genex missiles ignored these and the two waves of missiles passed by one another without any change in behaviour from either. However, moments after the *Warspite's* missiles had passed by the Genex ones the defence batteries on Defence Post Alpha began to fire at them.

"Captain we have eighteen weapon emplacements plotted on the target's surface." Goldman said as the last of the *Warspite's* missiles was shot down far short of the defence post.

Reeves had been watching his tactical display closely as the Genex missiles continued to close on the *Warspite* and he knew that there were still three of them remaining. However, he did not want to delay the attack on the defence post any longer than necessary and he also knew that the *Warspite's* two gauss cannons were less effective in a point defence role anyway.

"Lock gauss cannons on those targets and open fire. Keep shooting until they are out of action." he ordered and the two ventrally mounted gauss cannon turrets turned away from the missiles they had been targeting and instead unleashed bursts of projectiles at the Genex defence post.

Another of the Genex missiles exploded when it was hit by a blast from an X-ray laser and this was then followed by another being struck by one of the *Warspite's* light turrets. However, the evasive course flown by the final missile allowed it to slip through the cruiser's defences and it slammed into the ship from beneath about half way along its length before exploding and the bridge was filled with alarms.

"Hull breach! We're venting atmosphere." Goldman exclaimed.

The displays in front of Reeves and Knight told them where the *Warspite* had been hit and they could both see that it was perilously close to the cruiser's missile system. Had the hit been to the upper rather than lower surface of the hull then there was a good chance that it could have detonated the remaining missiles. However, it was still possible that the launcher had suffered damage.

"Is our missile system still operational?" Reeves asked.

"I'm still reading full operational capability captain." a gunner responded.

"Captain Commander Bernard is calling." Goldman said as she activated the intercom.

"Bridge this is engineering," Bernard's voice said, "we've lost the particle inductor. That last hit's blown a damned great hole in it."

Located along the *Warspite's* lower decks and running for a large portion of the ship's length the particle inductor was the source not only of the tachyons that the *Warspite* used for faster than light travel and communication but also the gravitons that were essential for maintaining the artificial gravity field that kept the gravity inside the ship at earth normal and also prevented the crew from being crushed under the force created by the acceleration that the ship was capable of.

"Can you repair it commander?" Reeves asked.

"I'm not sure yet, I've sent a team to see what the extent of the damage is but right now we're running on reserves for the artificial gravity field so I recommend that you limit our acceleration and turning to five gees and under." Bernard told him.

"Understood commander." Reeves replied and then he looked at Ash, "Did you catch that Ash?" he said.

"Yes captain, "Limiting all manoeuvring to five gees unless otherwise ordered." Ash answered.

"Captain enemy defences have been disabled." one of the ship's gunners announced and Reeves turned towards the row of weapon stations.

"Launch missiles. Main gun fire." he ordered and at the same time as another ten missiles left their launchers the one neutral particle beam cannon still functioning opened fire on the Genex defence post.

There was still one defensive battery operational on the small moon. This had not been able to target the previous wave of missiles before they were all shot down but as the second wave closed in they entered its field of fire and it began to shoot at them. By this time though there was too little time remaining for a single turret to shoot down all ten missiles and barely a second after the first missile was intercepted the next struck the surface of the moon, followed rapidly by the rest and all of them detonated in rapid succession. The combination of nine heavy missiles and repeated hits from the *Warspite's* main gun was more than the structure of the small moon could bear and it began to break up before the reactor at its heart went critical and exploded, taking with it what was left of the moon.

Willis fired along a corridor as an injured marine was dragged back out of the way by his comrades. The Commonwealth troops were spreading out from the airlock as they tried to locate vital areas of the outpost. So far though they had been unable to break through the defences the Genex had put in place and each attempt to break out was being met with dogged resistance by Genex warriors and the handful of leaders commanding them. The only saving grace that Willis could see was that the Genex had not considered the outpost worth defending very heavily and all of the opposition to his marines so far had come from light infantry like his own. The Genex were willing to risk a degree of collateral damage though and the warriors defending the outpost from the Commonwealth marines were not only armed with rifles and machine guns but were also willing to use grenades against Willis' troops.

"This is Willis, First Platoon has just run into another ambush. Has anyone found a hole yet?" he broadcast to his troops.

"Negative major." Chandola responded.

"Same here major. Third Platoon is pinned down as well. Doesn't look like more than a squad of them but they know the ground." another officer added and Willis turned to look at Lucas who was stood close behind him, her rifle still in her hands.

"Hey lieutenant, would you mind if my men blew a few big holes in this place?" he asked and Lucas frowned.

"Decompress it you mean?" she asked in reply.

"No." Willis replied, shaking his head, "Fighting in a vacuum is too dangerous. It's impossible to treat gunshot wounds when you can't get at them."

"Then what do you want to do?"

"Well we know that there aren't any levels above us because we'd have seen them from the surface so that must mean that the base extends deeper down into the moon. We've got spare shaped charge cord with us so I'm thinking us using some to blow a hole down to the next level. Maybe the Genex aren't guarding down there as heavily. I'll leave a squad up here to keep the Genex busy but the rest of the platoon can head down a level." Willis explained and Lucas nodded.

"Okay let's do it." she said.

Willis backed away from the corner he had been firing around and allowed another marine to take his place instead. Then he made his way to the demolition specialists with First Platoon.

"I want a hole." he told them.

"Sure major. Where?" one of the marines he was addressing responded and Willis pointed at the floor beneath them.

"Right about here ought to do." he told them. The two marines carrying the explosives then began to lay out a ring of the shaped charge on the floor while the other marines nearby stepped back, "Be ready with grenades." Willis said to them, "When we get the hole we'll throw a few down there just to make sure that the way is clear before we drop down ourselves."

"Ready major." one of the demolition specialists said when the charge was laid out and they too stepped back from where the hole was to be created.

"Blow it." Willis ordered and the marines triggered the explosive charge.

The directional blast was powerful enough to cut right through the floor plating, the ducts and gravity generators running beneath it and also the ceiling of the level below. This created a hole almost three metres across and the section of floor inside the hole that was no longer supported by anything dropped straight

down, dragged to the floor below by its artificial gravity. There were lightweight tables and chairs in the room below where the hole had been blasted and these collapsed under the weight of the falling floor. The marines around the hole also heard a brief scream that suggested someone had been right below it when it fell, however there was no time to check this before three nearby marines including Willis tossed grenades through the hole from different angles.

“Go!” Willis snapped the moment that the third grenade detonated and he and the other nearby marines rushed forwards to the hole. Willis and a handful of other marines took the chance on simply jumping down and landing on the section of floor that had once filled the hole but behind them the other marines tossed a rope ladder down and secured it on the floor above so that they could descend more safely, if more slowly. Looking around it was clear to Willis that the room he and his marines were now in was some sort of mess hall filled with tables and chairs like those crushed when the ceiling fell in. The grenades had ripped though a lot of the furniture in the room and there were also several bodies lay around it. Spotting movement behind a counter at the end of the room Willis fired a quick burst from his rifle and he heard a clatter as someone knocked something over when they fell.

“Spread out. Secure the room.” Willis ordered and the marines rushed away from the hole, heading for the remaining hiding places in the room and kicking over furniture to make sure that there was no-one behind it. Behind them more marines climbed down the ladders from the floor below and Lucas came with them. As she looked around the room she focused on the corpses of the Genex who had been caught in the grenade blasts. Some of these were lying face down and to make sure that they were not just feigning death the marines kicked them to roll them over so that they could be certain of their condition. It was as a marine did this to one body that Lucas noticed that it had been holding a computer tablet and that the device appeared to still be intact, presumably shielded from the explosions by the owner's body. Lucas went over to the body and picked up the tablet and she smiled when she saw that it was intact and active. As with the systems aboard the *Edwin Cane* the user interface of the tablet was not the same as an ordinary Commonwealth equivalent but it was similar enough that Lucas was quickly able to start exploring the contents of the tablet. “Major Willis! Come here quickly.” she called out after a short time.

“What is it?” Willis asked as he ran towards her.

“This tablet was logged on to the Genex network when its owner was killed by the grenades and he shielded it with his body.” Lucas told him, showing him the tablet.

“So it's still logged on?” Willis said and Lucas nodded.

“We have a floor plan.” she replied.

“So where are we?”

“It looks like the level numbering starts with one right at the top so this is level two and we're in the mess hall.” Lucas said as she tried to navigate her way through the floor plan, “A-ha. Here we are.” she said and she showed the screen to Willis again. A pulsing dot on the screen suggested that the tablet was getting live updates from the outpost's computer network about its location and using this to show this on the map, “It looks like there are five levels altogether.” Lucas continued as she went on searching the floor plan, “I think that the main command centre is on the fourth level along with the computer core. The only thing below that is the power plant and what looks like a hangar of some kind.”

“Can you transfer a copy of that to our own tablets?” Willis said but Lucas shook her head.

“I'm sorry major. Perhaps Commander Bernard could rig something up to copy the data but I don't recognise any of these sockets and the wireless link doesn't work on the same format as our tablets. In fact I can't even guarantee that the map file would be in a format our tablets can read anyway.”

“In that case we to try and find more of them. I'd like every platoon to have one.” Willis said and he looked around the room again, “Check these bodies. See if any of them have tablets on them that are still working.” he ordered and the marines in the mess hall began to search the Genex bodies.

“Colonel, Captain Fowler has confirmed that the Commonwealth marines have breached level two. He's trying to redeploy his men but he doesn't have enough to cover both levels entirely.” North told Edison.

“Did they break through our perimeter?” Edison asked.

“No colonel. It looks like they used explosives to blast their way from level one to level two.” North answered.

“Colonel perhaps we should consider a full lock down. Seal every pressure door between here and level two and shut down all the elevators.” Crawford suggested.

“And then how do our troops get around? We'd have to manually open every door from here when they wanted to pass through and then close them from here as well.” Edison pointed out.

“Not to mention that if the Commonwealth troops can blast through a ceiling then they can blast through a door. Assuming they don't just override the lock like they did with the airlock's outer door.” North added.

“Nevertheless colonel, it might slow the Commonwealth down while Captain Fowler redeploys his troops.” Crawford said.

“Oh very well.” Edison said, “Seal all emergency pressure doors on level three. Then while Captain Fowler is

moving his men down to level two I want everyone down here on level four that can handle a weapon and is not already doing essential work given a gun and deployed to protect the stairwell and command centre. In the mean time what is that cruiser doing now?"

"Still circling us colonel." Crawford said, "They'll be in the line of fire of our last defence post soon." North snorted.

"It's a wreck." he said, "The missile system is out and its defence batteries are no match for that cruiser. We've seen it using weapons with much better range and hitting power than our light guns. It won't even have to use up any missiles. One clean shot by an X-ray laser or neutral particle beam to the reactor will make it go critical."

"We have our own defensive batteries." Crawford pointed out.

"More light guns only." North said.

"Yes but if they'll give that cruiser something more to think about and if we bring in our attack craft at the same time then maybe we can get them to back off long enough for us to get a technical team out onto the surface to rig up an emergency transmitter so we can at least get our drones back under control. There also the *Silent Knife*. She may not-

"No." Edison interrupted when Crawford mentioned the ship he intended to spirit him away from the outpost and both Crawford and North stared at him, startled by his determined response.

"Colonel if we launch the *Silent Knife* now while the Commonwealth cruiser is on the opposite side of the moon from its hangar then we might be able to use its communication system to send commands to our drones." Crawford explained, "The crew won't be able to fully control that many but the computer has enough processing power that they should at least be able to get them turned around and heading in the right direction."

Edison looked at a nearby tactical display again. It was now obvious that the outpost would fall to the Commonwealth assault sooner or later. The overwhelming advantage in numbers and firepower that his forces had begun with had been dealt a series of crippling blows. A quick glance at the time told him that the distress signal he had ordered sent at the start of the battle would just now be reaching the Genex fleet command at Sanctuary but even their fastest warships were more than two days away and he estimated that the time remaining to the outpost was going to be measured in hours rather than days. It was also obvious to Edison that if he was going to use the *Silent Knife* to escape in that he would have to be aboard the ship in time to launch it while a significant number of the outpost's fighters and interceptors were still operational. Delaying until they were all gone would mean that the Commonwealth cruiser and any attack craft that remained would be able to chase after the corvette.

"Taking the *Silent Knife* out is a suicide mission." Edison said, "But you're right. If we don't use the ship now we'll all be killed anyway."

"I'll tell the captain to launch as soon as he's ready." Crawford said.

"No. I'll tell him in person." Edison responded and his two subordinates stared at him again, "The defence of this outpost is my responsibility so I'll take command of the ship myself."

Voluntary self sacrifice for the communal good was not a common trait among the Genex, especially not the leader caste who were infamous for attempting to undermine one another for their own advantage so neither Crawford nor North had expected Edison to make this announcement.

"As you wish colonel." North said as he tried to think of a way of making sure that when a relief force arrived he would be the one to be able to claim the credit for defending the outpost, something that would hopefully get him transferred to a better posting.

"North, you have command while I'm gone." Edison said and North grinned, glancing at Crawford who frowned back at him, "I'll need a route clearing for me to the hangar. Have Collister meet me there. His expertise with our computer system will speed up getting the ship set up to command the drones."

"Of course colonel. I'll issue the order immediately." North replied.

"Here's another one." a marine called out as he picked up a tablet that had been hidden beneath the body of a dead Genex. This was the third one the marines had found during their search but so far only one more after the first had been active and Lucas had been unable to log onto the Genex network with the other two.

"Pass it to the lieutenant." Willis ordered and the marine tossed the tablet across the room. Lucas was not ready for this and she almost dropped it on the floor, the tablet bouncing between her hands several times before she finally got a grip on it, "Nice catch. Were you on your high school softball team by any chance?" Willis commented.

"Oh ha ha." Lucas replied as she examined the tablet and then she smiled, "It's logged on." she said, calling up a floor plan and then holding up the tablet for Willis to see.

"That gives us three." he said.

"That should be enough for now." Lucas said, "We should get moving. Send two back to other platoon commanders while we head for the computer core. Then you can head for the command centre and we'll

have total control of the base.”

“Harris!” Willis called out, turning towards one of his marines.

“Yes major?” the marine responded.

“Take two of the tablets to Lieutenants Chandola and Maynard. Tell them I want them to sweep the upper levels and secure them while we head for level four.” Willis told him.

“Yes major.” the marine said again, nodding as Lucas handed him two of the functional tablets.

A century spent avoiding detection by the Commonwealth meant that the navigation data provided to shipping within Genex space was tightly controlled and only select vessels were authorised to travel beyond their borders. However, there were still renegades and pirates that ignored these rules and the mining ships used to sustain the outpost in the Eta Indi system would be a tempting target for them as a source of supplies for their own ships. The *Silent Knife* was the solution to this possible problem, giving the outpost the ability to protect the mining ships no matter where in the system they happened to be located. The corvette's faster than light drive enabled it to respond rapidly to threats inside the system but it also meant that the light warship could be used as an escape vessel if the system came under attack as it had now.

The hangar that the *Silent Knife* occupied was located on the lowest level of the outpost and the ship filled almost its entire width and height, only the length extended more than a hundred metres ahead of the corvette's prow to the large exterior doors that were camouflaged on the outside to minimise the chance of detection. Access to the *Silent Knife* was provided by a retractable tube that connected to one of the corvette's airlocks and as Edison, accompanied by a pair of armoured warriors to serve as a personal security detail, walked along this he saw engineer Collister and Lieutenant Schafer, the commanding officer of the *Silent Knife* waiting for him. As one of the worker caste, Collister lacked the deviousness to turn on Edison and betray his plan for escape to any of the other leaders at the outpost while Schafer being a leader himself meant that he was quite happy to abandon the rest of the base personnel if it meant that he escaped with his life.

"Engineer Collister, Lieutenant Schafer, are we ready to launch?" Edison asked.

"The communication system will permit limited control over our drones. But the same command must be given to them all." Collister answered.

"In all respects the *Silent Knife* is ready though colonel. We're just awaiting your security authorisation." Schafer added. Because of the covert nature of the outpost, launching the corvette required Edison's authorisation and right now he regarded this as a guarantee that he would not be left behind.

"Very well. If everything is set here then Engineer Collister and I will go to the computer core and engage the reactor overload. We should be back in about a quarter of an hour." Edison said.

"Very well colonel. But what do I tell the command centre staff in the meantime if they ask why we haven't launched yet?" Schafer said.

"Tell them there is an issue with the communication buffers that prevents us from controlling the drones. Tell them that I and Engineer Collister are working on the issue and that we will be launching soon. Do not tell them that we are not aboard though. Do you understand?"

"Of course colonel. We'll be waiting for you to return." Schafer replied.

The rate of the marines' advance through the outpost was limited by the pressure doors that had been sealed to block their path. These were not enough to bring them to a complete halt, however and by using a mix of electronic skill to override the locks and explosives to simply blast them open Willis and his men continued toward the main computer core. Unfortunately it was not possible to get through these doors without giving away their position. Overriding the lock produced an alert in the command centre, while explosives were loud and also produced alarms when the smoke was detected by damage control sensors. This meant that the few minutes just after breaking through a pressure door were the most dangerous for the marines, when they were most likely to be ambushed by Genex warriors responding to the alarms. These attacks were conducted by small units of Genex who would suddenly open fire from behind cover in the hope of injuring or killing one or two of the marines and then withdrawing before the marines could bring their superior numbers and firepower to bear.

"That corridor over there." Lucas said, checking the floor plan while a marine fired a sustained burst from a machine gun that forced another small party of Genex to fall back. On this occasion one of the Genex was caught in the open as he began to move and he was hit by multiple rounds from the weapon.

"What about it?" Willis asked.

"About ten metres down and we'll be right over the computer core. If we blow through the floor here and then again below we can end up right outside.

"You heard the lieutenant." Willis said, turning to look at the marine demolitions team, "Make me a hole."

The orbital space around the moon on which the Genex outpost was constructed was becoming crowded with debris from the smaller moons. A significant amount of this had fallen to the main moon itself, creating numerous impact craters on the surface. This presented a problem for the crew of the *Warspite* though, as the debris that remained in orbit for the time being only served to obstruct their path and limit their fields of fire. It also offered cover to any attack the Genex chose to launch against them and Knight decided to

suggest a change in their course.

"A high orbit is likely to give us a better field of fire at the last moon. It'll give their attack craft less chance to get the jump on us if they suddenly come over the horizon as well." he said and Reeves nodded.

"Commander Ash can you take us out by another five kilometres and reorientate the ship so that we'll have a shot with the main gun as soon as the last moon comes over the horizon?" Reeves asked and Ash nodded.

"Yes captain. If I start now I can keep our acceleration below point five gee." he answered.

"Carry out the manoeuvre commander." Reeves ordered.

Ash fired the *Warspite's* engines at just a fraction of their potential power output, sliding the heavy cruiser into a higher orbit while also limiting the extent to which its artificial gravity field had to compensate for it.

"What are the Genex attack craft up to?" Knight said, looking around Reeves to where Goldman sat.

"Still holding on the other side of the primary moon." she said, "Do you want any drones sending over to take a look?"

"No." Reeves said, "If they chose to make a rush for us I want the maximum number of our own attack craft available. Station our drones between us and the moon and order our fighters and interceptors to split into two groups. One to appear above us and the other below to anyone coming around the moon. Weapons I want all turrets aligned forwards. As soon as the last of the moons comes into view open fire with everything we've got. It's missile system might still be active and we don't have a hundred drones to throw out as a shield any more."

"Enemy target dead ahead captain." Ash announced suddenly as the last of the smaller moons came into view. Unfortunately for the *Warspite's* crew the damaged part of the moon was not visible from their current position and so the fusion reactor at its heart remained protected under layers of rock.

Having already been ordered to open fire as soon as a target presented itself all of the *Warspite's* turrets and its remaining main gun fired together. Although even the main heavy neutral particle beam cannon lacked the instantaneous destructive power of the warheads fitted to the *Warspite's* heavy missiles the cruiser's beam and projectile weapons were still powerful enough to melt through the rock, especially where the magnetically accelerated gauss cannon rounds struck the moon first and caused the surface to crack.

Programmed to respond to attack, the handful of operational defence batteries that could target the *Warspite* returned fire at the cruiser but, being intended for protection against incoming missiles or attack craft, these lacked the level of firepower necessary to cause serious damage and as each of them opened fire they gave away their position. Once this had been determined one of the *Warspite's* gauss cannons would launch a rapid burst of projectiles towards them, exploiting the weakness inherent in fixed defences that they could not move out of the way before the projectiles struck them. Before their shots even hit the moon, the gauss cannons had already returned to their pattern of general bombardment that was blasting away chunks of the moon.

This continued until enough of the structure of the moon had been blasted away that the main reactor was exposed from the facing towards the *Warspite* as well as on the opposite side. As soon as this happened the gunner operating the main gun fired at the reactor. Despite the strength of the material used in the casing of the reactor, the neutral particle beam cannon was able to burn a hole right through and the magnetic field that contained the plasma at its heart was released.

"Target destroyed captain." Goldman reported as the superheated matter consumed what remained of the moon.

"Do we go after the attack craft now?" Ash suggested.

"No, not yet." Reeves replied, "Until our particle inductor is operational again I don't want us chasing after targets like attack craft. Now that they don't have any of their orbital defence bases left we can afford to wait for them to come to us. For now monitor the main moon itself for any signs of enemy activity. Target them with gauss cannons and fire at will. In the mean time I need to speak with Lieutenant Commander Shaw."

"You're on now sir." Goldman responded.

"Archangel here captain." Shaw's voice added.

"Commander what is the status of your ships?" Reeves asked.

"We lost seven to the Genex in total captain. But the big problem is fuel. We've been pushing our ships hard and our tanks are starting to run low, especially the interceptors. They just aren't built for long duration sorties." Shaw told him.

"Understood commander. I want a rotation set up for your squadrons to land and refuel and rearm. Given that you've highlighted the issue of the interceptors we'll start with them." Reeves ordered and then he glanced at Goldman and added, "See to that commander."

"Copy that captain. I'll order the interceptors back to the ship. O'Neil's squadron can go second and our own will be last." Shaw said.

"Confirmed Archangel. All craft are to land in the aft hangar as called off." Goldman told her.

"Until those attack craft show themselves it's just up to the marines now." Reeves commented.

When the marines penetrated the outpost's fourth level they cleared the way using grenades again and when the first of them dropped through the hole he fired his rifle at a Genex sentry who had been just outside the blast area of the grenades.

"Clear!" he yelled, rushing away from the hole as more marines began to drop down through it. On the other hand Lucas waited for a ladder to be deployed and climbed down carefully, by which time Willis and a pair of marines had already approached the door to the outpost's computer core and were inspecting it.

"Looks like a standard pressure door." Willis told Lucas, "We could blast through it easily but—"

"But that would risk damaging the computer on the other side that I need access to." Lucas interrupted and Willis nodded.

"We'll have to override the lock instead." he said before waving the platoon's technical specialist forwards, "Open this door." he ordered and then he stepped back to join a section of marines that positioned themselves where they could fire through the door as soon as it opened.

"Check your targets." Lucas told the marines, "I don't want stray gunfire damaging the computer.

"Got it!" the marine technician exclaimed suddenly.

"Stand to." Willis called out as the pressure door then began to slide open, "Move!" he added when the opening was big enough for his men to fit through and the marines charged into the computer core. Behind them Lucas unslung her own rifle and followed them through the doorway. Inside the core was filled with the data storage and processing machinery necessary to run the outpost, with only narrow walkways available between it. This did not present much of a problem to the marines though, their rifles were built with a bullpup configuration where the magazine was located behind the grip with spent casings ejected forwards alongside the barrel so that they could be fired equally well left or right handed.

The marines spread out, splitting up into individual fire teams as they made their way between the computer equipment to make sure that there were no Genex warriors lying in wait to leap out and attack. However, on this occasion their caution was not necessary, although the Genex had stationed sentries outside the computer core they had not been willing to risk a gun battle inside the room and there were not even any workers present to watch over the fully automated equipment.

"It's clear." Willis said, lowering his rifle as he turned towards Lucas.

"Did anyone see anything that looks like an access console?" she asked.

"Yes lieutenant. I think there's one over there." a marine corporal answered, pointing down one of the walkways.

"Show me." Lucas said and she followed the marine to a small space where several walkways met and there was a circular opening surrounded by consoles, "Yes this looks like it. Major can you let the Warspite know that we've found the computer and I'm going to start trying to access it?"

"Sure thing. What about my men? Do you still need us here?" Willis replied but Lucas shook her head.

"No, just leave me a fire team just in case the Genex send anyone to try and retake this place and then continue towards the main command centre with the rest of your platoon." she told him.

"Corporal Hastings, I want your fire team to stay here and guard the lieutenant." Willis said, looking at a nearby NCO and the other marine nodded.

"Yes major. Anyone that wants her will have to come through us first." he replied.

"Hopefully it won't come to that." Lucas commented as she sat down at one of the consoles and began to study it.

"Everyone else move out with me." Willis ordered, "We've got a command centre to storm." and the bulk of the platoon began to file out of the room.

Edison, Collister and the pair of warriors escorting them had heard the explosions that signified the Commonwealth marines breaching the level before the gunfire as the last of the sentries being despatched. Edison knew that he really ought to alert the command centre to their presence right outside the computer core but to do that would mean alerting his subordinates to his plan to write off the outpost and escape without them. If that news got out then it was likely that the dock holding the *Silent Knife* would be stormed by other leaders hoping to secure a place aboard the corvette themselves and in all likelihood the ship would never be able to take off. Instead the outpost's commanding officer waited to see what the marines would do. If they destroyed the computer core then he could easily justify fleeing without destroying the outpost since the most meaningful intelligence that the Commonwealth could gain from studying it would have been lost along with the computer. However, when the Commonwealth marines chose to withdraw Edison saw an opportunity.

"They're heading for the command centre. Give them two minutes to get further away and then we'll move in." he said. Then he looked at his bodyguards and added, "You two move in first, just in case they left anybody behind."

"Yes colonel." one of the armoured warriors replied. Then after giving the Commonwealth marines time to get far enough away that they would not notice them the two Genex warriors moved towards the computer core.

It was not far from the computer core to the command centre and the platoon of marines commanded by Major Willis soon had the entrance in sight. However, unlike the rest of the outpost where the Genex warriors had been spread thinly, a significant force had been deployed to protect the command centre and this included a pair of belt fed machine guns that had been set up behind barrier made from packing crates. Two layers of crates had been laid out horizontally on the floor to form a low wall while others had been placed vertically on top of these with narrow gaps between them for the Genex to fire through.

"Back!" the first marine to see the Genex guards called out moments before the machine guns opened fire and he was hit repeatedly. None of the rounds that hit his armoured chest plate were able to penetrate but several other rounds did and he collapsed on the spot, screaming in pain.

"Someone pull him back." Willis said, leaning around the corner to fire a burst of covering fire at the Genex. He hit no-one though and the warriors manning the machine guns were not intimidated enough to suddenly stop shooting. Therefore, the only way that the injured marine could be recovered was for someone to risk reaching out from behind cover to grab hold of him and pull him across the floor.

Pulling the pin from a grenade, Willis tossed it around the corner but it bounced off one of the vertical crates before it landed about two metres in front of the Genex defensive barrier before exploding. The packing crates had been chosen to make the barrier from because their contents were heavy and durable and this meant that the grenade blast neither destroyed nor shifted the barrier and after a moment's pause the machine guns fired again, repeated short bursts preventing Willis and his marines from charging the Genex position. Willis thought that a weapon such as a shoulder fired laser might be able to penetrate or destroy the barrier, but employing such a weapon within the outpost would be difficult. The marine firing it would be very vulnerable to attack while he was setting up and taking aim so Willis decided that a new approach was necessary instead.

"Someone take over for me." Willis said as he stepped back from the corner and let his rifle drop on its sling to his side while he began to study the floor plan on the Genex tablet again, quickly locating the command centre and focusing on the corridors surrounding it. He quickly saw that there was another approach to the command centre but he had no doubt that it too would be guarded by a squad of Genex warriors in a hastily fortified position like the one around the corner. However, there was also a side passage that connected to the corridor Willis and his marines were now it about half way around the corner towards the barrier. This would not allow his men to outflank the Genex, but it would enable them to attack from two different locations at once. Being closer it might also be easier for a marine armed with a grenade launcher to put a round through one of the gaps that the Genex were firing through, "Okay I want a squad to head back that way about twenty metres. Hang a right and then circle around until they reach the junction that connects back to this corridor and see if they can put a grenade through that barrier."

"I'm on it major." a marine sergeant responded before looking at his men and adding, "With me."

The marine squad hurried back along the corridor towards the turning but just as they reached it another group of Genex warriors appeared ahead of them and opened fire. Their shooting was instinctive and none of the marines were hit before making it through the junction but the sergeant still brought his men to a halt rather than risk having the Genex warriors at their back, "Major we've got company on your six." he transmitted using his spacesuit's built in radio, "Looks like squad strength and from the weight of fire I'd say they've got a belt fed weapon for support."

"Understood sergeant. Can you still get into position to attack the barrier?" Willis replied.

"If someone can keep those Genex off our backs, yes." the sergeant answered.

"Okay I'm sending another squad to cover you. Wait for them and then get moving." Willis ordered.

The marine squad waited, firing at the newly arrived Genex to prevent them from advancing further and cutting the squad off from the rest of the platoon. They continued to use short bursts of automatic fire to hold the Genex back until there was the familiar sound of one of their own machine guns being fired as the second marine squad arrived to support them.

"Right that's it. Let's move." the sergeant ordered and his squad began to move again, making their way towards the junction where they were to attack the Genex barrier protecting their command centre.

The two Genex warriors moved alternately while covered by the other as they closed in on the entrance to the computer core with their rifle held at the ready. One of the marines inside to protect Lucas stepped into view without realising that the Genex were outside and one of the warriors fired a single shot that struck the startled marine's faceplate. The bullet easily pierced the transparent plate before killing the marine and the two Genex warriors immediately dropped into crouching positions, expecting to come under fire at any moment.

Sure enough Corporal Hastings himself leant through the doorway and fired three rounds in rapid succession to deter the Genex from advancing further.

"We've got company! Tucker's down." he called out and deeper in the computer core Lucas stopped what

she was doing and looked around, hearing more gunfire from the direction of the entrance. Although she had faith in the capabilities of the marines assigned to protect her she still picked up her own rifle and double checked it, just in case. Then she heard a scream as another marine was hit and she got up and brought her rifle to her shoulder, considering moving to help the remaining two marines.

The firing from the direction of the door came to an abrupt halt following a sustained burst that did not sound like it came from one of the marines' seven millimetre rifles and Lucas activated her radio.

"Corporal Hastings, report." she transmitted but there was no response, not even from one of the other marines to tell her that their fire team's leader had been killed. Realising that she was now alone and that the Genex would likely be moving in to clear the computer core she switched her radio to communicate with Willis, "Major Willis this is Lieutenant Lucas. I've got Genex closing on my position and I think that the marine fire team you left here is down."

"Damn." Willis responded, "Look lieutenant we're right outside the command centre and we've got Genex on both sides. I can't get anyone to you from my platoon. I'll see if one of the others can reach you but until then you're going to have to try and stay out of sight. The Genex probably don't know that you're in there."

"Okay major. I'll wait to hear from you. If you can take the command centre then we can end this anyway." Lucas responded and she shut off her radio.

Then she thought she heard the sound of footsteps heading towards her location and she leant around one of the large racks of computer equipment that headed towards the entrance to the core. She was just in time to notice movement and she fired a single shot from her rifle that missed and then ricocheted off a far wall before embedding itself in one of the numerous computer drives in the room.

In response to this someone fired back at her and Lucas withdrew. The sound of the return gunfire did not have the sharp 'crack' of supersonic rifle rounds and this suggested to her that someone was using a pistol calibre weapon instead.

Despite the risk of damaging the equipment in the room Lucas then fired a rapid burst back towards the Genex, hoping that the demonstration of the firepower she had available would make her opponent think that they were facing another marine and that there could be more lying in wait close by. However, instead of provoking a withdrawal by the Genex, Lucas' shot provoked another short burst of fire in return. Lucas then began to consider her position, knowing that the Genex currently knew exactly where she was and she looked around at the different ways away from the console station where she was. It was then that she saw a large figure appear between two of the racks of electronics and she took aim with her rifle. However, before she could fire Lucas was suddenly struck from the side as the second Genex warrior slammed his body into her, knocking her to the floor. The warrior then ripped Lucas' rifle away from her while the first dashed forwards and aimed his own rifle towards her head.

"Stop!" Edison called out as he appeared from where he had been firing at Lucas with sidearm and as he walked closer he holstered the weapon, "You don't look like a Commonwealth marine to me." he added as he stood looking down at Lucas and then he looked at the console she had been working at, "So you were accessing our network, were you? That means that you are either an engineer or perhaps an intelligence officer. In either case lieutenant, I can see that's your rank from the markings on your suit, you will make quite a valuable prisoner." then he looked at the warriors, "Search her." he ordered, "Then make sure that she is secure. She's coming with us. Engineer Collister, engage the destruct system. The Commonwealth is welcome to this worthless lump of rock now."

"Captain I'm picking up some odd readings from inside the enemy base." one of the *Warspite's* sensor operators said.

"Can you do better than just 'odd' crewman?" Knight asked.

"Large scale thermal output but with no noticeable change in the operating status of the base." the operator replied.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman?" Reeves said, looking to his side.

"I don't know captain." she said as she studied the combined readings from all of the *Warspite's* sensors and tried to piece together an explanation.

"Feed the data down to engineering. See if Commander Bernard can shed any light on what's going on." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain." Goldman replied.

"Also get me Major Willis." Reeves added and Goldman nodded.

"You're on now." she told him.

"Major what is your status?" Reeves asked.

"Right outside the enemy command centre captain. Problem is they're dug in too well. Would you object if the command centre was slightly damaged?" Willis responded.

"How slightly major?" Reeves asked.

"A hole blown in the ceiling so that second platoon can bypass the external defences entirely." Willis said.

"What's Lieutenant Lucas' opinion on that major?" Reeves asked.

"The lieutenant is laying low captain. She's got Genex closing in and my platoon can't get to her." Willis told him.

"Captain, Commander Bernard wants to speak to you urgently." Goldman said suddenly.

"Put him through." Reeves said, nodding, "Commander, what's-

"Captain we need to get our people out of the Genex base and get ourselves away from it as quickly as possible." Bernard said without waiting for Reeves to finish.

"Why?" Knight asked when he heard this.

"The sensor readings you sent me look just like the energy profile from a fusion bomb, only in very slow motion. I think they've rigged their reactor to blow." Bernard said.

"Blowing themselves up to stop us getting the base?" Ash commented, "That sounds like the sort of thing they'd do."

"They blew up every damned city on Langley to stop us invading at the end of the war." Thomas added.

"Something that was probably just to cover their escape." Knight pointed out.

"Major Willis did you catch that?" Reeves said.

"Yes captain. Is it something that we might be able to override?" Willis responded.

"Bernard, can we shut down the self destruct?" Knight asked.

"I've no idea. But I doubt we can do it in the fifteen to twenty minutes I think we've got." Bernard answered.

"Major Willis get out of there. Fall back to the surface and we'll send down shuttles to evacuate you." Reeves ordered.

"Fall back!" Willis ordered, using his radio to broadcast to the entire company, "Everyone get out of here. This place is going to blow in a quarter of an hour."

The marines immediately began to fall back towards the airlock where they had entered the outpost. When the unit blocking the retreat of Willis and his platoon saw that they were facing a much larger number of soldiers than they had been just a few seconds earlier they pulled back as well, not realising why the Commonwealth marines had abandoned their assault on the command centre. On their way back to the hole where they had entered the outpost's fourth level the platoon once again approached the computer core and Willis attempted to contact Lucas again.

"Lieutenant Lucas do you read me? We're closing in on the computer core now. Are you still in there?" he signalled but there was no response, "First squad with me. We're going to check on Lieutenant Lucas. Everyone else get the hell out of here." he told his men before he hurried into the computer core, leaping over the bodies of Hastings and the other marines he had left to protect Lucas. Rushing to the consoles where he had last seen her, Willis now found only her space suit in pieces and dumped on the floor along with her rifle.

"Bag this stuff up." he told the marines with him, "If we get this back to Doctor Thundercloud maybe he can tell us whether she might still be alive."

"What the hell is going on?" North demanded as alarms sounded all around the command centre. When the guards outside had reported that the Commonwealth marines were pulling back he had wondered whether the outpost crew's resistance had been enough to convince them to call off their attack but now he was not so certain.

"Main reactor is still pulling in fuel at one hundred and forty percent." a nearby worker told him.

"And you can't shut it down?" North said.

"No sir. The commands have been deleted from the computer network." the worker replied.

"It's worse than that." Crawford added as he studied the readouts on a nearby console, "It looks like our entire operating system is breaking down. This can't be the Commonwealth. Someone here must have sabotaged the system."

"Get me the *Silent Knife*." North ordered, "I want to speak to Colonel Edison immediately. No excuses."

"Ah Major North." Edison's voice said, "I was wondering when you'd be calling."

"Colonel what's happening?" North said.

"What's happening major is a very old naval tradition that specified the captain should go down with his ship. That's why I chose to put myself in charge of the *Silent Knife* while putting you in charge of the outpost. Now when the outpost explodes and hopefully takes that Commonwealth cruiser and all of its marines with it you get to go down with it as well while I escape. Don't worry though. When we get back to Sanctuary I'll make sure that people hear how bravely you faced your impending death. Edison out."

Edison then shut off the *Silent Knife*'s communications and looked at Lieutenant Schafer.

"Are we ready to launch captain?" he asked, using the traditional form of address that termed the commanding officer of any craft as 'captain' regardless of their rank.

"All systems are on line and reporting normal operation and we have a Commonwealth officer hog tied naked in the strong room aft. We can launch as soon as you give your authorisation to open the hangar doors colonel." Schafer answered and Edison smiled as he punched a six digit code into a keypad in front of him.

"Space doors opening." the *Silent Knife*'s helmsman reported and Schafer nodded.

"Take us out ensign. Maximum acceleration." he said.

"Captain we have a launch." Cortez exclaimed when the *Silent Knife* burst from its hangar and accelerated away from the gas giant.

"Is it the scout ship we're after?" Reeves asked.

"I don't think so captain, although the profile is similar." Goldman answered.

"Captain I'm picking up a build up of tachyons. The ship is preparing to jump to FTL." Cortez added.

"We can't abandon our marines." Knight pointed out.

"Put me through to Lieutenant Commander Shaw." Reeves said and Goldman nodded.

"Archangel here *Warspite*." Shaw's voice said.

"Commander can your squadron intercept that ship heading for open space before it can jump to FTL?" Reeves said.

"Maybe captain but our fuel reserves are gone. We'd probably get one pass and then we'd be drifting. We'd be sitting ducks for the Genex." Shaw said.

"Very well commander. Bring your squadron home." Reeves said before he turned to Goldman, "Lieutenant

Commander Goldman send our drones after that ship. Relay them targeting information for the FTL drives. They're our only shot at stopping it from escaping now."

"Yes captain, assigning targeting instructions now." Goldman replied and outside the *Warspite* the cruiser's attack drones accelerated to follow the fleeing corvette while the manned fighters began their approach to land aboard it.

Meanwhile the shuttles and dropships that had been sent to the surface of the Genex occupied moon were just setting down outside the airlock when the first of the marines emerged from inside the outpost. These troops had been the ones looking after the company's wounded and they helped these fellow marines aboard the nearest craft before disembarking again to provide additional cover for the ships that remained on the surface while the first took off.

Most of the rest of the marines arrived in platoon size groups. Each dropship was designed to be able to hold a full platoon and with the losses they had taken this meant that the craft waiting for them had far more capacity than was actually needed, allowing the marines to rush aboard any of them that they wanted before they took off. Only Willis and the squad accompanying him arrived as a smaller group to find just three shuttles remaining for them and the marines who had carried the wounded aboard the first shuttle to lift off. "We're the last." Willis broadcast to the remaining marines and the waiting shuttle pilots, "Everyone aboard and then we can dust off."

As soon as the marines were aboard the shuttles the pilot's lifted off and accelerated towards the waiting *Warspite*.

At the same time the marines were carrying out their withdrawal the *Warspite's* drones were racing after the *Silent Knife*, something that did not go unnoticed by the crew of the corvette.

"I have eight contacts closing from aft. Accelerating at twenty-gees." the sensor operator reported.

"That's too slow for what we've seen of their missiles." Schafer said.

"Yes captain. I think that they're drones." the sensor operator replied.

"How soon can we jump to FTL?" Schafer asked, concerned at the damage the drones might be able to inflict on his ship if they managed to catch up with it.

"Course is already laid in and the hull is charged. We should have enough imaginary mass in five seconds to jump for the initial point to throw off pursuit." the helmsman said. The *Silent Knife* would not be travelling directly to the new home world of the Genex. If the ship did that then there was the risk that its position could be identified by the crew of the *Warspite* so instead the corvette would make a short jump along a different heading before dropping to sub light speed again and then completing the journey to Sanctuary once they knew that they had not been followed, "Four. Three. Two. One. Jumping."

"Captain the target just jumped away." Goldman said and Reeves frowned.

"What about our marines and fighters?" he asked.

"All fighters and interceptors are aboard and the last of the shuttle is just landing now captain." Goldman told him.

"Helm as soon as the hangar is sealed get us away from that moon at best possible speed. Don't spare the gravitons or we may not have a ship left." Reeves said.

"Last shuttle now aboard and the hangars are all reading closed." Goldman announced.

"Go!" Reeves snapped.

Ash turned the *Warspite* to face directly away from the gas giant's moon and brought its engines up to full power, accelerating away at eighteen gees. Normally the cruiser would have been able to keep up such a pace until the laws of relativity prevented any further acceleration but with its particle inductor damaged the *Warspite's* artificial gravity field now had a limited amount of the gravitons needed to keep it operational and Goldman kept a close eye on the quantity remaining, ready to tell Ash to cut acceleration before the crew were all crushed.

Behind the *Warspite* the Genex attack craft realised that something was wrong when both the cruiser and their own corvette suddenly fled from the moon and they too turned and started to accelerate away from the moon. They did not follow the *Warspite* or its drone squadron though, still fearing the effectiveness of the cruiser's defences. Instead they headed off above the system's orbital plane to get clear of any hostile craft. Two minutes after the *Warspite* began to accelerate the reactor at the heart of the Genex outpost finally reached the point where it could no longer contain the plasma held within it and despite the best efforts of the Genex crew to improvise a solution the magnetic field surrounding this collapsed. The blast shattered the entire moon, killing everyone still on or below the surface. The pieces of the moon were hurled outwards in all directions, many of them breaking up into smaller pieces as they went. Neither the *Warspite* nor the Genex attack craft had managed to get completely beyond the danger area of this expanding cloud of debris but the effects on the two were vastly different. The lightweight Genex attack craft stood no chance of surviving impacts with the debris and every last one of them was ripped apart. Even where crew were able to

eject they too then collided either with debris from the moon or wreckage from the other attack craft and all of the crew were killed. On the other hand the *Warspite* had the benefit of not only being further from the centre of the blast and also being far more heavily protected. This meant that although the ship was struck repeatedly by pieces of debris these could not penetrate the thick armour plating that coated the ship's hull. "We're clear." Goldman said when the collisions finally ceased and Ash shut off the *Warspite's* engines, letting the ship coast instead.

"What about the Genex?" Knight asked.

"It looks like they're gone." Goldman answered, "The moon their base was built on is not there any more and we're not picking up any energy emissions that would suggest any of their attack craft are still operational."

"Then we're in the clear." Knight said, looking at Reeves. However, the *Warspite's* captain was staring past him at the empty seat where Lucas normally sat.

EPILOGUE.

"Of course Mister Secretary. I'll see to it right away." the old man said before hanging up the phone.

"Well? Did he say what you needed him to grandfather?" his granddaughter asked and the old man smiled.

"The secretary told me that a corvette arrived from the Eta Indi system just under an hour ago. Carried aboard that corvette were a handful of survivors from the forward operating base in that system and a Commonwealth fleet officer who was part of a force that attacked it. Owing entirely to errors made by Jennifer Hayes and her associates the Commonwealth is now aware that our supposed extinction following the war is false and that we have survived to recreate our society, even advancing beyond where we were before the war." he said.

"And what did he ask you to do about it grandfather?"

"He asked me to make sure that Jennifer Hayes and her associates are made examples of my dear. Would you mind contacting the others? Oh and have the car brought around, we need to move quickly. I understand the *Grey Dawn* left space dock on a routine patrol half an hour ago so there is no time to waste."

"Of course grandfather. I'll make the calls now."

"What's taking so long?" Martins asked as the *Grey Dawn* continued to fly towards the outer reaches of the system where the Genex had made their new capital. For a military ship to obtain the clearance necessary to accelerate to faster than light speed was normally routine but on this occasion the permission was not being granted by traffic control.

"I don't know captain. Control just keeps telling us to stand by." the communication officer replied.

"I want to speak to them directly. I want to—" Martins began before an alarm sounded.

"Hostile lock!" the sensor operator snapped.

"Here? From where?" Martins demanded, unable to believe that his ship was coming under attack within their home system.

"We've got a destroyer moving out of eclipse at bearing two-seven starboard." the sensor operator said before suddenly adding, "Incoming!"

"Weapons free. Shoot down that missile. Helm get us back to port." Martins ordered. However, before the helmsman could turn the scout ship around and take it back to the safety of the space port orbiting Sanctuary the sensor operator spoke up again.

"We've got another ship dropping out of FTL." he said and as a second warship appeared in close proximity he added, "Hoplite-class frigate. Range two thousand kilometres."

The frigate opened fire immediately, before Martins could order evasive action and a single blast from the larger warship's main gun burned right through the scout, the last thing Martins taking in being the sudden increase in temperature in the bridge before even the air around him burst into flames.

With the *Grey Dawn* reduced to a smouldering hulk the two warships both turned towards Sanctuary and headed for home themselves.

Conrad and his men removed their packs as soon as they returned to their barracks following an exercise that had lasted most of the day. Now they sat on their bunks and chatted as they began to unpack their equipment.

"Quiet!" Conrad said suddenly, "Listen up." and the warriors all stopped their talking, enabling them to hear the whistling sound of an incoming mortar round, "Hit the deck!" Conrad shouted and the warriors threw themselves to the floor moments before the mortar round hit the roof of their building and exploded. This blew a large hole in the roof and sent debris falling all around the warriors. Looking around, Conrad saw that his men all appeared to have survived and then he looked for his rifle. Finding it quickly he ejected the magazine and crawled to his locker where he knew that there were several that held live ammunition instead of the blanks used in training. Before he could reload his rifle though, there were heavy footfalls from the other side of the door to the barracks and then it suddenly flew off its hinges as the two warriors clad in powered armour standing on the other side kicked it open. Both of the warriors were armed with machine guns and they opened fire together, spraying gunfire around the barracks. Equipped with thermal imagers in their armour, the pair could home in on the body heat of each of Conrad's men even through the debris from the collapsed ceiling.

Conrad himself was hit in his leg and collapsed, his just loaded rifle falling from his grip and sliding out of reach. In desperation he tried to drag himself across the debris-covered floor to retrieve it but just as he reached out to take hold of the weapon once more an armoured boot came down on his hand and he cried out in pain. Then he looked up at the warrior in powered armour just as the warrior aimed his machine gun down at Conrad and fired.

Horst and her family were just sitting down to dinner when the front doorbell sounded. Glancing at her phone Horst saw the feed from the porch camera showing a courier standing outside with a package despite the lateness of the hour.

"It's a delivery," she said and she turned to the worker caste servant currently laying down food in front of her children, "Go and sign for it Clara."

"Yes Doctor Horst," the servant replied.

"Do you think the delivery man was just waiting for us to start eating before ringing the bell?" Horst's husband asked in jest and Horst smiled at him. However, before she could reply there was a loud 'bang' as the front door was pushed violently open the moment that Clara unlocked it and both Horst and her husband leapt to their feet and turned to see what was going on. From where they were stood they could see that instead of a delivery man standing on their front doorstep there were at least two warriors dressed all in black and carrying automatic weapons while the security camera hung off the wall and had a device connected to it that had fed Horst the false image.

"Please don't-" Horst began but before she could continue pleading for her family's safety the first warrior shot Clara dead where she stood and a total of four heavily armed warriors rushed through the front door in the Horst family home.

"What is the meaning of this?" Horst's husband demanded as the warriors formed a line side by side and raised their weapons, but instead of replying to him they just opened fire.

Flashing blue lights on the leading and tailing escort cars ensured that traffic got out of the way of Stein's chauffeur driven vehicle while he headed home. As far as he was concerned there was nothing at all unusual about the trip he had made daily for many years until all of a sudden he heard a loud 'whoosh' from outside the vehicle that was followed by an explosion and his driver slammed on the brakes.

"What the hell is going on?" Stein snapped and he looked out of the window to see that his convoy was crossing a bridge over a wide river that ran through the capital city. Above this river, approaching the bridge at low altitude he could see a pair of military vector thrust vehicles and looking forwards he saw that the lead escort vehicle was now ablaze.

"It's an ambush," the security agent sat next to Stein's driver told him as he drew a rifle from its mounting. A flash from one of the vector thrust vehicles caught Stein's attention and he turned in time to see a second missile streak towards the bridge and slam into the tail escort vehicle. The warriors in this vehicle had already begun to disembark following the initial attack but only two of them had made it out of the vehicle fully and they were both blown off their feet by the blast.

"This is Minister Stein's vehicle," the panicked driver said into his radio, "we are under attack on the North Fourteen bridge!" but then he flinched as the radio produced a loud burst of static, "They're jamming us." he exclaimed.

With the wreckage of the two escort vehicles preventing Stein's driver from moving his vehicle either forwards or backwards and other traffic on the bridge now at a standstill, there was nowhere for the driver to use as an escape route. With their target trapped, the two vector thrust vehicles moved in and hovered over the bridge at opposite ends while a squad of warriors wearing exoskeletons to further enhance their strength beyond their existing genetic advantages dropped down from them using lines that heavier power armoured troops could not have done and began to make their way along the bridge, closing in on Stein from in front and behind. These enhanced infantrymen were easily able to make their way between the immobile traffic jamming the bridge and as they came closer they opened fire with short bursts from the machine guns their exoskeletons enabled them to wield one handed. Stein's vehicle was too heavily armoured for their rounds to penetrate but the two warriors who had escaped the rear escort vehicle were not so lucky and both died without being able to get off a shot. The guard inside Stein's own vehicle opened the door and rolled out, firing at the first of the enhanced infantry to leap onto the vehicle immediately beside him and the man toppled backwards. However, the guard could not hope to defeat two full squads of enhanced infantry on his own and when the next of the attackers appeared behind Stein's vehicle he fired a burst of machine gun fire in the guard at close range.

Stein himself remained in his vehicle even as the attackers fired through the open door into the driver's compartment and killed him as well. He had survived assassination attempts before and it was clear to him that his attackers wanted to be able to see him when they killed him so that they could confirm his death to whoever had ordered it, otherwise they would have just used another air to surface missile from one of their transports to destroy his vehicle. The armour on Stein's vehicle was designed to protect him from attacks by all manner of small arms, including weapons of the calibre used by the machine guns being used by the enhanced infantry troops on the bridge and he was confident that if he remained where he was then the local police would be able to respond before his attackers were able to get inside. Although political assassination was considered a fact of life to the Genex leadership caste it was not legal and Stein was counting on the assassins withdrawing as soon as the first police sirens were heard approaching.

However, Stein's hopes were dashed when he saw one of the warriors bound over several cars with an anti-armour laser mounted to his exoskeleton in place of the machine guns carried by the others. Pointing this at one of the doors to the passenger compartment the warrior used the laser to burn through the lock while Stein could only watch in horror. The moment that the lock was fully burned through another of the warriors ripped the door open and looked inside while Stein was backing away to the far side of the vehicle. "I can pay you!" he cried out, "Name your price and I'll-" but then he was cut off mid-sentence by a burst of machine gun fire aimed at his chest.

In his role as a strategical analyst Vale always made sure to keep a close eye on the Genex military deployment databases and he had set up his computer to alert him whenever any sudden changes were made to either of them. Therefore, when the *Grey Dawn* was suddenly listed as destroyed a message flashed up on his computer screen.

"What the hell?" he said to himself, frowning. This message was then followed by a second that informed him of an explosion at a military base following an exercise and he knew immediately that it was the one where Conrad and his men were usually stationed. Checking back with the report of the *Grey Dawn* being destroyed Vale searched for any other deployments in the area where the scout was lost and he quickly identified the frigate *Rapturous* and destroyer *Upper Hand* as having been present, "Two capital ships to take out a scout? Someone wanted to be sure." Vale said to himself as he also realised that anyone with the power and influence to order such ships to destroy another Genex vessel would have to be very well connected indeed. With the sudden deaths of Martins and Conrad too convenient to be a coincidence Vale quickly brought up a civilian news feed and checked to see if there was anything in there he could connect to anyone else associated with the plot to trigger a war between the Commonwealth and one of its neighbours. It did not take long for him to find footage recorded by bystanders of the attack on Stein's convoy that clearly showed units of enhanced infantry deploying from troop carriers before assaulting his vehicle and dragging his corpse out. Then he found a police report of gunfire at Horst's home address that was accompanied by a list of bodies found at the scene when officers responded. All of this led to one inescapable conclusion. Someone was killing off everyone associated with Hayes' plan. Quickly Vale pulled his phone from his pocket and as he ran from his office he dialled Hayes' number. However, although it rang she did not answer and it went to voicemail just as he reached the elevator.

"This is Commander Jennifer Hayes. Leave a message." Hayes' recorded voice said, followed by a beep. "Commander Hayes it's Vale. Stein, Martins and Horst are all dead. I'm getting out now and I suggest that you do the same while you still can. Whoever is behind this is bound to be coming after-" and then Vale just had time to notice the warrior standing inside the elevator as its doors slid open pointing a pistol at him before the man fired a single shot.

Hayes could see that the light was still on in Kane's office and she hoped that he would not come to the door as she returned to her own. It was now widely known among the intelligence community that the forward base in the Eta Indi system had been attacked and destroyed by a Commonwealth cruiser and Hayes knew that she was going to be in the firing line when it came to looking for a scapegoat. The last thing she needed now was Kane taunting her about this.

Moving as quietly as possible she opened her office door and slipped inside before closing it behind her. The first thing she then noticed was her phone resting on her desk where she had left it and the screen indicated that she had a message from Vale. Picking up the phone she called up the message and listened in horror as he described how everyone associated with her plan was being killed off before there was a single gunshot that made her flinch.

Cursing to herself Hayes rushed for the cupboard where she kept an emergency bag and opened it to double check the contents. Inside she found fake identity documents, a change of clothing, money and most importantly to her right now a pistol and several magazines. Inserting one of these into the weapon, Hayes slung the bag over her shoulder and rushed back to the door but when she opened it she gasped as she found her escape blocked by the old man, his granddaughter and four warriors. Instinctively Hayes brought up her pistol and aimed it at the old man's head but before she could fire his granddaughter leapt forwards and knocked it from her hand before punching her hard enough cause Hayes to fall to the floor, bleeding from her nose.

"Jennifer, you weren't planning on leaving us were you?" the old man said and then a pair of his warrior bodyguards stepped forwards and bent down to pick her up from the floor by her arms, pinning them behind her back as they produced a set of plastic handcuff ties that they used to bind her wrists.

"What's going on?" Hayes demanded as the warriors then began to tear at her clothing, ripping off her skirt, jacket and blouse as they searched her for any additional weapons, "Why don't you just shoot me and get it over with?"

"Now why would I want to do that Jennifer?" the old man asked, "George Stein, Enrico Vale, Angela Horst,

Michael Conrad and Daniel Martins are all dead. If I have you killed as well then who would be left to be punished for the way your plan has revealed our survival to the Commonwealth. No Jennifer, you are going to live. We'll find a new role for you, one where you can pay back society for your failure. All it will take is a little surgery here and there and you'll be perfectly compliant."

"No!" Hayes screamed as she realised what was to become of her, "No you can't turn me into a drone!"

It was then that Kane's office door opened as he came to investigate the noise and he came to a sudden halt when he saw Hayes now wearing only her underwear as the warriors restraining her applied more plastic ties to her ankles and then to her arms just below her elbows, pulling them together painfully.

"Alex help me!" Hayes cried out, "Whatever you want, I'll give it to you. I'll come and work for you, just don't let them take me. Please Alex."

"Shut her up." the old man's granddaughter said and a gag was pushed into Hayes' mouth.

"Well Commander Kane?" the old man asked, turning to face Kane as the gag was fixed in place, "Do you have anything to say?"

Kane smiled.

"Does this mean that Jennifer's office is now available?" he asked and the old man smiled back at him.

"Yes, I suppose it does." he replied and then as Hayes struggled in vain the warriors holding her dragged her down the corridor towards the elevators.

The old man and his granddaughter accompanied the warriors and their helpless captive into the elevator and his granddaughter noticed that the old man was smiling again.

"What's so amusing?" she asked as the elevator doors slid shut.

"Oh I was just thinking my dear." he responded, "Jennifer Hayes may still get the war she's been trying to start. The Commonwealth has been able to identify who is responsible for manipulating them these last few years. Alex Kane has seen a rival removed from her position and now we are well placed to proceed with the next stage of our own plans. All in all I think everyone emerged a winner today. Isn't that a nice thought to end on?"