

# WARSPITE: THE GATEWAY TO HELL

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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A century ago the Genex attempted to overthrow the Commonwealth in a war that was thought to have ended with their extinction. Now though a renegade officer within the Genex ranks has executed an audacious plan to unify his people with the Commonwealth only to do this he is willing to risk the total downfall of humanity.

Now the crew of the *Warspite* lead a desperate mission to save the Commonwealth's most deadly foe from the same fate that has befallen so many other civilisations...

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## PROLOGUE.

Secretary LeClair's bodyguards reached for their weapons when the door to his office in the underground bunker opened unexpectedly.

"At ease." the Secretary of the Genex government ordered when he recognised the new arrival and the warriors relaxed to let the officer at the door enter.

"Mister secretary we have to evacuate you." the officer said.

"Evacuate major?" LeClair responded.

"Yes sir, this location can no longer be considered secure." the officer told him.

"Major Olson, this bunker was designed to be totally secure." LeClair said.

"Yes sir but our forces are having to fall back further in the capital. Our machines – The machines are advancing and General Biyase's current estimate is that the entire northern quarter will fall within twelve hours. Once that happens anything in the air will be vulnerable." Olson explained.

"You mean our armed forces can't even keep control of our own capital?" LeClair said angrily.

"Mister secretary the machines' activation-" Olson began.

"Yes, yes, I realise that our own machine army gave no indication that anything was wrong until they all suddenly came online and started attacking our own people. What I want to know is what caused this and why our regular forces seem so unable to do anything about them." LeClair said and then he stood from behind his desk, "In fact I'm going to go and find out for myself."

Surrounded by his security detail the secretary exited his office, stepping from the luxuriously decorated room into the far more utilitarian appearing corridor with its concrete walls and ducts fixed to them outside. He knew the way from his office to the strategic command centre by heart and along the way guards and other passing personnel snapped to attention as he and his entourage walked past them.

"Attention!" a guard called out when LeClair entered the bustling command centre. Dozens of technicians and officers worked at consoles and a number of senior officers from all branches of service, army, navy, marines, air force and space fleet were gathered around a large central display table that showed the position of every military unit within a hundred kilometres. Here and there were a number of civilian advisers as well, acting as liaisons between the military and the civil authorities that were handling the evacuation of non-combatant personnel from the capital city.

"Carry on." LeClair said and the command staff returned to their work, "General Biyase, what is our situation?" he then asked the dark skinned man in the uniform of a Marine Corps general.

"The machines are advancing from the north. The Seventh Armoured Division tried to hold them but their position has been overrun and the machines have entered the city. Their main force is still in the suburbs but infiltrators have been reported within a hundred metres of our position." General Biyase replied.

"The docks are out of action Mister Secretary, we can't bring any more forces from the sea or evacuate that way." a naval admiral added.

"How?" LeClair asked, looking at the table and seeing that the coast was several kilometres from the front line to the north of the city.

"It was the loading robots." a civilian replied, "They went crazy at the same time as the robot army and started smashing everything up. The dock supervisor tried to shut them down but the override didn't work and they killed him."

"What happened to the safety protocols? Civilian machines shouldn't be able to harm anyone." LeClair said.

"They failed. We don't know why. Right now we've got a brigade moving through the city and taking out any robot and disconnecting computer networks to prevent whatever this is from spreading." Biyase answered.

"We still have control of the air and space for now Mister Secretary." the fleet admiral added, "Which is why we must evacuate you now. The robot squadrons based on the outer planets have activated the same as the forces here on Sanctuary but for now the fleet has them contained to the edges of the system."

"And then what?" LeClair said, "Where are we supposed to go once we're in space?"

"Admiral Dalton is mustering forces near Refuge." the fleet admiral responded, "Every system is under attack but so far Refuge is holding."

"Has there been any word from Redoubt since the last briefing?" LeClair asked and the officers around the table looked at one another nervously, "I'll take that as a 'no' then." LeClair added.

"Mister Secretary as you know our intelligence believes that whatever this is began at the orbital facility at Redoubt. The last communique from Admiral Dalton suggested that some of the officers plotting against you may have attempted to gain control of the robot forces there. He said something about an alien computer virus." Biyase told him and LeClair frowned.

"You know something about this Mister Secretary?" Biyase asked.

"Admiral Dalton warned me about it some time ago when a Member of Parliament wanted to use it. Apparently it originates from a signal designed to fool civilisations into thinking it offers them advanced

technology. Technology that focuses on robots and automation. Then it hijacks that technology to wipe out whatever civilisation received the signal. It's what wiped out the Sissusk and almost destroyed the independent colony on Verne. I had ordered it classified but obviously someone found out about it. I can only hope that those responsible were among the first casualties, otherwise I may find myself having to battle an insurrection from my political enemies as well as these machines." LeClair explained.

"That might explain some of the actions we've witnessed Mister Secretary." the senior army officer present said and he opened a separate window on the table's display, using it to show another map, "Enemy forces seized Milton's Ridge. It meant diverting a significant force away from their advance on the capital."

"You think they went for the production plants?" LeClair asked and the army officer nodded.

"Yes sir. The plants are largely automated and can be configured to produce almost any machinery. The enemy could use them to increase their numbers." he said.

"Mister Secretary we are wasting time." Biyase said, "We must get you into space. The carrier *Langley's Hope* is standing by to take you and your family to Refuge. Your wife and children are already aboard but the longer we delay the harder it will be to get you all away safely."

LeClair nodded.

"Of course general. Let's go." he said, the suggestion that failing to leave immediately could put him in increased danger being all it took for the Genex leader to agree to go.

"Come with me mister secretary." Biyase said and he turned away from the table and headed for one of the command centre's exits.

LeClair and his security detail followed the general from the command centre to an elevator. This took the party from the subsurface level to the roof of the government administrative building that was built on top of the bunker to disguise its presence. Here several warriors in powered armour stood on watch at the roof's edge, looking down into the streets that were largely deserted now that the city was coming under attack and searching them with their armour's integral sensor systems for signs of enemy activity. The reason for Biyase bringing Secretary LeClair to the roof was in the centre though, an armoured dropship with its engines idling.

"Hurry up." one of the dropship's crew called out from the back of the craft, waving the secretary and his party towards him, "We've already come under fire from airborne anti-personnel drones the machines are sending this way."

"Hurry up mister secretary. We should-" Biyase began before all of a sudden there was the sharp 'crack' of a high velocity projectile struck the general in his chest. Lacking any body armour, the man fell dead instantly while two of the warriors standing at the edge of the roof turned towards the source of the shot that their armour's sensors rapidly identified. This was a small rotor drone less than a metre across that mounted a light projectile weapon beneath it and both warriors targeted it with the laser weapons built into their armour. There were two rapid flashes of light from the beam weapons and the drone promptly burst into flames and spun towards the ground.

At the same time as the armoured warrior sentries were taking out the drone the warriors escorting Secretary LeClair suddenly closed in tight around him to form a shield with their own bodies. Then they grabbed hold of him and dragged him aboard the waiting dropship.

"Clear!" one of the bodyguards snapped and the crewman by the door slammed his hand on the control to close it at the same time as he activated the intercom headset he wore.

"The secretary is aboard and we're secure for take off." he said.

"Okay we're moving now." the pilot responded from the cockpit and before anyone even had the chance to strap themselves into any of the seats in the passenger compartment of the dropship the craft's engines roared and it shook as it rose up off the roof.

The pilot pulled back on the flight controls as soon as the dropship was airborne and began to accelerate skywards before even raising its landing gear. As the dropship gained altitude the pilot pre-empted any attack that might be launched against his craft by ejecting the physical countermeasures that it carried to decoy any missiles while also activating its electronic defences to try to prevent any weapon locks in the first place.

It took less than two minutes for the dropship to get from the roof into space where a large number of warships orbited the Genex capital planet. These varied from light warships less than a hundred metres in length to a smaller number of massive capital ships up to two thousand metres in length and it was towards a trio of these that the dropship pilot steered his craft. This formation consisted of a pair of battlecruisers that flanked a large fleet carrier and squadrons of attack craft as well as escorting frigates and destroyers surrounded these larger ships. As soon as he made the course change an alarm sounded in the cockpit when the dropship detected that it was being targeted.

"Approaching dropship this is the *Langley's Hope*, identify yourself." a voice said sternly.

"*Langley's Hope* this is *Genex One*. We have the secretary aboard and are en route to dock." the pilot responded.

"Understood *Genex One*. You have priority clearance to dock on pad four." the officer aboard the carrier *Langley's Hope* said and as the dropship flew closer a squadron of fighters flew towards it to provide it with cover on its final approach.

The pilot flew the dropship into the carrier's massive central docking bay and set the craft down on a pad marked with a large number '4'. The docking bay itself was open to space and instead of closing the outer doors so that air could be pumped back in the pad began to descend into a smaller, isolated airlock chamber beneath it and as soon as the pad reached the bottom of this chamber an armoured door slid shut above it to seal it off from the main docking bay. In turn this allowed the isolated chamber to be repressurised and as soon as a suitable level of atmospheric pressure had been reached an honour guard of marines led by one of the *Langley's Hope's* senior officers entered, forming two lines either side of the dropship's main deployment hatch.

"Attention!" one of the warriors ordered when the hatch opened and Secretary LeClair emerged, stepping down onto the deck.

"Mister secretary." the officer said as she too stood at attention.

"At ease captain." LeClair replied, "What is our status?"

"A course is being laid in for Haven. Admiral Fischer will give the order to depart as soon as you instruct." the captain answered and LeClair nodded.

"Very good captain. What about the machine forces?" he added.

"They appear to be gathering in force approximately six light minutes from our position. The admiral expects them to attack as soon as they gather enough vessels to match our own numbers. He believes that when we withdraw their attack on Sanctuary will be accelerated." the officer said.

"Then we should leave before they are strong enough to match our current force captain. Tell the admiral to break orbit immediately." LeClair told her.

Haven, the Genex colony world in the Cordoba Durchmusterung -50 12929 system also had a large number of warships in orbit around it when the battle group led by the *Langley's Hope* arrived. The planet Haven had an environment similar to that of Earth, just as all the Genex colony worlds had but now a large section of the surface was obscured by the dense cloud of particulate matter hurled into the upper atmosphere by multiple surface level nuclear detonations.

"Admiral the light cruiser *Enigma* is hailing us." one of the *Langley's Hope's* bridge officers announced as the carrier approached Haven.

"*Enigma*?" Admiral Fischer said, frowning, "What the hell is that ship doing here?"

The *Enigma* was one of a small number of derelict alien built vessels that the Genex had discovered more than a century earlier, at a time when humanity had yet to encounter any sentient life in the galaxy other than themselves. Proof of the existence of other spacefaring species had prompted the Genex to try to overthrow humanity's Commonwealth, believing that only their genetically engineered nature could unify the species against any alien threat. That war had been a disaster for the Genex and when they were forced to flee beyond charted space they took the alien ships with them. However, since no-one could agree the best way of using them all the alien ships had remained in dock.

"I ordered the ship deployed admiral." LeClair announced as he entered the *Langley's Hope's* bridge in time to overhear what Fischer had said, "Admiral Dalton requested the use of the ship and I granted it. I expect he is using it as his flagship."

"There are at least forty ships in orbit with tactical superiority over the *Enigma*. Why would he use a light cruiser as his flagship?" Fischer pointed out.

"I suspect that it is because he trusts the crew of the *Enigma* whereas he is uncertain about the loyalties of the other crews but perhaps we should ask him. Is it Admiral Dalton who is trying to make contact?" LeClair said.

"The communication is accompanied by a flag officer's clearance code sir." the communication officer said.

"Are we close enough for real time?" Fischer asked.

"Approximately half a second delay at this range admiral." the communications officer answered.

"Put him through to the central console." Fischer ordered and a new window appeared on the central console that Fischer and LeClair stood beside. This showed an image of an elderly white haired man in the uniform of a Genex admiral.

"Admiral Dalton, I don't usually see you in uniform." LeClair said when he saw this. Although he was a fleet officer, Dalton had spent much of his career in intelligence where he had become a figure of fear and largely referred to simply as 'The Old Man'.

"I thought it better to dress for my role as commander of this fleet mister secretary." Dalton replied after the brief pause caused by the time taken for radio signals to travel back and forth between the *Langley's Hope* and the *Enigma*.

"Mister Secretary command of this fleet should be entrusted to someone with more experience of naval operations." Fischer said.

"Such as yourself Admiral Fischer? How well did your experience serve you at Sanctuary? You couldn't even keep our capital safe enough for our leader to be able to remain in his headquarters. On the other hand under my leadership the main force of robotic combat units on Haven has been eliminated." Dalton said.



"Then you are responsible for the after effects of a nuclear blast that we are seeing Admiral Dalton?" LeClair asked and the old man smiled.

"Seven nuclear blasts actually. I authorised the captain of the Valley Grant to target the main holding facility for our automated combat units on the planet when contact with it was lost. Some of the machines were able to escape before the orbital strike and the corruption has spread to some civilian networks but for now at least the situation here is stable." he said.

"Admiral Dalton makes a good argument Admiral Fischer. Perhaps if our forces had been bolder on Sanctuary then we would be there. LeClair said, looking at the admiral beside him.

"The appointment of a fleet commander is of course at the discretion of the executive branch of government." Fischer responded.

"Yes it is. Admiral Dalton I hereby appoint you to-" LeClair began before Dalton's interruption reached the *Langley's Hope*.

"Mister Secretary in this situation I feel I should counsel you against appointing me as your supreme fleet commander. Admiral Renard aboard the *Phantasm* or perhaps Admiral Bennett if she is able to reach us would both make for better choices in these circumstances. Haven is now secure and the only way that the machines will be able to take it is if they launch an all out fleet assault. In that situation either of those two officers would be better able to direct the actions of our warships. I maintained command only while we lacked suitable civilian oversight that, now you are here, we have. There are other duties that I feel require my attention." he said.

"Such as" Fischer replied, clearly irritated that Dalton had not only called into question his abilities as a fleet commander but also recommended that Secretary LeClair chose from two of his rivals for command of the ships gathered here.

"Such as determining the exact state of our forces and our territory. We have five settled worlds and dozens of outposts systems that could be under attack. With our interstellar communications currently limited to prevent the spread of the virus that has caused this the only way we can be certain of how far it has spread is for me to take the *Enigma* and visit each system in turn. Then we will know exactly what we are facing." the old man said.

"And what do you already know of this virus admiral?" Fischer said, "What can our intelligence service tell us?"

"It appears to be derived from the alien virus that destroyed the Sissusk Empire as well as the alien species that once inhabited Verne. I believe that the aliens who built the *Enigma* and the other ships we found also fell victim to the same virus. Unfortunately since we had such a large existing robotic military force for the virus to take control of the process has been massively accelerated. We know that certain factions within the military and congress have been plotting against the secretary and I suspect that they were able to get hold of a copy of the original alien transmission that carried the virus, most likely from records left behind by the late Congressman Stein. They probably planned to use it to take control of our robotic forces themselves and it got out of hand." the old man explained, leaving out the truth of his own hand in releasing the alien computer virus, "We should also bear in mind that any senior officer who has been able to rally any of our forces to their command instead of yours could be planning to remove you from office." the old man added.

"Very well Admiral Dalton. You are to detach the *Enigma* from the fleet here and take it to our other systems and assess the situation at each. If you doubt the loyalty of any military officer or civilian official you encounter then you are authorised to terminate their position and appoint a replacement of your choosing." LeClair told him, "Before you leave though I would like your current assessment of our chances."

There was a pause before the old man answered, longer than could be explained by simple transmission delay but then he answered.

"Overall fair to good." he said.

"We're being forced back on every front. How can you be so optimistic?" Fischer said and the old man smiled.

"Let's just say that I have what our ancestors would call 'a little faith.'" he replied.

## 1.

There were already three separate Commonwealth member nations on the planet Centaur in the Gamma Pavonis system, located at the edge of the Outer Colonies region and the crowd was gathered to mark the creation of the fourth on a previously unsettled continent. Such ground breaking ceremonies typically drew a crowd of a few hundred at most, drawn from the leaders of the new colonial effort as well as a small Commonwealth delegation and a handful of local journalists. However, for this particular ceremony the crowd was in the thousands. In addition to the usual Commonwealth presence there was also a sizeable military honour guard present as well as elected representatives from not only the existing three nations of Centaur but from other planets as well. The pool of journalists was drawn from all across the Commonwealth and in addition to them crowds of private citizens had also made the long journey to witness what was being heralded as a potential turning point in the development of the Commonwealth itself. The issue was not the creation of another nation on Centaur, but the colonists themselves.

For the first time in history the Commonwealth would be admitting a member nation that had a non-human population.

The Krawlek were an avian looking species, with elongated necks that ended in beaked heads. This physiology made it impossible for them to speak human languages and communication between the two species had to take place using electronic translation equipment and robots programmed with both languages. Former slaves of the reptilian Sissusk, several thousand Krawlek had been liberated by a human exploratory fleet before they could be taken to wherever the machines directed by the mysterious alien computer virus was taking its captive populations and since then they had lived as refugees on Centaur. Now though they were establishing a new homeland of their own and would be becoming a part of the Commonwealth that had freed them.

"The establishment of a new colony is always good news," the senior Commonwealth dignitary present said into the microphone on the podium mounted on the stage she stood on facing the crowd seated in rows in front of her while several other important guests sat behind her, "but today this ceremony marks a new chapter in the history not only of humanity but of all known sentient life. For the first time the Commonwealth will become an organisation not only committed to bringing together the nations of man in peace and co-operation but also the nations of all other species who share our values. The Krawlek came to us as newly freed slaves with nothing to call their own but in the months they have been on Centaur they have shown their eagerness to try and rebuild what they had before war and occupation by the Sissusk took it from them. The admission of this new Krawlek nation that, although unpronounceable to any human I am told is to be called 'Land of New Beginnings' in their primary language is just the first in what is likely to be a number of alien nations that will be admitted to the Commonwealth and I can confirm that as we speak Commonwealth officials are undertaking negotiations to admit several Brekken nations to the Commonwealth as well."

This statement drew a number of startled looks and gasps from certain places in the gathered crowd as well as glances towards the small number of fur covered Brekken among the audience, all of whom wore military uniforms. The Brekken had first been contacted by the Commonwealth about fifty years earlier, at which point they had possessed a medieval level of development. In the following decades they had developed rapidly with human help but had to master even powered atmospheric flight for themselves, let alone space flight and interstellar travel. This massive difference in technology as well as issues relating to the different attitudes of their nations towards abandoning cultural traditions such as absolute monarchs and slavery had resulted in them remaining independent of the Commonwealth.

"It is now my pleasure to introduce to you Ak'Tak'Kar, the newly elected First Minister of this new nation who will say a few words of his own." the Commonwealth dignitary added and there was applause from the crowd as he stepped back and one of the avian aliens rose from his seat to approach the podium.

Standing where the human dignitary had a few moments before the alien let out a squawking sound. The microphone mounted on the podium automatically determined that this was the language of the Krawlek and provided a translation so that the audience could understand what was being said.

"Thank you mister ambassador." the Krawlek said, "I cannot overstate the pleasure it gives me to be here today. My people were enslaved by the Sissusk and then faced extinction at the hands of the computer intelligence. We mourn the loss of the rest of our species but thanks to the Commonwealth and in particular the forces commanded by Captain Reeves of the cruiser *Warspite*, who is here with us today," and the Krawlek pointed a feathered arm towards one of the men sat in the audience wearing the uniform of a Commonwealth fleet captain and many of the cameras present also turned towards him briefly before focusing on Ak'Tak'Kar again as he continued speaking, "and it is his honour that we will be naming our first settlement, the capital of our new homeland 'Reeves'. Here we will take our place among the other member nations of the Commonwealth to work with our new human allies in the advancement of both our species."

There were several more speeches from both human and Krawlek speakers before a group consisting mainly of Krawlek but also including the senior Commonwealth dignitary present gathered just in front of the stage and at this point Captain Reeves was also invited out of the crowd to join them as Ak'Tak'Kar used a shovel to ceremonially break the ground to symbolise the beginning of the construction of the new city and there was more applause.

"Captain Reeves will you be staying?" the Commonwealth dignitary asked Reeves quietly as the applause was dying down but Reeves shook his head.

"No ambassador, I have to return to my ship. I'm expecting to receive new orders soon." he replied.

"The Genex? I thought they were in the Indus Sector, not Pavo." the ambassador commented.

"Yes but Pavo is right next to Indus and any conflict could easily spill over. Added to which my crew has more experience in dealing with the Genex than any other." Reeves pointed out.

"Ah yes, I understand that you brought that Genex woman back with you." the ambassador said before they were approached by a large man in the uniform of a Commonwealth marine major.

"Major Willis." Reeves said.

"Captain Reeves I'm sorry to interrupt." Willis said.

"Not at all, go ahead major." Reeves replied.

"Commander Goldman just contacted us from the *Warspite*, Rear Admiral Kim wants to see you as soon as possible aboard the *Ashford's Fury*." Willis told him.

"Is our shuttle ready?" Reeves asked and Willis nodded.

"The pilot says he can launch as soon as we're aboard." he said.

"Then we should go." Reeves told him before turning to the Commonwealth ambassador and adding, "I'm sorry about this but duty calls ambassador."

"Of course captain. I'll explain to the others." the ambassador said before Reeves and Willis turned to leave, walking away from the area where the ground breaking ceremony was being held towards where the various shuttles and aircraft that had brought the attendees here were gathered on flat ground.

"Captain Reeves!" a woman's voice called out as the two officers walked across the open ground towards their shuttle and Willis glanced over his shoulder.

"Uh-oh. Reporters." he said when he saw the woman and two men carrying sound and camera equipment rushing towards them.

"I think I'd rather be dealing with Sissusk than journalists. At least those reptiles have an excuse for being cold blooded." Reeves commented.

"Captain Reeves I'm Sandra Sands of the Commonwealth News Association do you have any comment about the plan to admit Brekken nations into the Commonwealth?" the woman said, leaping in front of the officers.

"No." Reeves said simply as he and Willis stepped apart to go around her.

"No you don't have a comment or no you don't approve?" she added.

"Major do you happen to know where the Commonwealth press officer is at the moment?" Reeves said.

"No idea captain. Sorry." Willis replied with a smile.

"Then under Commonwealth Fleet Regulations I can't give what would be an unauthorised interview Miss Sands." Reeves said as the shuttle from the *Warspite* came into view a short distance ahead of them along with the two marine guards on duty outside it and when they saw Reeves and Willis approach with the news team hurrying after them they straightened up.

"Oh come on. How about I don't use your name?" the reporter said.

"If my name's not important then I suggest you ask one of the other officers back there. I seem to remember one who was talking the ears off anyone who would listen." Reeves said.

"Okay I admit it, an interview with you would be ratings gold. How about some comment about the Sissusk prisoners of war being held here on Centaur? Some are saying that they should be released now that they could be the last of their species left alive." the reporter said.

"As I've already told you, you will have to clear it with the press office before I can give you an interview. Unfortunately I'm about to board this shuttle and return to my ship. Goodbye Miss Sands." Reeves said before he stepped aboard the shuttle.

The reporter also moved towards the open hatch but she immediately found her way blocked by Willis.

"I really wouldn't recommend trying to board a Commonwealth military vessel without permission miss. My men are very well trained at anti-intruder operations." he said and he glanced at the two armed marines before looking back at the reporter and smiling.

The Lincoln-class battleship *Ashford's Fury* was one of the largest vessels orbiting Centaur. Ordinarily the vessel was based at the fleet base located in the Delta Pavonis system located about half way between Centaur in the Gamma Pavonis system and Earth but it along with three other vessels of the class had been sent to Gamma Pavonis, along with numerous other warships, to take part in a mission beyond the frontiers of Commonwealth space. One of the four mighty battleships had been destroyed during that mission and



another badly damaged but the mission had been a success and the identity of the force responsible for manipulating the Commonwealth into encountering the first alien species with technology to rival humanity's had been revealed. The Genex, a genetically altered faction of humanity that had launched a violent uprising aimed at overthrowing the Commonwealth a century earlier. That uprising had been put down and the Genex believed to be destroyed but now it was known that they had survived, relocating far beyond the Fringe Worlds to rebuild their forces.

Prior to the expedition the Commonwealth fleet stationed in the Gamma Pavonis had been commanded by Admiral Mitchell aboard the carrier *Jericho*. However, she had been killed when her ship was hit and command of the fleet had then fallen to Rear Admiral Kim aboard the *Ashford's Fury*. Thus when the fleet had returned to Commonwealth space the rear admiral and his squadron of battleships had remained at Gamma Pavonis instead of returning to their home base while a permanent replacement for Admiral Mitchell was found.

"We're cleared to dock directly with the *Ashford's Fury*. Secondary port side airlock." the pilot announced over the intercom as the shuttle approached the massive warship.

"Sounds like the admiral wants us in and out quickly." Willis commented, smiling. Docking at an airlock instead of landing in a hangar meant that there was no need to seal and pressurise the hangar before the shuttle's passengers could disembark and the process would not have to be reversed for them to depart.

"I can't say that I'm opposed to that. I'd rather be back aboard the *Warspite* where I know I'm not about to be ambushed by reporters." Reeves said, "You know one actually turned up at my home yesterday?"

"Looking for your house guest?" Willis asked.

"I suspect so." Reeves answered before there was a dull 'clump' as the shuttle made contact with the *Ashford's Fury*.

"Seal established." the pilot announced.

"Okay let's do this." Reeves said.

"Do you want us to accompany you sir?" one of the marine guards asked as he stepped to the hatch leading to the battleship they were docked with and prepared to open it.

"No thank you private. I think Major Willis and I will be safe enough aboard one of our own battleships."

Reeves said and he and Willis got up and walked over to the hatch.

As soon as the hatch was opened they stepped through into the *Ashford's Fury* where a small unit of marines armed with rifles stood at attention just beyond the battleship's airlock chamber while an officer with a lieutenant's markings on his duty uniform stood at the end of the line and faced the new arrivals.

"Permission to come aboard lieutenant?" Reeves said.

"Granted sir." the lieutenant responded, "The admiral is this way."

The lieutenant led Reeves and Willis from the airlock to the battleship's bridge, located as was typical for human capital ships deep within its structure as extra protection from damage during battle. Admiral Kim himself was standing near the centre of the bridge when Reeves and Willis were led in, studying the display of the central console while other members of the bridge crew busied themselves making sure that the systems were in working order for when the battleship was next called into action.

"Captain Reeves of the *Warspite* to see you admiral." the lieutenant announced and Kim looked up.

"Very good lieutenant. You are dismissed." he said.

Reeves and Willis both then approached the central console to join Kim.

"Admiral." Reeves said.

"Captain. I hear you're something of a celebrity now." Kim commented.

"The Krawlek have named a city after him." Willis replied and Kim smiled.

"Is there a statue?" he asked.

"Not yet." Reeves replied.

"Give it time captain." Kim said, "Now down to business, I expect you already know that a large Commonwealth fleet is being gathered at Gliese Eight-Four-Two in the Indus Sector."

"Yes admiral." Reeves said, nodding.

"Well I can tell you that that fleet is to be deployed to Genex space. Officially just to evaluate the threat posed by their forces and the alien AI program you reported was unleashed there." Kim said.

"And unofficially?" Reeves asked.

"Despite certain concerns over the morality of requiring people to undergo an invasive medical procedure before offering them help, the Commonwealth has voted to extend an offer of friendship to the faction led by the individual you met with in the Luyten two-one-two nineteen system. Any Genex willing to follow him and undergo the treatment necessary to ensure that their offspring will be ordinary humans instead of more Genex will be permitted to seek shelter within the Commonwealth." Kim said.

"And what about those that don't admiral?" Willis said.

"No armistice was ever signed at the end of the war major. Any Genex force that does not fully co-operate will be fired upon if it tries to enter Commonwealth space. I understand that a significant minority of

Commonwealth members favoured simply reinforcing our territory and waiting to see if that alien AI even bothered coming our way after dealing with the Genex." Kim said.

"So in other words we are free to engage any targets." Reeves commented and Kim nodded.

"Exactly captain. Of course your exact rules of engagement will depend on the fleet's commanding officer." Kim said.

"The *Ashford's Fury* isn't going to be a part of the fleet as well?" Reeves asked and Kim shook his head.

"No captain. My squadron will remain here at Centaur. We still can't be certain that the Ticik aren't going to respond to our engagement in the Alpha Pavonis system with an attack on the Commonwealth. If they do attack then that attack will take place here and with the *Jericho* in dry dock and the *Warspite* deployed in Genex space that leaves the defences of Gamma Pavonis looking pretty thin. My battleship squadron will make sure that you still have a base to come back to. The same goes for the Caliphate."

"Ah yes, my intelligence officer Lieutenant Lucas told me that they appear to be nearing completion of that assault cruiser they've been working on." Reeves said.

"Yes. Obviously though as much of a threat as it could be to Centaur itself the planet's own defence forces along with our battleships would make short work of it. There's also the issue of the alien species encountered in the Draco Sector. The Commonwealth still knows little about them or their motives so more forces need to be kept in that region as well. Both of those will limit the ships that can be spared for this mission." Kim added.

"Still it's nice to know that I don't need to pack my family off to somewhere safer." Willis commented.

"So when are we to leave admiral?" Reeves said.

"As soon as you can make the *Warspite* ready." Kim told him. I've been told that you'll be equipped with appropriate mission adaptive modules once you get to Gliese Eight-Four-Two. There is one thing though Captain Reeves, you need to obtain the services of the foremost expert that we know of in regards to the Genex and their territory."

"I think I know where this is going." Willis said, smiling at Reeves.

"You mean Jennifer Hayes, don't you admiral?" Reeves added.

"Yes. She worked for their intelligence service for almost twenty years according to her initial debrief. I understand that she has been staying with you since you got back to Centaur." Kim said.

"Yes, I had a spare room and I thought it better for her to be in private housing rather than on a military base where she'd be little more than a prisoner." Reeves said.

"Well the Commonwealth thinks that now is the best chance for her to prove her claims to have switched loyalties to us. You are to take her aboard the *Warspite* to Gliese Eight-Four-Two where the fleet commander will decide how she will be assigned. She's to be given the honorary rank of lieutenant for the purpose of pay and privileges but she won't have any authority to give orders on whatever ship she is assigned to." Kim explained.

"So she might not be serving aboard the *Warspite*?" Reeves said.

"That depends on the fleet commander. I've not been informed of his strategy, only the basic Commonwealth objectives." Kim replied.

"Major are you okay getting to the *Warspite* form here?" Reeves asked, looking at Willis and the marine nodded.

"Of course captain. I can take a transit car to her berth. I take you're heading back planet side to collect our passenger?" Willis responded.

"Yes' it's the only way I can be sure my house is properly secured before we leave anyway. I'll join you as soon as I can." Reeves told him.

"Any instructions before you arrive captain?" Willis said.

"No, I don't think so. Just make sure that the crew know we're shipping out as soon as possible. Have Commander Knight issue a recall to any crew not aboard and tell Commander Bernard that any repairs that are outstanding will have to wait until we get to our destination." Reeves told him.

"Yes captain." Willis said.

"Admiral is there anything else?" Reeves asked, turning back towards Admiral Kim.

"No, you are dismissed captain. Major." he said.

"Yes sir." Reeves said and then he and Willis turned to leave.

"Oh captain there is just one more thing." Kim called out to them.

"Yes admiral?" Reeves asked and Kim smiled.

"Good hunting." he said.



Jennifer Hayes had a slim build and was tall for woman, but not so tall that it had made buying clothes difficult and she was holding one outfit up against her after another to look at herself in the mirror to compare their appearance when she heard the front door open.

"Jennifer it's me." Reeves called out.

"I'm up here. My clothes arrived." she responded and Reeves climbed the stairs towards her bedroom.

"You are wearing some of them aren't you?" Reeves commented.

"Just a robe right now but I'm decent if that worries you." Jennifer said.

"It might worry you rather more when you hear what I have to say." Reeves said as he reached the doorway and looked into the bedroom where Jennifer stood looking at herself.

"You better not be about to tell me that the Commonwealth wants its money back. I spent half the allowance they gave me on these clothes and I'll need the other half to pay my way here with you." she said.

"The *Warspite* is being deployed." Reeves said and Jennifer suddenly turned towards him.

"You mean I won't be able to stay here? Where is the Commonwealth sending me?" she asked.

"Actually you're coming with me aboard the *Warspite*. We're going to need your expert advice." Reeves told her and she smiled.

"You mean the Commonwealth is going to help the Genex?" she said.

"They've decided to accept Admiral Dalton's offer." Reeves answered.

"You know that the old man can't be trusted?" Hayes commented and Reeves smiled.

"You have pointed that out on more than a few occasions. However, we won't be alone this time. We'll be part of a fleet and the Commonwealth thinks that having you along with us will make things easier. You're the only person we can rely on who knows anything about Genex territory. Now get a move on Lieutenant Hayes." he said.

"Lieutenant? I was a commander in the Genex intelligence service." Hayes said.

"Yes and how did that work out for you? You ended up bound, gagged and sat in a pool of your own bodily waste for a week when your superior shot you into space. Just be glad the Commonwealth will be paying you." Reeves said.

"Paying me? Well that makes all the difference." Hayes said as she smiled back at Reeves.

Returning to the *Warspite*, the shuttle entered the docking bay at the front of the eight hundred metre long heavy cruiser and Reeves and Hayes waited for the hangar to be pressurised before disembarking. As they crossed the deck of the hangar the *Warspite's* first officer and chief engineer came walking towards them, joining them as they walked back in the other direction.

"Commander Knight. Commander Bernard." Reeves said.

"Captain. Lieutenant." Knight responded and the first officer smiled at Hayes.

"Do I need to salute?" Hayes whispered to Reeves.

"I think we can skip that. You aren't part of the formal chain of command." he replied.

"I hear you'll be coming with us." Bernard added.

"At least as far as our first stop." Reeves told him.

"Which is where exactly? Major Willis just told us we were shipping out and then headed to check on his marine company." Knight said.

"We're heading out to Gliese Eight-Four-Two in the Indus Sector." Reeves told them, "From there we're heading into Genex space. The Commonwealth has decided to take up the offer made by the man I met with. What's our current situation?"

"All major repairs have been completed." Bernard answered, "We have a few secondary electrical problems still but nothing that we can fix with a bit of rewiring en-route."

"And all our personnel are accounted for. We've almost ninety percent aboard and the rest on their way. Lieutenant Commander Shaw will probably be the last one to get here, she and her fiance had just left for a vacation after being separated for so long by our last deployment." Knight added and Reeves winced.

"Who was the lucky one who got to tell her to come back?" he commented.

"Goldman delegated that duty to one of her staff. Someone who had annoyed her." Knight said with a grin.

"What about me?" Hayes asked, "Where do you want me?"

"I'm sure the captain knows where he wants you." Bernard said and while he and Knight smiled at one another Reeves frowned.

"She will need quarters." he said.

"Already sorted, one of the vacant officer's cabins. It's an ensigns cabin though." Knight said.

"Then if someone could show her to them I want to get to the bridge." Reeves said and Knight turned

towards one of the ground crew that had entered the hangar to conduct maintenance on the shuttle that Reeves and Hayes had arrived aboard.

"Crewman." he called out.

"Yes commander?" the man asked as he rushed towards the officers.

"Crewman I need you to show Lieutenant Hayes to the quarters that have been assigned to her." Knight said, reaching out for the tablet computer that the technician held so he could enter the details of Hayes' quarters. "Bear in mind that her rank is honorary crewman. She can't give you an order and she isn't cleared to anywhere without permission." Reeves told the technician.

"Yes sir." the man responded as he took the tablet back from Knight and then he nodded as he checked the information on it, "This way please miss." he added, looking at Hayes while the *Warspite's* three most senior officers made their way towards the cruiser's bridge.

The bridge of the *Warspite* was similar to that of the larger *Ashford's Fury*, with a large console at the centre of the room that officers could gather around. Behind this was the navigation station and then the row of consoles for the captain, first officer, operations officer and intelligence officer while in front was the helm.

The sensor operators sat along one side of the bridge while along the other were the consoles for the cruiser's gunners. With the ship in dock few of these seats were currently occupied but Thomas, the ship's navigator, Ash, its chief helmsman and Goldman the operations officer were currently stood at the main console when the others entered the room. Meanwhile Lieutenant Lucas, the *Warspite's* intelligence officer sat at her own console.

"We saw you on television captain." Goldman said, smiling at Reeves.

"Are they going to put a statue up?" Ash added and Reeves smiled back at the trio.

"It has been suggested. I've been asked to provide pictures for them to work off." he replied.

"We all helped rescue those Krawlek." Lucas pointed out from the back of the bridge, "Do we get anything named after us?"

"I'm sure that the Jessica Lucas Sewage Treatment Plant could be arranged if the captain put in a good word for you." Bernard commented.

"Lieutenant Commander Thomas," Reeves said, ignoring the banter between his crew, "We need a course for Gliese Eight-Four-Two."

"Easy." Thomas replied, nodding, "It's less than a dozen light years away. We can be there in about a day and a half."

"Good. Once there we'll be rendezvousing with a Commonwealth fleet that will advance into Genex space as soon as we've had the chance to swap out our mission adaptive modules from the drone carriers we've got right now. Officially we're going there on a reconnaissance in force mission. Unofficially though the Commonwealth has decided that it is willing to accept the offer made to us by this Admiral Dalton." Reeves explained.

"The guy that Jennifer Hayes says can't be trusted." Goldman commented.

"I'm not so sure I trust her." Lucas added.

"She helped you escape." Thomas reminded her.

"Only to help herself." Lucas replied.

"Nevertheless she is the best source of intelligence we have regarding the Genex and their forces. While some of those may be willing to fight alongside us, others may not. Plus of course there is the issue of the AI controlled ships. Lieutenant Lucas do you have a copy of the report of Miss Hayes' debriefing?" Reeves said and Lucas nodded.

"Yes captain. I was just going through it now. Unfortunately there are some significant gaps in it. Being a spy she didn't have much involvement in military operations." she said.

"Well if you have any questions you can just ask Lieutenant Hayes." Reeves said.

"Lieutenant?" Ash commented, "I thought she was a commander."

"The Commonwealth has given her an honorary commission. She will be treated as an officer but she is not part of the chain of command and she can't give anyone an order. Make sure everyone is aware of this."

Reeves said, looking around at his senior officers, "Now Mister Thomas if you wouldn't mind plotting us a jump to Gliese Eight-Four-Two I'd like to leave as soon as all our people are aboard."

"On that subject captain we've been contacted by the dockyard control. They say that there is another group of passengers coming aboard." Goldman said and Reeves frowned.

"Dignitaries from the Commonwealth?" he asked.

"No captain. Word that we're being deployed must have leaked to the press because apparently our press office got a request to embed a team." Goldman told him.

"You're kidding me." Reeves responded.

"No captain. I saw the order myself. Approved by fleet command." Goldman told him.

"I wonder how they managed to pull that one off?" Knight said.

"Well if we're stuck with them we'll just have to make the most of it. Get Major Willis to alert his marines to make sure none of these journalist go wandering anywhere they shouldn't be." Reeves said and Goldman

nodded.

"Yes captain. I'll make the arrangements for Miss Sands and her crew." she said.

"Wait, did you say 'Sands'? As in Sandra Sands?" Reeves asked.

"That's right. Do you know her?" Goldman answered and Reeves sighed.

"We've met. She was at the ground breaking ceremony for the *Krawlek*. She tried to get an interview and I fobbed her off by telling her to contact the press office. She must have gone through with it and found out about the deployment when they said I wouldn't be available." he said.

"I take it you don't want to give her an interview then captain?" Ash said.

"No I do not commander. Lieutenant Commander Goldman, as operations officer it will be your job to brief that woman. Liaise with Lieutenant Lucas regarding what she can and cannot be told. Oh and under no circumstances is she to send any signals that haven't been checked and approved by the pair of you first." Reeves said.

"Come in." Hayes said when there was a knock at the hatch to her quarters while she was going through the items of clothing and equipment that she had been provided with. The clothes were all fleet issue duty uniforms with sets of lieutenant's markings for her to use and among the other items was a tablet computer. Hayes quickly determined that this had no network capability, meaning that she could not use it to gain access to any part of the *Warspite's* computer system. Obviously there were limits to how far the either crew or the Commonwealth itself were willing to trust her. She smiled as the hatch opened but sighed when the man who entered was not Captain Reeves but the ship's medical officer, Doctor Thundercloud instead, "Oh hello doctor. I thought you might be the captain."

"No, just me." Thundercloud replied, "When I heard you were aboard I thought that I'd come and check on how you are doing after the surgery you were put through."

"Fine I suppose. Although I haven't exactly had the chance to put this altered reproductive system to full use. I may not either given my obvious old age." Hayes said and she smirked at him as she reminded him of how he had presented his report into the changes made to her reproductive organs while she had been a prisoner, these now meant that any children she had with a person who was not a Genex themselves would be ordinary humans but she had thought that the process was being used to sterilise her. When Thundercloud had revealed that she could still bear children he had also commented that being past her mid-thirties meant she was still past her natural peak fertility.

"I really didn't mean it that way." he said, "I want to make sure that you are not experiencing any complications though. Do please let me know if you suffer any discomfort or sickness."

"All hands, all hands." Goldman's voice then announced over the shipwide intercom, "Standby for departure."

"Sounds like we're on our way." Thundercloud said before he added, "You can reach me via the infirmary at any time."

"Thank you doctor." Hayes replied just as there was a slight shudder when the *Warspite* disengaged from the orbiting dockyard above Centaur.

"How far is it to Gliese Eight-Four-Two doctor?" Hayes asked and Thundercloud frowned.

"How should I know? I'm a doctor, not a navigator."

### 3.

Wrapped in its shell of tachyons, it took the *Warspite* just over thirty hours to reach Gliese-842 from Gamma Pavonis. Located almost forty light years from Earth the system was technically located in what humans termed The Fringe Worlds so it would ordinarily see little traffic. However, when the ship dropped to sublight speed the crew saw that they were far from alone.

"We've just been lit up by active tadar. It happened almost as soon as we came out of FTL. Possibly responding to our tachyon shell scattering." one of the *Warspite's* sensor operators said.

"Do you have a source Cortez?" Knight asked.

"Looks like a picket. Range four million kilometres." the young woman replied.

"Captain we've got well over a hundred transponder signals coming in. All Commonwealth military or reserve." Goldman added.

"Positions?" Reeves said.

"Pretty much everywhere. I'm picking up heavy units in orbit around the primary planet."

"Te Uira." Thomas interrupted.

"What?" Goldman said.

"The only planet in this system that is settled is called Te Uira. After the Moari god of lightning." Thomas said.

"How apt given what we're here to do." Knight commented.

"Well it looks like the bigger ships are in orbit there. Some docked at the station and others in free space."

Goldman said, "Then there are other ships further out."

"We're still being scanned by active tadar captain." Cortez said.

"Any communication?" Reeves said.

"Not yet captain." Goldman said.

"They probably haven't read our transponder yet. They're waiting to see who we are." Knight suggested and then she smiled, "Incoming tachyon signal captain." she said.

"Tachyon comms. They're in a hurry." Knight said.

Despite the widespread availability of tachyon communications that offered near real time communication across a star system and interstellar communications speeds of twenty light years per hour at current technology levels, most wireless communications still took place using cheaper radio or laser based systems that were limited to the speed of light. Only the most important communications would take place over tachyon channels."

"What ship is it?" Reeves asked.

"Ident says it's the *Sovereignty*, Olympus-Mons-class heavy carrier." Goldman said, "The transmission is marked classified, for the attention of you, Commander Knight, Major Willis and-" Goldman said. Then she paused before she finished, "and Lieutenant Hayes."

Reeves nodded.

"Have it transferred to my quarters, we'll take it there. Let Major Willis and Hayes know as well." he said.

"Yes captain." Goldman said.

"In that case the bridge is yours Lieutenant Commander Goldman." Reeves added as he and Knight got to their feet to leave.

Making their way from the bridge to Reeves' quarters the two men found both Willis and Hayes already waiting for them outside the door.

"Do you know what this is about captain?" Willis asked as Reeves opened the door but he shook his head.

"No, only that this transmission is important enough to use a tachyon signal for and it's coming from a heavy carrier." he said.

"Sounds like orders from the fleet commander." Willis commented and Knight nodded in agreement.

With space aboard starships at a premium, even aboard a relatively large vessel like the *Warspite*, crew cabins were necessarily cramped and the captain's quarters were no exception. This made it something of a squeeze for all four people involved in the call to fit and Willis stood behind the others while they sat side by side.

"Bridge this is Reeves." Reeves said into the intercom handset, "Put the call through to my quarters now. We're all here."

"Aye captain. Transferring the call to you now." Goldman responded and the computer display on Reeve's desk activated to show the face of a man in the uniform of a full admiral in the Commonwealth fleet.

"Reeves, I'm Admiral Winchester and the Commonwealth has ordered me to command this task force." the man said.

"Yes admiral. It's a pleasure to meet you." Reeves said, "Allow me to introduce my first officer Commander Douglas Knight and the commanding officer of my marine company Major Benjamin Willis. Also Miss Jennifer Hayes. Miss Hayes is-"



"Yes I'm aware of Miss Hayes' background Captain Reeves. Now all of this has been put together in somewhat of a hurry and some of our units still haven't arrived. I need a report on the status of your ship." Admiral Winchester said.

"The *Warspite* is fully operational admiral." Reeves said.

"Yes and how is she configured? What modules are you carrying?" the admiral asked.

"Right now two drone hangars filled with courier drones. We're just back from a long range mission where we were operating largely alone." Reeves told him and he nodded.

"Okay in that case I need you to put in at the orbital docks to switch them out. The *Warspite* needs to be able to handle pretty much any operation so I want you carrying a regular attack craft hangar and an assault module." Winchester said.

"What will be carrying admiral?" Reeves asked.

"Two extra squadrons of superiority fighters and one of bombers along with two companies of light infantry and one of heavy." Winchester answered.

"That's a lot of hitting power. On the ground and in space." Knight commented.

"Yes it is." Reeves agreed.

"Well you may need it. As soon as the modules are fitted I want the *Warspite* to lead a squadron we're calling Advance Squadron One to the Luyten Two-Twelve-Nineteen system." Winchester said.

"Where we met with the old man." Hayes said, "A system that will be totally overrun by the machines by now."

"According to your report there is a space station in that system. Is that correct captain?" Admiral Winchester said.

"That's right. It's just an automated station for stranded ships to be able to shelter in while they wait for rescue." Reeves said.

"But if we can take it then it would make a useful forward operating base." Admiral Winchester said.

"It may not have a living crew admiral, but the system is infected with the alien AI and as Hayes pointed out they'll be control of the station as well as the rest of the system by now." Reeves replied.

"That's why you won't be going in alone captain. You'll have a pair of heavy pickets, a dozen destroyers, five frigates and half a dozen light warships." the admiral told him, "The infantry are something of a mixed bag and Major Willis will have overall command of them. None of them are Commonwealth regulars, two are from member nations and the third is an allied unit that will probably need a certain amount of training to get them up to speed with our weapons."

"Should be doable admiral." Willis commented.

"Good. If that isn't a strong enough force for you to be able to seize the system entirely then it should at least allow you to hold out long enough for me to arrive with the rest of the fleet. I'll send you the exact details of the ships in your squadron and the troops you'll be carrying now." Winchester added and then he looked aside and gestured to someone not visible on the screen, letting them know that they were to carry out his instruction.

"Thanks admiral, I'll get to reviewing it as soon as possible." Reeves said and the admiral nodded.

"Very good captain. Carry on." he said and then the screen went blank as the signal ended.

"You know it's not uncommon for Genex admirals to send the people they want to dispose of on missions like this." Hayes commented, "You know, suicide missions."

"The captain's led this ship and its crew through tough assignments before." Knight said and Willis smiled before he added.

"Yeah, we took out that outpost of yours on our own." he said.

"But this time you'll be facing an entire fleet of warships rather than just one small outpost." Hayes pointed out.

"This time we'll have a fleet of our own though. Right captain?" Knight said as he looked at Reeves who was already reviewing the list of ships and troops that were being assigned to his command, "Of those twelve destroyers we're getting, eight of them are Shadow-class stealth ships."

"How good are Genex sensors?" Knight asked, looking at Hayes again.

"Inferior to yours. On average all our technology is ten to twenty years behind yours in fact. Once a thinker knows something is possible he can probably figure out how it's done in a few years but they've never got past the issue of their lack of original thinking. Only the warriors and leaders like me have that and warriors lack the intelligence for science, so that only leaves the leaders."

"Who seem to spend most of their time getting rid of their enemies." Willis commented.

"Yes and that's why the old man came up with this ridiculous plan." Hayes replied.

"What wipe out the Genex entirely? Seems like it'll work to me." Willis said.

"Never mind all that now." Reeves said, "The automated warships we faced at Luyten Two-Twelve Nineteen would have been using standard Genex sensors, right Jennifer?"

"That's right. The robot forces are equipped with standard weapons and other systems to make supply easier." she answered.

"So unless the AI virus has upgraded them in any way that means their sensors are inferior to ours." Reeves said and Knight smiled.

"And since we'd have trouble spotting a Shadow-class destroyer that didn't want to be found theirs are going to have no hope." he said, "If we all enter the system together then the tachyon scatter from the stealth ships will be hidden by those from the others. Then they can go dark while we advance."

"What about these extra troops? Who's the admiral sending us?" Willis asked.

"Let me check." Reeves said as he looked at the data file Admiral Winchester had sent him, "Okay the heavy infantry company is from Nova Rodina under a Captain Vetrov and we've got a light infantry company from Nepal under Captain Tamang."

"Nepal?" Willis said, frowning.

"Yes, is there an issue with that major?" Reeves asked.

"So they're Gurkhas?" Willis said.

"That's right, a Gurkha rifle company." Reeves said.

"What's wrong with Gurkhas?" Knight said.

"Apart from the fact that they terrify me?" Willis responded.

"Gurkhas?" Reeves said, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms as he looked at the marine officer.

"It's the way they smile at you all the time while they're cleaning those blades they all carry. No soldier should ever be that happy." Willis said and Reeves and Knight grinned at one another.

"What about the third company?" Knight said.

"Ah yes, our allies." Reeves said, turning back to his computer and then he hesitated, "Now this is interesting. Their commanding officer is a colonel."

"But a colonel outranks a major. Shouldn't he be in command?" Hayes pointed out.

"Normally yes, but I can see why Willis is being given authority over him." Reeves said.

"Now you've got my attention. Who are they?" Knight asked.

"They're Brekken." Reeves said and Willis' eyes widened in surprise.

"You're kidding me." he said and Reeves shook his head.

"No, it says right here. First Expeditionary Company, Brekken Allied Rifles. Looks like a total of five platoons of between twenty and thirty men each, each one drawn from a different Brekken country." Reeves said.

"This must be in preparation for them joining the Commonwealth. They're looking to prove that they're our allies." Knight said.

"General Harran did say that the Brekken were worried that we might stop defending their planet in the face of alien threats to the Commonwealth." Reeves said.

"Who?" Hayes said.

"A Brekken general I spoke to a couple of years ago." Reeves told her.

"Still worried about the Gurkhas?" Knight said, looking at Willis.

"That depends on how much these guys smile at me." Willis responded.

"Well their commanding office is a Colonel Garash, I'll send you the details of his troops and the other two companies. Take a look at them and see what you make of them." Reeves said, "First though escort Hayes to the bridge. She needs to liaise with Lucas and Shaw to let them know what we could be facing."

"Sure." Willis said, nodding.

"In the meantime I better order a course set for the space station around Te Uira." Reeves added, reaching for the intercom handset.

"What do you have planned?" Hayes asked before he could activate the intercom.

"Commander Knight and I are going to go through this list of the ships that we'll have under our command. We'll need a deployment plan in place by the time we've swapped our drone carrier modules out for the attack craft hangar and assault module." Reeves answered.

"If you'd like to come with me." Willis then told Hayes and the two of them left Reeves quarters. It was then that Reeves noticed Knight smiling at him.

"So what's the story with you two anyway?" Knight asked.

"Us two?" Reeves replied.

"Yes, you and Jennifer Hayes. You seem to be getting pretty close." Knight said.

"Oh we are getting on very well. She did seem like she was throwing herself at me at first, but I think that was a way to try and get my support." Reeves said and Knight smiled.

"A very Genex way of thinking." Knight commented.

"Exactly. Mind you she is proving to be pretty good company."

"Despite being naturally manipulative." Knight said and Reeves stared at him for a few moments before responding.

"So was my ex-wife. Compared to her Jennifer is a saint." he said.

"Well for your sake I hope so captain. After all, you have just sent her to talk to Shaw and Lucas, who I'm sure would both be very interested to quiz her about your private life." Douglas pointed out.

"This is what our sensors recorded at Luyten Two-Twelve-Nineteen." Lucas said as she stood by the central console in the bridge of the *Warspite* with Lieutenant Commander Shaw, the cruiser's chief fighter pilot and Hayes and the three women all looked at the annotated map that filled its display surface, "This is the station you and the captain were aboard and this is the planet those robot ships seemed to be based at." she added, pointing out the two facilities.

"Yes." Hayes responding, nodding, "The station was just a shelter for broken down ships."

"Was?" Shaw commented.

"Well who knows what that AI could have done with it in the past couple of weeks?" Hayes said.

"That's what we're hoping you could tell us." Lucas said.

"I was never told exactly what was stored at the depot in the system but I do know the basics. There are depots like that scattered all around our territory, they're meant to be able to respond should a Commonwealth force find us." Hayes said.

"Which we have." Shaw said.

"Yes and the idea was that the forces at any of the depots would be able to ambush any intruding Commonwealth fleet. Or any other fleet for that matter. We chose our new home world on the basis that we were as far from any alien civilisations as possible, but we made sure that we were prepared for an attack from any direction. Especially when we discovered the Ticik." Hayes explained.

"Yeah, thanks for introducing us to them as well." Shaw said sarcastically, knowing that Hayes was the person most directly responsible for the Commonwealth's first encounter with another space faring species.

"So the base houses a full fighting force then?" Lucas said and Hayes nodded.

"Yes, capable of combat in space and on the surface. That means they'll have weapons that could be used to fortify that space station your admiral wants to use as a base. Mainly missile but there are hard points on the station that could be used to mount direct fire weapons as well."

"So you know where?" Lucas asked.

"No, sorry. All I can tell you is that the station would have been built with being converted into a defensive base in mind, even if it was made about a hundred years ago. It spins for gravity so knock out a turret in one spot and another will come around to take its place." Hayes told her.

"Looks like major Willis may have his hands full taking it intact then." Shaw said, "What about the base on the planet's surface?"

"Extensive. More than what's needed just for storage of the robots kept there. There are supplies for living troops as well. Basically the system is already set up for us, the Genex that is, to use as a forward base of our own. It's heavily fortified as well. I can't be sure of the exact armament but it'll have a full range of defensive capabilities."

"I suppose it's built deep enough underground that our gauss cannons couldn't penetrate?" Lucas said.

"Of course." Hayes replied.

"There have to be some parts of it nearer the surface though. Dockyards for any ships kept there, airlocks, sensor and weapon mountings. Even if we can't destroy the base we can make it impossible for it to cause us any trouble." Shaw pointed out.

"Take out the surface defences and then send in the marines?" Lucas suggested and Shaw smiled.

"Can you think of a better way?" she responded.

"No but getting close enough to attack it could be a problem. Even before it was infected by that alien computer virus the base was programmed to respond to attack." Hayes said, "Even though I don't know the exact forces that will be there I do know that it will be in the region of thirty to forty warships plus attack craft and that's only a fraction of the total robot fleet. There are about six hundred robot warships in service, about a third of the entire fleet. That includes reserves mind you."

"A fleet of about eighteen hundred? That's smaller than the Commonwealth fleet by about three or four hundred." Shaw commented.

"And that's without even counting various national forces." Lucas added.

"That may be but we're not going to have your entire fleet are we? We could be outnumbered two-to-one and I wouldn't be surprised if there were at least a couple of ships in the battlecruiser to dreadnought range there." Hayes pointed out.

"Then I guess we'll have to hope for another of the captain's miracles to happen." Lucas said.

"Speaking of which." Shaw added and she turned to Hayes, "How about you let us in on what's going on between you and Captain Reeves?" and all of a sudden everyone present on the bridge turned to look towards the women standing at the central console, "See, everyone wants to know."

"We all already know that you're his plus one to Lynn's wedding." Goldman said from her station, looking towards Shaw.

"Then everyone is going to have to mind their own business." Hayes said, "If there's one thing I've learned among my people then it's that you never go behind a superior's back unless you're sure they won't be able to get back at you in any way and-"

All of a sudden one of the marine guards by one of the entrances to the bridge spoke up.

"I'm sorry this area is restricted." he said and when the rest of the bridge crew looked around they saw the journalist Sandra Sands and her camera and sound men standing just outside.

"You should be in your quarters." Goldman said sternly as she got up to approach the woman.

"I'm supposed to have access to this ship and its crew. I know we've arrived at our destination so why hasn't anyone told me what's going on?" Sands demanded.

"Miss Sands you will be briefed when there is something to tell you. For now we're just waiting for our orders. Now the guard will escort you back to your quarters and if you insist on leaving without an escort again then I'll consider reassigning your accommodation to the brig." Goldman warned her and the journalist frowned.

"Haven't you ever heard of the freedom of the press?" she snapped.

"Yes. Haven't you heard of fleet regulations concerning insubordination? They apply to passengers as well as crew Miss Sands." Goldman said before the guard grabbed hold of the woman to remove her from the bridge.

"I see your journalists are pretty much the same as ours." Hayes commented as Sands was taken away.

"The Genex have journalists?" Lucas asked.

"Oh yes. Generally they come from the leader caste like me. We're the ones with the drive to get the best stories." Hayes answered, "Of course there's a fairly high turnover rate at the higher levels of the profession."

"Why's that?" Shaw said.

"Because no Genex leader wants his schemes revealing to his political enemies and journalists who uncover them tend to be retired very quickly when they are shipped off to have their reproductive organs removed and certain parts of their brains cut out.." Hayes said and Goldman sighed.

"In different circumstances I think our societies could learn a lot from one another." she joked.

## 4.

The process of swapping the two mission adaptive modules the *Warspite* was capable of carrying was designed to be as straight forwards as possible but it was still one that took several hours, requiring all of the links between the old modules to be properly disconnected before the physical swap could be carried out and the appropriate links re-established and during this time the crew not involved in the swapping of the modules prepared themselves for the journey ahead. In the case of Willis this meant meeting the troops that would be under his command.

"On your way to meet your men major?" Thundercloud asked as the two officers met in the corridor near the airlock that was connected to the space station orbiting Te Uira.

"That's right doctor, I need to know what I've got to work with. What about you?" Willis replied, noticing that Thundercloud was carrying a portable medical kit.

"The same actually." Thundercloud told him, "I've been asked to take a look at some of the Brekken troops."

"They aren't sick are they?" Willis said, coming to a sudden halt, "It's probably the first time any of this lot have left their home planet and if there's something that-

"I don't think you need worry about contagion Ben." Thundercloud interrupted, "From the sounds of it a few of them just pushed themselves too hard during the training they've been doing."

"I'm not sure whether or not to be pleased about that." Willis said as they started to walk again, exiting the *Warspite* and stepping into the space station where they approached the troops from the local military forces manning a nearby checkpoint, "Which way to the ground forces training area?" Willis asked.

"That way sir. Cargo bay six." one of the guards told him, pointing down the wide hallway that was built to accommodate large numbers of people or cargo at once.

"Thanks." Willis said as he and Thundercloud set off again, "So don't the Brekken have their own medics?" he added.

"They do but of course our medical science is far ahead of theirs, even concerning their own species and since he knew that I've had the chance to examine some of them before back on Centaur their commanding officer asked me to take a look at his men." Thundercloud explained.

"Figures. Well here we are, bay six." Willis responded when he saw a set of large doors cleared marked with a numeral '6'. Rather than open these large doors though the two officers made their way to a smaller personnel door beside them and entered the cargo bay through this.

Inside the massive cargo bay had been set up as a barracks for the troops waiting to be loaded aboard the *Warspite*. Most of their equipment was already aboard the assault module though so there was little in the way of this present. This left a large area of the cargo bay vacant and the soldiers had set up what looked like a number of obstacle courses.

As soon as the two officers from the *Warspite* entered they were met by a pair of men much shorter than they were with tan coloured skin, both of whom smiled when they saw them.

"Welcome sir." one said and Willis froze.

"Gurkhas." he said.

"How may we help you?" the second Gurkha asked.

"Major Willis and Doctor Thundercloud from the *Warspite*." Thundercloud replied, "We were asked to meet you here. I'm to see Colonel Garrash."

"Ah yes. Colonel Garrash. Over there." the second Gurkha told him, pointing out the area of the cargo hold that was occupied by the furry Brekken troops. Although humanoid in appearance the aliens had a squat build to them, standing about one and a half metres tall and muscular as a result of the higher gravity of their home world compared to Earth. Most of them wore bulky uniforms that had a pale brown, grey and green pattern to them that was similar to that of the disruptive pattern applied to the camouflage clothing of many Commonwealth nations. However, their uniforms also had bright yellow stripes running down the sleeves of their jackets and the legs of their trousers. Among them a small number instead wore more formal uniforms with markings on their shoulders that were obviously based on Commonwealth rank insignia but with a Brekken style applied. One of these Brekken also had fur that was tinged with grey in places suggesting that he was older than the others who varied from a light tan to a dark brown colour and it was apparent that this was Colonel Garrash.

The Brekken officers were stood talking to several of their opposite numbers in the Gurkha and Rodinan forces while a small number of Brekken troops in their bulky uniforms sat close by and when the officers from the *Warspite* approached them they all looked in their direction.

"Ah, you are the doctor I requested?" the Brekken that Willis and Thundercloud took to be their leader said and Thundercloud nodded.

"Yes I'm Doctor Thundercloud. What do you need me to look at?" Thundercloud asked.

"These men collapsed while training. I need them to be ready for battle." Garrash answered and he pointed to the seated Brekken soldiers.

"Of course. What happened exactly?" Thundercloud said as he walked up to the seated Brekken troops and set down his medical kit beside them.

"They were trying to keep up with my men." the Gurkha officer Tamang said.

"My men realise that they have been given a great honour by being allowed to join your mission and all of them want to perform to their best. They are training hard." Garrash added.

"It's those suits of theirs." Vetrov, the Rodinan officer said.

"They look like NBC suits. I'm Major Willis by the way sir." Willis commented and Garrash nodded.

"That's exactly what they are major." Garrash responded, "Training versions only of course, hence the stripes, but my men need to get used to wearing them if we're going to face any enemy that may be able to deploy gas against us. Our fur prevents gas masks alone getting a seal so we need full suits and there may not be enough time to don a suit while under attack."

"I see, it's the heat." Thundercloud said while he examined the Brekken, "NBC suits are like ovens even without a layer of fur and trying to keep up with some of the toughest troops known to man will have been too much."

Garrash shook his head slowly.

"Yes, I have warned my men about that but some of them think they can train themselves to withstand such overheating." he said.

"That never works." Willis said, "If your men are getting too hot then they need to drink more water."

"Of course, although it would be nice if we had access to some of those metal suits and their regulated temperature." Garrash said and he glanced towards Captain Vetrov.

"Colonel, unfortunately I have no suits in a suitable size for your men. Even if I did it takes a year of training to operate one." Vetrov said.

"And we may have less than a week. I've been told that it'll take us about four and a half days to get to Luyten Two-Twelve-Nineteen and our arrival could be heavily opposed." Willis told the gathered officers, "Colonel are your troops rated for vacuum combat?"

"No." Garrash replied, "We have been trained in the use of modern small arms by your people and Captains Tamang and Vetrov have been explaining the use of some of your support weapons since we arrived but we have no spacesuits."

"I was afraid of that." Willis said, "In that case you'll have to sit out any fighting at Luyten Two-Twelve-Nineteen. There are no habitable planets there."

"My men will be disappointed major, but if we must wait for combat then so be it." Garrash said.

"On the other hand my men's powered armour will serve you well in space. We are all fully rated for zero gravity and zero pressure combat." Vetrov commented.

"Good because you're likely to be my first wave." Willis said before he turned back to Garrash, "Colonel has the command structure been explained to you?" he asked and the stocky alien nodded.

"It has major. You have tactical authority that will supersede my rank." he said.

"Yes so I'd like you on the bridge of the *Warspite* to observe all operations that your men aren't involved in." Willis told him.

"A reasonable instruction. What of my subordinates?" Garrash said.

"I don't suppose that Captain Reeves would object to one or two more." Willis said, "So doc, what's the story with you?"

"I don't think that any of the Brekken need any medical attention but they need to watch how much they exert themselves in these suits and keep drinking water. They can't condition their bodies to overcome dehydration any more than we can." Thundercloud replied.

"So they'll be fit for duty?" Willis asked.

"Oh yes, they'll be fine in a few hours unless they try exerting themselves again." Thundercloud answered.

"I shall ensure that they rest doctor." Garrash added.

"You might want to have all your men rest for a while colonel." Willis suggested, "The assault module will be fitted in a few hours and then your men will need to board the *Warspite* and double check their gear. Once we leave port there's no turning back."

"Status?" Reeves said as he entered the bridge and went to his seat at the back from where he could oversee everything that was happening.

"Course to Luyten Two-Twelve-Nineteen plotted and distributed to squadron captain." Thomas replied first.

"The other ships are already in formation and waiting for us to join them." Knight added.

"What about our extra forces?" Reeves said just as Shaw and Willis entered the bridge.

"All the troops are in their barracks and ready captain." Willis said.

"Same goes for our pilots. Everyone's ready to go." Shaw added.



"Then since everyone appears to be waiting for us I suggest we leave. Commander Goldman please request permission to depart from space dock traffic control." Reeves said, looking at Goldman.

"Te Uira traffic control this is *Warspite*, requesting permission to depart." Goldman signalled before waiting for a response.

"Confirmed *Warspite*. You have permission to depart and good hunting." the voice of a controller responded soon after.

"Mister Ash kindly disengage from the station and take us out." Reeves ordered and Ash nodded.

"Aye captain. Moorings cleared, engaging thrusters." he replied.

The *Warspite* moved slowly away from the station and rotated to face the rest of the squadron before Ash fired the main drives to accelerate away once the cruiser was clear.

The other ships of the squadron were already in the formation that Reeves wanted them to adopt and had communicated to their captains. This placed the frigates and a third of the destroyers either side of the *Warspite* with the heavy pickets equipped with their enhanced sensors and multiple squadrons of attack craft on the flanks to provide maximum coverage. The light warships, four corvettes and a pair of scoutships would be behind the capital ships, ready to move forwards. This left the remaining eight destroyers, all Shadow-class stealth vessels. Here in the Gliese-842 system they were easily detectable from the transponders they had active to prevent collisions with commercial traffic, however the plan was for them to run silent as soon as the squadron arrived in the Luyten 212-19 system, mixing themselves in among the other ships to hide their presence.

"Squadron signalling ready to engage FTL drives captain." Goldman said as the other ships all signalled their status to the *Warspite* while it moved into the centre of the formation, matching their speed and heading.

"What's our ETA at Luyten Two-Twelve-Nineteen?" Knight asked.

"Slowest ships in the fleet are the two heavy pickets at seven point two light years per day. That gives us a travel time of four days and seventeen hours." Thomas responded.

"Course and speed with squadron now matched captain." Ash then announced and Reeves nodded.

"Commander Goldman send to squadron, report execute jump on my mark." he ordered.

"Yes captain, you're on with the squadron now." Goldman replied.

"Charging hull." Ash added and throughout the squadron the assembled warships charged their hulls so that the oppositely charged tachyons they were releasing at the same time would bind to them, producing an imaginary mass component greater than the real mass of the vessels inside the tachyon shells.

"All ships reporting ready. Hulls charged and tachyons in place." Goldman said.

"Three. Two. One. Mark." Reeves said, his voice carried to the entire squadron and in unison their helmsmen fired their main engines to apply thrust to their ships. This motion was passed onto the tachyons currently spinning around them, causing them all to move forwards in relation to the ships and they were immediately propelled to faster than light speeds, heading directly towards Luyten 212-19 more than thirty light years away.

"Jump executed captain. Velocity is now seven point two light years per day." Ash said.

"Very good. I want the crew at action stations ten minutes before we arrive at Luyten Two-Twelve-Nineteen." Reeves said, "We'll launch our fighters and drones as soon as we drop out of FTL." and then he got up from his seat, "Commander Knight you have the conn. Call me if there are any issues"

"Yes captain." Knight replied before Reeves left the bridge.

Reeves was heading towards his cabin and had just entered the section of the ship used for officers' quarters when all of a sudden he heard a familiar voice call out to him.

"Captain Reeves!" Sands shouted and Reeves winced.

"Yes Miss Sands?" he said, turning towards her as she rushed towards him, her camera and sound operators hurrying to prepare their equipment.

"Captain we've just jumped to FTL. How about you give me an interview now before we get to our destination? For a start where are we heading to?" Sands asked.

"Miss Sands I've assigned Lieutenant Commander Goldman to brief you as and when information can be released. Now if you don't mind I have a ship to run." Reeves answered.

"But aren't you heading back to your quarters?" Sands said, knowing enough about the layout of the *Warspite* to realise that Reeves was coming from the bridge.

"Actually I was just on my way to speak with our mission adviser." Reeves said, quickly thinking up an excuse for him not to have to speak to the reporter.

"Is that the Genex woman? Why do you have a Genex aboard this ship captain? What is her role in this?"

Sands said without leaving enough of a gap between her questions for Reeves to respond to any of them.

"As I've already told you, Commander Goldman-" he began.

"Yes, you've promised that Lieutenant Commander Goldman will brief me but so far she hasn't told me anything more than you have." Sands interrupted as Reeves turned a corner to go down a passageway that would lead him directly to the quarters assigned to Hayes.

Reaching the door to Hayes' quarters he knocked and called out.

"Miss Hayes it's Captain Reeves, may I speak to you?" he said as Sands and her crew followed him and the door began to open. Reeves quickly darted through the door as soon as it was open far enough for him to get inside and then pushed it closed behind him. It was only then that he realised that Hayes was wearing only a towel.

"Since we've jumped to FTL I was about to take a shower." she explained.

"Perhaps I should go." Reeves said, reaching for the door but Hayes stepped in front of him.

"Hey you obviously had a reason for coming here." she said.

"Yes but it was somewhat selfish. I was trying to get away from that reporter." Reeves told her and she smiled.

"I don't blame you. From what I've seen of her there doesn't seem to be much difference between the journalists in the Commonwealth to those in the Genex Empire." she said.

"Yes but if you're about to shower I shouldn't be here." Reeves said.

"Captain Reeves you took me aboard your ship when you could have left me adrift in space and then you took me into your home when I could have been stuck in a little room like this all the time instead. Plus you've invited me to join you as your plus one at Lieutenant Commander Shaw's wedding. When we first met I thought that seducing you might just cause you to want to keep me around, yet you resisted every advance but still helped me out. I think I can trust you." Hayes said. Then she suddenly grabbed one of his hands and placed it on her side so that he had a grip on her towel before lifting her hands up onto the top of her head, "There you go captain, now you have a choice, you can let go of the towel and sit on my bunk and wait while I shower or you can just pull this towel right off before I can stop you. I think I know which you'll choose but frankly I wouldn't mind being wrong. What I said originally about looking for some fun wasn't entirely untrue and if you want to take up any of my earlier offers then they're all still open."

## INTERLUDE.

"There goes another." Captain Schaar, commanding officer of the light cruiser *Enigma* said when the alien built light cruiser's sensors detected a tachyon pulse indicative of a starship engaging its faster than light drive.

"Yes," the old man sat behind her said, looking down from the raised platform their seats were located on at some of the bridge crew, "there is little in this system to keep them here. They want captives and there are none to be had here. I expect they'll leave a token force to guard the facilities here but send the rest to populated systems."

The door at the back of the platform then opened and a younger woman entered the bridge, walking towards the vacant seat beside the old man and sitting down in it.

"Grandfather." she said simply.

"Are you fit to be on duty my dear?" the old man asked, "Your surgery was only a few hours ago."

"I'll be fine grandfather." she replied, "You were happy for Jennifer Hayes to escape less than an hour after she underwent the procedure."

"Yes but she is expendable, whereas you most definitely are not. Apart from the fact that you are my granddaughter I suspect that we may still have need of your considerable skills." the old man said.

"Then we aren't done with killing?" Schaar asked, glancing at the old man.

"No, not by a long shot Anna. Even if the Commonwealth does agree to our terms then Secretary LeClair is bound to resist and at least some of our commanders will inevitably join him. We need to be able to deal with them without having to have our forces destroy one another." the old man said.

"Captain we have a contact." one of the bridge crew said suddenly and Schaar, the old man and his granddaughter all looked towards him.

"Report." Schaar ordered.

"We have a tachyon trace that indicates a larger wave approaching the system captain." the crewman told her.

"What direction? Our territory or the Commonwealth?" the old man said.

"The Commonwealth sir. Tracking back suggests a point of origin in the Gliese Eight-Four-Two system." the crewman responded.

"Then the Commonwealth has agreed to your offer grandfather." the old man's granddaughter said.

"Perhaps. What is the strength of the reading?" the old man responded.

"Limited." the crewman said while Schaar called up the readings on the console attached to her own seat.

"We aren't picking up enough stray tachyons to get an accurate picture." she said. Although the sensors of the *Enigma* were more advanced than those aboard any Genex-built vessel they still followed the same physical laws and the cruiser's passive tachyon sensors could only detect the stray tachyons that broke loose from the shell surrounding a vessel moving faster than light. An active radar pulse would offer far more information but using any of the ship's active sensors would reveal its presence in the Luyten 212-19 system to the machines that still controlled it and had a significant force there.

"So it could be an entire fleet or it could just be a single scoutship." the old man's granddaughter said.

"I doubt a single light vessel like a scout would produce enough stray tachyons for us to notice them until the last minute." Schaar commented, "This signal is at least ten light years away."

"So it is a fleet." the old man's granddaughter said and he nodded in agreement.

"Yes my dear but we must still discover what sort of fleet it is. The Commonwealth's leaders are not foolish, I doubt they would commit their full force just on my word. This is more likely to be an advanced party, one strong enough to engage a small fleet of enemy warships but not enough to wage war against an empire." he said and then he smiled.

"Is something amusing you admiral?" Schaar asked.

"No, it just occurred to me that I think I know exactly who will be commanding that force approaching us from the Commonwealth." the old man answered.

"Is that important?" Schaar said.

"Perhaps. If I'm correct then we should remember our manners and thank him for the Champagne he gave us. In a day and a half Captain Reeves could be here again." the old man said.

"And Jennifer Hayes with him?" his granddaughter added.

"Probably. It is in her nature to try and position herself where she can gain the greatest advantage, just as it is in ours and that means being able to make herself indispensable to Captain Reeves. That obviously can only be achieved by staying as close to him as possible."

## 5.

Anticipating the call to battle stations before arriving at Luyten 212-19, Reeves made sure to be on the bridge when the time came. The rest of the bridge crew had made the same decision and so when Goldman called the *Warspite* to action stations it was already fully manned. There were some differences to the usual staffing of the bridge this time though, Major Willis was present to monitor any deployment of ground troops and he was joined in seats around the central console by both Colonel Garrash who was there to observe and Hayes who was present to give advice. The only other difference was in the guards at the entrances to the bridge. Ordinarily these would be marines from the *Warspite's* own onboard company of troops but these men were now deployed to the ship's hangars ready to deploy in support of the Rodinan soldiers and the Gurkhas. Therefore, shipboard security now fell to the Brekken troops who had spent their time aboard familiarising themselves with the cruiser's layout while Colonel Garrash stressed the importance of their role. This meant that at each of the entrances to the bridge there were a pair of armed and armoured Brekken sat in the seats just inside the doors.

"Approaching Luyten two-Twelve-Nineteen captain." Ash announced from the helm station at the front of the bridge.

"All stations stand by." Knight said.

"Hangar is reporting our squadron is ready to launch captain. The same with our extra squadrons in the module." Goldman added and Reeves nodded.

"I want a passive sweep of the system as soon as we come out of FTL." he said, "I want the exact location of the space station and the depot where the machines were stored along with the positions of any active units." he ordered.

"Dropping to sub light in five. Four. Three. Two. One. Mark." Ash said and in near unison the entire Commonwealth squadron scattered the tachyons their ships were wrapped in and dropped to sublight speed. The act of dispersing the shells of tachyons inevitably produced large bursts of the strange particles that could only exist at faster than light speed, scattering them across the system and letting anyone with a suitable detector know that someone had just arrived. This was why Reeves had had his squadron execute its journey in a very specific formation. This was close enough that the individual tachyon bursts from each ship would be indistinguishable from one another and the presence of the eight stealth destroyers would not be immediately given away upon their arrival. More detailed information would either have to wait for light and heat from the newly arrived squadron to spread throughout the system or require the use of an active tadar system, in turn revealing the presence of the device to the Commonwealth ships.

"Squadron reporting in captain. All vessels apart from the stealth destroyers signalling ready." Goldman said.

"I take it the stealth ships have already gone dark." Reeves said and Goldman nodded.

"I think so captain." she answered, "They aren't reading on any of our passive sensors."

"Good. Make sure no active sensors are lit up without my permission. That goes for the entire squadron, I don't want to give our stealth ships away

"Contact in open space captain." one of the sensor operators called out suddenly.

"The profile is a near match for the refuge station." Lucas added as she quickly compared this to the scans made on the previous occasion the *Warspite* had come to the Luyten 212-19 system just a few weeks earlier.

"A near match?" Knight commented.

"Yes commander. The silhouette is a match but the energy profile has changed." Lucas told him.

"I told you, the machines have fortified it." Hayes said, smiling at being proved right as she, Willis and Garrash all got up from their seats so they could properly study the information being presented on the central console even though for the time being there was nothing relevant to the *Warspite's* ground forces being presented to them.

"Range?" Reeves asked.

"Twelve million kilometres captain." the sensor operator who had first reported the station's presence replied.

"We can be there in under twenty minutes at full burn." Knight suggested.

"What about the machines? Are there any signs of any of their ships?" Reeves asked.

"Yes captain, I've got several contacts clustered around the planet the depot is based on and three others in close proximity to the station." Goldman told him.

"I think we've got a pair of destroyers and a cruiser at the station captain." Lucas said, studying the information from the *Warspite's* sensors.

"So we've got them outgunned." Knight said.

"Yes, but where's the rest of their fleet?" Reeves pointed out, "Miss Hayes what do you think?"

"There aren't enough ships." she said, "Plus nothing bigger than that cruiser near the refuge station."

"They could be in eclipse from us captain." Thomas pointed out.

"You can bet that they won't stay that way once we make our move." Knight commented.

"No, I don't think they will but at least we'll be able to see them coming." Reeves responded.

"Captain I'm not picking up any energy readings from the tachyon relay satellites orbiting the star." one of the sensor operators said.

"Confirmed." Goldman added as she checked her console, "No power detected from any of the satellites." With the power requirements of tachyon communications being so vast, broadcasting signals over a wide area was not possible and the technology could only be used for point to point communications and even though over interstellar distances the signals would naturally spread out to cover a wider area this meant that it was necessary to know the exact point in space of the target for a signal to within a few kilometres for a target in the same star system or a few tens of millions of kilometres if the signal was to be sent to another system. Therefore, the only way to guarantee that a message sent to another system would reach its intended destination was to aim the transmission at the star itself and use a system of satellites in near orbit to relay this within the target system. Without such satellites real time interstellar communication was impossible and every effort was made to keep them functioning.

"Now that is peculiar." Knight said, looking at Reeves.

"Yes it is but we can worry about that later." Reeves said, "Lieutenant Commander Goldman send to the squadron, all ships steer towards the refuge station at full burn. Launch all attack craft and expect to receive incoming fire. Mister Ash take us to that station. Lieutenant Lucas I need to know what modifications have been made to it."

"Aye captain, turning now," Ash said, turning the *Warspite* towards the Genex refuge station and around the cruiser the other ships of the squadron followed suit.

"How long until we have a profile on those ships?" Schaar asked impatiently as the bridge crew of the Enigma worked to try and identify the starships that had just arrived at the Luyten 212-19 system.

"Probably around two hours unless they move closer to our current position." one of the crew responded before the door behind Schaar opened with a 'hiss' and she turned her chair to see the old man being helped into the bridge by his granddaughter.

"I hear we have company Anna." he said.

"Yes admiral." Schaar responded, "The force we detected approaching from the Commonwealth has arrived in the system two light hours from here. Unfortunately we don't know their exact strength yet."

"Couldn't you count the number of tachyon pulses?" the old man's granddaughter asked.

"No. The fleet arrived in very close formation. So close that we registered only a single large tachyon burst." Schaar answered.

"They're deliberately hiding their numbers. Interesting." the old man said.

"You have an idea grandfather?" his granddaughter asked him and he smiled and nodded.

"I do." he said, "I think that when the electromagnetic signatures of those ships reach us we still won't be seeing them all."

"Stealth ships?" Schaar said.

"Possibly. Even a stealth ship cannot hide the scattering of tachyons." the old man said.

"Perhaps we should move in for a closer look." Schaar suggested.

"I think not captain. We can't guarantee how they would react to such a move. They may not realise that we aren't their enemy and open fire. Let's see what they do before we do anything that would reveal our presence to them and the machines."

"Captain I'm picking up tachyon emissions from the space station." Cortez announced.

"They obviously aren't planning to go to FTL." Knight commented.

"They must be signalling for reinforcements. They'll have spotted us by now and know that they're out classed." Reeves said.

"They'll send in more ships from the depot." Thomas said, glancing at his navigation console to check the relative position of the planet on which the depot was constructed compared to the *Warspite*.

"Time for us to show our teeth I think." Reeves said, "Commander Goldman send to fleet, scramble."

"Aye captain." Goldman responded and she activated the *Warspite's* ship to ship communications before sending out Reeves' order, "*Warspite* to squadron, scramble, scramble, scramble."

All of the capital ships in the squadron carried some kind of attack craft aboard them, ranging from the handful of drones and fighters carried aboard the destroyers and frigates to the larger number of drones and manned interceptors aboard the heavy pickets. The *Warspite* was the primary carrier asset in the fleet though, the hangar module it was carrying increasing the size of the heavy cruiser's aerospace wing to three squadrons of superiority fighters and in the launch tubes used for its own fighter squadron Shaw had been waiting impatiently for the order to go.

"Shaw, we're up." her navigator told her from the fighter's back seat as soon as he received the order to go and she grinned.

"Okay Kaz, hold on." she said before the electromagnetic catapult was triggered, hurling the fighter down the

launch tube and out into space, "*Warspite* this is Archangel, we're clear. Got a target for us?" she transmitted to the *Warspite*, using her call sign instead of her name.

"Not yet Archangel, just make sure no-one bothers us. We could have incoming soon so watch out." Goldman responded.

"Watch out she says." Shaw commented without the transmitter so only Mori her co-pilot could hear her, "Do anything else in a fighter and you'll probably crash."

Squadron fully deployed." Mori then told her, "Drones too."

"Okay what about the other squadrons from the module" Shaw asked.

"Fighters are out, just the bombers to come yet." Mori answered, "Looks like the other ships are launching their squadrons as well. Wait, check that."

"Who's holding back?" Shaw said when she heard this.

"I'm not picking up any launches from the *Praetorian*." Mori said, referring to one of the squadron's destroyers.

"They could have a fault with their drone control system. Oh well, hopefully four drones won't make that much of a difference. What about the stealth ships, do we know where they are?" Shaw.

"No they're running dark and haven't launched their drones." Mori said.

"Okay then we'll just have to trust that they end up where they need to be when they're needed." Shaw said.

"I've got the station dead ahead." Mori added, "Reading three ships in close proximity just as the *Warspite* reported."

"Okay let's do this." Shaw said as she switched her fighter's communications to address all of the manned attack craft squadrons, "This is Archangel to all craft in the wing. We don't have a target yet but one could appear at any time. I want fighters at the front, interceptors in the middle and bombers at the back. Interceptors be ready to move forwards if the enemy try sending anything towards us. Bombers we'll make you a hole in any fighter screen the enemy put up and you fly right through it." she broadcast.

"Copy that Archangel, bombers clear and in position." the leader of the bomber squadron responded and this was followed by acknowledgements from the leaders of the other fighter and interceptor squadrons.

"Captain our fighter squadrons are all in place and most of our drones are out but the *Praetorian* is unable to launch." Goldman told Reeves as she monitored the progress of the attack craft deployment from the bridge of the *Warspite*.

"Have they said why?" Knight asked but Goldman shook her head.

"No sir, just that the release mechanism hasn't functioned." she replied.

"I'll make a note to request an explanation from the *Praetorian's* captain." Knight said.

"Good. Mechanical failures like that could be the difference between success and-" Reeves began before Cortez interrupted him.

"Captain I'm picking up tachyon emissions from the depot." she said.

"Another transmission?" Reeves asked.

"No sir, too big." Cortez replied.

"Here they come." Ash said.

"Send to all ships, weapons free and fire at will. Don't wait for us to assign targets." Reeves ordered.

"*Warspite* to squadron, weapons free. I say again weapons free. Target at your own discretion." Goldman broadcast to the other ships of the squadron right before there was a sudden tachyon burst as the AI controlled warships located near to the depot triggered their faster than light drives to cover the distance between the planet and the space station and the Commonwealth squadron now saw the full strength of the robotic warships in the system.

"Multiple contacts captain." Goldman reported.

"I'm picking up two large ships at the centre." Lucas added.

"Hayes your input would be appreciated." Reeves said and Hayes looked at an image of the largest machine controlled warships on the central console.

"Those are battlecruisers captain. The hulls are old, predating when we were able to crack artificial gravity so they were prime candidates for converting to automated operation." she said, "Watch out for them at close range captain. Ripping out the life support system gave the engineers a chance to add more light turrets for point defence. Getting missiles or attack craft through will be next to impossible."

"What about the other ships?" Knight added.

"The two cruisers are light cruisers and then there are six destroyers and a pair of frigates." Hayes said.

"Captain I'm picking up launches from the enemy force." Goldman said, "They look like drones."

"Commander Ash turn us towards those battlecruisers. If missiles and attack craft aren't going to be able to deal with them then it's up to us. We still have the advantage of our main guns. Weapons prepare to fire as soon as you have a target."

"Turning now captain." Ash said.

"Captain our destroyers are firing. Wide spread." Goldman said when the *Warspite's* sensors showed a succession of launches from their own squadron. The missiles carried by the destroyers were not as



powerful as those carried by the *Warspite* itself but they could still cause significant damage to the AI controlled vessels, especially their own destroyers and frigates and launching an early volley of them immediately put the other side on the defensive. However, the AI controlled warships responded with the efficiency that only machines could achieve and their own destroyers dropped back in their formation to allow the superior number of light turrets on the other vessels to target the incoming missiles. These were all shot down before they reached the AI controlled vessels returned fire with a missile barrage of their own and at the same time their force of drones split into two groups, one remaining to protect their warships with the other half accelerating to engage the Commonwealth forces.

"Enemy drones advancing." Mori told Shaw when their fighter's sensors showed this advance.

"How many?" Shaw asked.

"Tracking says seventy-eight." Mori answered and Shaw smiled.

"Not enough." she said before activating her communications, "Archangel to all fighters. Break and engage. Good hunting everyone, remember that the *Warspite* will be keeping score and there's a bottle of Kentucky' best for the winner."

The pilots of the single seat interceptors immediately brought their engines up to full power, speeding through the gaps in the wall of superiority fighters as they headed towards the oncoming drones. In turn the drones fired a volley of missiles at the Commonwealth attack craft but they did so while the pilots still had the chance to defend themselves and they aborted their run, breaking off sharply as the missiles turned to follow. As the two sets of attack craft continued to close in on one another Shaw heard the tone indicating that her fighter had a lock on one of the drones and she immediately unleashed one of the missiles she carried. The weapon dropped from the internal weapons bay before it accelerated towards the drone. The machine detected the approaching missile but was already committed to an attack run on one of the interceptors and rather than take evasive action its onboard computer attempted to carry out its strike first. However, the interceptor pilot was able to evade the lock long enough for the missile to hit the drone and it exploded.

"Yes!" Shaw exclaimed when she saw her target destroyed, "First blood to me."

"Actually one of the fighters from the *Wasp* already made a kill." Mori told her, having seen the previous kill on the screen in front of him.

"Damn it Kaz, did you have to tell me now?" Shaw said.

"Better than after you brag publicly about it." Mori pointed out. Then as he saw another drone heading for them he quickly added, "Eleven o'clock low!"

"Got it." Shaw responded, turning the fighter while maintaining its heading and at the same time she switched from missiles to the twin gauss cannons mounted either side of the cockpit and fired a rapid burst of projectiles that struck the enemy drone and its engine abruptly flared out as it began to tumble onwards. While the Commonwealth attack craft were engaging the enemy drones the *Warspite* continued on its course towards the two AI controlled battlecruisers. These two ships were almost twice the length of the Commonwealth heavy cruiser and carried far more missiles and mounted more guns than it but these were only light and medium weapons as opposed to the heavy missiles and main guns of the *Warspite*. This gave the smaller Commonwealth vessel an advantage in the range and individual firepower of its weapons that its crew were about to try and use to their advantage.

"Main guns locked on target captain. Enemy within range." one of the *Warspite*'s gunners announced.

"Open fire." Reeves ordered and the gunner reacted right away, firing the twin neutral particle beam cannons that the heavy cruiser mounted along its forward hull.

The high powered beam weapons projected twin beams of energy at the speed of light towards the closest of the AI controlled battlecruisers and both of these struck the enemy warship head on. Neutral particle beams were renowned for their ability to penetrate even the thickest of armour plating and these did just that, burning right through the prow armour of the battlecruiser before the vessel could turn aside out of the path of the beam. One of the beams struck one of the battlecruiser's missile magazines and all of the stored munitions promptly detonated in a brief fireball created by the combination of both warheads and fuel that tore apart the entire prow of the battlecruiser. Despite the destruction though the fully automated ship continued to advance, ignoring the fact that the entire forward section of the ship for a length of almost two hundred metres no longer existed, taking with it more than a hundred missiles and its own main guns. With no crew to preserve and only the most basic sense of self preservation the AI saw no reason to break off while it could still contribute to the fleet it was part of.

"Do we have a missile lock?" Reeves asked.

"Yes captain, missiles locked." another of the *Warspite*'s gunners answered.

"they've got a lot of anti-missile coverage out there." Knight pointed out.

"I know but with the forward weapons on that battlecruiser down I'm hoping it gives us enough of a hole to get a shot through." Reeves replied. Then he looked back at the gunner and added, "Four missile salvo. Fire." he ordered.

"Aye captain. Missiles away." the gunner responded and along the dorsal hull of the *Warspite* four hatches opened in unison before one of the cruiser's heavy missiles burst out of each, propelled upwards

magnetically before their own engines cut in and they arced forwards towards the already damaged battlecruiser.

The AI system controlling the enemy fleet detected the missile launch immediately and the automated warships began firing at the fast moving weapons. However, the formation had been built around the idea that the larger ships were able to protect themselves, so the damage to the battlecruiser had indeed created a hole in their defences that the drones that had been held back now rushed to try and plug.

One of the missiles was hit by fire from a light cruiser while a second made it to within ten kilometres of the battlecruiser before being rammed by a drone on a suicide run intended to protect the far more valuable capital ship. This still left two other missiles though and both of them hit the battlecruiser in rapid succession. The first struck one of the warship's drive units and there was another massive secondary explosion as the fusion reactor within it lost containment and the plasma it held burst out. On the other hand the second missile flew into the twisted wreckage at the front of the ship, bypassing its armour entirely and the warhead detonated deep within it. The combination of these two blasts was too much for the already damaged battlecruiser to withstand and the crippled vessel was rocked by further explosions before there was a final massive explosion that consumed the entire vessel as its main reactor went critical and all of the fuel it contained underwent fusion at once. When the flare of light this created subsided all that remained of the battlecruiser was shrapnel.

"Target destroyed captain." Lucas reported with a smile and Willis looked towards Hayes.

"A battlecruiser twice our size and we took it out with two volleys." he said, grinning at her, "Did your people really think a ship like that would be any use against us?"

"They still have plenty of ships left major." Knight said.

"Yes but maybe we can keep them too far away to inflict any real damage on us." Reeves said, "Have the fleet turn to starboard. Let's see if we can keep out of range of their guns."

In response to the loss of the battlecruiser, the AI controlled fleet began to tighten its formation so that the surviving ships could offer one another better mutual protection with their turrets and drones. As they did this the cruisers and destroyers fired another volley of missiles to prevent the Commonwealth ships from taking advantage of their reorganisation. Having demonstrated its hitting power, the *Warspite* was the target for a significant quantity of these missiles.

"Incoming. Twenty plus missiles." Goldman announced when the *Warspite's* sensors picked up the incoming missiles. Although each of these missiles had only a medium explosive yield twenty represented a significant threat to any vessel.

"Switch turrets to defensive fire." Knight said, knowing that the turrets alone were unlikely to shoot them all down before they reached the *Warspite*.

"Can we get a firing solution on that second battlecruiser?" Reeves added.

"Sorry captain, she's out of our arc." the gunner answered.

"Do you want me to come about captain?" Ash asked.

"No, I don't want to break formation. Goldman put our drones in the path of those missiles. See if they can take the pressure off our turrets." Reeves responded.

"Captain the *Wasp* has been hit." Goldman exclaimed when one of the enemy missiles slipped through the Commonwealth's defences and struck the heavy picket positioned out on the flank of the fleet.

"How bad?" Reeves said.

"They're reporting a fire in the main hangar. They're evacuating so they can decompress." Goldman announced.

"Tell them to fall back if they have to. We don't need their sensors to keep track of the enemy and their attack craft are already out anyway." Reeves told her and she nodded before passing on his order to the crew of the damaged *Wasp*.

## 6.

The eight Shadow-class destroyers had continued to drift onwards while the fighting raged between the two fleets. When the Commonwealth squadron had first arrived they had moved apart from the other ships, travelling purely under their own momentum and now they were passing under the AI controlled fleet while it moved to try and close the gap with the Commonwealth force. The sinister looking vessels were triangular in shape with carefully angled propulsion units placed on their upper and lower surfaces so that they would not create angles in the hull likely to reflect energy. While all destroyers were armed primarily with missiles, having just a few guns for protection the Shadow-class vessels had a purely missile armament and the two forward facing edges were lined with the launching tubes for their medium yield weapons. Should they be detected and come under fire they would instead rely on the four drones they carried in concealed launchers for defence.

"That's a kill." Commander Vasquez, commanding officer of the *Obsidian* said when he saw the enemy battlecruiser explode on the screen in front of him.

"Captain the second battle cruiser is moving towards our position. They'll be right over us in about forty seconds." his operations officer told him.

"Estimated distance?" Vasquez asked.

"One thousand kilometres sir." the officer answered.

"Point blank range." Vasquez commented.

"And from a direction they won't be expecting an attack from." his first officer added and Vasquez nodded.

"Weapons I want a firing solution for tubes one through ten on that second battlecruiser when it's at its closest point to us." he ordered.

"Aye captain. Plotting firing solution now. Target energy profile entered into guidance system." one of the destroyer's gunners responded while Vasquez watched the AI controlled battlecruiser continue to come closer, its weapons firing towards the Commonwealth ships it could see while seemingly oblivious to the presence of any of the stealth destroyers present as well.

"Target approaching minimum distance now captain." the operations officer said.

"Firing solution plotted." the gunner added.

"Open fire." Vasquez ordered.

As soon as Vasquez gave the order to fire ten missiles burst from their launchers but instead of the magnetic launchers used on most Commonwealth ships these were ejected into space using a charge of highly compressed nitrogen gas to avoid creating an electromagnetic pulse that an enemy ship could detect. The missiles themselves were also designed to evade detection for as long as possible by turning themselves towards their target with more compressed gas thrusters. Only then did their main rocket engines ignite and in rapid succession the ten missiles shot towards the unsuspecting battlecruiser.

The battlecruiser detected the missiles as soon as their main engines ignited but by this time it was too late. Only some of the vessel's defensive turrets could be turned to try and shoot down the incoming missiles and it could not attempt to turn out of their path. Two of the missiles were struck by the battlecruiser's defensive fire but the remaining eight all found their target, hitting the battlecruiser one after another all along its ventral hull.

Individually the explosive power of the *Obsidian's* missiles was limited but eight of them going off together was enough to cause significant damage and the battlecruiser was rocked by further secondary explosions. The automated vessel's engines continued to burn as they had done before the missiles had hit it but now they were jammed, taking the vessel out of formation as it now maintained a constant rate of acceleration and turn.

"Captain I think the battlecruiser's computer core has been hit, it's just continuing with the last action it was carrying out." Lucas said as she studied the massive vessel's strange behaviour that was carrying it away from the other AI controlled vessels.

"Its guns are still firing." Ash pointed out.

"Secondary control systems for cases like this." Hayes responded, "Each turret will continue to protect the ship but it can't take any offensive actions."

"The rest of the enemy squadron appear to be ignoring it." Knight commented.

"Yes commander, they're moving to fill the gap its left in their formation." Goldman said.

"Then we ignore the battlecruiser for now." Reeves said, "Helm I want us in position to engage those light cruisers directly. Miss Hayes, what sort of defences do they have?"

"Light turrets only. They have medium yield missiles but nothing that can threaten this ship in terms of direct fire weapons." Hayes told him.

"Thinking of moving in closer again?" Knight asked and Reeves nodded.

"Yes. If that battlecruiser is out of the fight then there's nothing in that fleet that can match us in a broadside to broadside engagement. Mister Ash take us into X-ray laser range. Goldman instruct the fleet to follow us and expect to take fire."

The most powerful direct fire weapons left among the AI controlled vessels were the medium main guns of the two frigates and as the Commonwealth fleet closed in both these ships turned to face the *Warspite*.

"Captain the enemy appears to be targeting us." Goldman said.

"Weapons return the favour. Lock our X-ray lasers onto those frigates and fire as soon as you have them targeted. Helm keep taking us towards the light cruisers, fire the main guns as soon as we can." Reeves ordered, "Goldman tell our corvettes that I want cover. When they figure out what we're doing those machines are going to open up on us with everything they have."

"Aye captain." Goldman replied before passing on the order for the squadron's four corvettes to take up defensive positions close to the *Warspite*. The lightweight warships carried only a handful of light weapons but acting in unison they could be as effective as a frigate in providing defensive fire and as the Commonwealth squadron moved closer to the enemy the corvettes positioned themselves around the *Warspite*.

"Got him!" Shaw exclaimed as she watched another enemy drone explode in front of her fighter, "Kaz hurry up and find me my next kill."

"Hang on I'm working on it." Mori replied from behind her.

"We can't be running out surely. I've only taken out four so far." Shaw said.

"I think they're pulling back." Mori said, "Yes the drones are disengaging and pulling back to the rest of the fleet."

"Well let's not let them get close enough to be covered by their capital ships' guns." Shaw said as she activated her communications, "This is Archangel, all fighters pursue. A running target is an easy target but don't get within range of their squadron's fire."

All of the Commonwealth's manned interceptors and fighters promptly turned to give chase to the retreating drones. Focused entirely on forming up with their fleet, the drones were indeed easy targets with their engines burning hot and making missile locks easy to acquire while gunfire could be plotted to intersect with the straight courses they were following and one after another they began to explode.

"Five. Ten. Fifteen." Mori said as he counted the kills but then all of a sudden there was another explosion as a Commonwealth fighter was hit.

"Break off! Break off!" Shaw snapped, "We're getting in range of their guns."

The Commonwealth attack craft immediately turned away from the Genex squadron, heading away at an angle as they slowed down enough to be able to circle back towards their own forces.

"Shaw check it out." Mori said from behind Shaw as he watched his console.

"What is it Kaz?" Shaw asked.

"It's the *Warspite*. It looks like Captain Reeves is taking her right down the enemy's throat." Mori told her.

The *Warspite* accelerated directly towards the middle of the machine force, obviously aiming for the two light cruisers that now made up the core of this. Seeing the threat the AIs controlling the enemy vessels rapidly shifted from a general missile bombardment of the Commonwealth squadron to launching their missiles almost exclusively towards the oncoming heavy cruiser. The *Warspite's* gunners were prepared for this and the ten light turrets mounted on the starship began firing immediately while its drone squadron was directed to intercept missiles that got through this defensive fire. On its own the sheer number of missiles being fired at the *Warspite* would have overwhelmed even this defence but the *Warspite's* turrets were joined by those of the four corvettes, lightweight warships less than a quarter of the length of the heavy cruiser but each one carrying a pair of light turrets of their own that they directed towards the incoming missiles. No defensive screen could be perfect though and one of the missiles launched by the machine fleet slipped past the multiple barrages to strike the *Warspite* on its side and even deep within the ship as the bridge the crew heard the rumbling of the explosion.

"Damage report." Knight said.

"Single hit on port side." Goldman replied, "No significant system damage but we're venting atmosphere."

"Evacuate that section and seal it. Commander Bernard's people can take care of it when we're done."

Reeves ordered. Then he looked at the rows of gunners to his left and added, "Distance to target?"

"Enemy light cruiser entering effective range of main guns now captain." one of them responded.

"I've got him right in our sights." Ash added, smiling.

"Open fire." Reeves said and the gunner fired the *Warspite's* main neutral particle beam cannons.

Capable of penetrating even the thickest armour, the particle beams fired by the weapons were able to burn deep into the light cruiser they both struck. The structural damage this caused was too much for the light cruiser to bear while still manoeuvring and the ship broke in two about half way along its length in a series of

explosions. The two now separate sections of the light cruiser then collided with one another and were both torn open as they ground against one another, turning the warship into a cloud of tumbling debris.

"Captain enemy frigates coming into range." another gunner, one of the two responsible for operating the *Warspite's* two medium X-ray laser turrets, reported as the two frigates providing defensive fire to the machine squadron came closer to the *Warspite*. This of course meant that the *Warspite* itself would soon be in range of the frigates' main guns and Reeves reacted quickly.

"X-ray lasers fire at will." he said and both of the dorsally mounted turrets that had been tracking the two frigates opened fire one after another.

The X-ray lasers lacked the sheer power of the heavy cruiser's main guns but they were still effective weapons and against a target the size of a frigate they posed a significant threat. One of the beams hit its target's prow and there was a small explosion as the main gun that posed a threat to the *Warspite* was destroyed before it could fire. Meanwhile the second turret hit the other frigate in one of its drive units and the ship spun as this cut out and unbalanced the thrust being provided, preventing the AI from firing its main gun as it was abruptly and unexpectedly pulled off target.

Throughout the engagement the artificial intelligence controlling the robotic warships had been continually assessing the previously unknown capabilities of the Commonwealth ships and comparing the data to the known performance of its own vessels. With the damage inflicted on the two frigates the assessed differences in the two fleets suddenly reached a critical point and the AI determined that victory was impossible with the forces remaining at its disposal. Therefore, to prevent the needless loss of further resources it determined that retreat was the only viable strategy remaining to it and the remaining warships began to turn away from the Commonwealth squadron.

"Target is turning away captain." Ash said as he turned the *Warspite* to try and get the remaining light cruiser directly ahead of them.

"Picking up tachyon activity within the enemy ships." Cortez added.

"They're pulling back but they aren't reeling in their drones." Knight commented when he noticed that the enemy drones were continuing to provide a defensive screen for the warships that they had been launched from.

"They're treating them as disposable as we would." Reeves said, "Mister Ash stay on that light cruiser. Weapons fire as soon as you have a shot."

"Aye captain." Ash responded as he matched the robotic light cruiser's manoeuvring.

"Firing now." the *Warspite's* main gunner said suddenly as the enemy ship moved into his sights and the *Warspite's* main guns fired again. By this point the enemy drones had been able to position themselves between the two cruisers and one of the beams struck a drone on its way towards the enemy capital ship. The power of the beam was so intense however, that this barely affected it, the drone was utterly destroyed and the neutral particle beam still struck the light cruiser. Striking it directly from behind, the beams burned their way along a significant length of the light cruiser's structure and there were several explosions from within it. As these were taking place the light cruiser's engines suddenly spluttered and died, the vessel no longer operating under power and instead it just drifted onwards while the frigates and destroyers that were all that remained of the robotic fleet continued on without it.

"Captain all power sources within the enemy cruiser are dying." Goldman reported, "She looks dead in space."

"And the other ships?" Reeves asked.

"Tachyon readings nearing critical level captain. They could jump at any minute." Cortez told him before the images of the robotic warships shown on display screens showed them vanishing one after another as each of them engaged their faster than light drives.

"Heading?" Knight said.

"It looks like they're falling back to their base." Cortez said.

"Captain the drones are still active." Goldman added when she saw that the automated attack craft that had been protecting the larger warships continued to manoeuvre and fire on the Commonwealth's own attack craft.

"When we attacked that outpost the drones shut down as soon as we took out the control system." Knight pointed out and Reeves nodded.

"Hayes do any Genex drones have the capability for this level of independent action?" he said but she shook her head as she watched the activity of the drones on the central console, seeing that the drones were switching from one target to another and still acting in an organised fashion.

"No, they are assigned a target and will go after it but they shouldn't be able to co-ordinate attacks on different targets." she said.

"Captain the EM emissions from those drones has increased since the enemy capital ships retreated." Lucas said.

"Could they be acting like a hive? Combining processing power to create a replacement control system?" Reeves suggested.

"That would be way beyond what our technology can produce." Lucas answered.

"Ours too." Hayes added.

"The alien AI, it must have directly spread to the drones and now it's controlling them like any other technology." Knight said.

"Then we'll just have to take them all out." Reeves said.

"The drones appear to be pulling back as well captain. Heading back to the depot at sublight speed."

Goldman added as a pattern in their manoeuvring began to emerge.

"Without a living crew they can be patient." Knight commented.

"And they can outrun our capital ships. Connect me with Lieutenant Commander Shaw." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain, you're on now." Goldman responded.

"Archangel this is *Warspite*." Reeves said.

"Reading you *Warspite*." Shaw's voice responded, "What's going on with these drones? Their mother ships are gone but they're still active."

"We think that the drones are working together to improvise some sort of control system. Their acceleration is too great for us so it's down to you. You're going to have to take them all out. They're all carrying active copies of the alien virus and they could spread it." Reeves told her.

"Understood captain." Shaw said, "Okay Kaz give me an update."

"I'm still picking up almost a hundred drones. It looks like they're organising themselves to provide mutual cover but they're definitely pulling away and accelerating." Mori replied and Shaw activated the fighter's communications to address the other attack craft.

"Okay we've got the machines on the run but Captain Reeves doesn't want them getting away. All fighters and interceptors pursue at full burn. Let's show them that a computer is no match for a real human pilot." she broadcast.

Leaving the Commonwealth's slower moving bombers and own drones that could not be controlled at long ranges without a dedicated command and control craft that their force lacked the fighters and interceptors followed the retreating AI controlled drones. The underlying technology of the Commonwealth attack craft was superior to the enemy drones and at full power they were capable of outpacing them and even with the initial head start they had the drones were unable to stay out of firing range.

The lighter interceptors were the first to get close enough to launch missiles with a reasonable chance of hitting their target and a wave of missiles sped towards the fleeing drones. This prompted a mass release of decoys that exploded between the missiles and the drones in an attempt to create a sensor blinding curtain that would cause the missiles lose their target locks. This was only partially successful however, the heat from the drones' drives running at full power gave the missiles' sensors a significant thermal profile to lock onto and few of them were fooled by the decoys. The majority of the missiles passed through the decoy screen and went on to hit their targets, blasting them to pieces.

"That's another fourteen down." Mori reported as he watched the icons representing the enemy drones on his screen blink out one by one. Then he noticed the remaining drones execute an unexpected manoeuvre though, "Wait, they're turning." he added.

"Turning? Turning where?" Shaw responded.

"Back towards us I think." Mori told her.

Checking her own instruments Shaw saw that Mori was correct. The drones had determined that in fleeing they were making themselves easy targets for the Commonwealth attack craft. Unable to use their weapons without slowing down anyway, the drones had turned and were now using their main drives to reduce their velocities instead so that they could engage their pursuers directly.

"Archangel to all craft, enemy is engaging. I repeat enemy is engaging." she broadcast.

With the drones decelerating the two forces now closed on one another more rapidly and there was a swift exchange of missiles that saw more craft on each side destroyed before they came within practical range of their direct fire weapons.

Shaw fired a rapid burst into the path of a drone heading towards her fighter and the projectiles ripped the machine to pieces before it could try to evade her attack. Elsewhere more of the fighters and interceptors fired their guns as the drones passed through their formation, one of them crashing into a Commonwealth fighter in a collision that destroyed both craft without giving the pilots of the fighter any chance to eject.

It took only seconds for the two forces to pass through one another's formations and the Commonwealth fighters and interceptors immediately turned to face the AI controlled drones while slowing down. On the other hand the drones continued to reduce their speed as they had been doing before passing the Commonwealth formation and the Commonwealth pilots were able to fire another barrage of missiles before the drones began to turn again.

"Hey Kaz did you see that? Is it just me or are those things' responses slowing down?" Shaw said when she noticed the sluggish response of the drones.

"I sure did. They're still putting out massive EM signals though." Mori replied.



“Captain Reeves said they were working together to form a control system. Maybe the more of them we take out the less effective that becomes.” Shaw said and Mori smiled.

“Maybe trying to jam their comms would have an effect as well.” he said.

“Can you do that?” Shaw asked..

“Maybe. I’ve got their frequency so I should be able to broadcast static on it.” Mori said and Shaw nodded.

“Do it and get everyone else to do it as well.” she said.

“With everyone broadcasting static we won’t be able to co-ordinate our actions.” Mori pointed out.

“Maybe not but I’m guessing that we’ll be able to act on our own far better than those drones can.” Shaw responded.

As the two forces of attack craft closed in on one another once again the Commonwealth craft all switched their communications systems to flood the channel being used by the AI controlled drones with meaningless static. This prevented the Commonwealth fighters from communicating with one another or the capital ships that had launched them but it had the desired effect and as they came closer the drones suddenly shut down as the improvised control network directing them collapsed.

“That’s it! Kaz you did it!” Shaw exclaimed, “Now let’s finish these things off.”

## 7.

"Captain the fighters have engaged their jamming signal." Goldman said when her instruments showed that the squadrons of Commonwealth attack craft were no longer communicating but that the strength of the EM emissions from them had increased massively.

"Is it working?" Thomas asked.

"I think so." Lucas responded from the intelligence console, "All the drones look like they're on ballistic courses now and none of them are firing."

"So much for AI." Knight said and Reeves smiled.

"God makes intelligence better than man." he said.

"Did you tell that to the ambassador of Nexus when it was aboard?" Knight said.

"Nexus was supposedly created by accident." Reeves pointed out, "God may have planned for its creation but man didn't. That's why it's the only truly sentient machine system we know of."

"Worried that your God may see artificial intelligence as another Tower of Babel and strike you down?"

Hayes commented but Reeves just smiled.

"At least you remember something of what I read to you." he said.

"Well the jamming looks like it's doing the job it's supposed to captain." Goldman said, "Our fighters are taking out the drones and they aren't fighting back."

"Good. What about the other machine forces?" Reeves said.

"No sign of any more tachyon activity near the depot and there's no activity at all from the station yet."

Goldman told him.

"But the station has been modified?" Knight commented.

"Definitely." Lucas said, nodding, "Our sensors show an increased power output from the last time we were here."

"But do you have any idea of what that power could be being used for?" Reeves said.

"Comparing visual scans to what were taken last time show several additions to the station's outer hull that could be turrets." Lucas said.

"I told you." Hayes added, "They'll have been taken from the depot."

"What sort of firepower are we talking about?" Knight said.

"From the size I'd say that they're equivalent to our light turrets." Lucas said.

"The station structure can't handle heavy weapons." Hayes added, "We'll be perfectly safe in this ship."

"Maybe, but if we want to take that station intact then we've got to send in troops and those turrets will make short work of our shuttles." Willis pointed out.

Shaw turned her fighter as hard as she could to try and bring her guns to bear on the last of the AI controlled drones, a machine that was still following a ballistic course. However, before she could attempt to make her shot the drone exploded as another fighter pilot opened fire just moments before.

"Damn it!" Shaw hissed, "That would have made me the top scorer. Now Mitch O'Neill has four to his name as well and he got his quicker."

"Regretting offering that bottle of Kentucky's finest?" Mori asked with a grin.

"You bet I am. O'Neill is so tight he won't share a drop with the rest of us." Shaw answered.

"His instructors did give him the call sign Gasket for a reason." Mori commented.

"Okay, okay. I should have expected this. Now shut down our jamming and give me a clear channel." Shaw told Mori.

"Jamming down, comms open." Mori responded.

"This is Archangel to all craft. Enemy eliminated, we're done here." Shaw broadcast before she received a signal from the *Warspite* a few moments later.

"Archangel this is *Warspite* we have another job for you before you come back home." Goldman told her.

"Copy that *Warspite*, what do you need?" Shaw asked.

"The captain wants you to do a flyby of the station before we deploy our boarding party. Your orders are to take out the defensive batteries without compromising the integrity of the station itself." Goldman said.

"Understood *Warspite*, we're going in now." Shaw said.

As well as barracks and armouries for the troops it carried the assault module carried by the *Warspite* featured a hangar with enough small craft to deploy those troops into battle. The largest of these was a lighter, a large shuttle designed to deliver a full company of troops into a relatively safe area. Given their lack of training in space or airborne warfare this was to be used by the Brekken troops but there were also a number of smaller craft meant for use by the Gurkhas and the Rodinan heavy infantry. Unlike the lighter

these were armed and intended to remain on station after deploying their passengers to be able to provide them with air cover.

It was to some of these craft that the heavy infantry from Nova Rodina now headed, marching in columns while wearing their powered armour. As well as covering their entire bodies with plating that was almost impervious to most small arms fire this armour was sealed against the vacuum of space and most other hostile environments. In addition to this the armour was fitted with its own weapons in external hard points. Every suit carried a machine gun that was belt fed from a large ammunition reserve on the wearer's back along with a support weapon that was usually a grenade launcher but that in some cases had been replaced with a laser for anti-armour use. Given that they were to be conducting a boarding operation the suits of powered armour had also been fitted with add-on rocket motors that would enable the wearers to act in space as well as inside the station.

While these troops marched in their columns towards their shuttles Sandra Sands stood at the side of the hangar with her news team.

"Okay how's this?" she asked as she stood with her back to the Rodinan troops to try and get them in the background of the shot.

"Perfect angle." her cameraman said.

"Those footsteps are playing havoc with your mike though." her sound man added as he listened to the feed from her microphone that was picking up every heavy, echoing footstep on the hangar deck from power armoured feet.

"Well I can't exactly ask them to keep the noise down can I?" Sands pointed out, "This isn't live anyway. Filter it all out in post."

"Okay but it will look like we're editing the footage." the sound man said.

"We are. Look, I'll start before all those troops get aboard their shuttles and we lose the shot." Sands said.

"Sure go ahead." the sound man replied and Sands looked directly at the camera as the cameraman gave her a thumbs up.

"This is Sandra Sands aboard the *CSV Warspite*, the heavy cruiser assigned to lead the Commonwealth's first wave advancing into Genex space to investigate the threat posed by this enemy once thought defeated. Now though there is another threat on the horizon, that of an alien artificial intelligence that has already brought down the empire of the Sissusk, came close to destroying the independent colony on Verne and now seems poised to consume the Genex as well. The squadron led by the *Warspite* has just engaged a task force under the control of this artificial intelligence and I am told that it was defeated with very little loss of life on the Commonwealth's side. Now though the *Warspite* stands poised to launch an assault on a space station vital to the Commonwealth mission that is currently controlled by the artificial intelligence. Behind me you see a company of troops from Nova Rodina boarding their shuttles to make this assault. They are to be the first wave of the assault, backed up by marines of the *Warspite's* own compliment and it is hoped that by this time tomorrow the Commonwealth will have a secure foothold in the territory of the Genex." Sands said before she adopted a more relaxed tone and added, "Okay so how was that?"

"It'll do." the sound man said.

"Good job too. The last of those Rodinan troops are getting aboard their shuttles so we've no visual of them for a second take." the camera man said and Sands frowned, "What's up Sandra?" he added.

"What's up? Seriously? I'll tell you what's up, we're here with me giving a speech to camera that tells people exactly nothing they couldn't hear from a government press officer. I need interviews with senior officers, that Genex or a Brekken. Better yet we need to get close to the action and report it while it's happening instead of after." Sands replied.

"You know that Captain Reeves will never go for that." the cameraman said.

"Yeah, he won't even give you an interview." the sound man added, "He's hardly likely to let us sit on the bridge in the middle of a battle."

"Then we need to find another way." Sands replied.

The hangar was then filled with the sound of a klaxon and the ground crew for the shuttles began to head for the exits.

"What's going on?" Sands' cameraman said.

"The hangar is about to be depressurised so the shuttles can launch. You need to leave." a nearby crewman said.

Hearing this the trio of reporters joined him in leaving the hangar as quickly as possible and Sands glanced back through the window of the airlock door after it slid shut behind them.

"Get a shot of this." she told her cameraman and he pointed his camera through the window in time to capture the outer hangar door opening and the shuttles carrying the Rodinan heavy infantry lift off and head into space.

While the other Commonwealth attack craft returned to the warships that launched them, the interceptors from the damaged *Wasp* instead landed on the second heavy picket, the *Existence*. The *Warspite's* own

squadron of fighters instead flew towards the system's refuge station, the original purpose of this station was to provide a place where the crews of any ships stranded in the system could seek shelter while waiting for rescue. Stations such as this had been constructed by the Commonwealth since the earliest days of interstellar travel in every system possible and the Genex had maintained this practice as they established their own empire.

Although not specifically a military installation, the station had been designed with the addition of weaponry in mind and the alien artificial intelligence had done just that, adding numerous light turrets to the station to protect it against attack. A large warship such as the *Warspite* would easily be able to destroy the station with its medium and heavy guns while remaining out of range of these turrets but the intention was to take the station as intact as possible and that meant getting close enough to come under fire from its defences.

To prevent this the fighters would have to move in and destroy the turrets first.

"Okay boys," Shaw broadcast to the rest of the squadron as the fighters headed for the space station, "we'll be entering firing range soon so remember to jink and weave. We'll need to engage these turrets with guns so I want everyone's navigators to be ready with firing solutions."

Each of the fighter pilots acknowledged the instruction and then they began to manoeuvre at random to confuse the AI's targeting systems shortly before they entered the effective range of the station's guns.

"We're being targeted." Mori announced when he picked up the specific energy pulse from a targeting sensor trying to pick out their fighter. Then there was a flash as the station opened fire with an energy weapon only for the blast to miss Shaw's fighter by several metres.

"That was a close one Kaz. Can you give me the source?" she asked.

"Yes but at this range we can't engage. The turrets are all rotating and the rate of spin will take that one out of our firing arc by the time the rounds from our gauss cannons reach the station." Mori told her.

"Then what can you give me to shoot at?" Shaw responded.

"There's another turret coming into view now. Lead the shot by six degrees and fire." Mori said.

"Got it. Firing now." Shaw said before she fired a rapid burst from her fighters cannons. The projectiles fired from these weapons sped through space at more than a hundred kilometres per second but even at such a rate the turret that was their target still moved by a significant distance in the time it took them to reach it. However, the turret's motion was entirely predictable and so by aiming off slightly Shaw was targeting the place where the turret would be rather than where it was and the gauss cannon rounds struck it and the hull of the station immediately surrounding it, destroying the weapon in an instant.

The other fighters in the squadron followed suit, firing rapid bursts of projectiles in between flying in an evasive pattern to fool the AI's targeting ability. This was not entirely successful though and there was a sudden flash as one of the fighters was hit, a free electron beam laser striking its wing. This produced a brief fireball but the fighter remained largely intact.

"Terminator, what's your status?" Shaw asked the pilot of the damaged craft.

"I can hold her together but I've lost most of my fuel." the pilot replied.

"Then get out of here. Turn and burn for a low consumption flight back to the *Warspite*. Let them know you're coming." Shaw ordered.

"Understood commander. We're out of here." the other pilot said as his fighter began to decelerate. To save as much fuel as possible he used the craft's forward facing drive units to slow his fighter instead of using up fuel to turn away from the station. Then he used the same drives to set the fighter into a course in reverse before shutting off the engines and drifting, saving what precious fusion fuel remained for the deceleration and docking manoeuvres.

While the pilot of the damaged fighter was retreating the rest of the squadron continued towards the station, manoeuvring and firing at the turrets that had been attached to the exterior of the station and Shaw smiled when the flashes of weapons fire from it ceased.

"That looks like the last of them Kaz." she said.

"The station's still running targeting sweeps though." Mori said.

"At us?" Shaw asked.

"No. The shuttles from the *Warspite* are closing from behind us. I think they're – whoa!" Mori exclaimed.

"Kaz what is it?" Shaw said.

"Missiles. The station just launched missiles at the shuttles. Twenty of them. There must have been a battery it was keeping in reserve." Mori replied and Shaw activated the fighter's communications again.

"We've got multiple missiles heading for the shuttles. Shoot them down." she told her pilots before adding, "Shuttle pilots this is Archangel you have incoming missiles. Take evasive action."

"What does this mean?" Colonel Garrash asked, looking up from the central console.

"It means that our troops are in for a bumpy ride colonel." Willis responded as he reached for the communication panel that gave him a direct line to the officers of the boarding party, "Captain Vetrov are your men ready to deploy?" he said.

"We were ready as soon as we launched major." Vetrov answered and Willis smiled and looked at the Brekken standing opposite him.

"Colonel Garrash in a decade or two your men could be doing this as well." he said, "Captain Vetrov, deploy your men."

The passenger compartments of the shuttle carrying the power armoured troops from Nova Rodina opened up to expose the soldiers they carried, secured in metal clamps that now released so that when the shuttles suddenly decelerated the soldiers continued to hurtle forwards through space towards the refuge station while the missiles that had been fired continued to track the shuttles that they had been targeted at.

"Whoa! Watch out for those Rodinans." Shaw exclaimed as an armoured figure passed close enough by her canopy for her to see unaided.

"Don't worry, I can see them all on my screen." Mori said, "I'll make sure you don't accidentally shoot them or run them down."

"You better had Kaz." Shaw commented as she fired a missile of her own, having locked onto one of the enemy missiles

In addition to the shuttles carrying the heavy infantry there were also five other small craft that had been launched by the *Warspite* to carry the marines intended to act as support to the Rodinans as well as the medical and engineering specialists needed to deal with casualties and to take control of the station's systems. Two of these craft were skips, shuttles that carried weapons for their own protection while the other three were dropships, more heavily armed craft intended to support planetary landings and as the missiles launched from the station closed in these craft opened fire, joining the fighters in picking them off before they could get close enough to threaten any of the troop carriers.

While the fighters and armed skips and dropships were dealing with the missiles the armoured Rodinans continued to drift towards the station.

"Range one thousand metres. Begin breaking." Vetrov ordered when the display on the inside of his helmet visor told him that he and his men were close to the station and the power armoured soldiers all fired the rockets their armour had been equipped with for this mission, rapidly slowing them down so that when they landed on the outside of the station's spinning ring section they were moving slow enough not to injure themselves as they used the electromagnets built into the soles of their armoured boots to clamp onto the hull.

"All squads down and set captain." Vetrov's most senior non-commissioned officer told him in their native Russian when the soldiers were all on the hull.

"Move out. Squads one and two move with the spin, three and four against it. Find us some access points we can use." Vetrov responded, also in Russian, before Willis' voice was heard.

"Just a reminder captain, this is a Commonwealth operation. Speak English please so we all know what you're doing."

"As you wish major." Vetrov responded before he switched briefly to a private channel linking him only to his command section and in Russian he added, "Since it's too much trouble for you to learn our language." and his men laughed.

"Why do I get the feeling you were just insulted Major Willis?" Colonel Garrash asked when he heard the laughter.

"Because Vetrov and his men have the same sense of humour as every other soldier and marine in the galaxy" Thomas commented.

"As long as it avoids a mutiny I'll overlook it." Willis said as he watched the feeds from the cameras mounted to the Rodinans' power armour as they moved across the hull in search of a way into the space station.

8.

As Vetrov's group was moving around the spinning section of the refuge station they suddenly saw another group of humanoids coming towards them and from their lack of friendly transponders it was obvious that they were not the other group having gone all the way around.

"Contact ahead!" Vetrov snapped as he brought up the arm that had the machine gun mounted to it and opened fire at the advancing robots.

Being designed for combat the robots' bodies possessed similar resistance to small arms fire as the power armoured troops and there were sparks as many of the bullets were simply deflected away. Here and there some of the rounds fired by the Rodinans found weak points in the robots' armour though and a few of the machines simply came to a halt, one of them flying away from the spinning ring section of the station as its power failed and the electromagnets holding it to the hull likewise failed. The robots returned fire at the human troops with the machine guns that they also carried, having been designed to use standard infantry weapons by the Genex to make supplying them easier.

"Lasers." Vetrov ordered simply and a pair of his men whose armoured suits were fitted with anti-armour lasers stepped forwards and levelled the powerful energy weapons towards the robots. The lasers flashed as they were fired and the energy beams shot towards the advancing robots. Unlike the rifle calibre machine guns that had only limited effectiveness against the robots the lasers had no difficulty in penetrating the robots' armoured bodies and the lasers produced more flashes of light as they burned through armour and circuitry. One of the robots exploded in a brief flare of light when the laser burned into its power pack and the increase in temperature caused it to combust, turning the humanoid machine into debris flying off into space. The artificial intelligence controlling the robots rapidly determined that the troops in powered armour were more than a match for the small force it had sent outside to deal with them and it instructed them to pull back.

"Warspite the enemy are retreating. We are going after them. I suspect they're heading for an airlock we can use to get inside." Vetrov signalled when he saw the robots start to move backwards, alternating between laying down cover fire and moving steadily back the way they had come. The Rodinans followed the retreating robots, keeping the pressure on them to get back inside the space station while also taking care not to destroy them all before they could lead the human troops to the entrance they intended to use.

As they continued to fall back the robots moved over the side of the ring, walking towards the inner surface and when the Rodinans followed them they saw the hatch that the machines had been heading for. This was a large rectangular cargo hatch that from the point of view of someone standing inside the ring had a ceiling that opened into space and was reached by an ascending platform that the robots now used as an elevator to take them back inside.

"Quickly, open fire." Vetrov ordered when he saw the robots gather on the platform and it began to descend, knowing that every machine destroyed outside was one that his men would not have to face inside the station and his men opened fire with machine guns and lasers again. With the platform descending these attacks hit the upper sections of the robots while they could not effectively return fire while they were tightly packed together on it and only a few short bursts of machine gun fire came back at the troops in powered armour.

When the robots had disappeared Vetrov waved his men towards the hatch and they moved forwards as quickly as they could. They were too late though to be able to reach the hatch before the artificial intelligence that was now in control of the station was able to close it, sealing them outside.

"Antonov get me this hatch open now." Vetrov ordered and one of his men moved to the control panel beside the hatch and crouched down next to it.

The crouching soldier used his armoured fist to smash open the control panel, exposing the circuitry behind it and he plugged a compact computer tablet into this, wires running from an external port being used to connect to specific parts of the circuit. The computer that controlled his power armour had more processing capability than the tablet but given the nature of the enemy that the human troops were facing it was considered too dangerous to give the artificial intelligence a direct link to the armour's computer.

It took just a few seconds of manipulating the circuitry to find the right combination of signals to open the hatch and it slid open again. As soon as this began to happen there was a burst of gunfire from inside the airlock as the robots positioned below attempted to dissuade the Rodinans from entering the station. This was insufficient to cause the soldiers to give though and they returned fire, shooting down into the airlock with their own machine guns and at such close range the weight of fire was enough to destroy all four of the robots before Vetrov leapt down into the airlock.

"Clear. Follow me down." he told his men as he looked around.

The first thing that Vetrov noticed was that the internal door of the airlock was also open, exposing the interior of the station to the vacuum of space. For a facility controlled by machines this was perfectly

understandable. The robot garrison would be just as able to operate in a vacuum as in a pressurised environment but any invading human force would have to wear sealed armour and fall back to pressurised areas to be able to treat casualties.

"This is Vetrov to *Warspite*. We are inside the station." Vetrov transmitted.

"Looks like you're up Miss Hayes." Willis said, looking at her.

"They'll have to make their way to one of the spokes." Hayes said as she looked at the diagram of the station shown on the central console that also showed the positions of the troops in powered armour, "The main computer is located in the central core between the wheel and the antenna cluster at the end."

"Did you get that captain?" Willis added.

"Yes major. We are on our way. I will send the second unit to the docking bay to secure it for your men."

Vetrov replied as the feed from his armour showed him walking deeper into the station.

"Major is it not unusual for there to be so little resistance so far?" Garrash asked as he looked at the camera feeds, seeing that none of them indicated any active opposition.

"This isn't a significant installation. Maybe the machines aren't that interested in holding it." Hayes suggested.

"That would make sense. They may have just have a few guards at key locations. They certainly weren't prepared to face our troops outside." Willis said.

"Or they could just be lying in wait to ambush our men." Knight commented.

"What's the status of the second wave?" Reeves added, looking at Goldman.

"All the transports are through the missiles safely captain." she replied, "They should be docking in a few minutes."

"The rest of Vetrov's men are entering the ring section now. Looks like that hole you blew in it is still there captain." Willis said and Reeves smiled, remembering having to blast a way out of the station when he and Hayes came under attack while aboard it.

"How long until they can reach the docking bay?" Reeves asked.

"Not before the marines get there." Willis answered.

"I'd rather not have the marines cutting or blasting their way inside if they can help it. Tell them to wait for Vetrov's men to open the doors for them." Reeves ordered and Willis nodded.

"Yes captain." he responded, "What about Captain Tamang's men?"

"Order them to their ships but hold them for now. If resistance continues to be light we may not need them at all." Reeves said.

In one of the skips Bernard and Doctor Thundercloud sat among several marines as well as personnel from their own departments. Ordinarily they would have also brought along a number of the *Warspite's* own robots to assist them but the risk that one or more of them could become infected by the alien artificial intelligence virus was too great and so only human troops would be involved in this mission.

"Okay I understand." Bernard said when the dropship's pilot informed him of their status.

"What's happening?" Thundercloud asked.

"We're not going aboard right away." Bernard told him.

"Why not?" Thundercloud said.

"Because Vetrov's men haven't made it to the hangar yet and Captain Reeves doesn't want us walking into a trap." Bernard replied.

"He doesn't think our marines can protect us?" Thundercloud said, looking at the marines who stared back at him.

"I think he's more worried about the machines lying in wait with something powerful enough to take out an entire dropship with its marines still aboard." Bernard said before he changed the subject, "Once we do make it aboard how long will it take to set up the shelter?"

"Not long. About ten or fifteen minutes. We'll have to make it to the ring section first though. Medical treatment in zero gee is complicated and dangerous." Thundercloud said, "What about you? How long until the station can be declared secure?"

"Ah now that is a good question." Bernard replied with a smile, "Every aspect of the station's computer system is going to need wiping and reformatting. That AI will probably have invaded everything right down to the lighting controls and if we miss one piece of it then it could spread out to infect the whole thing again. Let's just say that I think you'll be needing that shelter of yours for a few days yet doctor."

Ordinarily travelling between the refuge station's rotating rings and the central core would be done using one of the elevators that ran the length of the spokes that connected these two different sections but Vetrov and his men ignored these in favour of parallel access shafts that could not be influenced by the station's computer. This took longer than using the elevators but guaranteed that his men would reach the core safely.

Having made their way along one of these access shafts Vetrov and his men came under fire as soon as they entered the core, a long cylinder that housed the main computer and sensors at one end with the hangar and fusion reactor at the other. Without true artificial gravity, the central core of the station was a weightless environment and this allowed easy movement along the entire length without the risk of falling. The lights in this part of the station had been extinguished and so the robots hiding in the passageway remained out of sight until the flash of their weapons revealed their positions. As had happened previously though this fire was limited to machine guns only from a small number of robots positioned in the direction of the main computer, obviously intended to protect the artificial intelligence that controlled the station.

"I count five of them captain." one of Vetrov's men told him as the power armoured troop ducked back into the spinning passage that led out to the ring, having counted the separate muzzle flashes.

"We'll use grenades corporal. I don't want us exposed to their fire for any longer than necessary. In here they can concentrate their fire too much to take that chance." Vetrov said and then the soldier leant back into the core and aimed his grenade launcher along it, firing three rounds in quick succession before retreating out of sight again.

"You're hit corporal." Vetrov commented, noticing a small chip in the other soldier's helmet from a bullet that had not been there a few moments earlier.

"Yes captain. There is no damage though." the corporal responded before he added, "Detonation confirmed."

In the vacuum inside the space station there was no sound from the grenades when they exploded and the station itself was too big for the shrapnel to create enough of a vibration for the soldiers to notice. However, among the information provided to the troops by their powered armour was the status of the grenades fired by the launchers and the corporal's display indicated the detonation of all three that he had just launched.

"Let's go." Vetrov said and he jumped back into the core passageway and looked towards the robots who had been protecting it. In the confines of the passageway the shrapnel produced by the three grenades had found the weak points in the robots' armour and now all but two were just wrecks floating in zero gravity. The final two were still active but clearly heavily damaged and they twitched as they tried to take aim at Vetrov. Before either of the machines could fire though he brought up his own machine gun and fired a sustained burst at them, the hail of bullets finishing off the two robots.

"Just a reminder Captain Vetrov, Captain Reeves would like the station intact." Willis' voice said over Vetrov's radio and the power armoured officer just smiled as he continued towards the computer core with his men.

The lack of illumination other than what the soldiers themselves had built into their armour meant that it was not until they neared the end of the passageway that they saw that the way ahead was blocked by a closed hatch, the first such closed doorway they had encountered since entering the station.

"Antonov, the door." Vetrov ordered and the technical specialist moved forwards.

Before Antonov could attempt to force the door open though it unexpectedly slid open of its own accord and there was a sudden, brilliant flash of light that triggered the Rondian soldiers' visors to darken in response.

"Laser!" Vetrov yelled even though his radio would have alerted his men equally as well no matter the loudness of his voice. However, his warning came too late for Antonov who was caught right in front of the doorway and the energy beam burned right through him in spite of his armour. Rupturing both the fuel tank for his rocket pack and also the power cell for his armour the soldier was turned into a fireball and pieces of him and his armour flew around the passageway, striking more of the power armoured troops.

Without waiting for a target to present itself clearly Vetrov fired his grenade launcher repeatedly, sending half a dozen grenades through the open hatchway into the darkness on the other side before the passageway was lit up by the laser once more and over his radio Vetrov heard one of his men scream. Looking around he saw that the laser had sliced off the man's arm and now two other soldiers were holding him steady while a third attempt to seal the wound and his armour before either blood loss or the vacuum of space could kill him.

"Vetrov's men are under fire from a heavy weapon." Willis said.

"The machines were lying in wait," Hayes said, frowning.

"We can't wait for the rest of Vetrov's men to secure the hangar, they need reinforcements quickly." Willis said.

"Order the skips to breach the hangar and clear it for the dropships." Reeves said, "If they can't do it in under ten minutes then I want the marines to do an EVA and make their own way inside."

"You're abandoning the idea of taking the station intact captain?" Knight asked.

"I'd rather not cause any damage to it but I'm sure that Commander Bernard's men can handle patching a few holes if they have to." Reeves replied.

The two skips launched by the *Warspite* moved closer to the refuge station before extending docking collars that clamped onto the side of the hangar located at the very end of the structure. With these in place the marines carried aboard the skips could apply rings of shaped charges to the station's hull and as soon as



these went off, blasting the hull sections in the middle into the hangar, the marines rushed through into the station.

They emerged into the weightless environment of the hangar and using the rocket packs fitted to their armoured spacesuits they began to spread out. The artificial intelligence controlling the station had indeed deployed a force of combat robots to the hangar and equipped them with heavy weaponry but this was all set up to face the main hangar doors themselves and the machines could not turn these weapons towards the entry points created by the marines before they opened fire.

Most of the marines were armed only with rifles but these were still capable of taking out the roughly human sized robots if they hit the right spot and a pair of the machines were destroyed as they tried to turn a missile launcher towards one of the entry points. Other robots were armed with machine guns and they returned fire at the marines more quickly. However, the speed at which the marines had been able to spread out meant that they could only be targeted as individuals, limiting the effectiveness of the automatic weapons. This did not prevent all of the marines from being hit though and several of them were hit by one or more rounds from the machine guns before they could make it to the cover of the docking berths inside the hangar.

Once they had made it to positions where it was possible to anchor themselves the marines began to deploy their support weapons and a number of them employed the grenade launchers mounted beneath their rifles. Unlike the weapons that the Rodinan heavy infantry were equipped with, that for this mission had been loaded exclusively with explosive fragmentation rounds, the marines were also equipped with shaped charge anti-armour rounds and they loaded their single shot launchers with these before firing them directly at the robots crewing their heavy weapons.

Designed for engaging heavy infantry and light armoured vehicles, these grenades were equally effective against the combat robots defending the hangar and a direct hit was enough to punch through even the thickest of their armour after which the blast of the shaped charge would destroy their internal circuitry.

"I have the control booth in sight. I'm going in." the officer commanding one of the two marine platoons inside the hangar signalled, his message relayed by the skip that had transported his men to the station back to the *Warspite*.

"Lieutenant that might not work. You'll have to find a local override to make sure that the computer can't lock you out." Hayes told him.

"Understood *Warspite*." the lieutenant responded as he and a squad of his men rushed along the walkway towards the hangar control booth, their magnetic boots keeping them clamped to the walkway.

As they approached the booth though the hatchway that separated it from the hangar itself opened and a robot emerged and fired at the marines with its machine gun. The lieutenant felt the force of an impact to his chest and he gasped, but luckily for him his chest plate stopped the bullet that hit him. Before the robot could target him again the lieutenant's men opened fire and the robot jerked under repeated hits from rifle rounds until one struck one of the machine's eyes, piercing the optic before smashing the main processing system located inside its head.

Bursting into the control booth the lieutenant saw that it was empty and while his men took up positions by the doors leading back to the hangar as well as deeper into the station he hurried to the console. Despite having been designed and built by Genex engineers several decades earlier the console was still laid out in a manner that was familiar to the marine officer, a holdover from the Commonwealth roots of the Genex. With the hangar already in a vacuum the lieutenant knew that it was safe to open the outer doors and he jabbed at the control labelled with this function. However, when he pressed the button the doors failed to open.

"The console looks like it's locked out by the main computer." the lieutenant signalled before waiting for a response from the *Warspite*.

"Just keep the button pressed down for override." Hayes responded after a short delay and the lieutenant pressed the control again, this time keeping it pressed and sure enough the hangar's outer doors began to slide open.

"It's working." the lieutenant said, broadcasting to all of his men as well as the skip and dropship crews, "All pilots be advised that the enemy still has heavy weapons covering the doors. Marine units will mark these for targeting."

"Copy that lieutenant, designating now." one of the marine squad leaders responded.

Built into the optical sights on their rifles, the marines had laser designators that were intended to be used when calling in fire support. Missiles launched from land based launchers several kilometres away or carried aboard dropships could be guided precisely to a target using one of these lasers and the marines now used them to pick out the robot crewed heavy weapons as the hangar doors opened to allow the dropships outside to fire the missiles they carried.

One after another three of the missiles were launched from the dropships without any input from their pilots being needed and these flew into the hangar, homing in on the energy reflected from their targets and there was a succession of explosions that blasted apart sections of walkways where the robots had set up their support weapons. With these destroyed the dropships were then able to fly right into the hangar while the

remaining robots could only try to engage them with small arms that were unable to penetrate their armoured hulls. The crews of the dropships logged the source of every attack directed at them and once these had been identified they returned fire with the lasers and gauss cannons the craft were armed with. More powerful than infantry carried weapons, these ripped apart the remaining robots and in a matter of seconds only the *Warspite's* marines remained inside the hangar.

"Captain the hangar is secure." Willis reported as the central console showed feeds from marine cameras as the rest of the company disembarked from their dropships.

"What about casualties?" Reeves asked.

"Eight dead and five wounded among the marines. Vetrov's company have lost six dead now and two wounded." Willis told him.

"Are such ratios of dead to injured common?" Garrash asked, "On Brekka we usually have more injured than dead."

"A consequence of fighting in a vacuum colonel. Injuries can easily become rapidly fatal because they can't be treated in time." Willis answered and the Brekken officer nodded in understanding.

"How long until your men can reinforce Captain Vetrov?" Knight said.

"They should be ready to move out from the hangar in-" Willis began before the feed from one of the power armoured soldiers suddenly showed him coming under fire and Willis expanded the image, "Wait, it looks like the squads Vetrov sent to secure the hangar are coming under fire as well."

"This is Lieutenant Egorov, we are under fire from heavy weapons in the reactor section." the officer commanding the heavy infantry unit signalled.

"They guarded all the key points with their heaviest firepower." Hayes commented.

"Is that not logical? If they lacked the numbers to protect the entire station then why not concentrate their best weapons in the most important locations?" Garrash said and Hayes smiled at him.

"Not bad thinking for someone who's never fought in space." she said.

"I was just thinking about this place as if it was a fortress on Brekka and how I would defend it against a superior foe." Garrash replied.

"Using heavy weapons in the reactor section seems dangerous." Knight said, "One stray shot and-"

"Boom." Ash interrupted.

"The AI must regard that as an acceptable risk. They may even trigger it deliberately." Reeves said, "Have Egorov and his men hold their position. Maybe they can keep the machines sufficiently occupied for your marines to be able to surprise them from behind."

There were three heavy weapons set up in the core of the station protecting the reactor section, all of them positioned to fire along the passageway that the Rodinans were using to get from the ring section to the hangar. Two of these were shoulder fired laser weapons while the third was a tripod mounted automatic cannon that had been bolted to the side of the passageway. Each of these weapons had a team of four robots to operate and support it and those not needed to fire the weapons or supply them with ammunition engaged the Rodinans with machine gun fire instead. These machine guns and the automatic cannon were fired in limited bursts to keep the Commonwealth troops pinned down while the lasers fired whenever a target presented itself.

The robots had fortified their positions with barricades erected in front of their weapons and so moving out from the hangar the *Warspite's* marines were thus presented with clear targets from behind, each of them illuminated by the flash of the robots' own weapons fire. Aware that the marines had taken the hangar, the robots had deployed two more of their number to watch in this direction and as the marines emerged they opened fire with their machine guns. However, with the heavy weapons needed to combat the troops in powered armour only small arms could be used against the marines who were now using man portable armoured shields to provide them with mobile protection and the rifle calibre rounds from the machine guns just bounced off these.

"Grenades. AP only, watch your targets." the officer leading the marine advance ordered and the marines came to a halt, those carrying shields at the front so that the grenadiers could fire over them. Fired almost in unison, four grenades with shaped charge warheads flew along the passageway. These were all aimed at the robots manning the heavy weapons and one after another they struck their targets. In the case of the robots carrying the portable lasers the grenades struck the bulky power packs carried on their backs and this produced two large explosions. These blasts produced only minimal shrapnel and the flames were rapidly extinguished in the vacuum of the passageway but both the anti-armour weapons were destroyed in the process.

The effect of the two grenades aimed at the automatic cannon and its gun crew was more dramatic though. One of the grenades hit the gunner itself and it was destroyed as easily as the other robots who had been hit by such rounds while the second round hit the side of the weapon itself before detonating. This split open the breech of the weapon and ignited the propellant of the round inside. Ordinarily this would be contained by the chamber of the cannon but now it simply added to the destruction caused by the grenade itself and the blast

spread to the weapon's magazine, triggering a much larger explosion as all of the ammunition went off together and filled the passageway with fragments.

The human troops in front of and behind the robots' position were already in cover and protected from this shrapnel but the other robots were caught in the midst of a storm of flying fragments that cut most of them to pieces. Only one of the machines survived and this was still cut in half at the waist, left to float helplessly in the weightless environment of the station core. The robot lost its weapon in the blast and it was unable to do anything as the Commonwealth marines began to advance once more, the officer leading them aiming his rifle at the crippled machine and firing a burst of bullets at it when its now unprotected innards were exposed and the last robot was finally destroyed.

"Passageway through reactor section is now clear." the officer broadcast, "Damage to station unknown, requesting engineering support."

"Affirmative lieutenant." Bernard responded, "My team will be there in five minutes. Leave one squad there just in case there are any more robots about then continue with the rest of your men to the main computer core and reinforce Captain Vetrov."

"Understood commander, we're on our way." the marine lieutenant replied as he waved at one of the nearby squad leaders that his men were to remain and protect Bernard's engineers while the rest of the company joined with the Rodinan heavy infantry and went to reinforce Captain Vetrov's assault on the main computer core at the far end of the station.

Vetrov pushed past the floating wreckage of a robot as he and his men advanced towards the computer core. The machines defending this part of the station had not been concerned about using heavy weapons inside it and now there was a gaping hole in the hull where a mine had been placed to kill any nearby intruders. With the interior of the station already in a vacuum this hole made little difference in the short term, all combatants already being prepared to fight in such an environment but it was something that would need be patched if the station was to be made liveable.

Nevertheless the Rodinan troops pressed on, clearing out one corridor at a time until ahead of Vetrov one of his men stepped out around a corner and was immediately caught in a hail of gunfire from multiple machine guns. Individually the bullets posed little threat to the power armoured trooper but the sheer number of bullets that hit him made some damage inevitable and there were sparks from one of his knee joints as the mechanism there was destroyed. This locked the armour's leg in position and kept the soldier stuck in the path of the gunfire.

"Shut off your boots and push off." Vetrov told the soldier but his instruction came too late as he saw the man's faceplate crack and air began to escape moments before more rounds hit the weakened area and the inside of the face plate was suddenly sprayed red with blood.

Another armoured soldier responded with a pair of grenades that he angled around the corner, bouncing them off the opposite wall to try and get them as close to the defending robots as possible before they detonated. However, the effectiveness of this could only be guessed at without any more of Vetrov's men risking exposing themselves until he received word that the *Warspite's* marines had arrived to reinforce them.

"Lieutenant do your men have ballistic shields?" Vetrov asked the officer in the armoured spacesuit that was much lighter than his own powered armour.

"Yes captain. Four per platoon." the lieutenant told him and he smiled.

"Good. Then I need a wall across that corridor so we can see what's down there without getting shot." Vetrov said and the lieutenant looked back at his men.

"I want shields up here now." he ordered and marines carrying shields moved forwards, gathering just before the corner before they began to move around it one at a time.

Sheltering behind his shield the first marine stepped around the corner and immediately dropped into a crouching position, pressing the shield up against the wall. The following marines repeated this pattern, placing their shields up against that of the one before until they had built a wall all the way across the corridor that they crouched behind while it was struck repeatedly by the fire from the machine guns carried by the robots at the far end. Although the shields were no tougher than the plating of the powered armour worn by Vetrov and his men they had the advantage of behind a solid mass, with no joints or breaks offering weak spots that a lucky shot could exploit. Each of the shields did have a transparent vision block embedded into its structure though and this allowed the crouching marines to see beyond them without having to expose themselves to enemy fire.

"We've got six robots, all armed with machine guns standing in front of a hatch at the far end of the corridor. I don't see any heavier firepower." one of the marines reported.

"That's all I needed to hear." Vetrov said as he swung his arm around the corner and fired his grenade launcher blind, sending explosive projectiles down the corridor until his ammunition counter read empty. With no cover available to them the robots bore the full brunt of the successive explosions. Although there was no atmosphere to carry a blast wave from the grenades the fragments of their metal casings created a

dense cloud of shrapnel that the machines could not avoid and they were torn apart by it. Some of the fragments flew far enough down the corridor that they reached the marines' shield line but they were unable to penetrate the armoured barrier and the few that passed over it embedded themselves in the wall beyond rather than ricocheting around the corner towards the other human troops.

"Corridor clear." one of the marines announced following the explosions when he saw that there was nothing left of the robots other than wreckage floating at the end of the corridor.

"Advance." the marine lieutenant ordered and the marines lifted their shields off the deck and began to walk steadily down the corridor towards the hatch that the robots had been guarding, keeping their shields in front of them for protection while other troops fell in behind them.

"That looks like it's the computer core." Hayes said as she studied the feed from the cameras mounted to the helmets and powered armour of the advancing troops.

"That explains the defence. Plenty of firepower but nothing that was likely to cause structural damage to the computer itself." Willis commented.

"The hatch is sealed." a marine lieutenant reported, "We're going to override."

"No." Willis interrupted, "Blow the door with a shaped charge. If there are more robots inside you don't want them to have any more advanced warning than necessary."

"Yes sir." the lieutenant responded and Willis, Hayes and Garrash watched as the marines fixed a breaching charge of the type used to gain access to the hangar to the sealed hatch.

When this charge was triggered the marines equipped with shields were the first through the hole in the door, setting up a defensible position immediately inside for the troops who followed. However, there was no gunfire as any of them came through the door and looking around the room the human troops saw that they appeared to be alone. All the chamber contained were banks of computer drives and monitors showing the status of various systems aboard the station.

"*Warspite* the room appears empty." Vetrov said as he failed to detect any sign of opposition.

"Captain you need to cut the power to the computer." Willis said.

"Is there a battery back up?" Knight asked and Hayes nodded.

"We've kept that standard with official servers." she responded.

"Vetrov will have to find the batteries first or the computer may be able to make a controlled shutdown."

Knight said, looking at Reeves.

"Will that make much of a difference?" Reeves asked.

"If the AI is held only in active memory like it was in the brain implants on Verne then yes." Knight told him, "A controlled shutdown would give the AI the chance to copy itself to non-volatile memory."

"Major make sure that Captain Vetrov is aware of that." Reeves said and Willis nodded.

"Captain you are to locate and disable the battery back up before killing the power to the core." Willis signalled.

"Yes major, we have located the batteries and the main power input. Your marines are severing both now."

Vetrov replied and moments later the various blinking lights and illuminated display screens visible in the feeds from the troops aboard the refuge station all went out as the power to the computer core was cut entirely. Willis then stood up straight and turned towards Reeves.

"Captain the station is ours." he said.

## INTERLUDE.

"It doesn't look like the Commonwealth is going for the depot." Schaar said as she watched the Commonwealth ships moving closer to the refuge station and a number of shuttles begin to emerge from them, carrying personnel and supplies to it.

"No, Captain Reeves won't chance attacking the depot until he has a better idea of its defensive capabilities. I wouldn't be surprised if some of those stealth ships we know he has at his disposal are already moving in for a closer look." the old man replied.

"Should we make contact now grandfather?" his granddaughter asked and the old man paused to consider this.

"I think so, yes. We have information about the depot that could be of use to the Commonwealth and I think that revealing ourselves to Captain Reeves before a larger Commonwealth fleet can arrive would be wise. There is much less chance of a misunderstanding that way." he said, "Captain Schaar, please take us in closer and send the message now."

"Of course admiral." Schaar responded before she turned to her command crew, "Helm lay in a course for the Commonwealth fleet. Operations send the package now."

"Engaging drives now captain." the helmsman said as he brought the *Enigma's* engines back on line following the period of inactivity in which the ship had been running silent, observing the system while remaining unobserved.

At the same time as the *Enigma's* engines were fired the cruiser's communication system was also activated and began to transmit a radio signal. The distance between the *Enigma* and the Commonwealth ships was over ten light minutes so neither the firing of the engines or the radio broadcast would be detected by them for that long but the signal would at least alert them to the light cruiser's presence. The signal was also designed to be familiar to the crew of the *Warspite*, enabling them to identify the sender and forestalling any attack.

"The reactor is stable but the control system does look like it's been compromised." Bernard reported from the refuge station.

"That AI is probably in every computer aboard." Knight commented.

"That complicates matters. We'll need to shut them all down and that means taking the reactor off line."

Reeves replied, nodding, "Commander Bernard how long will it take you to shut down the reactor?"

"Not long. About ten minutes maybe to vent the core plasma and then shut down the control system. The bigger worry is going to be identifying every potential hiding place for the virus aboard. If we miss even one then it could spread through the system again and we'd be back where we started. If I knew the network communication protocols then I could try plugging a tablet in and seeing what I can ping." Bernard said and Reeves and Knight both looked at Hayes.

"Hey don't ask me." she said, knowing what they wanted, "That sort of thing is left to workers, not leaders."

"Keeping the peasants in their place." Thomas muttered.

"Captain we've got a heat signature. Looks like an engine flare." one of the *Warspite's* sensor operators said suddenly when the heat from the *Enigma's* engines finally reached the Commonwealth vessel.

"We're also picking up a signal captain." Goldman added, "Text only. Captain, I think you should see this."

"What is it?" Reeves said, looking at the screen in front of him as Goldman forwarded him the message they were receiving.

WARSPITE – WARSPITE – WARSPITE - WARSPITE – WARSPITE – WARSPITE - WARSPITE –  
WARSPITE – WARSPITE - WARSPITE – WARSPITE – WARSPITE - WARSPITE – WARSPITE –

"That's the same signal that led us to the courier carrying Lucas and Hayes." Knight said when he too read the repeating stream of text.

"Captain I've got Captain Perry of the *Existence* on the line." Goldman added.

"Put her through." Reeves said and the text on the screen was replaced with an image of the commanding officer of the heavy picket.

"Captain Reeves are you picking up a text message?" she asked.

"Yes captain, the name *Warspite* repeated over and over." Reeves answered.

"We've got a ship closing at about nine and a half light minutes that looks like it's the source. How do you want to respond captain?" Perry said.

"The signal matches one that we've seen before captain. I think it's intended to identify the sender to us." Reeves said, "I want that ship monitored but don't treat it as hostile yet. I think that they're here to talk and we need to listen."

"Yes captain. Existence out." Perry said before the screen returned to showing the continuing stream of repeating text.

"Can you give me a decent image of that ship?" Hayes asked, looking up from the central console where she was able to look at a blurred image of the approaching ship.

"Captain?" Goldman said.

"Do it." Reeves replied and she enhanced the image Hayes was looking at to give her a clearer picture of the vessel heading towards them.

"It's the *Enigma*." Hayes said.

"Is that something special?" Knight asked.

"Very. The *Enigma* is a light cruiser but it's a very special light cruiser." Hayes answered.

"What makes it so special?" Lucas said.

"It's one of the four alien ships that were found in the Tau-six Eridani system. The ships that proved humans weren't the only species to develop space travel."

"An alien ship. Adam will want to see that." Knight commented.

"Commander Bernard has to get that station up and running first." Reeves said. Then he looked at Goldman and added, "Commander I want to send a tight beam signal to that cruiser."

"Yes captain, aligning the laser transmitter now." she responded before nodding to indicate that Reeves could begin his message.

"This is Captain Reeves of the *Warspite* to the light cruiser *Enigma*. I am in command of an advanced squadron of warships sent by the Commonwealth. I have given orders that your ship is not to be fired on yet but I advise remaining one hundred thousand kilometres away from any Commonwealth vessel. I invite your commanding officer aboard my ship to begin talks. You may respond on the channel currently being used for your text signal. *Warspite* out." Reeves said before he sent the message.

"So now we wait the best part of twenty minutes for an answer." Knight pointed out.

"Are you really going to let them aboard the *Warspite* captain?" Lucas added.

"A small delegation, yes. I'll want you in on the meeting as well lieutenant." Reeves told her, "Along with Miss Hayes and Doctor Thundercloud."

"What do you need the doc for captain?" Ash asked.

"I want to know how the Genex commander who believes that the Genex should be re-engineered to produce ordinary human offspring plans to carry out his scheme and Doctor Thundercloud is far more likely to understand it than I am." Reeves explained.

"You're assuming that the old man is the one aboard that ship. For all we know he's already dead. Killed by the machines or his plan discovered and him executed for treason." Hayes said.

"Have a little faith Jennifer." Reeves said, smiling and Hayes frowned.

"You know that only goes so far in justifying taking risks." she said.

"You're wasting your time." Knight told her, "The captain has a habit of producing miracles right when they're needed."

The crew of the *Warspite* continued to monitor the signal being sent from the *Enigma* and roughly twenty minutes later it changed suddenly, the repeating text becoming an image of the old man sat on the bridge of the *Enigma*, his granddaughter just about visible behind him.

"Hello Captain Reeves." he said, "I can't tell you how happy I am to see you again. At our current speed we should reach the position you have indicated in about three hours and our ship will hold there with its weapons powered down. I'll take a shuttle across to your ship with my granddaughter and we can discuss how to proceed. *Enigma* out." and then the screen went blank, the stream of text no longer being broadcast either now that the *Warspite* had made contact with the alien built vessel.

"Captain I think you should consider what you're about to do carefully." Hayes said.

"You don't trust Admiral Dalton? He seems to have been straight with us before, even if he has unleashed an alien computer virus against his own government." Reeves said.

"Of course I don't trust him. Genex leaders aren't the trusting type, remember? But it's not the old man I'm worried about. It's his granddaughter." Hayes said and Willis grinned.

"You're afraid of a little girl?" he said.

"She's a killer. Do you think the old man would have trusted her to release the virus if she wasn't willing to see people die by her hand?" Hayes responded.

"I'm sure the captain doesn't intend letting any of our guests roam the ship freely." Knight said.

"No I'm not. Colonel Garrash I'll need some of your men to provide security." Reeves added and the Brekken officer bowed his head for a moment.

"Of course captain. I will assign a platoon to the task." he said.

"And Commander Goldman I need you to recall Doctor Thundercloud from the station as soon as possible. I'd like him with me when Admiral Dalton and his granddaughter arrive." Reeves added, "Oh and don't forget to update the rest of the fleet. I don't want anyone firing on the shuttle by accident."

"Yes captain. I'll make sure they all know what's going on." Goldman responded.

As instructed the *Enigma* came to a halt when it reached a point one hundred thousand kilometres from the Commonwealth warships. At this distance the *Warspite* would be able to engage the light cruiser with its main guns but any missiles fired by either side would take long enough to cross the distance that there was a reasonable chance of shooting them down.

Instead of a missile though, it was a shuttle that emerged from the alien built vessel and accelerated towards the *Warspite*. Intended for transferring passengers and cargo between ships in space rather than atmospheric operation the shuttle had a simple box shaped construction with engines mounted either side. During its journey the compact craft was monitored closely by the Commonwealth vessels for any signs of unusual activity and a pair of Commonwealth fighters met the craft and flew alongside it, ready to respond if it was determined to be a threat. Despite not appearing outwardly to be a weapon it would have been very easy for the Genex to pack the shuttle with explosives or even just rig its reactor to overload at the right moment. The shuttle behaved exactly as such a craft ought to though accelerating for approximately half the journey between its mother ship and the *Warspite* before starting to slow down again.

"*Warspite* this is *Enigma* shuttle one requesting permission to dock." the voice of a young woman said over the radio as the shuttle came close to the Commonwealth heavy cruiser.

"That's the old man's granddaughter." Hayes said, recognising the voice immediately.

"Would Admiral Dalton sacrifice her to destroy us?" Knight asked.

"No, she's the one thing he'd protect above everything else." Hayes answered.

"Commander Goldman, grant the shuttle permission to dock in the forward hangar." Reeves ordered, "Miss Hayes you and I should head for the briefing room now. Goldman see to it that Doctor Thundercloud meets us there and have Colonel Garrash and his detail at the hangar to welcome our guests."

"What about that journalist captain? Do you still want her there?" Goldman replied and Reeves sighed.

"I suppose so. If she's at the hangar to see the Genex get off the shuttle then she can't claim that we've kept everything hidden from her." he said.



"So will she be in on your meeting?" Knight added.  
"Good grief no." Reeves responded as he got up to leave.

"Have you got the angle?" Sands asked her cameraman as he pointed his camera towards her so that he would also get the Brekken soldiers now lined up beside the hatch leading to the *Warspite's* forward hangar. Given the ceremonial nature of the role they were about to perform these troops had dispensed with the chemical warfare suits they had been wearing and wore their dress uniforms instead. Colonel Garrash himself was present to greet the Genex on their arrival and escort them to the briefing room where Captain Reeves would be waiting with Doctor Thundercloud and Hayes.

"Yes, I've got the hatch and the honour guard in." he responded.

"Okay so we'll wait until those deck hands confirm that the hangar is being pressurised and then I'll give my speech. That should bring us to when the hatch can be opened and we'll go through and get some shots of the Genex." Sands said.

"Sandra look." the sound man commented when he saw the display beside the hatch indicating that air was now being pumped back into the hangar and Sands quickly faced the camera and began to speak.

"This is Sandra Sands aboard the *CSV Warspite*, the heavy cruiser leading the first wave of Commonwealth ships to enter Genex space. Behind me you can see an honour guard of Brekken infantry, present aboard this ship in advance of their formal admission to the Commonwealth. These soldiers are waiting to welcome aboard more guests in the form of representatives of the Genex themselves. This represents the first formal negotiations between the Commonwealth and the Genex since the Madrid Conference prior to the outbreak of the Genex War more than a hundred years ago and-

Before Sands could get any further the display beside the hatch showed that the hangar had reached full pressure and the deck hands present opened the hatch. As soon as this was done they and the Brekken soldiers moved through and Sands beckoned for her team to follow her.

"Come on, this is it." she said as they rushed through the open hatchway into the hangar as well.

Inside they saw the Genex shuttle now resting on landing gear that had deployed from each corner of its fuselage and the Brekken soldiers formed two lines outside it's exterior hatch while Garrash stood at the end of these lines and faced the hatch.

"Guard attention!" the sergeant in command of the honour guard ordered as the hatch began to open and the Brekken troops snapped to attention, their rifles held over their shoulders as the old man appeared with his granddaughter.

The old man wore a white fleet uniform that was decorated with the medals he had been awarded by his government over the years while his granddaughter wore smart civilian clothing and carried a tablet computer.

"Admiral Dalton welcome to the *CSV Warspite*." Garrash said as he approached the Genex, "I am Colonel Garrash and I will take you to Captain Reeves."

"You are Brekken?" the old man said, smiling as he began to walk along with Garrash, "I'm sorry but this is the first time I'm meeting members of another intelligent species. In fact Captain Reeves is the only person who isn't a Genex that I've met prior to now. I wasn't aware that the Commonwealth was using Brekken troops."

"That's okay admiral." Garrash responded, "A number of Brekken countries are in the process of joining the Commonwealth and my men and I are here to support our allies."

"Have you met many non-Brekken before now?" the old man asked.

"Personally, yes. Most Brekken will rarely see humans on our home world but the Commonwealth sends many military advisers to help train our forces just as they send technical advisers to help us develop our technology. All of my men have already encountered humans on many occasions." Garrash answered.

"Did any of them mention us?" the old man's granddaughter added.

"As a matter of fact, yes. That is why my men's weapons are loaded and they have been told that they do not need to wait for permission to use them should you do anything other than accompany me to Captain Reeves." Garrash said before there was a shout from close by.

"Admiral can you spare us time for an interview?" Sands called out.

"The admiral is going to a meeting with Captain Reeves." the Brekken sergeant told her as he and several of his men prevented Sands and her team from getting too close to the Genex.

"Are you here to negotiate an end to the war? Are the Genex formally surrendering?" Sands added but the old man ignored her as he walked alongside Colonel Garrash and they left the hangar, at which point Sands and her team were prevented from following them.

From the hangar Garrash proceeded to escort the old man and his granddaughter to the briefing room where Captain Reeves was waiting with Doctor Thundercloud and Hayes and all three stood up as the old man was shown into the room and the Genex noticed that both Reeves and Thundercloud were armed with pistols holstered on their legs.

"Admiral Dalton captain." Garrash said

"Thank you colonel. Admiral Dalton it's good to see you again. Welcome to the *Warspite*. You already know Miss Hayes of course and this is my medical officer Doctor Thundercloud." Reeves said before the Brekken officer turned to leave.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet again." the old man replied as they all sat down around the table that had been prepared, "This is my granddaughter Susanna. I trust no-one more than I trust her."

"They don't trust us yet though grandfather." the young woman said as she glanced down at the small mirror she held in the palm of her hand.

"What makes you say that my dear?" the old man asked and she smiled.

"Those pistols aren't the only weapons they have grandfather. There are a pair of personal defence weapons taped to the underside of the table where the captain and the doctor can easily reach them." she said.

"Now, now my dear. The last time Captain Reeves and I met I did have an entire cadre of warriors with me and they did destroy the ambassador of Nexus. Let the captain have his weapons, he won't need them anyway." the old man pointed out.

"Let me get straight to the point admiral." Reeves said when everyone was sat down, "The Commonwealth has agreed to your terms. A larger task force is on its way to assist in destroying the forces controlled by the alien artificial intelligence."

"That you unleashed on us." Hayes commented before Reeves continued.

"In return we expect that the Genex agree to correct the changes to their genetic structure so that their offspring will be truly human again." he said.

"The chaos caused by the alien computer virus has left the Genex government weakened and on the verge of collapse. I am certain that Secretary LeClair will agree to these terms once they are laid out to him. However, I must request that my role not be revealed right away. That could cause... difficulties." the old man said.

"You mean you'd be labelled a traitor and shot." Hayes said.

"How exactly do you intend to go about ensuring that any further offspring of your people will be ordinary humans?" Thundercloud asked.

"Susanna would you mind?" the old man said, looking at his granddaughter and she turned on the tablet she had set down on the table in front of her.

"Of course grandfather." she said before sliding it towards Thundercloud.

"The original genetic engineering that led to the Genex was in the form of an endogenous retrovirus introduced to fertilised embryos in vitro prior to implantation. This retrovirus became part of the child's DNA and was passed onto future generations." the old man said as the *Warspite's* chief medical officer began to study the information presented to him.

"Yes, I'm familiar with the process. Every good doctor is." Thundercloud responded before he continued.

"Well our counter process makes use of the same technology but has to be introduced prior to fertilisation. We obtained unmodified human DNA from the Verne and compared it to DNA taken from all four of our castes to identify where the changes had been made. Our genetic engineers then created a retrovirus designed to attack these changed DNA segments to cause them to revert to the unmodified form. We've had far less time to work on this than the original genetic engineers whose work created the Genex in the first place so we aren't able to modify an embryo, let alone an adult, only the reproductive cells themselves. The retrovirus is introduced into the reproductive organs directly via injection where it strips out the modified DNA strands in favour of the original human DNA. After that the retrovirus itself dies off leaving the ova in women or the germ cells responsible for sperm production in men permanently changed. My researchers attempted to create a version that could be delivered orally but nothing useful came of that. Had it worked then the retrovirus could have simply been introduced into the water supply and by the time anyone discovered what had happened most of the population would have been affected."

"So both parents in a Genex couple would need to be treated or the modified DNA of a single unaltered parent would just produce a worker caste Genex." Thundercloud said and the old man smiled.

"Exactly doctor." he said.

"How safe is the procedure?" Reeves said.

"I admit we did cut a few corners in the development, time was running short, but our initial test subject survived with no obvious side effects. Unless you have discovered something about her that we did not have the opportunity to discover." the old man said and he looked towards Hayes.

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking." she said.

"It seems that you'd have to individually treat every one of your people. How would you achieve this?" Thundercloud said.

"We've already made a start doctor. Most of the crew of my ship including Susanna and myself have been treated and I have allies across the empire already treating others." the old man said.

"How many people are we talking about in total?" Reeves said.

"There were approximately one point six billion Genex before the alien computer virus was released. So far we will have treated just over two thousand. Of course once we can deploy the full resources of the empire to

the project we can speed up the process massively. Each procedure only takes about ten minutes.” the old man said and Thundercloud quickly called up a calculator program on the tablet he had been given.

“Captain with a thousand doctors working around the clock it would still take about thirty years to get through the entire population.” he said.

“That’s another reason we need your help.” the old man’s granddaughter said, “The more medical staff you can provide the faster we can complete the task. There are three times as many human beings on Earth alone than there are in the entire Genex empire.”

“Probably fewer of us now thanks to you.” Hayes commented.

“And what is your plan for presenting this to your government admiral?” Reeves said.

“It should be presented as if coming from the Commonwealth captain.” the old man answered, “I’m sure that I can arrange a meeting between a representative of the Commonwealth and Secretary LeClair to make the offer of your military assistance in exchange for the Genex undergoing the retrovirus treatment.”

“Captain we are talking about forcing a medical procedure on people.” Thundercloud pointed out.

“I know doctor but Commonwealth governments have already considered the ethical question.” Reeves said, “Part of the deal will involve allowing Genex to resettle on worlds within human space. Any that refuse the treatment will be prevented from doing so. The Commonwealth has decided that this is no different to vaccine requirements that a lot of nations already have in place for visitors and immigrants.”

“So the Genex could continue to exist? Aren’t you afraid that one day they’d try overthrowing the Commonwealth again?” Hayes asked and the old man smiled.

“Jennifer if you knew the losses our forces were taking then you’d know that the Genex will never be a military threat to the Commonwealth again.” he said.

“From what Miss Hayes has told us I hear you weren’t much of a threat to us to begin with.” Reeves added.

“Indeed captain. The robot forces now under the control of the alien computer virus were meant as a means of evening up the numbers somewhat and giving us a large expendable reserve, just as we tried during the war.” the old man said.

“Talking of the robots, what can you tell us about the depot and its defences?” Reeves said, “If we are going to truly secure this system then we have to destroy the depot.”

“Of course, I expected that you would ask that. The tablet your medical officer has not only has the manifest of the depot included in its memory but also the results of the passive scans the Enigma has been carrying out since we arrived in this system several days before your arrival.” the old man said.

“The machines have been sending ships out of the system constantly.” his granddaughter added as Thundercloud passed the tablet to Reeves and he brought up the other data file it contained, “Their forces will be significantly weaker than the manifest indicates.”

“What about the tachyon communication satellites?” Reeves asked, “When we arrived in the system they were inactive.”

“Yes, that was done deliberately to try and limit the spread of the alien virus. Of course by the time the network was shut down it had already spread to almost every system under our control.” the old man told him before the intercom sounded and Reeves reached for it.

“Reeves.” he said simply.

“Captain I thought you ought to know that we’ve picked up a tachyon signal, stray tachyons from a fleet approaching the system.” Goldman’s voice said.

“Genex or machines?” Reeves said.

“Neither captain. This reading is coming from the direction of the Commonwealth. Admiral Winchester’s fleet will be here in about eighteen hours.” Goldman replied.

## INTERLUDE.

"My name is Commander Kane, I need to speak with Secretary LeClair." the Genex intelligence officer said to the warriors who met him on the landing field that had until recently been the garden of a large mansion house but was now dotted with shuttle sized spacecraft as well as a number of atmospheric rotor craft while weapon emplacements had been set up around the perimeter as well as at the house itself. Having just arrived by courier from Sanctuary, the two warriors pointed their weapons at Kane as they approached him and in the darkness of the night the flash lights mounted on the rifles dazzled Kane and caused him to raise his hand to shield his eyes.

"Identification." one of the warriors said, blocking Kane's path and he sighed.

"I don't have it." he said, "What I do have is urgent news for the secretary about the situation on Sanctuary, now are you going to let me pass or do you want to end up as drones?"

Tasked with protecting the complex that was now serving as the headquarters of what remained of the Genex government, the two warriors were not about to let anyone enter the building where their head of state was located without the correct authorisation. On the other hand they knew just enough about the current situation to know that chaos now reigned in the Genex empire and that Kane could easily be telling the truth. However, they could not make that determination themselves and so while one kept Kane covered with his weapon the second used his personal radio to summon someone who could.

Kane was quite surprised when the officer who walked across the landing field towards him turned out to be a woman who was visibly pregnant even in the darkness. Since escaping from the Commonwealth at the end of the war Genex society had encouraged reproduction in order to expand their numbers as rapidly as possible and the importance placed on pregnant women meant that they did not typically serve in the military for their own safety, as well as that of the child. Obviously the seriousness of the current situation was resulting in every member of the Genex armed forces being called up to serve.

"You are Commander Kane?" the woman asked when she reached Kane and he nodded.

"That's right captain. Intelligence under Admiral Dalton. I need to speak with Secretary LeClair or even the admiral if the old man is around." Kane answered.

"Admiral Dalton's whereabouts are currently unknown. If you want see the secretary then I'm going to have to verify your identity first." the woman said and she held out the tablet she was holding. Looking at the screen Kane saw that it had his service profile shown on it, including a picture of his face. Of course modern cosmetic surgery could alter someone's appearance but there was still one way to be certain and he pressed his right thumb down on an empty box shown near the bottom of the screen until there was a 'bleep' and the woman took back the tablet to check that his thumbprint had been confirmed.

"This way commander." she told him and she turned around and led Kane towards the house, the two warriors following behind him with their weapons still held at the ready.

Kane and the female captain walked between more warriors as they entered the house and he noticed these troops using their radios to inform their controls that someone had entered the building. Inside the building was luxuriously decorated and Genex flags, both those of Haven and the Genex empire itself. These looked as if they had been hastily added, obscuring some of the artwork on the walls behind them and Kane guessed that the building had been requisitioned in a hurry from a civilian. The room that Kane was taken to looked like it had once been a dining room, the large table still dominating the room now having computer equipment spread across it while the art in here had all been removed to make space for wall mounted displays that showed the deployment of Genex forces within the system and beyond. The room was filled with military personnel, some of them low ranking technical staff monitoring the computer equipment while around half were senior officers, many of them standing either side of the man Kane recognised instantly as Secretary LeClair himself.

"Commander Kane of our intelligence service to see you mister secretary." the captain said and across the table LeClair looked up.

"What do you want commander? As I am sure you can tell I am rather busy right now." he said.

"Mister secretary I've just arrived from Sanctuary with news from General Accardi." Kane said.

"And what is the news? Bad I expect." LeClair replied.

"The General has had to pull his forces back sir, the capital has fallen to the machines. He did his best to evacuate as much of the civilian population as he could but the machines launched a surprise attack on the relocation centre. Up to a million people could be dead or prisoners of the machines." Kane said.

"Prisoners. Ready to be shipped off through one of these no doubt. Take a look at that commander, it came in half an hour ago on a ship we sent to Redoubt." LeClair said and he tossed a tablet across the table.

Picking this up Kane looked at the display and saw an image of a vast structure being built in space. Using what looked like spacecraft as component parts the structure was a giant ring.

"A tachyon gate." Kane said when he saw this. Structures such as this had been seen in the former Sissusk Empire and an ancient example found on the surface of a moon in the same system as the independent colony of Verne. It was theorised that the rings were similar in function to the tachyon gates that had been constructed in the early days of human interstellar travel and were still in use in a few scattered places. These worked by having spacecraft fly through the rings where charged tachyons would be applied to their hulls, removing the need for them to carry their own tachyon generation or storage equipment. The primary difference was one of scale, these gates were vast in comparison to the human built devices and it was believed that they were for use over much greater distances. It was also theorised that instead of simply applying tachyons to ships individually the gates were used to project a massive corridor of the faster than light particles so that ships moving along it could travel at speeds far beyond anything that any known species was capable of. However, one key piece of information missing was how this amount of tachyonic mass would be created or where the power for it would come from and the fact that active gates self destructed when tampered with meant that an answer was unlikely to be found quickly.

"This is the sort of thing that your superior was supposed to be telling us about." one of the military officers with LeClair said.

"Do you have any information about the whereabouts of Admiral Dalton or the *Enigma* Commander Kane?" LeClair asked.

"No, I've heard nothing from him since before all this started." Kane answered.

"He was ordered to take the *Enigma* and survey our territory to assess the enemy's strength as well as what forces we had left." LeClair said.

"Sent? The admiral suggested it himself. He's probably taken the *Enigma* and run." a fleet officer suggested.

"The old man is no coward." Kane said in defence of his superior, knowing the reputation for ruthlessness that he had.

"No and I doubt that he would have waited for me to arrive here before leaving if he was just going to run and leave the rest of us to our fate." LeClair added, "Unfortunately that only makes it more likely that the *Enigma* has been destroyed and Admiral Dalton is dead." then he hesitated for a moment before adding, "Now that the capital has fallen how long until the whole of Sanctuary falls as well?"

"I barely got away." Kane said, "If there hadn't have been a passenger liner trying to get away at the same time I don't think I would have made it out before being shot down. Luckily for me the machines targeted the larger vessel first and by the time they were turning their attention towards me our fleet arrived."

"Then our fleet is still fighting for Sanctuary?" the fleet officer said and Kane nodded.

"It is." he said, "The strength of the machines is growing steadily. They're taking control of manufacturing facilities and starting to reinforce themselves but they haven't defeated us yet. We still control enough industry to be able to produce weapons for ourselves and every warrior and leader is being armed to fight. Workers are being trained to operate crew served weapons."

"Just as we did during the war against the Commonwealth." another military officer commented.

"The Commonwealth always had a massive advantage in numbers and for the time being we outnumber the machines." Kane pointed out.

"Yes but for how long? The machines have overrun Redoubt and according to you are making more of themselves on Sanctuary. Refuge and New Langley are both under attack. Only Haven is clear and the machines are probing our defences as well." LeClair responded.

"We need to know exactly what forces we have left." a marine general said and Kane held out the tablet he held.

"I brought this with me from Sanctuary." he said, "It contains details of our forces as they were when I left thirty hours ago."

The senior military officers present exchanged brief nervous looks. Intelligence thirty hours old could easily be inaccurate but without the tachyon relay satellites permitting signals to be sent over interstellar distances there was no way to get information any quicker.

"Sanctuary cannot be allowed to fall." LeClair told his commanders, "I want a plan to first reinforce our forces there and second to clear the system of the machines. Sanctuary has eighty percent of our population, if we lose it then we lose this war."

"Of course mister secretary." the marine general replied.

"Now I need sleep. I want a briefing by ten." LeClair said before he walked around the table to leave the improvised command centre.

When LeClair had left the room the senior military commanders turned their attention to Kane.

"Well commander," the fleet officer said, "you're in intelligence, how do you rate our chances?"

Kane hesitated.

"We're going to lose Sanctuary." he said, "Then the machines will take Refuge and New Langley and only Haven will be left. We shouldn't be planning how to win this war we should be planning how we can lose it without becoming extinct."

## 11.

"Ah Lieutenant Lucas it is good to see you again. I trust you are well?" the old man said as he and his granddaughter entered the *Warspite's* bridge with Reeves and Hayes.

Lucas frowned, remembering spending days restrained with a tube inserted uncomfortably down her throat.

"I don't think she's happy to see us grandfather." his granddaughter commented.

"Lieutenant Lucas could you join us at the central console?" Reeves said, "You as well Commander Knight." Gathering around the central console, Reeves called up the latest sensor readings of the planet on which the depot was located.

"It looks like the machines have their ships in geostationary orbit right above the depot." the old man's granddaughter commented.

"They haven't moved in hours and there's been no tachyon activity to suggest that they're communicating with anyone else." Lucas said.

"They can't communicate faster than light." Reeves said, "The Genex have pulled the plug on their network to try and limit the spread of the virus."

"Did it work?" Knight asked.

"Of course not." the old man answered, "The virus was uploaded directly into the network at Redoubt and from there it spread around our empire before anything could be done about it."

"Redoubt?" Knight said.

"It's one of our colonies." Hayes told him, "As well as Sanctuary there are Redoubt, Refuge, Haven and New Langley."

"Plus numerous outposts in the surrounding systems." the old man's granddaughter added.

"Well if they can't send signals faster than light and no ships have left the system since we arrived then the rest of the machines can't know that we're here." Knight said.

"And we need to make sure it stays that way." Reeves said, "I doubt that the AI on that planet will keep the arrival of Admiral Winchester's fleet to itself. We need to take out the rest of those ships before they can take word of us being here to other systems."

"Half a dozen destroyers and a pair of damaged frigates? We should be able to destroy them easily. In fact our stealth ships ought to be able to do it on their own." Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"How long until they're in position?" he said, looking towards Goldman.

"Another six hours captain." she replied.

"That deals with the capital ships in orbit but there could be couriers at the depot still." the old man said.

"Could be? Can't you be certain?" Lucas said.

"Our information is limited to comparing the activity we've witnessed to the depot's full manifest." the old man explained.

"And that leaves several smaller ships unaccounted for. They aren't warships but they could be used to tell the AI in others systems about you being here." his granddaughter added.

"So we need to take out the depot as well." Knight said.

"Something that will be much harder than destroying a handful of destroyers and frigates." the old man said.

"I've already warned them that the depot will be well fortified." Hayes said.

"Yes but the force that Captain Reeves has at his disposal should be more than suitable for the task." the old man replied, "The depot is well armed and protected against bombardment, yes but there are ways to defeat it. Captain do you have any scans of the depot?"

"Goldman give the admiral what we have." Reeves ordered and a set of small images appeared on the console in front of the old man.

"Ah this looks suitable." he said, enlarging an overhead image of the depot to fill most of the console's surface, "You can see the anti-aircraft batteries dotted all around the perimeter, these will keep attack craft away as well as being able to shoot down dozens of missiles fired at it per minute. On the other hand there are missile silos all over this area that can be used to fire on any warships entering orbit."

"That would be a strong position with a fleet to defend it, but without them it's a static target while we can position our forces however we want." Reeves said.

"A surface assault?" Knight suggested and Reeves nodded.

"That's what I was thinking, yes. All three companies we have that can fight in vacuum can be landed over the horizon and then get close enough to assault the defence line from below the angle of their guns. Admiral will this work?" he said.

"It should. The depot's defences are based around protecting it from an attack from space, enemy forces aren't suppose to be able to get as far as the surface. If the machines wanted to then they could boost their surface defences from the weapons stored inside the depot but there's no evidence of any new construction and I suspect that most of the contents of the depot have been sent to other systems to help subdue the

populations there.” the old man responded.

“That would fit with what Captain Vetrov’s troops and our marines encountered aboard the refuge station.” Lucas said, “The machines could have turned that into a killing ground, instead they put just a token force aboard.”

“This whole system is a distraction to them. There’s nothing here they want but they need to make sure no one else can use it in the way we’re planning to.” Reeves said, “Commander Goldman instruct the stealth destroyers to fire on the enemy vessels as soon as they can. Thomas I want a jump plotting to take us close enough to the planet that we can deploy our troops out of the line of sight of the depot’s weapons.”

“Yes captain.” Thomas replied.

Stealth ships were not impossible to detect, but they were designed to be as difficult as possible to discover and the only chance the alien artificial intelligence had of detecting the eight Shadow-class destroyers was if it happened to point a visual detector right at one of them while it was illuminated or if they happened to pass between any of the intelligence’s sensors and an object that could be scanned, creating a hole in the signal received. Without either of these occurring though the eight stealth destroyers were able to move undetected to within practical missile firing range of the remaining machine controlled warships now orbiting the planet that the Genex depot had been constructed on. Although these warships had abandoned the drones they carried when they withdrew from the battle with the Commonwealth fleet they had been reinforced by more such automated attack craft launched from the depot itself and the eight capital ships were surrounded by two dozen drones. These drones offered more anti-missile protection to the capital ships than the damaged frigates were capable of providing but the ability to strike without being seen still gave the Commonwealth ships the advantage.

Although they could not send any signals without giving away their positions, the destroyers could still receive orders from the *Warspite* and in this way they were able to co-ordinate their attacks. Each destroyer was ordered to target all of the enemy capital ships, launching a missile at each. The medium yield missiles carried by the destroyers would be unlikely to destroy a frigate or destroyer with a single hit but firing multiple missiles would not only increase the explosive power targeted at each ship but would also reduce the effectiveness of any anti-missile fire from the frigates and drones by coming at them from different directions at the same time.

The crews of the stealth destroyers plotted firing solutions against the robotic capital ships as they drifted closer until they reached their allotted firing positions, at which point each destroyer launched a wave of eight missiles. The compressed gas charges propelled the missiles away from the destroyers before their own engines ignited and they sped towards their assigned targets. The robotic warships responded by targeting these missiles but the suddenness of their appearance as well as the close range from which they had been fired limited their ability to defend themselves and one after another most of the missiles struck their targets and exploded, devastating the remaining machine controlled frigates and destroyers and reducing them all to burning wrecks. However, the flare of the missiles’ engines illuminated one of the stealth destroyers, the *Dead of Night*, just long enough for the artificial intelligence to lock onto it and the drones still orbiting the planet all turned and raced towards it.

“Captain they’ve seen us.” the destroyer’s operations officer exclaimed when it became obvious that the attack craft were all starting to converge on their location.

“Helm light up the engines. Weapons lock point defence missiles and fire at will.” the captain ordered and all of a sudden the previously stealthy destroyer powered up its main engines and made itself visible, “I need a channel to the *Warspite*.” he added.

“You’re on now captain.” the operations officer replied.

“*Warspite* this is *Dead of Night*. Enemy capital ships destroyed but we’ve been spotted. We’re pulling out now.” the captain signalled.

“Captain we’ve got surface launches.” the operations officer said.

“More drones?” the captain asked.

“No captain, these look like missiles.” the operations officer answered, “From their size I’d say they were heavies.”

“Damn, those things will crack us open like an egg if they hit us. Helm keep us at full burn, weapons target those missiles as well. They have priority over the drones.” the captain told his gunners.

“Aye captain, plotting firing solutions now.” one of the gunners responded before a volley of the fighter scale missiles carried by the destroyer for protection burst from their silos and angled towards the rapidly approaching drones and planet-launched missiles. Rather than the compressed gas charges used by the destroyer’s main armament these missiles were launched in the conventional manner, with magnetic fields used to accelerate them initially and this meant that they were travelling faster when their own engines ignited.

The pursuing drones broke off when they detected these missiles, turning to bring their forward firing gauss cannons to bear on them but the missiles launched from the depot were not capable of any such

manoeuvring and they continued right on into the path of the missiles targeting them and there was a succession of explosions as all but two of the missiles was destroyed well short of the *Dead of Night*. "Release drones." the *Dead of Night's* captain ordered, seeing on the screen in front of him that the final pair of missiles was still closing in on them and hatches opened in the destroyer's dorsal hull to allow the remotely controlled craft to be deployed. These four small craft headed towards the rapidly approaching missiles and targeted them with their gauss cannons, shooting down another of them. However, as soon as they had emerged from the *Dead of Night* half of the machine controlled drones turned towards them while the rest continued to fire on the destroyer's missiles.

Normally the Commonwealth drones would have taken evasive action to avoid the enemy craft but their priority was to shoot down the last of the incoming heavy missiles and this made them easy targets. Taking maximum advantage of this the machine controlled drones swooped down upon those launched by the *Dead of Night* and destroyed all four in rapid succession.

With no time to launch another volley of defensive missiles, this would have meant that the *Dead of Night* would have faced instant destruction by the missile but before it could hit the destroyer a second of the Shadow-class ships suddenly revealed itself by firing a volley of missiles itself and releasing its own drones at the same time. One of these missiles hit the heavy missile launched from the surface and it exploded short of its target. However, this was still close enough that the *Dead of Night* was caught up in the blast and shrapnel tore through sections of the triangular shaped hull and its engines dimmed and then failed completely.

Now drifting through space the *Dead of Night* would have been an easy target had not the second destroyer moved in to escort it, firing more of its defensive missiles in support of the drones now engaging the machine controlled attack craft. These were then joined by more drones as the rest of the stealth ships abandoned their camouflage, firing their main drives and turning away from the planet before they took up positions close to the crippled *Dead of Night*.

"Navigation is our course set?" Reeves asked and Thomas nodded.

"Yes captain. The jump should take us to within a million kilometres of the planet but over the horizon from the outpost." he said.

"Course is locked into the helm captain." Ash added.

"In that case commence the jump Commander Ash. Goldman order the rest of the squadron to jump as well. Major Willis alert your troops to be ready to drop." Reeves ordered, looking at the marine officer who once again was stood at the central console with Hayes and Colonel Garrash. Unlike for the assault on the refuge station though, the old man and his granddaughter were also present, ready to offer what advice they could about the facility.

The trip to the planet on which the depot was built took just a few seconds for the *Warspite* and the crew barely had time to notice that they had jumped to faster than light speed before the shell of tachyons around the ship was dispersed again. As planned the heavy cruiser had arrived at a point that was over the horizon from the depot, meaning that they were unable to see or fire on one another.

"Position confirmed captain, right where we're supposed to be." Thomas said.

"What about the rest of our ships?" Knight asked, looking at Goldman and the sensor operators to the right of the bridge.

"I've detected several tachyon pulses coming from where the other ships were supposed to aim for." Cortez reported.

"It's them. Picking up transponders now." Goldman added as the signals limited to the speed of light reached the *Warspite* moments later.

"Good, then they should be in position to shoot down any ships the machines try to launch." Knight commented, looking back towards Reeves.

"Commence drop." the *Warspite's* captain said simply.

As soon as the order to deploy the ground forces carried aboard the *Warspite* was given the hangar doors opened to allow the waiting troops transports to launch. This mix of dropships and shuttles sped down to the barren surface of the planet. As they descended the transport craft moved closer to the horizon as seen from the orbiting *Warspite* and touched down at a point where the depot's defence perimeter was just out of sight long enough for the three companies of soldiers they carried to disembark before they took off again. Ordinarily the armed dropships would have remained close by to provide fire support for the ground troops but for this operation they instead pulled back as the soldiers and marines began to advance towards the depot.

"All forces down and in formation. Advancing now." Willis said as the transponders from the ground troops indicated that they were moving towards their target before these were shut off to avoid broadcasting their position.

"You have your lighter units forward. Won't they be more vulnerable to the enemy defences?" Garrash asked.



“Yes colonel, but Captain Vetrov’s men are harder to hide from electronic detection. With their transponders and camera feeds shut down our light infantry are very stealthy whereas the heavy infantry company produce far greater energy signatures. With luck our light infantry will be close enough to the enemy defences to be able to engage them before they are detected.” Willis explained.

“How far until they come within line of sight of the enemy major?” Garrash said.

“At ground level the horizon is two and a half kilometres away and we landed our forces five hundred metres beyond that. They should getting a look at the enemy defences at any minute colonel.” Willis replied.

On the surface of the planet the two companies of light infantry, Commonwealth Marines and Gurkhas, moved cautiously with unit leaders using hand signals to guide their troops from one position judged to provide cover to another. Although imagery from space combined with information provided by the old man had provided the locations of the depot's fixed defences it was still possible that additional weapons had been deployed in more concealed positions. However, it was one of the weapon emplacements that were known to the assault force that came into view first as a platoon of marines made it to the top of a low hill and looked over the crest to see the reinforced silo that the turret, a quad mounted gauss cannon, was mounted in.

The turret remained motionless as the marine officer studied it, suggesting that it had yet to detect their presence and he decided to take advantage of this, waving his hand towards one of his men that was armed with an anti-armour laser. The man armed with the heavy weapon brought this forwards, crawling on his stomach to the top of the hill and aiming the laser down at the motionless turret. The mechanism of the turret was buried deep within the silo, too well protected for the laser that was limited to the power output from a battery carried on the operator's back but the ammunition feeds to the weapon were far less well protected. These feeds were made up of a series of links that formed chutes along which ammunition could pass and the laser operator took aim at one of these and fired.

Although the magnetically propelled round contained no volatile propellant, intelligence provided by the old man had confirmed that the defensive turrets fired an alternating mix of solid armour piercing and explosive tipped fragmentation rounds and it was the latter that made the turret vulnerable. As the laser burned through one of the feeds the turret's sensors detected the energy of the beam and it sprang into life, the turret rising up and turning towards the top of the hill. In the time that this took though the laser completed burning through the ammunition feed and struck the ammunition within. The mix of explosive and solid rounds meant that the beam struck one of the explosive filled projectiles and the round immediately went off inside the feed. This triggered a chain reaction within the feed as the blast set off the next explosive rounds within it and the pattern continued down into the main magazine. Once there all of the explosive rounds cooked off and produced a single massive explosion that ripped the turret free of its mounting, sending it up into the air before it came crashing back down to the ground.

"All units go hot. They know we're here now." the marine lieutenant broadcast, turning on his transponder and helmet mount camera at the same time.

Knowing that the depot's defences would respond to the destruction of the turret the infantry force now rushed forwards. Captain Vetrov and his heavy infantry now began to pull ahead of the marines and Gurkhas, their powered armour giving them better speed across the rough terrain but they were not clear of the area when Willis radioed a warning from the *Warspite*.

"You're being targeted by mortars. You have incoming." he told the troops on the surface.

"Get down!" Vetrov told his men just before the first of the mortar rounds came down on them.

Some of the mortar rounds were set to detonate on impact with the surface, adding debris from the ground to the shrapnel from their casings but others were instead set to explode at a fixed altitude and shower fragments down on troops who may have thrown themselves to the ground for cover from the surface detonations.

"Captain the *Cougar* reports that it has a lock on the position of those mortars." Goldman said as one of the Commonwealth corvettes also orbiting the planet signalled the *Warspite*.

"Tell them to fire at will commander." Reeves said, "Major warn our ground troops to expect fireworks."

"Yes sir." Willis replied with a smile.

The main gun of the *Cougar* was only a light gauss cannon, no more powerful than the two turret mounted gauss cannons mounted on the *Warspite*'s ventral hull but it was equally capable of providing the troops on the surface with fire support and the ship fired a rapid burst of projectiles at the highest rate that the weapon could manage. These solid projectiles could be detected by the depot's sensors and the distance at which the corvette had to orbit to avoid being fired on itself gave the artificial intelligence controlling the outpost plenty of time to respond. However, although some of the projectiles could be shattered and knocked off course by other gauss cannon rounds fired from the surface not all of them could be stopped and the area surrounding the mortars targeting the Commonwealth ground troops was hit by several rounds moving at tremendous speeds. Each impact released a large amount of energy, creating craters fifty metres across and hurling chunks of rock into the air. The mortars themselves were smashed apart by these forces and when the debris came back down the weapons had been silenced.

No longer under fire the Commonwealth infantry began to advance once more, and Vetrov's power armoured troops pulled further ahead. However, as they neared the hangar that they intended to use to enter the depot they the sensors in their armour began to detect significant heat emissions from inside it.

"This is Vetrov, I'm picking up an energy surge from the depot." the captain broadcast.

"Confirmed Vetrov, we're picking that up as well." an officer from the Cougar responded, "It looks like the machines are preparing to launch a ship."

"Understood, holding position." Vetrov said and he and his men took cover, waiting for the machine controlled vessel to emerge from the hangar rather than risk being caught in the blast from its engines as it took off.

It was just a few seconds later that a spacecraft just over fifty metres in length burst out of the hangar and headed straight up into space. The ship rapidly increased the power output of its drives and the ground all around the hangar entrance was bathed in heat and flames that would have incinerated even Captain Vetrov and his men inside their powered armour if they had been caught out in the open.

As it continued to ascend, the AI controlling the vessel began to charge its hull, preparing to jump to faster than light speed as quickly as possible. The *Cougar* was in the path of the ship though and the Commonwealth corvette rapidly locked its weapons onto it and fired a volley of four missiles. These were light yield weapons but to a ship the size of the one trying to escape from the depot a single hit would be enough to destroy it. The ship itself was unarmed but the depot's weapons opened fire as soon as the missiles were launched, trying to clear a path for the ship to get away. The difficulty was that the ship itself was positioned between the depot and the missiles, limiting the ability of the depot to protect its ship. Two of the missiles were still shot down quickly by powerful beam weapons fired from the surface before the remaining missiles entered the shadow of the ship. This vessel then began to turn aside, partly as an evasive manoeuvre but also to try and clear a line of fire for the depot to be able to fire on the remaining missiles. This manoeuvre came too late though and the two missiles struck the ship as it turned, one hitting the nose section and the second striking it further back. The two detonations were then rapidly followed by a much larger explosion from within the ship as its fusion reactor overloaded, consuming it in a brilliant flash of light before fading away to nothing.

"Target destroyed captain." Goldman reported when the sensor data being relayed from the Cougar showed the destruction of the automated ship attempting to escape.

"They won't be telling anyone about us then." Knight commented and Reeves nodded in agreement.

"Captain," one of the sensor operators said suddenly, "I'm still picking up a large heat corona from the depot. Bigger than can be explained by any of the equipment we know about."

"Admiral could you take a look?" Reeves asked and the old man looked at the central console where the *Warspite's* thermal imaging sensor readings were duplicated for him.

"These are most odd." he said, "I can assure you captain that there is no equipment in the depot that would require this sort of energy output."

"It looks like the engine from a capital ship." Lucas commented.

"There are no capital ships left in the depot." the old man's granddaughter pointed out.

"What about the depot's own power plant? Could it produce power like this?" Knight said.

"Yes of course. It may be automated but the depot was designed like the refuge station, to be readily convertible into something more." the old man said.

"So what are they running down there?" Ash said.

"Admiral does the depot's control system include the provision for self destruct?" Reeves asked and the old man's eyes widened as other officers looked at Reeves.

"No but there's no telling how the alien computer virus has affected it." he said.

"The tachyon gates." Knight said and Reeves nodded again.

"They blew up when tampered with." he said.

"The refuge station didn't explode." Lucas pointed out.

"Commander Bernard already had a team in the reactor section when the computer core was breached."

Reeves reminded her, "Any attempt to overload it would have failed."

"Captain the heat build up is increasing." Goldman said as she studied the readings as well.

"Major Willis get our people out of there. Tell them to fall back and send the dropships back in." Reeves ordered.

"The dropships can't land inside the perimeter without being shot down captain." Willis said.

"Then our troops are going to have to move quickly." Reeves replied.

"All ground units this is *Warspite*. Withdraw, I say again withdraw." Willis' voice said over the ground troops' communication network.

"*Warspite* what do you mean withdraw? We're two hundred metres from the target." Vetrov responded.

"Captain the depot is rigged to blow at any minute. Get your men out of there. The dropships will pick you up from the landing zone." Willis said.

"Fall back!" Vetrov shouted, "We're getting-" but before he could get any further everything around him went white.

"Energy spike!" Goldman exclaimed as the thermal output of the depot suddenly increased by several orders of magnitude and on the screen showing the planet that the *Warspite* orbited there was a massive flare of light from just over the horizon.

"Good God!" Knight said without thinking, then he glanced briefly at Reeves who was staring at the display on his console.

"I want comms with our ground troops immediately." Reeves said, "Helm adjust our orbit to get us a direct line of sight, Increase altitude if you have to keep us clear of the depot defences."

"Aye captain, adjusting orbit now." Ash responded as he began to move the *Warspite* to a position where direct communication with the ground troops would be possible.

"What's going on?" Garrash asked.

"It looks like the depot's reactor was overloaded to trigger a massive nuclear explosion." the old man told the Brekken.

"But why do such a thing?" Garrash said.

"To stop us getting inside the facility." the old man's granddaughter said as the effect of the blast came into the *Warspite's* line of sight.

With no atmosphere to support a cloud of dust all of the debris thrown up by the explosion was already falling back towards the surface but some of this had been thrown so high that the relatively low gravity of the planet had yet to drag it all the way down and the surface over a large area was still partially obscured.

"We're getting transponder signals captain." Willis said as signals began to be received from the transponders carried by the ground troops.

"Which units?" Knight asked.

"I'm picking up Gurkhas and marines." Willis answered, "Wait. There are a few of Vetrov's men as well but only a handful."

"They were closest to the centre of the blast." Goldman pointed out.

"Would their armour not protect them?" Garrash said.

"Against a large nuclear blast just a couple of hundred metres away? Not likely. What we're seeing here are the troops who were furthest away." Willis said.

"Lieutenant Lucas does it look like any of the depot defences are still active?" Reeves said, turning to his side to look at the intelligence officer.

"Captain I can't see any of the defences under that debris.

"They do have limited local battery power and secondary target identification capability." the old man added, "The missile silos will have been destroyed though."

"Then take us into a lower orbit Mister Ash. I want full sensor sweeps of the area to locate any survivors as well as any remaining active defences. Commander Goldman order the dropships to move in and pick up our men from their current locations, they may not be able to make it back to the landing zone." Reeves ordered.

As Sands and her team ran towards the *Warspite's* aft hangar they found that the entrance was already open and injured soldiers were being helped out by a mix of colleagues who had escaped the worst of the explosion, medical orderlies and Brekken troops.

"Quick let's get inside. I want footage of casualties being brought off the shuttles." she told her team and they ran into the hangar, squeezing past the casualties being brought out. Just as Sands had hoped the interior of the hangar had a chaotic appearance to it. Injured troops were being carried off the dropships and then lay on the floor to be examined by medical personnel who would determine the nature and extent of their injuries before they could be taken to the infirmary for treatment, "Quick, let's do this." she said, turning to face her crew.

"Okay you're on." the cameraman told her.

"Sound okay." her sound man added.

"This is Sandra Sands aboard the heavy cruiser *Warspite*. A short time ago the *Warspite* deployed a large force of ground troops to assault a fortified facility on the surface of the planet we are orbiting. The exact nature of this facility hasn't been revealed to me but a source says that the operation was carried out under the guidance of the Genex admiral who has recently come aboard. As you can see behind me the assault went horribly wrong when the facility apparently self destructed just as Commonwealth forces were about to enter it, destroying the facility itself and inflicting massive casualties on the Commonwealth troops." Sands said before she noticed Thundercloud standing by one of the handful of Rodinans in the hangar. The heavily armoured trooper was lying on the floor while two of the *Warspite's* hangar crew removed his powered armour so that the doctor could examine him properly, "I see Doctor Thundercloud, the *Warspite's* chief medical officer over there now, I'm going to go and ask him for his assessment of the casualties." Sands added before she began to hurry across the hangar, followed by her camera and sound men, "Doctor

Thundercloud do you have anything to say about this?" she called out.

"Not now. Can't you see I'm busy?" Thundercloud responded as he stood back to let the hangar crewmen lift the injured Rodinan onto a stretcher carried by a pair of Brekken, "Get him to the infirmary." he told the two alien soldiers and they began to head for the exit, halting when they found Sands and her team in their way.

"Doctor please just a few words." she said.

"Look just get out of the way and let me work." Thundercloud said angrily.

"The people have a right to know doctor." Sands responded.

"And they will know all in good time but for now I'm telling you to get out of here because when it comes to you acting like a ghoul and exploiting these men for your own benefit I really don't give a-

"I'm sorry captain, I know you don't like that sort of language being used." Thundercloud said as he, Bernard and Willis sat in Reeves' quarters.

"On this occasion I think I can overlook you being short with Miss Sands." Reeves replied, "What's the status of the casualties?"

"The worst we're keeping here in the *Warspite's* infirmary but we're moving the more stable cases out to the other ships. Admiral Dalton has also offered the facilities of his ship if they're needed." Thundercloud told him.

"I'm not so sure what our troops would think about that captain." Willis commented.

"What do we have left major?" Reeves asked.

"I'm not going to lie we've taken a big hit to our ground capability but it could have been far worse. Vetrov is dead, as are most of his men. I'd say only about a single squad of heavy infantry survived. Our marines and the Gurkhas were further away from the epicentre of the blast so they came off better but we've still taken losses to both. We've lost about a platoon of each." Willis told him.

"Captain Tamang suffered a slight concussion but he'll be fit for duty again in a few days. I've already discharged him from the infirmary." Thundercloud added.

"If we need more troops we can bolster our numbers from the marine contingents aboard the other ships. We can probably muster up another company's worth without leaving them unprotected. Of course we still have Colonel Garrash's Brekken troops but they're still an unknown quantity." Willis continued.

"The remaining Rodinans are going need their armour looking at." Bernard said, "My men can handle that though."

"Good, what about the station? Are you sure that's not going to self destruct as well?" Reeves said.

"Don't worry captain we've scrubbed the entire network. We were going to try installing one of our operating systems but Admiral Dalton has offered us a Genex one that we can install without any compatibility issues. If the alien AI was able to send a self destruct command to the reactor then it's already gone from the station computer and it's not coming back. By the time Admiral Winchester arrives with his fleet we'll have a forward base for him to operate from and thanks to the *Cougar* shooting down that courier that tried to make a run for it no-one outside the system will even know we're here yet."

"That just leaves the issue of the *Wasp* and *Dead of Night*." Reeves said and Bernard looked at his tablet.

"I've spoken to the engineers of those ships to see what they have to say. The *Wasp* is fixable. It'll take about thirty-six hours to plug the hull breaches but all their key systems are operational." he said.

"And the *Dead of Night*?" Reeves added and Bernard sighed.

"I hope Admiral Winchester is bringing a repair tender with him because she's going nowhere without one. Plus she'll need to dry dock to be fully repaired including restoring her stealth capability." he said.

"I should think that the Admiral will include at least one repair tender in his support force. Until then though I think we'll be better off using the crew of the *Dead of Night* to get the refuge station up and running." Reeves replied, "Now does anyone else have anything to say?"

"That reporter is still sniffing around for interviews from pretty much anyone." Willis said, "Everyone knows that they aren't to speak to her without clearance from you first but if she keeps at it she might find someone she can trick or buy off for a quote."

"We've already got guards on alert to make sure she doesn't go anywhere restricted, I'd rather not confine her to her quarters if it can be helped. I'm sure that she'd turn that into a story." Reeves said and then he sighed, "I think I'm going to have to speak to her myself."

"I thought you wanted nothing to do with her. Isn't that why you assigned Goldman to handle her?"

Thundercloud said and Reeves nodded.

"Yes and I still don't want to talk to her, but the fact is that fleet commander authorised her presence aboard this ship and she can ask all the questions she wants. She just needs to accept that she won't necessarily get any answers. If she sees that she can an interview with me though then she might just stop trying to get information from other people." Reeves said and Bernard smiled.

"You mean make the interview conditional on her behaving herself?" he said and Reeves smiled back at him. "Exactly." he said before there was a knock at the door to his quarters, "Come in." he called out and when the

door opened Hayes entered the room, her escort remaining in the corridor outside.

"I'm sorry I didn't realise you were busy. I'll come back." she said.

"No we're done here. Gentlemen I think we all know what we're doing now." Reeves said and Hayes stepped out of the way as Bernard, Thundercloud and Willis got up to leave. Then when the door to Reeves' quarters closed behind them Reeves looked at her, "So what brings you here?" he asked.

"You actually." Hayes replied, "I was wondering how you were taking what happened to your troops."

"You mean the fact that more than a hundred of them died because of the strategy I decided on?" Reeves responded.

"It wasn't your fault." Hayes said.

"I could have ordered a smaller force in first to evaluate the response of the AI controlling the depot but if it had been going to put up more of a fight then that would have tipped our hand to it." Reeves replied, "I thought sending in our full force right away would give us the advantage. Instead it cost lives that could have been spared."

"You must have lost people before." Hayes said.

"Of course but that was the single worst example of losing men under my command. I had a choice and made the wrong one."

"You couldn't have known for certain though." Hayes said and Reeves sighed.

"I know but if ever I stop feeling bad for the deaths of people under my command then I need to retire. My crew aren't just assets to secure me promotion." he said.

"That's exactly what they would be to us Genex." Hayes commented, "Hell the old man unleashed an alien computer virus that will probably kill millions just to advance his agenda."

"An agenda the Commonwealth is now going along with." Reeves pointed out.

"Does that bother you?" Hayes asked.

"The Genex are still human beings, even if their ancestors did decide that they were going to act like gods and turn their children in their idea of human perfection." Reeves answered and Hayes smiled.

"Yeah and look where that ended up. The Thinkers couldn't survive on their own and pretty much every prediction they made about the Commonwealth turned out to be wrong. The random genetic mix that made you and me turned out to be far superior." she said and Reeves stared at her, "What?"

"I'd hardly call your genetic heritage to be entirely random Jennifer. Somewhere along your family tree is at least one of those engineered scholars and an engineered killer." Reeves said.

"Is that what I am to you? An accident resulting from a flawed science project?" Hayes said.

"I didn't mean it like that Jennifer." Reeves responded.

"No I didn't think you did. You don't seem the type to just toss people aside. Even if they are descended from genetically engineered nerds and killers." Hayes said and she and Reeves both smiled at one another.

"Why the concern for my feelings anyway?" Reeves said.

"What, can't a girl be concerned for someone she's close to? I want to know where what we have is leading and for that I need to know how you feel." Hayes said.

"Ah so you think there is something between us Jennifer?"

"Think? I know it."

"How?"

"I think it was the fluid motion of your arm when you threw that towel across the room after you'd ripped it off me." Hayes replied.

## INTERLUDE.

The battleship that had been at the core of the machine fleet exploded in a brilliant flash of light when it was struck by a nuclear tipped missile and the remaining automated warships and drones turned to withdraw. The Genex fleet that had challenged them was not about let them escape though and as they followed they unleashed another barrage of missiles that overwhelmed the machine's defences and blasted apart even more of their vessels.

"We lost a pair of destroyers and a handful of smaller ships in that engagement." a Genex admiral said as the footage of the battle being shown on one of the command centre's larger screens froze.

"And the machines lost an entire task force. More than thirty ships including a battleship. I call that a win." Secretary LeClair said, a smile spreading across his face.

"I wouldn't be so pleased if I were you mister secretary." the admiral said sternly.

"Why not? We won didn't we? It was a decisive victory as well." LeClair said.

"Yes but this is the first time that the machines have sent such a strong force into our system mister secretary." the admiral began, "Their previous intrusions have been on a much smaller scale and they withdrew more rapidly. This time they put up a fight until they were overwhelmed. They're testing our defences more deeply now. More significantly though the battleship that was their flagship vessel was the *Illuminated Way*."

"So what?" Secretary LeClair asked.

"So the *Illuminated Way* is a Vendetta-class battleship and no ships of that class have been automated, at least not by us." the admiral told him and the secretary's eyes widened.

"But that means that the machines are turning our own ships against us." he said.

"Exactly. We have shipyards but constructing new vessels and training crews is going to take time. On the other hand if the machines can adapt our vessels to their use after disabling them then we can expect their strength to increase dramatically while our own reduces." the admiral said.

"What can we do about this?" LeClair asked, obviously concerned by what he had been told.

"In terms of bolstering our own forces we can perhaps look at arming civilian vessels. Of course they won't be a match for true warships but they're better than nothing. A missile or drone launched from a freighter is as dangerous as one from a destroyer. We can also opt to concentrate our defences here at Haven." the admiral said.

"You mean abandon our other colonies?" LeClair said.

"Yes mister secretary. There are more almost thirty million people here on Haven that we could still protect if we can reinforce our position." the admiral said.

"By abandoning more than a billion on Sanctuary and the other worlds. This may be difficult to sell to the public. Everyone will have someone they know on those planets." LeClair pointed out. He was perfectly prepared to abandon the inhabitants of the other Genex colonies to the machines if it helped guarantee his personal survival but the thought that the move could provoke an uprising against his leadership made him hesitate to give the order. At least until Kane, who had been standing close by and listening spoke up.

"Mister secretary the other colonies are all under direct surface attack. Haven is in the only system that is facing a purely space based threat. The inhabitants of the other planets will still have our ground, air and ocean forces to protect them. Perhaps by stressing that point the people will be willing to support a move that helps keep the machines off Haven it will encourage them to support the move." he said and Leclair and the admiral exchanged glances.

"That could work." the admiral said.

"I like the sound of that commander." LeClair added, smiling as he turned back towards Kane, "Admiral give the order to pull our fleets out of other systems."

"Yes mister secretary, I'll have couriers sent out immediately." the admiral responded.

"Could you just say something so I can check the sound level captain?" Sands' sound man said once he had clipped a microphone to the front of Reeves' tunic. For the interview Reeves had opted to wear his formal uniform instead of the plain blue duty one and the equipment had been set up in one of the *Warspite's* briefing rooms.

"One, two, three." Reeves said and the sound man nodded.

"Okay that sounds good." he said.

"Camera is all set as well." the cameraman added.

"Okay captain I'm just going to ask a few questions about what's happened in this system. Try to keep your answers as concise as you can. Viewers turn off quickly when facing long speeches." Sands said.

"You realise that I can't discuss anything that could put the crews of the ships under my command at risk?" Reeves said and Sands frowned.

"Who do you think I could tell captain? By the time we can get an outside channel we'll already be back in Commonwealth space." she pointed out.

"There are still regulations to consider Miss Sands." Reeves said.

"Okay then, how should I address you during this interview? Should I call you 'captain' or is it okay if I actually call you-" Sands began.

"Either 'captain' or 'Captain Reeves' will do." Reeves interrupted and Sands smiled.

"Of course." she said before she turned to her cameraman, "Okay let's go." she said and he activated the camera.

"Okay you're on." he said.

"Sound is good." the sound man added and Sands looked straight into the camera.

"Ladies and gentlemen this is Sandra Sands aboard the *CSV Warspite* in the Luyten two-twelve nineteen system. Here with me is Captain Reeves, commanding officer of the *Warspite* itself and also of the task force sent here ahead of the main Commonwealth fleet." she began before turning to look at Reeves instead, "Captain Reeves thank you for agreeing to this interview."

"You're welcome." Reeves responded despite his misgivings.

"Captain your force has just taken part in both fleet and ground engagements in this system. Could you tell me the purpose of these and what the outcome means going forwards?" Sands asked.

"Of course," Reeves replied, "the primary task of my force was to secure Luyten Two-twelve Nineteen ahead of the arrival of the main Commonwealth fleet. The first step to doing that was to destroy the enemy space assets."

"The enemy being the same artificial intelligence that is believed to have totally destroyed the Sissusk Empire and almost overran the independent nation of Verne on the planet of the same name, correct?" Sands said.

"Yes, that's right. All we know about it is that it of alien origin and is contained within a signal that masquerades as a similar message to our own SETI signals, an attempt to contact other species." Reeves replied.

"So you had to battle a force of fully automated warships?" Sands went on and Reeves nodded.

"Yes. Fortunately it seems that the alien AI did not regard this system as key to its operations and had spent the last few weeks sending most of the forces originally available to it elsewhere. We encountered a much smaller, but still significant force built around a pair of battlecruisers." he said.

"Ships much bigger than the *Warspite*, the largest ship in your force." Sands commented.

"Yes, twice the size but the weapons of a battlecruiser aren't as powerful as those on a heavy cruiser like the *Warspite* and because of that we were able to engage one of them from beyond their effective engagement range while the stealth destroyers that are also a part of the force were able to get closer without being detected. Of course the engagement wasn't all one sided, tragically we lost a number of attack craft pilots and there were injuries aboard the *CSV Wasp* when it was hit by enemy fire." Reeves said.

"Then you assaulted a refuge station." Sands said.

"That's right. The station may not be a military facility but it still offers us a base of operations and a combination of Rodinan heavy infantry and the *Warspite's* marines were able to board it and disable the computer. Our engineers have since made the station operational again and it is available for us to use." Reeves replied.

"The next stage of your operation in this system didn't go so well though did it captain? One of your warships was crippled and hundreds of troops needlessly killed." Sands said and the accusing tone of her statement startled Reeves.

"There were heavy casualties, yes." he said.



"Casualties that could have been avoided?"

"Only if we had known exactly how the AI controlling the depot built in this system to house the robots that the AI is now making use of." Reeves replied.

"I understand you've been taking advice from a Genex admiral. What was his role in the disaster that led to the massive loss of life? Did he withhold critical information?" Sands asked.

"Admiral Dalton has been very forthcoming and-" Reeves began.

"But didn't you claim that you didn't know about the depot's defences?" Sands interrupted.

"We didn't know that the AI would chose to destroy the depot through a nuclear detonation. That wasn't a capability included in the original control system put in place by the Genex." Reeves answered.

"According to this Admiral Dalton." Sands commented.

"Yes but even without his input I would still have ordered the attack the way I did."

"So you admit that you are responsible for the terrible loss of life?" Sands said and Reeves had to stop himself from losing his temper with the woman who he now believed was looking to try and manipulate him to make herself look good to her superiors and viewers rather than being interested in the truth of what happened."

Before Reeves could respond though there was a knock at the door and one of the *Warspite's* enlisted crewmen leant through as he opened it.

"Captain Reeves, Commander Knight sent me to tell you that Admiral Winchester's fleet has arrived." the man said and Reeves reached to remove his microphone.

"I'm afraid that this interview is going to have to wait for another time Miss Sands." he said as he got to his feet and handed the microphone to Sands' sound man.

"Wait Captain Reeves-" Sands began, getting up and turning to watch as Reeves left but he was gone before she could continue, "Damn it!" she hissed.

"I'm sure we'll have another shot." the sound man said and Sands glared at him.

"You think so?" she said, putting her hands on her hips, "Because I think that Captain Reeves isn't going to come anywhere near me again and we'll be back to bland statements from that Commander Goldman woman. I need something much better than that if I'm going to impress anyone back home."

When Reeves reached the *Warspite's* bridge the fleet commanded by Admiral Winchester was already close enough for light from the ships to have reached the *Warspite* and the cloud of warships was visible on screens all around the room.

"I thought you'd want to know as soon as they got here." Knight said as Reeves took his seat and Reeves smiled.

"You have no idea." he said, "Commander Goldman how many ships are in that fleet?"

"I'm picking up one hundred and eighty-four different transponders captain." Goldman answered.

"That's a lot of ships." Thomas commented.

"Have they communicated with us yet?" Reeves asked.

"Yes captain, we received a message from the *Sovereignty* asking you to call Admiral Winchester as soon as possible." Goldman told him.

"I think Admiral Dalton and Hayes ought to be here for that. Have the guard on their quarters escort them to the bridge would you?" Reeves said and Goldman nodded.

"Yes captain." she replied.

"Commander Knight with me." Reeves added as he got to his feet again and the two men made their way to the central console where the large display listed all of the ships that made up the Commonwealth fleet that had just arrived in the Luyten 212-19 system.

"Looks like the admiral did bring repair tenders with him." Knight commented when he saw that four of the vessels were among those that had recently arrived.

"Good, maybe they can get the *Dead of Night* back into action." Reeves said just as Hayes entered the bridge.

"You wanted me again Captain Reeves?" she said as she walked over to the central console and stood right beside him.

"Yes, we'll be talking to Admiral Winchester soon and I wanted you here to give him your evaluation of what's happened. Admiral Dalton should be on his way too." Reeves told her and she nodded.

"So are these the ships he's brought with him?" she said, looking at the information on the console in front of her.

"Combined with our squadron they give us more than two hundred ships in total." Knight said.

"Some are freighters though I notice." Hayes commented.

"One freighter can keep twenty warships running." Thomas pointed out before the old man and his granddaughter were shown into the bridge by a pair of marines.

"Ah Admiral Dalton." Reeves said, "Our main force has arrived and Admiral Winchester has requested that I contact him. I suspect that he'll be interested in talking to you as well."

"It would be my pleasure captain." the old man replied.

"Okay Goldman put us through." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain, connecting to the *Sovereignty* now." she responded before an image of Admiral Winchester on the bridge of the *Sovereignty* appeared on the central console.

"Admiral, welcome to Luyten Two-twelve nineteen." Reeves said.

"Thank you captain. I trust the system is secure?" Winchester responded and Reeves nodded.

"Yes sir. Though I regret to tell you that two of my ships have suffered significant damage and almost all of the Rodinan heavy infantry were killed during an assault on the main machine facility when it self destructed." he said.

"Unfortunate. Now what about that unidentified cruiser class vessel our sensors have detected and who are the strangers on your bridge?" Admiral Winchester asked.

"Admiral please allow me to introduce Admiral Robert Dalton of the Genex State Intelligence Service. The vessel you've detected is the *Enigma*, a light cruiser salvaged by the Genex but constructed by an unknown alien civilisation." Reeves explained.

"I'm honoured to meet you Admiral Winchester." the old man added and Winchester frowned.

"If I understand it correctly you're the one who is responsible for the alien AI being released into the Genex computer systems in the first place." he said and the old man sighed.

"Yes, unfortunately in order to build something new it is often necessary to tear down what is already standing." he said, "I am grateful that the Commonwealth has seen fit to respond as it has though. For a hundred years my people have obsessed themselves with taking revenge for our defeat, now though the mistakes of our creation can finally be put right."

"That will be for diplomats and governments to decide Admiral Dalton. My job is to follow their orders and right now my orders are to establish contact with your government and offer our aide in fighting this artificial intelligence in exchange for an end to the Genex as a separate society." Winchester told him.

"Admiral Winchester," Reeves began, "Admiral Dalton has requested that his role in both releasing the alien computer virus and getting us involved be kept secret from his government. It could cause problems."

"Well it's his government and I suppose he knows them better than us so I'll go along with that for now." Winchester said, "But in order to continue we're going to need to know where the Genex government can be found. I understand that their new home world is a planet called 'Sanctuary' in the Alpha Indi system. Will we find them there?"

"No admiral." the old man said, "Alpha Indi has been the site of a great deal of fighting and when the capital came under threat the government chose to relocate to somewhere more secure. I'd been able to secure another of our systems and so that's where they fell back to."

"So where is it?" Admiral Winchester asked.

"It's a planet called Haven in the system Cordoba Durchmusterung fifty one-two-nine-two-nine. It's almost thirty seven light years from here so getting there will take a few days." the old man answered.

"We can't just send a signal then?" Winchester commented.

"Oh no. In a vain attempt to control the spread of the virus the Genex government shut down all the tachyon communication satellites in our empire. You could send a signal but it would be blind luck for anyone to be in just the right spot to receive it." the old man said.

"If we just take our fleet there, what sort of reception can we expect?" Knight said.

"A good point. If the Genex government are dug in and expecting an attack in they might not be too happy to see a couple of hundred warships suddenly appear in their system." Reeves added.

"It's true that suddenly appearing close to Haven itself is likely to be seen as threatening. By dropping out of FTL further out in the system, say a light hour or more from the colony's orbit, you will have chance to explain your arrival before you can be fired on. Of course I'm willing to make the introduction, it may be better coming from me aboard the *Enigma* as proof that I'm not a hostage."

"In that case that's how we'll proceed." Admiral Winchester said, "Captain Reeves I want you to allow Admiral Dalton to return to his ship. We'll leave our support assets and destroyer squadrons here to fortify this system in case we need to fall back to it but other than them I want every operational ship ready to depart in eight hours. Admiral Dalton, I take it your ship can provide us with the orbital data of this planet Haven?"

"It can." the old man replied, nodding.

"Good. Then we'll need to know exactly where the planet is. Captain Reeves I want your advanced squadron and the *Enigma* to come out of FTL at one light hour beyond Haven's orbit. The rest of the fleet will time their jump to arrive at the same time but another light hour further out."

"So our arrival will hide yours and the Genex will see us an hour before they even know you're there unless they are running an active tadar system." Reeves said.

"Exactly. Admiral Dalton do you think that will cause any issues?" Winchester replied.

"Oh I don't think so. An hour ought to be enough for me to convince my government that you mean no harm. On the other hand it will put you close enough to help if they refuse to be persuaded." the old man said and he smiled.

## INTERLUDE.

Every ship that arrived in the Cordoba Durchmusterung -50 12929 system had to be checked to make sure that the alien artificial intelligence was not attempting to infiltrate troops or vessels into the only Genex system that was currently free of them. The only foolproof way to do this was to board each ship and verify that it had a living crew. More than one ship turned out to have no-one aboard them and these were rapidly destroyed to prevent the spread of the computer virus. On the other hand the occupants of those ships that did have people aboard them were questioned about what activity they had witnessed in the systems they had fled from. If they were military vessels then they made their reports to their superiors to be passed up the chain of command but the increasing number of civilian refugees were instead questioned by intelligence agents and those with the most significant information were passed on to Kane.

"You are Worker Joshua Velt, captain of the mining ship *Workhorse*?" Kane said as he entered the small sparsely furnished room in which a nervous looking man sat behind a table and the man nodded.

"Yes sir." he said as Kane sat down opposite him.

"I am Commander Leader Kane of the State Intelligence Service. I understand that your ship has come from the colony at Redoubt, is that correct?" Kane asked and Velt nodded again.

"Yes commander." he said.

"As well as yourself I see that more than a hundred others were aboard your ship when it arrived." Kane continued, reading the information from his tablet.

"Yes commander. They were all that could fit." Velt answered, "If I could have-

"I'm less interested in the number of people you rescued than the fact you escaped at all. We know that the system has been overrun by the machines. How were you even able to leave?" Kane asked.

"Most of the machines are gone leader. They have taken over manufacturing plants to make more of themselves and that is where they are concentrating their efforts. My ship was operating in the asteroid belt when the attacks began and we just hid there until the machines stopped hunting us. Then we went to the nearest fuel depot that stored tachyons we could use to get to FTL and the machines hadn't found. The *Workhorse* is equipped for faster than light travel but it doesn't have a particle inductor to make the tachyons itself. When we got there we found the crew hiding there too. We loaded as many people as we could aboard the ship and made a run for it. We jumped to FTL and came here." Velt said.

"Why here? Sanctuary is closer to Redoubt than Haven is." Kane pointed out.

"I know but I have family here I wanted to reach." Velt told him.

"While you were hiding what were you doing?" Kane asked.

"Nothing, we just watched to see if the machines were coming towards us. After they had taken over the planet there were still many small outposts scattered across the system and the machines began hunting for them." Velt said, "We shut down everything we could to avoid being detected."

"One of your crew claims to have detected a large energy surge. What can you tell me about that?" Kane said.

"The machines had gathered many ships in one place, hundreds of them, and we picked up considerable energy emissions from them for some time. Then all of a sudden there was a massive brief spike." Velt replied.

"Then what?" Kane added.

"Then nothing. The ships were so close together it looked to our sensors that they were all joined together and after there was the energy spike we detected nothing more for a long time. We thought that maybe they had all exploded until all of a sudden there was another energy surge, this one even bigger than the first and unlike that one it continued while more than a hundred other ships all approached before they disappeared from our sensors." Velt explained.

"Disappeared?" Kane said.

"They just stopped radiating any heat or any other energy in an instant. They just vanished. It reminded me of how it looks when a ship jumps to faster than light speed. The *Workhorse's* tachyon detectors are very limited and we can't detect the build up before a ship accelerates, only when one is approaching directly or it slows to sublight speed. But the direction they were heading wouldn't have taken them to any system in the empire. Do you know what happened to them?" Velt said.

"That's classified Worker Velt." Kane replied, getting back to his feet, "That's all I needed to know for now but we may need to speak to you again later." then he left the room without waiting for a response from the worker.

Kane knew that the thing that Velt had described could only be the operation of one of the mysterious tachyon gates used by the alien artificial intelligence to move prisoners to some unknown destination that was obviously well beyond charted space. Sadly without tachyon detection records it still did not explain how

the gates worked but even the limited data collected by the *Workhorse* represented more data than had been gathered up to that point and Kane knew that it needed to be passed on to the Genex fleet.

The building used for the interviews with civilian refugees had been a customs building of the largest spaceport on Haven so, wanting to pass on this information in person Kane had to get back to the mansion where Secretary LeClair was running his government from. Fortunately this had been provided for by a large number of ground cars available for the intelligence officers to use and taking one of these it was a short drive to the mansion.

Presenting his identity documents to the security officers at the gate Kane was allowed straight into the grounds of the mansion before being shown into the building. Rather than being taken to the command centre to see Secretary LeClair himself though, Kane was taken to the room being used as an office by the senior admiral advising the Genex chief of state.

"Admiral Newsom you'll want to see this." he said, handing the tablet to the fleet officer.

"Energy readings." Newsom said, frowning as he looked at the information shown on the display, "What is this?"

"I think it's a tachyon gate operating admiral. Unfortunately the ship that recorded this data had only the most basic of tachyon sensors so the crew couldn't monitor the way it actually operated but they still picked up the actual power used to run it." Kane told him.

"I thought the operation of these gates was supposed to need a power supply greater than anything the ships used to construct these gates could supply." Newsom commented, "These readings are big but not beyond the ability of the ships used to produce it."

"No, obviously there is still something we're missing but this data at least indicates something about how the gates work. I think that initial energy surge was a message being sent to wherever the gates are leading to." Kane said.

"Telling their owners to expect new arrivals?" Newsom said and Kane nodded.

"That seems likely." he said.

"So why bring this to me instead of Secretary LeClair?" Newsom asked.

"Because he's a fool. He's not interested in saving anything other than his own skin. My guess is that he'll just make a run for it when the inevitable invasion comes." Kane answered.

"Where's left for him to go?" Newsom said.

"I've heard stories about secret bolt holes that he's had prepared where he could wait out any disaster with a select few others. He could head for one of them or he could leave our space entirely. Hell, now that the Commonwealth knows we still exist he could head there and try to claim asylum." Kane said and Newsom leant back in his chair.

"I have ships at my disposal. I could be planning a run myself." he said.

"But then you'd never get what you really want." Kane replied, smiling.

"And what's that commander?"

"LeClair's job. Every admiral, general, politician and corporate CEO has eyed up that position since the leader caste came into being." Kane pointed out.

"So how is this supposed to help me become secretary and what do you expect in return for bringing it to me?" Newsom said.

"That gives you a target admiral. A nice big target that you can take out and claim all the credit for." Kane responded.

"Blow up the gate?" Newsom said but Kane shook his head.

"No, from the way the gates reacted when the Commonwealth tried to study them they're easy to destroy. Just get a ship close enough and they'll blow themselves up. Think about what it means that that gate has been activated though. Hundreds of transports were heading for it when the *Workhorse* left the system admiral, hundreds. The machines have rounded up nearly every person in that system and sent them through the gate. Now the machines control Redoubt and they're using the planet and probably every facility in the system to replicate themselves. Attack Redoubt and its system and you could cripple them. Given that there's no-one, or least hardly anyone left there it doesn't matter how much collateral damage you cause either. You could turn every planet and asteroid in the system to glass and no-one here would complain." he said.

"Only Secretary LeClair can order the launch of our strategic arsenal and in any case most of those missiles are on Sanctuary. The machines would shoot half of them down before they made it to FTL." Newsom said.

"I realise that. You'd have to send a taskforce instead. You are an admiral after all, you can authorise that." Kane said.

"Secretary LeClair ordered all fleet assets to defend Haven on your advice Commander Kane."

"Yes but I don't think you'll need much. Send a few scouts first to see what the machines have in the system, then I'm sure you can find a few destroyers that can be armed with nuclear weapons before being sent to patrol the outer reaches of this system that can happen to make the jump to Redoubt where they can launch

their missiles. We'd need to arrange for Secretary LeClair to be out of contact when the scouts brought back their information though." Kane said and a smile appeared on Newsom's face.

"Target's of opportunity." he said, "Of course the secretary will be furious when he finds out. Someone's bound to leak the fact that I sent ships to Redoubt."

"Yes I expect he will. He'll probably ask you to step down and replace you without considering the benefit of your action. Then of course when the attack is a success he'll be left looking timid while you'll look decisive. Plus of course you'll have destroyed a large part of the enemy's industrial capacity. Maybe enough to cause the machines to give up on taking Haven entirely and just accept what they already have." Kane said.

"Do you really think they'd do that? Give up while this system remains free?" Newsom said.

"Who knows? But there has to be some sort of guiding logic to the way the machines operate. In any case Redoubt is in the only significant system that they actually hold while we have secured Haven and its system while all the other colonies are contested. That makes us even. Destroy Redoubt and we have the advantage and if the machines do happen to take any more systems we can do the same to them, wait until the population have been sent through a gate and then nuke everything in sight." Kane replied.

"And what would you want in return for helping me become secretary, Commander Kane?" Newsom asked.

"Well obviously your first act as secretary would be to form a new government. I would happily serve in such a government if a suitable position was offered to me." Kane answered.

"What sort of position would you consider suitable exactly?"

"Oh I think my skills would make me a suitable minister of security, don't you admiral?" Kane replied.

"Minister of security? That would give you authority over the State Intelligence Service. I take I you have a few scores to settle?" Newsom said and Kane grinned.

"Many of them admiral. Many of them." he said.

"An inspection?" LeClair said, frowning when the suggestion was put to him during a briefing in the command centre.

"Yes mister secretary." Admiral Newsom replied.

"Right now the impression you are giving the public is of hiding in this command centre while our warriors prepare to sacrifice themselves." Kane added, "Visiting some of our front line forces will let you appear in the press to be taking a personal interest in our troops' well being as well as the state of our defences."

"No doubt the admiral would like the secretary to visit one of the orbital defence platforms." an army officer commented.

"The fleet would be the first line of defence if the machines attack. It seems reasonable that the secretary would want to see how well prepared they are." Newsom responded before Kane spoke up again, just as the admiral had expected him to.

"The problem with that idea admiral is what if the machines should attack at the time the secretary makes his inspection? Obviously a large task force would be detected well ahead of its arrival but you have to admit that we cannot rule out the possibility of them having already infiltrated a ship into the system. A stealth vessel or perhaps a ship disguised as a civilian one that we have yet to discover. If that were the case then the secretary would be trapped aboard the defence platform or worse yet his shuttle could be shot down. There is precious little of our government left without losing the secretary himself as well." he said.

"I thought you were in favour of an inspection Commander Kane?" LeClair said.

"Oh I am mister secretary, but not one that is so public that it makes you a target. Not only for the machines but also for anyone among our own people looking to usurp you." Kane replied.

"Then what is your recommendation commander?" LeClair asked and Kane looked towards the nearby army officers.

"I think that General Ellis would be able to suggest an army unit that would be suitable. Perhaps one of the artillery regiments we've positioned to cover potential landing zones." Kane said.

"Those units are in the middle of no-where." Ellis pointed out, "My best troops are right here in the city."

"Yes, here where anyone wanting to harm the secretary could try and recruit them. Troops at more isolated locations are less likely to be involved in any such plot. We can spring the visit on them at the last minute to make sure none of them can plan anything against the secretary." Kane explained.

"I like the sound of this." LeClair said before one of the technicians monitoring the data being fed to the command centre suddenly spoke up.

"Admiral we're getting an urgent feed from the *Corona* via tachyon link." he said.

"The *Corona*?" LeClair said, looking at Newsom.

"One of the pickets with our destroyer squadrons in the outer system. If they're using a tachyon link it must be important." the admiral replied before he looked at the technician and added, "Let me see it."

"Yes admiral." the technician said and he fed the signal to one of the larger screens in the room.

Current Genex tachyon transmission technology was equivalent to the Commonwealth's own faster than light communications and so the signals could travel at twenty light years per hour. Therefore, despite coming from the edge of the system the signal delay was negligible.

"This is the picket Corona calling Haven." the officer whose face appeared on the screen began, "We have detected multiple tachyon waves approaching this system. The strength of these indicate that several large forces are approaching and will arrive in approximately eight hours."

"The machines are coming." Ellis said, "We have to put our forces on full alert."

"Yes we do mister secretary." Newsom added, all thoughts of overthrowing the secretary suddenly put aside.

"Where will they strike?" LeClair asked, obviously concerned and he looked at Kane.

"Their smaller raids have targeted ships and outposts further out in the system mister secretary, but there's no point to a larger assault against them. Haven is the only logical target." Kane replied.

"I see. Admiral Newsom what do you recommend?" LeClair said.

"As General Ellis said we need to put our forces on full alert. Leaving ships on the outer edge of the system is a waste of time, they'll likely be overwhelmed easily if they stay there. Bringing all our assets back here will concentrate our strength. We can use reconnaissance drones to keep watch on the outer system if the machines chose to drop out of FTL there. We should also put our land, air and sea assets on alert as well. The machines could try to land forces and if they do then they'll come within firing range of our atmospheric and surface defences. Any landing site must be attacked immediately before the machines can fortify their position or disperse." Newsom said.

"We should be prepared to use our strategic weapons as well mister secretary." a nearby air force officer said, "If the machines come out of FTL in the outer system then we should target them with our missiles."

"At the very least that would help break up their formation and we could follow up the missile strike with attacks by destroyers. The ships we currently have spread around the outer system could be reorganised." Newsom said.

"What if the machines are sending dreadnoughts? What good are destroyers against them?" General Ellis said and Newsom smiled and glanced at Kane before he replied.

"General it just so happens that after discussing the existing pattern of behaviour of the machines while they conducted their raids I decided that small assault forces led by large capital ships could be taken on by our destroyers if they were armed with nuclear weapons. Right now every one of those destroyers patrolling the outer system carries between twenty and fifty nuclear warheads. They may have to get relatively close but a volley of them will destroy even the largest warship." he said.

"Then it seems we can be grateful for your foresight admiral." LeClair said, "Carry out your plan, pull our ships back and be prepared to respond to wherever the machines choose to come out of FTL. I want all our other forces on alert as well. As a last resort I want my personal ship prepared and while that's being done I must address the people. They need to see that I am at the centre of our defensive strategy."

Even before they dropped to sublight speed less than a light hour from Haven, the sheer number of stray tachyons that broke away from the approaching automated warships proved to the Genex defenders that their enemy was approaching in vast numbers. These stray tachyons were later followed by a massive surge of the particles as hundreds of ships decelerated, simultaneously scattering all of the tachyons that had surrounded them as they travelled from Sanctuary in the Alpha Indi system just over ten light years away. This briefly overwhelmed every tachyon detector close by as well as disrupting the active radar sensors being used to gather more detailed real time information. However, this disruption lasted only a brief amount of time before it was possible to get a count of the number of enemy warships to have arrived. Although outnumbered, the odds were not drastically against the defending Genex ships and as the automated intruders began launching swarms of drones they moved to intercept them. The Genex launched attack craft of their own, mainly drones at first but as the crews of interceptors, fighters and bombers were able to get to their craft these also sped from the launch bays of the capital ships heading towards the machine forces.

Accelerating much faster than any of the larger warships on either side, it was these two clouds of attack craft that first came within firing range of one another and while the larger vessels were still attempting to get missile locks the battle began in the space between the two fleets. The sheer number of drones launched by the machine forces allowed them to form their own artificial intelligence network, freeing them from the need for commands from their mother ships and as the Genex attack craft closed in on them they reacted quickly by adjusting their formations to face the Genex. In opposition to this the manned Genex fighters and interceptors moved to target specific sections of the machine drone force, attempting to open a gap that would allow their bombers to slip through and engage the larger warships with the ordnance they carried. However, the machine controlled drones anticipated this and as soon as holes began to appear they moved to seal them. One squadron of bombers attempted to rush through a narrow gap that appeared open but as soon as they broke away from the fighters escorting them a group of drones unleashed a wave of missiles that wiped out the entire squadron in mere seconds and the remaining bomber squadrons fell back behind the protection of the more agile attack craft.

While the dogfighting between attack craft continued the larger warships finally achieved their missile locks and unleashed a barrage of missiles towards one another. These passed through the clouds of attack craft

relatively unmolested before the defensive turrets of the warships themselves opened fire. Both sides had had plenty of time to organise their fleets to put frigates and other vessels armed with numerous turrets towards the front of their formations to provide a protective screen against not only missiles but also any attack craft that were able to slip through the massive battle going on between them and as soon as they had a clear line of fire against the incoming missiles they began to bring them down in massive numbers. It was inevitable given the numbers of missiles fired that some would be able to get through the defensive fire though and there were numerous explosions of various sizes as warships on both sides were hit. The Genex themselves suffered more hits than their machine opponents but it was the machines that came off worse during this initial exchange of fire as a number of the missiles fired by the Genex proved to be fitted with nuclear warheads and brilliant flashes of light consumed several of the automated frigates entirely. If the Genex had hoped that their sudden use of weapons of mass destruction would cause the machines to retreat though they were to be disappointed as the fully automated fleet accelerated, aiming to close the gap between them to the point where the use of such powerful weapons would pose as great a risk to the Genex as to them.

Bringing the two fleets closer together also brought them close enough to use their direct fire weapons against one another and the space between them was suddenly filled with projectiles and the energy of various particle beams as the two sides unleashed every weapon they had at their disposal. The brunt of this fire was born by the frigates at the front of both fleets and as more missiles were launched both sides resorted to intercepting them with drones before they could get close enough to threaten any larger vessels. It was at this point that not only the difference in numbers between the two fleets but also the psychology of each side began to show. The still numerically superior machines paid little attention to casualties and would not retreat. This meant that as long as they had at least one weapon capable of firing or were still able to manoeuvre no matter how slowly the automated warships carried on fighting, attempting to ram the Genex vessels if they had no other means of attack. On the other hand the Genex, especially the members of the leader caste who commanded their warships had a significant sense of self preservation and as they suffered damage many of them began to fall back towards Haven, further depleting the strength of their fleet.

“That was the *Duellist*.” Admiral Newsom said as he watched the transponder for one of the Genex battleships vanish from the strategic display.

“How long can our fleet hold out admiral?” LeClair asked and Newsom took a deep breath as he considered the question carefully.

“At the rate we’re losing ships probably just a few hours.” General Ellis commented.

“That depends general. There are still options open to us.” Newsom responded.

“Such as?” LeClair said.

“Retreating closer to Haven would allow our orbital defences to offer support. Right now they’re so far away that they just can’t target the enemy.” Newsom began.

“If the machines are able to get into orbit they could start landing troops on the surface.” Ellis pointed out.

“Which is what your warriors are deployed to prevent general.” Newsom replied, “Alternatively we could send the drones stationed aboard our orbital facilities to support our ships.” he added.

“Then what would protect our space stations if the machines break through?” LeClair said.

“Our orbital facilities are well armed mister secretary. The drones represent only a fraction of their firepower. On the other hand they could provide a significant boost to the strength of our fleet. However, I do think we should consider withdrawing some of these damaged ships that have already fallen back. They are contributing nothing at the back of the fleet but we might be able to repair at least some of their damage at our orbital shipyards before the machines can reach us.” Newsom said, “I’d also like to send in the *Langley’s Hope*.”

“Absolutely not.” LeClair replied without hesitation.

“Mister secretary, that carrier could-” Newsom began.

“Admiral the *Langley’s Hope* will be all that we have to cover an evacuation if the machines do get here.

Without it our people won’t stand a chance of escape.” LeClair interrupted but all of the gathered Genex leaders knew that Secretary LeClair really wanted the large fleet carrier to remain in orbit to protect his own personal escape rather than that of the general population.

“As you command mister secretary. But at least permit me to-” Newsom said before LeClair interrupted him again.

“Yes, yes, admiral. You may redeploy our drones and withdraw the most seriously damaged ships from the line. I won’t authorise any retreat though. The machines must be kept away from Haven at all costs.” he said.

“Admiral we’re picking up another tachyon wave approaching the system. Not as large as the first but still significant.” a technician suddenly announced.

“The machines are bringing in reinforcements.” Ellis said.

“Perhaps they are rethinking their chances against our fleet.” LeClair commented as the concerned expression he had worn for some time lightened, a smile starting to appear on his face.

"I wouldn't get your hopes up yet mister secretary. Those ships will have set off more than a day ago. They won't know a thing about the battle yet." Newsom told him.

"They're just a second wave." Kane added as he studied the sensor readings of the approaching ships, "They aren't even coming from the same direction as the fleet from Sanctuary. I'd say that it indicates the machines haven't been able to re-establish the tachyon communications network in the systems they have control of space in and are having trouble co-ordinating large scale operations. These ships were probably meant to arrive at the same time as the ones already here."

"And we can be thankful that they didn't." Newsom commented, "At least we've had the chance to take out a portion of their ships rather than facing their full force at once."

"For all the good your strategy has done us so far." Ellis said, "Mister Secretary I think we need to acknowledge that an invasion is inevitable and start preparing for it. Activate civil defence and declare martial law."

"He's positioning himself to stage a coup." Kane whispered to Newsom and the admiral nodded in agreement.

"You have something else to say admiral?" LeClair asked when he noticed this.

"Secretary LeClair I agree with the general's assessment. The machines will undoubtedly be able to land some forces on Haven and we need to make sure that we can react to that. Having civilians in the way will only make that more difficult. Impose martial law and a curfew now and we'll be able to redeploy our troops far more easily. For your personal safety I would recommend bringing down a platoon of marines from one of our orbital facilities. If you do need to evacuate they will be able to get you to your shuttle without the army having to divert troops from the front lines." Newsom said and Ellis frowned at the idea of marines taking over protecting the secretary, knowing that they would be loyal to Admiral Newsom rather than himself.

"Admiral I-" he began but LeClair did not let him finish.

"I agree. Admiral order the drones from our orbital facilities to reinforce our fleet then have a suitable marine force brought down to replace General Ellis' troops here at the mansion. In the meantime I will prepare a declaration of martial law to be issued as soon as you have your forces in place to enforce it." the secretary said.

Even accelerating as fast as they were capable of, it still took several hours for the drones launched from the Genex orbital facilities to join up with the ships of their fleet but the speed they had built up during the prolonged acceleration enabled them to perform a rapid flypast of the combat zone, firing missiles and gauss cannons at targets allotted to them by the Genex warships. Although the machine fleet had detected the drones' approach there was little it could do initially to defend against this attack without diverting firepower away from the fleet it was currently engaged with and this meant that the lightly armed drones were still able to inflict significant damage to a number of the outlying vessels of the machine fleet. This forced the artificial intelligences controlling the automated warships to re-evaluate their formation and while the drones that had just carried out their strafing run were slowing down again before they could turn around and come back for a second run the machine fleet began to redeploy its own drones and ship to be better placed to intercept them while still retaining the ability to engage the main Genex fleet. However, before either of these manoeuvres could be completed there was a massive burst of tachyons as another force of warships arrived in the Cordoba Durchmusterung -50 12929 system.



## 14.

"What the hell?" Ash exclaimed when the *Warspite* shed its shell of tachyons and dropped to sublight speed only to find a battle raging barely a million kilometres away.

"They're right between us and the primary settled planet." Thomas said, checking his navigation console.

"Captain we've just been lit up with active tadar." Cortez called out from her station.

"Can someone tell me what's going?" Knight added, looking towards Goldman.

"It's a major fleet action. Several hundred ships on each side." she replied.

"You think?" Reeves said, "What about transponders? Can you tell who is who?"

"I think so sir. Admiral Dalton gave us the format used by the Genex for their ID codes and we recorded enough in the Luyten Two-twelve Nineteen system for us to work out roughly what the machines are using." Goldman said.

"Good. Now get me a line to the Enigma. I need to speak to the admiral." Reeves said.

"I have the admiral on the line for you now captain. Putting him through." Goldman responded and the old man's face appeared on the screens in front of Reeves and Knight.

"Captain I take it you've seen what's happening." the old man said.

"Yes admiral, I'm about to order my squadron to engage in support of the Genex fleet but I need you to contact their commanders to let them know what's happening. I don't want to be shot at by both sides." Reeves told him.

"Of course not. What about Admiral Winchester's ships?" the old man said and Reeves and Knight both glanced at Goldman again.

"They dropped out of FTL right on target as far as I can tell." she said, "That puts them a light hour away."

"Captain from the amount of wreckage I'm picking up I think that this battle has been going on for several hours at least." Lucas said from her console, "Admiral Winchester's ships should be able to see it even if what they're seeing will be an hour out of date."

"Commander Goldman use tachyon comms to tell Admiral Winchester what we're doing and alert the rest of the squadron to advance and engage the enemy." Reeves ordered.

The arrival of the Commonwealth fleet surprised both fleets engaged in the fighting but for entirely different reasons. The Genex had been expecting reinforcements for the machine fleet and the arrival instead of a force of ships their intelligence officers were able to identify as being of Commonwealth origin caught them entirely off guard. On the other hand, the artificial intelligences of the automated warships had not been using their tachyon detectors, believing that the only threats they faced were in this system and so the arrival of another force not belonging to them was totally unexpected. Thanks to the warship profiles that the Genex had programmed their robotic fleet with though the artificial intelligences were still able to identify these ships as being of Commonwealth origin and in the absence of any other information they labelled these new arrivals as hostile.

"Captain some of the enemy ships are turning towards us." Goldman said.

"What classes are we looking at?" Reeves asked.

"Cruisers and larger." Lucas replied and from her seat by the central console Hayes nodded.

"Yes they've got their big ships at what was the back of their line." she added.

"Then they don't have any frigate cover." Reeves said as he reached into his pocket and produced a key. Then he looked at Knight and smiled.

"Are you sure?" Knight said as he took out an identical key and Reeves nodded.

"We can destroy a large portion of their firepower in one salvo." he said, "Weapons get me missile locks on the closest enemy warships. Goldman I want our destroyers to launch a salvo at the same time as us to confuse their defences." and then he and Knight both inserted their keys into keyholes positioned far enough apart that one person could not reach them both simultaneously and turned them at the same time. As soon as they did this an alarm sounded.

"Captain, nuclear weapons are armed." one of the gunners announced.

"Here we go again." Thomas muttered.

"Target five hundred kilo-tonne warheads against enemy vessels of one thousand metres or greater. Four per vessel, fire at will." Reeves ordered.

Six missiles burst out of the launching silos along the *Warspite's* dorsal hull at the same time as the other ships of the Commonwealth squadron launched their own missiles towards the fleet of automated warships. There were a dozen ships that met the criteria Reeves had given for being targeted by the *Warspite's* nuclear weapons and shortly after launching the noses of the nuclear tipped missiles broke open to release the warheads they contained. Each of the *Warspite's* missiles held eight individually targeted warheads and as they closed in on the machine fleet they broke open before any of them could be shot down by the automated warships' defences. The warheads they carried quickly spread out as soon as they were

released, preventing them from being targeted easily by the machines' turrets. The further apart from one another the warheads could get, the more time those turrets would have to spend turning to track them. The machines' largest vessels turned the attention of their lighter turrets towards the Commonwealth missiles, co-ordinating their fire to establish a screen that was effective in bringing down many of them far short of their targets but a number of the nuclear warheads remained elusive enough that they were able to slip through this fire and there was a brilliant flash of light as the first of them struck its target, a battlecruiser, and the large warship was torn apart. The energy of the explosion also destroyed more than a dozen other missiles and two other nuclear warheads but this still left many more to target the other warships. This explosion was followed by more, the majority of them were conventional blasts. The missiles fired by the Commonwealth destroyers and corvettes did little damage to the massive vessels but there were also more nuclear warheads that were each capable of destroying even the largest of ships outright and each successive detonation resulted in the destruction of another one of them. By the time the last of the nuclear warheads had either found its target or been destroyed only three of the machines' largest ships remained. "Captain the enemy vessels are moving towards us." Goldman said as all three of these ships, two battleships and a missile dreadnought began to turn towards the Commonwealth squadron and a number of smaller automated warships rushed to act as escorts, all of the drones performing that role previously having been wiped out in the multiple nuclear explosions. "Scramble all attack craft." Reeves said, "Weapons focus on that dreadnought, if she has anything like a full missile load then this could get ugly."

"Mister secretary you have to see this." Admiral Newsom said, when he saw the telemetry beamed to the command centre via a tachyon link from one of the Genex warships.

"What is it?" LeClair asked.

"It looks like the Commonwealth." Kane said in disbelief, "The ships that just dropped out of FTL aren't controlled by the machines at all. It's a Commonwealth task force."

"Yes and they're engaging the machines as well. They just launched a barrage of nuclear weapons that wiped out three quarters of their biggest ships." Newsom added.

"Mister secretary I have an incoming tachyon transmission." a nearby technician announced.

"The Commonwealth commander?" LeClair asked but the technician shook his head.

"No sir, it's Admiral Dalton aboard the *Enigma*." he said.

"So the old man isn't dead after all." Kane commented.

"Put him through to the main screen. Maybe he can offer an explanation for what's going on." LeClair said and moments later an image of the old man sat in the bridge of the *Enigma*, "Admiral what's going on?" LeClair demanded.

"Secretary LeClair by now I am sure that you have been made aware of the presence in this system of a fleet of Commonwealth warships." the old man responded.

"Nuclear explosions are hard to miss admiral." LeClair said.

"Indeed, as you can see though the Commonwealth have not come here to wipe us out. Instead they want to negotiate for peace. Right now though they are willing to help us defend Haven against this attack. I need you to order our warships not to fire on them. Do that and we'll be facing a war on two fronts. If that is Commander Kane that I can see behind you then he'll be able to tell you what the chances are of us defeating the Commonwealth." the old man explained.

"We can't. Even before our robotic forces revolted we didn't have the strength to challenge them openly." Kane said as LeClair looked towards him.

"Mister secretary the strength of this Commonwealth fleet could turn the tide against the machines." Newsom added.

"Then you approve of my ordering a truce?" LeClair said and Newsom nodded.

"I do mister secretary." he said.

"Very well admiral, give the order. But our ships are not to take orders from Commonwealth officers. A truce is not an alliance." LeClair told him.

As Reeves had expected the robotic dreadnought launched a wave of heavy missiles towards the *Warspite*, but although the vessel was obviously capable of potentially carrying more than a thousand such weapons this salvo consisted of only six missiles, many of its initial store having already been expended against the Genex.

"Target those missiles." Reeves ordered and the *Warspite's* turrets all turned to track the approaching missiles, shooting down all six in rapid succession.

"Lucas can you tell how many missiles that thing has left?" Knight added but Lucas shook her head.

"Sorry commander. That ship looks like it uses magazine fed launchers." she said.

"It does. It can fire up to fifty missiles in one salvo from a central magazine." Hayes said, "It was one of the first fully automated ships added to our fleet that was designed that way. The designers were concerned that

the AI might accidentally launch every missile at once if it could. Still, if it has more missiles than I would have expected it to give us a full salvo, spitting its fire between us and the other ships.”

“Mister Ash lay in an intercept course for the dreadnought. Main guns fire as soon as it comes within range.” Reeves said.

“Aye captain, heading straight for her now.” Ash responded

“That course will bring us within range of the battleships as well captain.” Thomas pointed out.

“We’re going to need cover.” Knight said.

“Goldman order our destroyers to target those battleships before their escorts can get into position. We need to keep their weapons turned away from us.” Reeves said, “Send that to the *Enigma* as well. Maybe Admiral Dalton can see his way to lending a hand.”

While the *Warspite* flew towards the dreadnought the Commonwealth destroyers as well as the *Enigma* fired another wave of missiles towards the two battleships, hoping to keep the focus of the powerful turret mounted weapons they were fitted with away from the heavy cruiser. This was only partially successful though as a neutral particle beam fitted to one of the massive warships burned a hole through the *Warspite*’s starboard wing assembly.

“Damage report!” Knight exclaimed as alarms sounded across the bridge.

“We’ve lost four of the starboard fuel tanks.” Goldman replied, “Plus the connections to the antenna arrays on the starboard side have been severed. Commander Bernard reports that damage control teams are already on their way.”

“Redeploy our drones to cover the starboard side. I don’t want us getting surprised by anything because we didn’t see it.” Reeves told her.

“Target entering firing range now captain.” a gunner reported.

“Fire at will.” Reeves responded and the *Warspite*’s main guns fired together, the beams striking the forward section of the dreadnought. This triggered a minor secondary explosion as missiles inside several launchers in the area hit exploded inside them but other than that the massive automated warship carried on coming.

“Captain there’s an odd pattern to the dreadnought’s energy emissions.” Lucas said.

“Are they preparing to fire?” Knight asked.

“I don’t think so commander. I think that the ship was damaged. Perhaps by our missile strike or may be the Genex did it beforehand. Either way I think there’s a serious breach in the hull.” Lucas said.

“Where?” Reeves said.

“From our facing it’s along the port side.” Lucas said.

“Mister Ash steer us to take us along the port side. All weapons stand by for a broadside at point blank range. Let’s see if we can make that breach work for us.” Reeves said.

Against a conventional dreadnought, a broadside to broadside engagement between it and the *Warspite* would likely result in the total destruction of the much smaller and less heavily armed heavy cruiser.

However, a missile dreadnought mounted only lighter turrets for point defence instead of also having heavy guns for direct fire, intended to remain far from targets and bombard them with missiles instead. This meant that unless the dreadnought had been keeping more missiles back then it had little firepower left remaining to it and what it had was good for use only at short range. As the *Warspite* continued on its course towards the dreadnought though a squadron of drones that had broken off from the fight against the Genex raced towards the Commonwealth warship.

“We’ve got incoming.” Mori told Shaw as the *Warspite*’s fighters moved ahead of the heavy cruiser, “Looks like about twenty drones and a pair of light warships coming up behind them.

“If the *Warspite* is going in for a broadside then she’s going need all her turrets for that dreadnought. That makes these drones our job.” Shaw replied before activating her communication system to broadcast to the other fighters, “This is Archangel to all fighters, we’re going in. We nail those drones and then the bombers can hit the ships behind them. Between us we should be able to take them out before they can get into position.”

The fighter squadrons launched by the *Warspite* promptly accelerated ahead of the heavy cruiser, moving to intercept the approaching drones. The two forces began to exchange fire as soon as they entered range of one another. The Commonwealth bomber squadron lagged behind the faster fighters slightly and this enabled them to adjust their course to take advantage of kills made by the fighters, watching for a hole to open up in the drones’ formation before moving to pass through it.

“Archangel we’re starting our run now.” the leader of the bomber squadron signalled from his craft, “Just keep those drones off our backs.”

“Copy that, we’ll cover you.” Shaw responded at the same time as she spun her fighter towards the bombers and accelerated towards them.

“Drones at eight o’clock high. Looks like they’re heading for the bombers.” Mori warned her.

“I see them, going for a lock now.” Shaw said before turning her fighter again until the first drone entered her

sights. Then she followed this, waiting for the indication of a missile lock at which point she quickly released the weapon before turning towards a second drone.

Meanwhile the missile sped towards the drone she had targeted, guided by its own onboard tracking system and despite the countermeasures ejected by the drone the missile struck the rear of the automated craft. The resulting explosion tore apart the back half of the drone and the front half simply began to tumble forwards through space, no longer a threat to the Commonwealth bombers.

The second drone was too close and moved across her sights too rapidly for Shaw to be able to get a missile lock so instead she switched to her fighter's gauss cannons and fired several rapid bursts as it moved in and out of her line of fire. One of these clipped the drone and damaged the control line to one of its thrusters just as it was firing. This jammed the thruster on and the drone began to spin until the automated control system could counter this by firing an opposing thruster as well. However, the time taken for this to take effect enabled Shaw to get into a better firing position and the next burst from her cannons shredded the entire drone.

Another nearby drone also exploded as another of the Commonwealth attack craft fired a missile at it while a fourth was only damaged and trailed fire behind it as it continued to try and intercept the bomber squadron. However, the relatively slow moving bombers were not entirely helpless and the defensive turrets they carried along their dorsal surfaces began to fire, initially boxing the drone in before another rapid burst of fire struck it head on and it broke apart.

"This is Archangel, you're all clear." Shaw broadcast to the bomber crews when she saw that there was only open space between them and the machine controlled light warships. Just seconds later the bombers opened their weapon bay doors and unleashed a massive volley of missiles significantly larger than those carried by the fighters towards these warships, expending all their stored munitions in one go and as the cloud of more than a hundred missiles sped towards the warships the bombers broke off, decelerating as they turned to take them back towards the *Warspite*.

The automated warships fired on the cloud of rapidly closing missiles but their size meant that they carried only a single turret each and even though they shot down more than a dozen of the missiles the rest slammed into the warships and they were rocked by explosions. Against a heavily armoured capital ship the missiles would have had little effect on their own and required multiple hits in the same place to inflict serious damage, but the hulls of these vessels were thinner and just one missile could blow a hole for a second to pass through before exploding inside the ship.

Only three of the light warships survived the barrage and as they emerged from the debris field that had been the other robotic ships they found themselves swarmed by the *Warspite's* fighters.

"Fire at will boys. Keep shooting and maybe we'll hit something volatile." Shaw broadcast before she opened fire on the corvette ahead of her fighter, peppering the side of the ship with projectiles.

"Hey watch your ammo counter." Mori warned her when his console told him that less than a quarter of the fighter's gauss cannon rounds remained.

"Damn it!" Shaw hissed as she ceased fire. However, before turning her fighter away from the corvette she switched her weapon controls to launch one of her remaining missiles and she grinned as it homed in on a thruster unit before exploding, knowing that her attack had at least done some damage, "Okay this is Archangel," she then broadcast, "we're done here let's get back to the *Warspite*."

While its fighters dealt with the drones and light warships supporting the three large capital ships, the *Warspite* continued flying towards the dreadnought and another blast was fired from the heavy cruiser's main guns. The twin beams hit the dreadnought just behind where the first shots had hit and they burned a deep gouge in the side of the ship. It did not take long after that for the two ships to come close enough for the *Warspite's* two medium X-ray laser turrets to be in effective range and as soon as they could their gunners opened fire as well, taking advantage of still being out of the range of the dreadnought's light defensive turrets to fire as many shots as possible while it could not respond. In particular the *Warspite's* gunners tried to aim for anything that looked like it could be a weapon, hoping not only to try and disarm the dreadnought but also to try and cause secondary explosions by destroying ammunition stores. However, as the two ships came close enough to be able to use their light turrets the dreadnought still had a number left and both vessels exchanged fire.

"Standby for hard turn." Ash announced before he counted down, "Three. Two. One. Now!" and he suddenly changed from having the *Warspite's* engines accelerating the ship forwards to turning sharply while keeping the same course, leaving the ship to drift sideways through space. For a moment this threw off the targeting of all of the *Warspite's* turrets but when the manoeuvre was complete the dreadnought was once again within the field of fire of the heavy cruiser's main guns and the gunner opened fire, sending continuous beams of energy into the dreadnought from close range. On impact with the dreadnought the neutral particle beams burned all the way through the ship and the gunner maintained them as the *Warspite* moved along the hull, cutting the dreadnought almost in two along its length before there was a huge explosion from inside and the dreadnought was blown to pieces.

"Captain I'm picking up an increase in tachyon levels." Cortez announced immediately after the destruction of the automated dreadnought.

"Are the machines getting ready to retreat?" Knight asked hopefully but Cortez shook her head.

"No sir, it's not coming from the robot ships, it looks like it's coming from Admiral Winchester's force." she said before she suddenly added, "They're jumping."

Positioned one light hour away, it took just moments for the main Commonwealth force to relocate to the combat zone and as the more than a hundred warships arrived within seconds of each other they began to bombard the fleet controlled by the alien artificial intelligence. The first victims of this bombardment were the two remaining robotic battleships that found themselves the focus of the Commonwealth fleet's battlecruisers, battleships and dreadnoughts. Massively outnumbered and outgunned the two huge robotic warships attempted to pull back to the relative safety of the rest of their fleet only to both be destroyed in a hail of missiles and energy blasts. At the same time as this was happening all of the Commonwealth vessels that were carrying attack craft began to launch them as rapidly as possible, creating a screen of hundreds of fighters, interceptors and drones between them and the robotic vessels while squadrons of bombers prepared to strike wherever enemy capital ships were devoid of adequate protection.

Although the remaining Genex fleet was still twice the size of the Commonwealth force, the deployment of the robotic fleet between them left it more vulnerable to attack from the Commonwealth ships and the Commonwealth crews took as much advantage of this as they could, shifting their aim from the burning wrecks of the two battleships and towards the other robotic vessels. Rather than firing on the cruisers that were the most powerful ships remaining to the machines Admiral Winchester ordered the smaller destroyers targeted instead. Relying on frigates for the bulk of their anti-missile and attack craft protection, the destroyers made easy targets for these weapons while those frigates were positioned on the far side of their positions relative to the Commonwealth ships to protect them against the Genex instead.

As one destroyer after another was reduced to drifting wreckage, depleting the firepower available to the machine fleet the alien artificial intelligence directing it determined that its current position caught between two opposing fleets was untenable and as one the ships it commanded began to move. The artificial intelligence did not intend to retreat from the system, although its ships were now outnumbered the situation was not entirely hopeless yet but if that was to be avoided then it was obvious that the automated fleet needed repositioning so that it could focus its defences along one side.

"Captain, the *Sovereignty* is signalling all ships to pursue." Goldman said.

"Makes sense. The admiral doesn't want those machines setting up a defensible formation." Knight commented.

"Are they heading for anything in particular or this just a general repositioning?" Reeves asked.

"There are no planetary bodies anywhere along their trajectory captain." Thomas responded, checking his instruments.

"Then they're just wanting to get their frigates in place to protect them." Knight added.

"Let's see how many more of their destroyers we can pick off before they can manage that then." Reeves said, "Weapons can you get me missile locks on twenty enemy destroyers for a salvo firing a single missile at each?"

"Captain that would use up more than half our remaining missiles." one of the *Warspite's* gunners replied.

"I'm aware of that petty officer." Reeves said, "Now that Admiral Winchester's ships are here we can reload once the battle is over."

"Aye captain, plotting firing solutions now." the gunner said, selecting twenty enemy destroyers that were separated from any escort, "Targets acquired captain. Ready to launch." he added when this task was done and Reeves nodded.

"Fire." he ordered and in unison twenty missiles burst from their dorsal launchers before turning towards the robotic fleet. The missiles spread out as each one tracked a different target and it did not take long for the alien artificial intelligence to recognise the threat to its ships.

Responding with what defensive weapons they had, the automated destroyers attempted to shoot down the missiles and several of them were destroyed far short of their targets. However, more than half were able to slip through the limited anti-missile fire and strike their targets. Of the fourteen ships hit six of them simply exploded, either through damage to their reactors or their own store of missiles self destructing while a further five had their control systems sufficiently damaged that they just shut down and began to drift lifelessly. Only three of the robotic destroyers survived and all of these were badly damaged by the impacts of the heavy missiles. The artificial intelligence controlling the fleet took no action to react to this, letting the three damaged ships fall behind as the rest of the fleet moved as quickly as possible to take up a less vulnerable position. This left the destroyers even more exposed and long range fire from a Commonwealth battleship which picked each of them off one by one.

The remaining Genex fleet also moved to pursue the robotic ships at the same time as the Commonwealth fleet did but no effort was made to try and link up with the recently arrived warships, a fact that did not escape the notice of Reeves.

"Commander Goldman have we had any communication from the Genex?" he said.

"No captain." she replied, shaking her head.

"The Genex ships are communicating with one another but it's all encrypted." Lucas added.

"This would be easier if we could co-ordinate our attacks with theirs." Knight pointed out.

"Get Admiral Dalton on the line. Maybe he can shed some light on this." Reeves said.

"Yes captain, contacting the *Enigma* now." Goldman said before the old man's image appeared on the screen in front of Reeves once more.

"Ah captain, what can I do for you? Things are rather busy here though. I have several other admirals all trying to get me to place the *Enigma* under the control of their squadrons." he said.

"That's sort of what I was wanting to ask you admiral." Reeves replied, "We haven't heard a single word from any of your ships. It's as if we're fighting two different battles."

"I must apologise for that captain. Unfortunately Secretary LeClair has ordered that our ships are not to take any orders from your officers." the old man said.

"He's probably hoping that your ships will bear the brunt of the fighting and leave him with a bigger fleet at the end of this." Hayes commented as she too watched and listened to the old man on the central console.

"Will they fire on us?" Knight asked.

"No commander, their orders specifically state that they must not. However, I would not expect any overt co-operation from them." the old man said.

"I'm starting to see how come we won the war." Ash commented.

"Truer than you might think." Hayes added.

"Admiral can you at least let us know what your fleet commanders are planning on doing so we can try to match our actions to theirs?" Reeves said.

"Of course captain. At present the commanders of our fleet are searching for weaknesses, both in the machines and your forces. They may have been ordered not to attack you right now but they're still considering the possibility." the old man said, "Of course I'll be keeping the *Enigma* apart from them." he then added.

"Thank you admiral, I'll pass that on to Admiral Winchester. *Warspite* out." Reeves said before he closed the channel, "Goldman warn the admiral that the Genex may be planning an ambush once this is over."

"Yes captain." Goldman responded.

"Captain the enemy fleet is coming about." a sensor operator announced as the robotic warships ceased their acceleration and began to turn, aligning themselves to be able to bring as much firepower as possible on the Commonwealth and Genex fleets, "Radar pulses indicate that they're locking on."

"Most of their targeting sweeps are aimed at our fleet captain." Lucas added.

"Then they must see us as the bigger threat." Knight commented.

"I think I've already pointed out that your ships are superior to ours." Hayes said, "Don't let the numbers of Genex warships out there fool you, whoever is in command of that fleet isn't sure that he could win a straight fight with you."

"Hopefully it won't come down to that." Reeves said, "Weapons are we in range of any of the enemy ships?"

"Yes captain, we still have a firing solution against their destroyers." a gunner reported.

"Captain they've got a screen of frigates and drones in place now. I doubt we'll get any rounds through." Lucas said.

"Are those cruisers on the flanks?" Reeves said, looking at the tactical display in front of him.

"I think so captain." Lucas replied.

"Positioned to be able to attack and cover their flanks." Knight said, "Are you thinking we should hit them?"

"They are the biggest ships the enemy has left." Reeves said, "Goldman get me Admiral Winchester."

"The admiral is broadcasting now captain. All monitors, heavy frigates, heavy cruisers, battleships and dreadnoughts are ordered to hit the enemy's left flank."

"Great minds think alike." Knight said, "That's a lot of direct fire."

"Helm turn us towards the enemy's left flank. Weapons fire the main guns as soon as we are in range." Reeves ordered.

## 15.

More than twenty Commonwealth warships varying in size from monitors just over a hundred metres in length to dreadnoughts almost twenty times that size all turned towards the left flank of the machines' new formation where a number of their cruisers were positioned. Large enough to carry a sizeable number of missiles and guns these ships could defend themselves at the same time as firing on the Commonwealth fleet and that made them the greatest threat. All of the warships diverted by Admiral Winchester had one thing in common though, every one was equipped with at least one heavy cannon whether it was fixed forward firing or mounted in a turret. This made it possible to engage the robotic cruisers from long range without using missiles that could be shot down en-route. Some of the robotic warships were also heavy cruisers though and most of these mounted a heavy forward firing cannon of their own so when the advancing Commonwealth ships opened fire the machines answered back in kind.

"Ash target one of those heavy cruisers." Reeves said when it became apparent which of the enemy vessels were carrying the most powerful armament.

"Heavy cruiser at eight degrees to port." Lucas said.

"Got it, turning now." Ash responded as he turned the *Warspite* to face the most obvious enemy heavy cruiser.

This was followed by the *Warspite's* own main guns firing at the opposing heavy cruiser. On their own the twin neutral particle beams were enough to damage but not destroy the automated warship, however the *Warspite* was not the only Commonwealth ship to target it and a volley from a Commonwealth battleship's turrets also struck the heavy cruiser soon after and the series of explosions that rocked the robotic warship culminated with a massive blast that tore it apart from the inside.

Initially the automated vessels tried targeting the larger dreadnoughts and battleships heading towards them but when this failed to inflict any more than superficial damage to any of them the alien artificial intelligence re-evaluated its targeting priority and instead focused on the handful of monitors among the Commonwealth ships. These light warships were far more vulnerable to enemy fire than the heavily armoured capital ships surrounding them and when a particle beam struck one of the monitors head on it burned through the full length of the ship.

"Captain the *Hellstorm* is gone." Goldman announced when the smaller ship was destroyed.

"Did any of the crew make it off?" Knight asked.

"I'm not picking up any distress beacons from escape pods." Goldman answered, "I don't think the crew even knew what hit them."

"Keep targeting those heavy cruisers. If we can take them all out then the monitors can hold back out of range of the other ships." Reeves said before another of the robotic warships exploded from the concentrated barrage of a Commonwealth dreadnought's turrets.

"Captain I'm picking up movement from the Genex lines." a sensor operator said.

"Confirmed captain. From the transponder data Admiral Dalton gave us the Genex are copying us. They're sending any ships they have with heavy guns against the cruisers on the right flank of the machines' formation." Lucas added, studying the transponders of the Genex ships that were moving away from the rest of their fleet.

"They've seen how effective your manoeuvre has been." Hayes commented.

"If they pull it off as well then the machines will lose the bulk of their heavy firepower. Plus they'll be caught between us again." Knight said.

"Picking up increasing tachyon emissions from the enemy vessels captain." Cortez said suddenly.

"Looks like the machines realise that they're about to be surrounded again as well." Reeves said.

"They're jumping." Goldman added as the first of the automated warships suddenly disappeared from the centre of the fleet's formation and one by one the others began to follow in rapid succession.

Not all of the automated warships were able to jump away though. The hundreds of drones deployed to protect the fleet lacked any faster than light capability and more than a dozen other warships had suffered damage that rendered them incapable of fleeing the system. Now these ships found themselves in a hopeless situation and in what humans would consider a final act of spite they all accelerated directly towards the nearest Commonwealth or Genex vessels, firing every weapon they had as fast as they could. The combined Commonwealth and Genex forces responded by firing back at the rapidly advancing robotic warships and their fire was devastating. The vastly superior number of manned warships meant that every robotic vessel came under fire from multiple vessels and being totally focused on attack meant that the automated ships took no evasive action to avoid direct fire weapons and employed their turrets purely for firing at the Commonwealth and Genex ships rather than incoming missiles. The result of this was that the automated drones and warships were destroyed in rapid succession leaving only drifting debris.

Even before the last robotic vessel was destroyed a number of Genex ships began to reorientate themselves to be better placed to fire at the Commonwealth fleet. However, for the time being they held their fire.

"I don't like the look of this." Ash commented.

"It looks like they're redeploying to attack us." Knight added.

"Lucas, are they targeting us?" Reeves asked the intelligence officer.

"I don't think so captain." she replied, "We are being actively scanned but they don't look like they're locking onto us yet."

"Waiting for orders?" Knight suggested.

"Probably." Hayes said, "I wouldn't be surprised if some of the fleet commanders start trying to reposition themselves further from you before an order to attack can reach them. They'll let their rivals take the brunt of your fire and hope to still be standing at the end."

"Numerically they are superior to our force by more than two to one captain." Goldman said.

"Yes but as well as being superior designs, your ships haven't been in combat as long as they have." Hayes pointed out.

"We're down to about twenty conventional missiles and half that many nuclear tipped. Who knows how many of those Genex ships have run out entirely?" Knight said.

"Captain we're receiving orders from Admiral Winchester." Goldman announced and Reeves nodded.

"Put him on commander." he told her and Goldman played the broadcasted message so that the entire bridge crew could hear it.

"This is Admiral Winchester to all Commonwealth vessels. The Genex fleet is deploying to an attack position but has yet to open fire. I want all squadrons to redeploy to defend against any incoming fire but do not fire unless specifically ordered to or if fired upon. Winchester out." the admiral's voice said.

"Helm take us back to our squadron. Goldman get me Admiral Dalton again. Maybe he can sort this out before anyone does something stupid." Reeves said but before Goldman could establish a communications link she saw that the Warspite was receiving another signal, this one from the Genex.

"Captain the Genex are signalling. It's a video signal being broadcast by one of their carriers." Goldman said.

"Probably their fleet commander." Hayes commented.

"Let's hear what they have to say. Use the main screen." Reeves said and Goldman fed the signal to the large screen at the front of the bridge where everyone present could see it.

It was immediately obvious that, unless a high degree of manipulation had been used the signal did not originate from aboard a starship. Instead the background was of a luxuriously decorated building while the camera focused on a man in smart civilian clothing while other individuals in a mix of military and civilian clothing could be seen working in the background as the man began to speak.

"This is a message to the commanders of the Commonwealth fleet in our system. I am Secretary Leader Ernest LeClair, Chief of State of the Genex Empire. This message is being relayed to you from my headquarters on the Genex world of Haven. I thank you for the assistance you have provided us in defending our world from attack by the artificial intelligence that has somehow subverted a large portion of our armed forces. Be warned though that we will take all actions necessary to preserve our sovereignty from the Commonwealth. You have no claim to any world, outpost or space station in this system at all, they are exclusively ours. Beyond that I wish to extend an invitation to you to send such emissaries as you wish to negotiate the terms for the extension of the truce that is currently in place between us. I have issued orders to the commanders of our forces that your fleet is not to be fired on as long as it holds its current position. Any attempt to approach any Genex facility with the exception of emissaries travelling to us will be judged as a hostile act and our forces will respond. Thank for your understanding and co-operation."

"That slimy little weasel." Hayes exclaimed when the message ended and the others on the bridge all turned to look at her.

"Something wrong Miss Hayes?" Knight asked.

"Do you think that Secretary LeClair is hiding something?" Reeves added.

"Oh of course he is. He's a politician, even if he wasn't Genex then he still wouldn't be trustworthy. I'm talking about him. The guy off to the right in the suit standing beside the admiral." Hayes answered, looking at a still image taken from the message that she had called up on the central console and she then shared it with Reeves and Knight.

"Do you know this man?" Reeves said.

"Yes, very well." Hayes replied, nodding.

"Ex-boyfriend?" Lucas commented and Reeves frowned for a moment as he glanced at her.

"Heavens no. That's Alexander Kane, his office was opposite mine back at intelligence headquarters. I should have known that he'd survive and end up sucking up to the secretary himself." Hayes said.

"Captain we're getting a message from the *Sovereign*." Goldman added, "Admiral Winchester wants to see you, Miss Hayes and Admiral Dalton aboard as soon as possible."



The shuttles carrying Reeves and the old man from the *Warspite* and *Enigma* were directed to land in the same docking bay aboard the carrier *Sovereign* and it was only when both craft were safely aboard that this was pressurised so that the passengers could disembark and it was then that Reeves saw that the old man was once again accompanied by his granddaughter.

"Does your admiral know that she's a killer?" Hayes asked quietly as they walked towards the old man and his granddaughter.

"I'm sure that the admiral's marines are competent enough to protect him." Reeves responded as a team of marines led by an officer entered the docking bay and approached the newly arrived group of officers,

"Permission to come aboard lieutenant?" Reeves added and the marine officer smiled.

"Granted Captain Reeves. Admiral Winchester sends his compliments. If you, the admiral and your assistants would like to come with us we'll show you to the bridge."

"The bridge?" Hayes commented and the marine nodded.

"Yes miss. The admiral is currently directing fleet operations personally." he said.

"The lead the way lieutenant." the old man said and the marine officer turned to leave while the other marines waited to fall in behind the party from the other two ships.

The docking bay to which the shuttles had been directed had been chosen by the *Sovereign's* flight controllers because of its proximity to the carrier's bridge and it took less than five minutes for the party to get to it. The *Sovereign's* bridge was much larger than the *Warspite's* was, requiring additional control stations for flight controllers and drone operators for the squadrons of attack craft that the two-kilometre long vessel carried in its cavernous hangars and as the party entered these were issuing orders for some of their squadrons to remain on station while others returned to the carrier to be rearmed. There was also the search and rescue effort for pilots of attack craft who had been forced to eject that needed to be co-ordinated with other ships to keep several of the bridge crew busy.

Admiral Winchester meanwhile, was stood by the bridge's central console along with the *Sovereign's* captain and intelligence officer, all three men studying a map of the system on the console.

"Ah Captain Reeves, it's good to meet you face to face at last." Admiral Winchester said before the marine lieutenant could announce them.

"Likewise admiral." Reeves responded.

"And the same goes for you of course Admiral Dalton." Winchester added, turning towards the old man.

"Yes admiral. Thank you for extending this invitation to come aboard your vessel and trusting us enough to allow us onto your bridge." the old man replied.

"Well Captain Reeves seemed happy enough to have you on his. It would be rude to act any other way."

Winchester said, "Feel free to take a seat if you wish."

"Thank you admiral. At my age sitting down is much preferable to standing for long periods." the old man said before he took a seat close by.

"Let me get to the core of why I asked you here." Admiral Winchester said, "I want your evaluation of the message sent by Secretary LeClair."

"Right now he and all of his senior staff will be wondering exactly why you are here and what you want in exchange for helping defeat the machines." the old man told him.

"So you haven't explained about ending the ability of your people to produce more Genex offspring?"

Winchester asked.

"No admiral. I mentioned to Captain Reeves that I think that would be best coming from you or one of your officers. The less I am associated with your presence here or the release of the alien computer virus the better." the old man answered.

"If the others knew of my grandfather's involvement they would not react well." his granddaughter added.

"They'd kill him in other words." Hayes said.

"And refuse to accept the terms you need to offer." the old man pointed out.

"But is the offer of a meeting genuine?" Winchester said.

"I believe so. There really isn't any other way for the secretary to find out why you're here after all. I recommend using the *Enigma* to transport you to-" the old man began but Winchester shook his head as he interrupted.

"No." he said, "I won't be going. As commander of this task force I will remain aboard my flagship."

"Uh-oh. I can see what's coming." Hayes muttered.

"Captain Reeves, you will meet with this Secretary LeClair." Winchester said.

"I knew it." Hayes added.

"I'll need my medical officer." Reeves said.

"Of course. Presumably Miss Hayes will also accompany you?" Winchester said.

"Her input would probably be useful admiral, yes." Reeves replied and then he looked at the old man, "What about a security detail?" he asked.

"Oh I think Secretary LeClair will tolerate the presence of a handful of your marines. You'll be on a planet

controlled by Genex troops after all.” the old man said.

“I’ll be there to watch your backs as well.” his granddaughter added.

“Is that supposed to sound impressive?” the Sovereign’s captain said when he heard this.

“Don’t underestimate my granddaughter captain.” the old man said, “Few who make that mistake once do so a second time. If it makes you all feel more comfortable though I will be there with a contingent of my warriors from the *Enigma* as well. I do suggest that we decline any invitation to actually land on the surface of Haven though. A shuttle moving to or from the surface would be vulnerable. On the other hand if we were to meet the secretary aboard one of the orbiting stations then the *Enigma* could dock directly. If we do need to retreat then escaping aboard a cruiser will be easier than a shuttle.”

“That does sound like a good idea.” Reeves commented, “The Genex may not want our warships approaching their planet but they can hardly object to one of their own doing it.”

“Then that is how we’ll proceed.” Admiral Winchester said and the old man smiled.

“I will make the necessary arrangements.” he said before he looked at Reeves and added, “Captain I will see you aboard the *Enigma* with shall we say a platoon of your men? One squad can accompany you to meet with Secretary LeClair while the rest remain aboard just in case. Jennifer will you be coming back with us or will you accompany Captain Reeves back to his own ship first?”

“I think I’ll stick with Captain Reeves.” Hayes responded, linking arms with Reeves, “It’s not that I don’t entirely trust you admiral but – wait, no, it is that I don’t entirely trust you.”

“Secretary LeClair,” Kane said as he entered the room LeClair was using as his private office.

“Yes commander?” he asked.

“We’ve just heard from Captain Schaar aboard the *Enigma*. The admiral has met with the commander of the Commonwealth fleet and agreed to transport a delegation to the orbital space dock.” Kane said.

“What do we know about this delegation?” LeClair said.

“It will be led by the commanding officer of one of their ships, the same ship that discovered our existence in the first place according to the admiral. He will be accompanied by at least two other officers and a small security detachment.” Kane told him.

“A security detachment?” LeClair commented.

“Don’t worry sir, they aren’t going to be trying to assassinate you. There’ll only be a single squad of them and they’re light infantry. Admiral Newsom’s marines will have no difficulty in overpowering them if it becomes necessary.” Kane explained.

“When will they get here?” LeClair said.

“They haven’t actually agreed to come here mister secretary. They have agreed to be transported to the space dock to meet with you there. They see that as a more neutral location than Haven itself. Don’t worry, Admiral Newsom has assured me that he can guarantee your safety between here and the station.” Kane said, “If you agree then the admiral will have the Commonwealth delegation aboard the space dock by noon tomorrow our time.”

“Very well, tell Admiral Newsom to make the preparations. I’ll meet the Commonwealth delegation as suggested.” LeClair replied.

“Major Willis!” Sands called out as the marine officer was exiting the *Warspite*’s armoury. Behind him was the platoon of marines that would be acting as a protection detail for Reeves when he met Secretary LeClair. Willis, like one of the marine squads was wearing his dress uniform and their armament was limited to a rifle and sidearm with only the ammunition that could be carried on their belts. On the other hand the rest of the platoon were dressed for battle, wearing full body armour and carrying with them the usual mix of weapons for a marine platoon that included machine guns, grenade launchers and also a pair of anti-armour lasers. Using many of these aboard a spacecraft or station came with risks but Willis believed that the benefits of the firepower they offered outweighed these and so had ordered them included in the marines’ load out.

“Miss Sands the armoury is a restricted area, you aren’t allowed inside.” Willis responded.

“I know, but I’m not inside am I?” Sands said.

“What do you want Miss Sands?” Willis asked.

“I know you’re going to meet with the leader of the Genex. I should be there to cover it.” Sands said.

“That’s not my decision to make.” Willis told her before looking around at one of his men, the lieutenant who commanded the platoon being taken aboard the *Enigma*, “Denning, get your men to the hangar and load their gear aboard a dropship.”

“I know that major but right now Denise Goldman is on duty on the bridge so I can’t get through to her and after our interview was interrupted Captain Reeves has shown a wonderful ability to always be somewhere that I’m not.” Sands said.

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t have practically accused him of being responsible for the deaths of the best part of a company of heavy infantry.” Willis commented and Sands sighed.

"I'm a reporter, I need to ask tough questions." she said and Willis glared at her for a moment before responding.

"Miss Sands this is a warship, not a passenger liner." he said, "Every man and woman aboard knows that they could be called upon to put their life at risk to achieve our mission and a commanding officer who only takes actions that can't possibly lead to the loss of life will fail every time. If I were you I'd stick to the interviews I know you've been getting with the enlisted personnel. They're the ones closest to the action most of the time. Who knows, maybe the captain will be willing to give you another go at an interview once we're on our way back home."

"Or maybe he won't and all I'll have to give my editor will be interviews with a bunch of grunts who don't have a clue about the big picture." Sands said and some of the marines walking past on their way to the hangar paused to stare at her. Noticing this Willis stepped closer and bent down to whisper into her ear.

"If you want to go anywhere or record anything you go through the proper channels Sandra." he said softly, "The only alternatives to that are sitting in your quarters or being escorted to the brig under guard. It's your choice, now my men and I have a job to do so get out of our way while we do it."

Sands watched angrily as the marines carried their equipment away from the armoury in the direction of the hangar.

"Excuse me, but you can't stay here." she heard a voice say from behind her and turning around she saw a pair of Brekken soldiers with pistols holstered on their hips standing in the doorway to the armoury looking at her. Obviously these two soldiers were on duty as the armoury staff and Sands nodded.

"Don't worry, I'm going." she told them before she walked away, heading back to her quarters.

When she reached the compartment she and her team occupied both her cameraman and sound man were inside checking their equipment.

"So is that jar head going to speak to the captain for you?" her cameraman asked and she frowned.

"What do you think Dave?" she responded angrily.

"Obviously not." the sound man commented.

"Well a couple of the engineering staff are willing to be interviewed. They've both been doing EVAs to work on that hole that got shot through the ship's wing. Maybe they'll have something interesting to say about the dangers of working in a vacuum while under fire." the cameraman added.

"Only they won't, will they? They'll just have the same tedious tales of work that isn't much different to a car mechanic. We need to get to where the action is." Sands said.

"Yeah, but the crew won't let us." her sound man pointed out.

"What if they didn't know?" Sands suggested and her camera and sound men looked at one another.

"What are you suggesting Sandra?" the cameraman asked.

"I mean maybe we can sneak into somewhere we're not supposed to be and set up a camera. You brought those compact models along didn't you?" Sands said.

"Of course but how are we supposed to get anywhere we can't already go without an escort and permission?" the cameraman said and Sands smiled.

"We'll need uniforms." she said, "Nothing special, enlisted crewmen or marines will do. I think pretending to be an officer would be pushing it."

"Impersonating members of the crew? That'll never work Sandra." the sound man said.

"Sure it will. Haven't you noticed that a lot of security roles are being filled by the Brekken right now? I bet they won't know the crew well enough to be able to tell the difference between them and us as long as we're dressed right."

We'd still never make it to the bridge. Reeves or Goldman would spot us in an instant." the cameraman responded.

"Maybe not the bridge, no. But I bet we could get into engineering or the hangar. Then as long as we keep our distance from anyone else we should be fine." Sands said.

"That could work." her sound man said, nodding slowly, "But where do we get uniforms from?"

"Dave said that we're got engineers willing to talk to us. I think we should ask them to help us with a piece on what day to day life aboard a warship is like and get them to show us some of the more mundane parts of the ship." Sands said and her cameraman smiled.

"You mean like the laundry?" he said.

"Like the laundry." Sands replied.

Reeves looked around the *Enigma's* hangar when he disembarked from the skip that had brought him and the rest of his delegation to the alien constructed spacecraft.

"I bet Adam wishes he was here." Thundercloud commented as he followed Reeves from the skip.

"Yes, but at least he's been able to go aboard an alien ship before. That Sissusk light cruiser." Reeves replied, recalling the first opportunity that the Commonwealth had to go aboard an alien vessel.

"There's not much to tell really." Willis added as he too disembarked from the skip with Hayes.

"Do you know how many people have tried to find an excuse to get aboard this ship since it was found?" she said, "Thousands. They all wanted to come aboard just to see it. Mind you a fair few wanted control of it for themselves which is why most of them were just told 'no'."

"So this is your first time aboard as well?" Reeves asked and Hayes nodded. Before she could respond though Willis noticed the old man's granddaughter entering the hangar.

"I think this is our welcome." he commented.

"Miss Dalton." Reeves said to her.

"Hello captain." she replied, smiling, "My grandfather and Captain Schaar send their greetings and welcome you aboard the *Enigma*. If you'd like to come with me I'll show you to the bridge. The crewman there will show the rest of your party to a lounge where they can wait while we travel to Haven." and she looked towards a nearby crewman who had followed her into the hangar.

"Captain you should take a couple of men with you." Willis said and Reeves smiled at him.

"I think I'll be just fine major." he said and then he and the old man's granddaughter walked away together.

Reeves paid close attention to the design of the *Enigma* as he was shown through its corridors. When the Genex had found the light cruiser it had been abandoned for centuries and restoring it had been a major task. Unfortunately this meant that some features that Reeves would have expected to see aboard an alien ship, such as signage in a non-human alphabet were missing. Had he not known better, Reeves could have easily believed that it had been constructed in a human shipyard.

That perception changed though when the door to the bridge itself opened and he was shown inside. Here he found himself standing at the rear of a raised platform that extended midway across the bridge. There were three chairs on this platform, one occupied by the old man and the second by a woman Reeves recognised from video communication he had had with the *Enigma* but did not know. Surrounding the platform were the other bridge duty stations, looked down on by what Reeves took to be the command stations.

"Ah Captain Reeves." the old man said as he turned around in his chair while the woman got to her feet,

"This is Captain Leader Anna Schaar, commanding officer of the *Enigma*."

"Thanks to the admiral's influence." Schaar added and she and the old man smiled at one another.

"Do you need me for anything else grandfather?" the old man's granddaughter asked.

"No my dear, you may go now. Why don't you go and keep our other guests company?" the old man answered, "Captain Reeves, please do sit down."

"Of course grandfather." she replied before she exited the bridge again.

"So what do you think of the *Enigma* captain?" Schaar asked as Reeves walked to the vacant seat beside the old man's and sat down.

"The architecture of the bridge is interesting to say the least." Reeves answered as he looked down at a nearby crewman who kept his head bowed, his deferential stance suggesting that he was a member of the Worker caste, "The team we put aboard a Sissusk light cruiser described something even more extreme in their bridge though. There it looked like the most senior commanding officers looked down on their bridge crew from a high platform."

"I kind of like the sound of that." Schaar commented as she took her seat again.

"Mind you from what I've heard from the crew it was the galley that needed most work to make it functional." the old man added, "Whatever alien species built this ship and the others found with it fed their crews with a variety of synthetic pastes dispensed by machine. Of course we had to change that before we could use them ourselves."

"Status?" Schaar said, looking towards her flight officers.

"Course laid in. Tachyon-ion drive ready. We can jump in one minute." one of them responded.

"Jump when ready lieutenant." Schaar ordered and the bridge crew began to work quickly, charging the *Enigma's* hull and building the shell of tachyons around the ship that would allow it to travel faster than light. As soon as the mass of tachyons reached a suitable level the *Enigma's* engines were fired and the light cruiser sped away from the other ships of the Commonwealth and Genex fleets towards Haven. Moving at hundreds of times the speed of light, the journey to the orbital space of the Genex colony world took barely a

minute instead of the hours it would have taken at sublight speed and Reeves saw a close up image of one of the space stations orbiting the planet on the screens all around the bridge.

"This is where we will meet with Secretary LeClair." the old man said.

"We've been informed that he is already aboard." Schaar added, "We'll dock directly and you and your party can go aboard."

"My granddaughter and I will join you and your men, captain." the old man continued, "Captain Schaar will remain aboard the *Enigma* and ensure that the ship is ready for a rapid departure should things go wrong."

"Hopefully that won't be necessary." Reeves commented and the old man smiled.

"Hopefully." he said.

"Captain, station traffic control is sending docking instructions." one of the bridge crew announced without looking up from his console.

"Helm take us in." Schaar ordered as the old man called up the details of where they were to dock.

"It looks like we're being guided to the command section instead of the regular docking ports. Security there will be tight." he said.

"I take it that's good?" Reeves asked.

"If the secretary is entering these talks in good faith, yes. Otherwise it could make getting out difficult if we're ambushed. There will be numerous security bulkheads that we will need to open one at a time." the old man answered and Reeves smiled.

"Why do I get the feeling that you have a way of doing that?" he said and the old man smiled back at him.

"Indeed I do captain. Before Secretary LeClair was evacuated from Sanctuary I brought our forces here under my command and cleared this system of the machines. During that time I made sure to have a number of computer access codes generated that would give me access to any facility on or orbiting Haven that I desired. Normally I would expect Secretary LeClair to have had his personal security unit search for such things and remove them but given the current situation I doubt that that has been foremost on his mind." the old man explained.

"Of course I have copies of those codes." Schaar added, "If you need to evacuate then I'll make sure that reinforcements are sent aboard from the *Enigma*."

"Docking clamps extending captain." the *Enigma*'s helmsman then announced as the light cruiser closed in on the space station and a set of clamps began to unfold and open to grab hold of the ship. Once this was achieved the ship was pulled in closer so that one of its air locks could be connected to the station and allow people to pass from one to the other.

"Captain Reeves, I think we should be going." the old man said.

"Of course." Reeves replied and after he stood up he helped the old man to his feet as well.

"Thank you captain." the old man said before looking at Schaar and adding, "Anna do be a dear and let my granddaughter know which airlock she should take the rest of our party to. Then place the ship on high alert without letting station control know. I'd rather we not have to deal with any intruders regardless of how this meeting turns out."

"Of course admiral. If Captain Reeves agrees I'd like to deploy the rest of his men on stand by close to the air lock leading to the station along with a team of warriors. It'll position them in the best place to go aboard if you need help. I'll put our warriors on other access points to cover them as well, just in case someone attempts an EVA to get inside." Schaar said.

There was no formal welcome for the party going to meet Secretary LeClair when they went aboard the space station, instead there were just a pair of armed Genex warriors standing either side of a smaller man in a fleet uniform.

"Crewman worker," the old man said when he saw the rank markings on the man's sleeves and guessed his caste, "where is the secretary or his guards?"

"My apologies admiral leader." the man said, averting his eyes from the old man, "I was ordered to escort you to him."

"Then lead the way." the old man said sternly and the worker turned around and began to walk away while the two warriors stepped aside to allow the party from the *Enigma* to move between them, glaring intently at the marines as they passed by. Once the entire party had gone past the two warriors began to follow them, still focusing on the armed marines.

"Not overly welcoming are they?" Thundercloud commented as he glanced back at the warriors following them.

"I don't think that they are meant to be doctor. Mind you they aren't much as a show of strength either." Reeves responded.

"My men could certainly take them both out." Willis added, his voice loud enough for the warriors to overhear and both of them snarled.

"That's not saying much major." the old man's granddaughter said with a smile when she heard this, "I could kill them both before either managed to get off a shot and they probably know it."

"Now, now my dear. Those warriors are only doing their jobs." the old man told her.

"They don't have the brains for anything else." Hayes added.

As had been suggested when the Enigma had been directed to dock, the chamber where the delegation was going was only a short distance away and they soon reached the large doors that led to it. These slid open to reveal a chamber that was obviously meant for holding a significant number of people, far more than were currently in it. Although the compartment was located within the station for protection one wall was dominated by a massive screen that showed an image of the planet below to give the impression that it was a viewport on the outer hull. Two large tables had been set up in the room and Secretary LeClair sat at the end of the far one while a transparent barrier had been erected between them. This was obviously armoured and suggested that the Genex still considered the possibility that this meeting was a ruse to launch an assassination attempt on their leader's life. This barrier did not stretch all the way across the room though and there was enough room either side of it for someone to walk around. However, LeClair was not alone in the room and there were more Genex warriors on both sides of the barrier, all armed with rifles to provide him with added protection while either side of him at the end of the table sat Kane and Admiral Newsom.

"Well, well, Alex." Hayes said when she saw her old rival facing her across the room.

"Jennifer." Kane responded.

"Admiral," LeClair said, looking at the old man as the Commonwealth officers sat down at the table right in front of them and the squad of marines lined up along the wall behind them, "perhaps you could introduce our guests."

"Of course mister secretary." the old man responded, "Secretary LeClair it is my honour to introduce you to Captain Reeves of the Commonwealth Space Vessel *Warspite*. With him are his chief medical officer, Doctor James Thundercloud and marine Major Benjamin Willis. They have brought with them an offer for a lasting peace between us and the Commonwealth."

When the old man was finished Kane leant over to LeClair and whispered in his ear, prompting a nod from him.

"Commander Kane informs me that the woman with you is Jennifer Hayes, a former agent of yours who was responsible for the Commonwealth discovering our continued existence. Could you explain how she was able to get to be among the Commonwealth delegation admiral?" he said.

"She is my advisor on your society." Reeves said before the old man could answer, "When my ship's intelligence officer was captured by your forces Miss Hayes had also been taken into custody. The pair of them co-operated in their escape, Miss Hayes providing a way out of the facility they were being held in as well as transport off world while my intelligence officer guided her to us where she was able to claim asylum. The Commonwealth considers her a citizen now and she enjoys the same protections as the rest of my crew."

"A bold claim." Newsom said.

"Admiral perhaps you should hear out what Captain Reeves and his party have to offer before you start posturing." the old man said while he and his granddaughter walked around the barrier to sit down in a pair of seats that had been left vacant for them at the side of the other table.

"Yes, perhaps we should find out what the Commonwealth is offering." LeClair added, "Captain Reeves, please do begin."

"Secretary LeClair, the Commonwealth and the Genex are still formally at war. No treaty was ever signed nor any ceasefire declared by either side at the end of your failed revolt." Reeves said, watching as the Genex sat facing him all frowned at the mention of the war during which the Genex had failed in their attempt to overthrow the rest of humanity, "The Commonwealth is willing to enter into such a ceasefire and declare an end to the war. Given that a century has passed and all of the damage to the Commonwealth has long since been repaired we will not be seeking any form of reparations from you." Reeves said.

"How noble." LeClair commented.

"However," Reeves continued, "there is the matter of the continued threat of the Genex to the Commonwealth. Right now your empire stands on the brink of collapse and it would serve the Commonwealth well to see this happen. On the other hand the alien artificial intelligence that threatens you now may threaten us next if it is allowed to succeed here. Therefore, the Commonwealth is prepared to ally with you in your fight providing certain conditions are met."

"And what might these conditions be Captain Reeves?" Kane asked.

"Doctor Thundercloud, perhaps you should explain." Reeves said.

"Of course captain." Thundercloud said as he activated the tablet computer he had brought with him, "Is there a screen I can connect this to?" he added, looking around.

"I have a copy of your files here doctor." the old man said as he turned on his tablet and he connected it to the large wall screen across the room from where he sat and moments later diagrams of strands of DNA appeared, replacing the simulated view of Haven.

"These show the changes made to Genex DNA that differentiates them from ordinary humans."

Thundercloud said as everyone around the table looked at the screen, "The changes are embedded so

deeply in every cell of a Genex that they will also be passed on to any offspring they may have, thus giving rise to a new generation of genetically altered humans without the need for any further engineering. As I understand it the ability to carry out any further modifications were lost to the Genex when they were forced to evacuate Langley at the end of the war a hundred years ago. However, the Commonwealth has been able to produce this.” Thundercloud then looked at the old man and added, “Admiral, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course doctor.” the old man said and he scrolled to another image, replacing the one shown both on his tablet and the wall.

“That’s not DNA.” Newsom said.

“No, this is a retrovirus not too dissimilar to the one used to create the Genex in the first place. However, instead of being introduced to a fertilised embryo as that one was, this is introduced to the reproductive organs of the parents by injection. It has the effect of reversing the changes made in the human DNA, restoring them to normal.” Thundercloud said, “Any Genex treated with this would produce ordinary human offspring as long as the other parent wasn’t an untreated Genex.”

“Thank you doctor.” Reeves said, “Mister Secretary the Commonwealth is willing to give sanctuary to any of your people who agree to this treatment and if you are willing to mandate it then we are willing to continue to fight alongside you against the artificial intelligence that threatens you right now.”

“You would exterminate us.” Newsom said.

“How is it any different to what our ancestors intended to do if we’d won the war admiral?” Hayes responded, “We didn’t plan on genocide and we lacked the numbers to permanently enslave the rest of mankind.”

“I recommend you give the Commonwealth’s offer serious consideration Secretary LeClair.” the old man said, “We are on the verge of collapse. On the other hand the Commonwealth’s forces could offer us the chance of survival.”

“The senate would never agree.” Newsom said.

“And where is the senate right now admiral?” Kane asked, “Less than a quarter of them have made it here.”

“The current state of emergency also grants the secretary considerable executive power.” the old man pointed out.

“I still need to discuss this with my advisers.” Leclair said as he got to his feet, “Captain if you could wait here I will have refreshments sent for you.”

Kane and Newsom also got to their feet to accompany LeClair from the room, as did the old man. However, as the old man’s granddaughter began to stand up he placed a hand on her shoulder.

“No my dear.” he said to her quietly, “I think you should wait here with our guests.”

“Of course grandfather.” she replied, nodding before watching him leave the room with the other high ranking Genex.

“So what do you think the chances are?” Willis said, looking towards Captain Reeves.

“That they’ll agree to your terms or that they’ll try to poison us with the food that’s brought?” Hayes responded.

“Don’t worry, they would be fools to try and poison you. They couldn’t guarantee that you’d all consume it at the same time.” the old man’s granddaughter said, walking back around the armoured barrier and sitting on the side of the table near Reeves and his party. Then she looked towards the armed warriors who had remained in the room when their superiors had left, “They are more likely to try something more direct.”

“Then it’s a good job that we’ve got Major Willis’ marines to protect us.” Thundercloud replied.

Sands’ cameraman was still carrying his camera over his shoulder when they left the *Warspite*’s laundry rather than putting it away in the bag he had slung over his shoulder that he normally used to store and carry it in.

“I hope you got what you wanted.” one of the crewmen Sands had interviewed said as they were leaving and she smiled at him.

“Thanks, yes. I think you gave us a good look at how you have to live in space.” she said, “I think we can make our own way back to our quarters now.”

The crewman nodded back at her.

“Sure. Let me know if you have any more questions.” he said.

“I will.” Sands replied before the crewman walked away. Sands and her team walked in the opposite direction, heading towards their quarters, “Did you get them?” she whispered and her cameraman nodded.

“I think I managed to grab four.” he responded quietly but Sands said nothing in return as two more members of the *Warspite*’s crew appeared in the corridor ahead of them, instead waiting for them to pass by and disappear from view again.

“So one spare.” she said when she saw that the crewmen were no longer anywhere near the news team.

“Why do we need a spare?” the sound man asked, “Doesn’t taking more than we need mean it’s more likely that someone will notice that some of their uniforms are missing?”

“Because I couldn’t make out the sizes properly.” the cameraman said, “I got an extra one to give us a better chance of having one that fits.”

"We'll check them out as soon as we get to our quarters. If they're wrong we need to find a way of getting more." Sands said.

As soon as the team returned to their quarters the cameraman dropped his bag to the floor and Sands crouched down to open it while the cameraman carefully set his expensive camera down on his bunk.

"Okay, let's see what we've got here." Sands said as she took the stolen Commonwealth fleet uniforms from the bag. As she had requested these all belonged to enlisted personnel and the rank markings on them were all of relatively low rank, "Is this medical?" she said, holding up one of the shirts.

"I think so." the sound man replied.

"And it looks like it's your size Nick." Sands said, tossing the shirt at him and he held it up in front of himself to test the size.

"Looks good." he said before trying it on and confirming the size was indeed correct while Sands continued to go through the bag, pulling out three more shirts of various sizes and ranks.

"I don't think any of these will fit me properly." she said, "This one is about the right width but look at the length, it comes down to my knees."

"It's not my fault you're so damned short." her cameraman replied, "Look, just tuck the shirt in your pants and roll up the sleeves. I've seen plenty of crew with their sleeves rolled up."

"The pants look the same." Sands added as she took a matching pair of trousers from the bag.

"So what? As long as the waist size is right you'll be fine. Everyone tucks their pants into their boots anyway, you can just cut the legs down as much as you need to." the cameraman said.

"You sound like you're having second thoughts Sandra. This was your idea in the first place, remember?" the sound man added.

"Yeah and if we get caught then all three of us could be looking at prison for impersonating members of the military. Assuming they don't just shoot us out of hand as spies." the cameraman said and the sound man frowned and looked at him.

"Do you think Reeves would really have us shot? Isn't he supposed to be really religious? I thought those types opposed capital punishment." he said.

"You think a man who regularly sends people under his command to their deaths would worry about a few spies?" the cameraman asked.

"Shut up the pair of you." Sands said, "No-one is getting shot or sent to prison. We'll just sneak one of those cameras into a suitable spot and leave it there. Then we'll get the footage I really want."



## 17.

"It would be the end of our civilisation." Admiral Newsom said.

"Would it?" the old man added from the side of the office where he sat. Meanwhile Secretary LeClair sat behind his desk and Newsom sat opposite him. Finally Kane stood beside the old man, his eyes continually moving back and forth between looking at Newsom and the two warriors standing either side of the door into the office to provide security.

"Of course it would. No more workers, warriors, thinkers or leaders. Do you want to have to compete against our entire population for your position?" Newsom said.

"Worried you wouldn't make the grade admiral?" LeClair commented and Newsom glared at him.

"Don't tell me you're actually considering accepting the Commonwealth's terms." he said in surprise.

"No, of course I'm not. Their offer of a final ceasefire to formally end the war between us will be accepted, we're obviously in no position to be able to fight the Commonwealth as well as these machines but I will not order our people to abandon our birthright." LeClair responded and Newsom smiled.

"I'm relieved to hear that mister secretary." he said.

"Then the Commonwealth will likely withdraw its forces and we will face the next machine attack alone." the old man pointed out.

"Perhaps not if they can be convinced that their offer is under consideration." LeClair said and he looked towards the old man, "Admiral you've had more contact with these people than I have, what would you say was the best way to manipulate them into staying here while we work on bolstering our forces?"

"The Commonwealth operates by building a consensus between its members, I'd suggest exploiting that" the old man answered, "From what was said in front of them they know that you have considerable power to rule by direct edict but none of them have any idea of the limits of this power. We can simply tell them that you think there could be resistance to an emergency executive order and want the backing of the senate. That should give us several days in which we can even make an honest effort to gather as many surviving senators as possible while also gathering intelligence on what forces the machines have remaining after their failed attack on Haven and how they are deployed."

"While the Commonwealth protects Haven." Newsom added, smiling and nodding his head slowly.

"It would help if I could present the Commonwealth with some preliminary data about our senators." the old man said, "I set up a unit to try and locate specific high ranking officials, did that continue operating after I left on the *Enigma*?"

"Yes, I took over when I made it here from Sanctuary. The information was passed from intelligence to fleet command. I wanted to make sure that we could easily check on any ships claiming to be carrying VIPs if they made it here alone." Kane told him.

"Very wise commander. Mister secretary if is okay with you I will go and review these. The more factual data I can present to our guests the more believable the lies will be," the old man said and he reached up a hand for Kane to help him to his feet.

"Of course admiral." LeClair said.

"I should go as well. I'd like to check the latest intelligence reports, there may already be something we can use." Kane added.

"Yes commander, go. Admiral Newsom and I will discuss options for our next move." LeClair said.

Kane and the old man split up when they left the office, the warriors on guard outside watching as they walked in opposite directions.

When he reached the turning in the corridor that would take him to the intelligence service's offices aboard the space station Kane did not take it. Instead he carried on along the corridor until he reached a barracks currently occupied by a force of marines who were already armed with personal defence weapons and wearing body armour.

"Is it time commander?" the leader of the marines asked when Kane entered the room.

"Yes captain. The admiral sends his compliments." Kane responded and as soon as he said this the marines jumped to their feet with their weapons in their hands. Kane then stepped aside to allow the marines to leave, hurrying from the barracks and lifting their weapons into a ready position.

As he watched them head in the direction of the office being used by Secretary LeClair, Kane took out his compact tablet that was interfaced with the station's communication system and switched it to its text messaging mode, typing and sending a simple message.

ADMIRAL, THEY ARE ON THEIR WAY.

The guards outside LeClair's office raised their weapons as soon as the marines came charging around the corner, the group now clustered together behind a pair of their number holding armoured shields up in front of them.

“Stop right there!” one of them yelled but the marine refused and instead those behind the shield carriers opened fire with sustained bursts of automatic fire until they saw both guards fall.

Inside the office LeClair, Newsom and the two other guards heard the gunfire and the guards drew the automatic pistols concealed beneath their jackets, rushing across the room to take up positions either side of the door. At the same time LeClair reached for his panic button, pressing it to trigger an alarm as well as sealing the armoured door shut.

“They won’t get in.” he said before he brought up the feed from a security camera in the corridor outside to get a better idea of what was happening. When he saw the live feed though he immediately looked at Admiral Newsom, “Admiral aren’t those some of your marines?” he said as Newsom looked at the footage open mouthed.

“This can’t be. I never ordered this.” he said.

“You assured me that all of the marines aboard this station were loyal to you admiral.” LeClair reminded him as he watched the marines outside the door fit a small explosive charge to it before standing back and taking cover behind their shields.

The charge was not powerful enough to destroy the entire door, but that was not its purpose. Instead the charge was just designed to destroy the locking mechanism. As soon as the charge went off the marines moved forwards and two of them now fixed hand holds to the door so that two of them could drag it open. As soon as they began to do this though the guards inside the office opened fire with their pistols, using rapid bursts to try and persuade the marines to retreat away from the doorway. However, the combination of the armoured shields as well as their own body armour meant that the pistol rounds posed little threat. Only one of the marines fell when a round struck his leg where there was no armour and two others immediately began to drag him away.

In response to this attack the marines returned fire with their personal defence weapons. These fired the same calibre rounds used by the guards’ pistols but the weapons held far more of them and the marines could afford to fire sustained bursts through the gap in the doorway. This enabled them to score repeated hits on the guards and even when the shots struck the armoured vests they wore, enough rounds could hit in a close enough group to punch a hole through and one of the guards quickly fell to the floor with blood pouring out through a hole in his armour.

The guard’s gun dropped to the floor as well and slid across it towards Admiral Newsom. Seeing this he dived towards it, hoping to retrieve the weapon with the intention of using it as a last ditch defence against the marines outside. However, when LeClair saw this he instead believed that the admiral would turn the gun on him and he leapt to his feet and threw himself over the desk to intercept Newsom before he could gain control of it.

“Help me!” he called out to the remaining guard as he and Newsom struggled for control of the pistol.

“I’m not your enemy!” Newsom exclaimed but LeClair refused to acknowledge his words and moments later the warrior caste guard struck Newsom from behind with the butt of his pistol, not risking shooting him while Secretary LeClair was so close to him.

In withdrawing from the doorway though the warrior had left the way open for the marines outside and one of them was able to take up a firing position in the gap that allowed him to empty his magazine into the back of the guard.

“Out!” the marine yelled as instead of reloading his personal defence weapon he leapt sideways so that another marine could take his place just as Newsom was able to push LeClair away from him and the marine fired a single shot at the horrified Secretary of the Genex Empire that hit him right between his eyes.

“Target is down. Target is down.” the marine said as he jumped through the partially open doorway. Lowering his weapon he dashed towards Admiral Newsom and reached down to help him up.

“Are you injured sir?” the lieutenant in charge of the marine strike team asked as he entered the room behind the warrior.

“What the hell are you playing at lieutenant” Newsom demanded as he got to his feet, “I’ve met workers with more sense than you have. Do you want to see us all reduced to drones?”

“Sir I don’t understand, we were following your orders.” the lieutenant said.

“I never ordered this!” Newsom snapped.

“But Commander Kane-” the lieutenant began and Newsom snarled.

“Kane!” he hissed. Then he began to move towards the doorway, “Come on, Kane has forced our hand and now we need to move faster than whoever he is working for.”

In the space station’s command centre a worker looked up from her console when it showed a security alert. “Commander we have a security alert from the secretary’s office.” she said and the watch officer immediately turned towards her.

“Check the cameras petty officer, I want to know what’s going on and alert our marines.” he ordered.

“Sir it appears that marines are attacking the secretary’s office.” the worker told him when she called up the camera feed.

"Commander," another voice said from across the room and the watch officer looked around to see the old man walking towards him, "who assigned your marine contingent to this station?"

"Admiral Newsom assigned them himself sir." the commander said.

"And Admiral Newsom is currently with Secretary LeClair. I think calling on more marines would be a bad idea commander."

"But the secretary-" the commander said.

"Needs our help, yes." the old man interrupted, "Now lock down the station so we can make sure that Admiral Newsom's mutiny cannot spread. Then find every member of the secretary's personal security detail available and have them surround his office. In the meantime I will contact my ship and bring its marine contingent aboard to deal with Newsom's traitors."

"Of course admiral." the commander replied and he looked at the worker again, "Petty officer do as the admiral said and start with that door right over there." he told her and he looked towards the main entrance to the command centre, knowing that there was an entire squad of marines assigned to the station by Admiral Newsom right outside.

"That sounded like gunfire." Willis said when he heard a series of 'pop' sounds just as he was about to take a bite of some of the food that had been delivered to the meeting chamber.

"It was." the old man's granddaughter agreed before an alarm began to sound and there were 'clunk' sounds from the doors as they were sealed. This caused the Commonwealth marine guards to begin to bring their weapons up, suspecting an ambush and the armed Genex warriors in the room did the same.

"Wait!" Reeves ordered, "Hold your fire."

"Captain if-" Willis began, nervously looking towards the Genex warriors just as one of them lifted a hand to his ear as he received a message over his communicator.

"Miss the secretary is under attack." he said to the old man's granddaughter, "We've been ordered to go and help him."

"Very well warrior. I'm sure that Captain Reeves' marines will be able to protect us but leave two of your sidearms with us anyway." she replied and she held out her hand.

"What's going on?" Reeves asked as two of the Genex warriors handed their sidearms and extra ammunition to the young woman.

"Obviously someone is trying to seize power. We need to make sure that the right person ends up in charge. I suggest you arm yourself captain, I see your marines also have sidearms they can provide you, Doctor Thundercloud and Major Willis with. I suspect that Jennifer Hayes will be more comfortable with one of our weapons though." the old man's granddaughter said as the Genex warriors hurried towards an exit, one of them radioing the command centre for the door to be unlocked for them.

"Thanks." Hayes said and she took one of the pistols from the younger woman, checking its chamber before she tucked some of the spare magazines into her pockets.

"Major Willis, Lieutenant Denning is signalling us from the *Enigma*." one of the marines said as he too received a signal through an earpiece.

"Communicator." Willis said and the marine unhooking the radio from his belt, disconnecting the earpiece as he handed it to the officer, "Willis here." he said into it.

"Major it's Lieutenant Denning, something's going on aboard the station, the Genex marines are heading aboard and Captain Schaar has recommended that we be ready to break you out." the marine officer aboard the *Enigma* responded.

"Okay, secure access to the *Enigma* for the ship's marines only but hold position for now. We aren't sure what's going on here and I don't want to risk you shooting at the wrong people." Willis said and he looked at Reeves who nodded in agreement with the marine officer's orders.

At the same time the old man's granddaughter took a phone from her own pocket and checked that it was connected to the station's communication system before she tried calling her grandfather, setting the phone to its speaker mode so that everyone present would be able to hear the conversation.

"Yes my dear?" his voice said a moment later.

"Grandfather the warriors in the meeting room have told us that the secretary is under attack and we've just heard from the Commonwealth marines aboard the *Enigma* that Captain Schaar is sending her marines aboard the station." his granddaughter said.

"Yes, the secretary's office is under attack by Admiral Newsom's marines. Don't worry about me though my dear, fortunately I had already left before the attack began. Now we need to contain the admiral's forces though." the old man said, "In the meantime I suggest that you get Captain Reeves and his men back to the *Enigma*. They'll be safer there and I doubt that the captain has any wish to get involved in our internal politics."

"Thank you admiral." Reeves said.

"We'll need the doors unlocking grandfather." the old man's granddaughter pointed out.

"Of course. I'll have the doors rigged to respond to your phone's network identification signal but be careful,

not all of the marines will have been caught in their barracks.” the old man said before there was a hammering sound in the background, “In fact some of them are far too close for comfort.”

“Grandfather I should come and help you.”

“No, get our guests back to the *Enigma* first. Our own marine contingent is already on its way to us and they are better armed than you are.” the old man said.

“Very well. I love you grandfather.” his granddaughter replied before she hung up the phone and turned towards Reeves, “Come with me, I’ll get you back to the ship.” she told him.

Although their mission had been intended to only require one door be forced open the marines that had assassinated Secretary LeClair had equipped themselves with a much larger number, each man in the team carrying at least three of the explosives. This meant that they were able to blast their way through the sealed bulkheads as they made their way back towards the barracks where the bulk of the marine forces remained. Admiral Newsom had sent word to other marine units aboard the space station that they were to try to seize control of key areas of the orbiting facility but with a lock down in effect the vast majority of them found themselves trapped in limited areas. Newsom hoped to change this by reaching the barracks and nearby armoury where he knew he could find enough men and weapons to take the station.

“Stand back.” one of the marines said as he planted a charge on the last of the armoured doors before the barracks and Newsom ducked behind the marines’ shields with the squad before the explosive went off. However, unlike the previous times this had been done no members of the squad then needed to move forwards to force the door open once its lock had been destroyed. Instead someone on the other side did this first and Newsom and the marines all raised their weapons.

“Friendly!” the marine officer who appeared through the widening gap called out, raising his hands as soon as he recognised the admiral.

“Stand down.” Denning ordered his men and the warriors all lowered their weapons.

“Captain what is your status?” Newsom asked the officer as he lowered his hands.

“We received your message to take the station admiral but we’ve been sealed in this section. The armoury is locked down as well so we can’t get into it.” the marine captain told him.

“That’s why we’re here captain. We still have charges left that can get us into the armoury. Then I want you and your men to arm yourselves with whatever weapons you can find. Then spread out, release any of our men trapped in other sections and detain all other crew members, especially Commander Alexander Kane of the State Intelligence Service. He’s the cause of this and I want to know who he’s working for. I suspect that old man is behind this but I need to be sure before I kill the wrong man and the real culprit escapes.”

Newsom said as he stepped through the now open doorway and began to make his way towards the nearby armoury.

“Of course sir. What about the Commonwealth troops that are aboard?” the captain asked and Newsom considered this for a moment. He was tempted to have them wiped out as well but he knew that it would take only a single signal to reach the Commonwealth fleet barely a light hour away for them to attack and despite the numerical advantage that the Genex fleet had over them, the damage caused would cripple Haven’s defences before another attack by the forces of the alien artificial intelligence.

“We will be continuing the policy intended for us by Secretary LeClair.” he said after careful consideration, “We need the Commonwealth delegation kept alive as well. Take no hostile action against them. Hopefully they are still sealed inside the conference room.”

“And if they aren’t still there admiral? What if they side with our enemies?” Denning asked.

“Then we will have no choice. Kill them all, but do it quickly and make sure you have proof of their aggression. It will strengthen our hand against them.”

“Stand back!” one of Denning’s squad then called out after fixing a pair of charges to the door of the nearby armoury. Although an explosion inside the armoury could trigger a chain reaction that would destroy the contents, the door itself was armoured to be able to contain such a blast and the second charge was needed to make sure that the locking mechanism was disabled.

Everyone in the corridor took cover, either retreating through open doorways or sheltering behind the available armoured shields before the charges were triggered simultaneously. The charges did exactly what they were supposed to do and the lock on the armoury door was destroyed. The weight of the door required two warriors to drag it open but as soon as it was it allowed all of the gathered marines to rush inside where they began to arm themselves.

Just as the old man had promised his granddaughter’s phone was able to open the armoured doors between the conference chamber and the docking port where the *Enigma* was berthed remotely as she approached them. With no way of knowing what might be on the other side when the doors opened she waited to do this for the *Warspite*’s marines to deploy to cover the doorways although she still led the way as they moved, darting almost silently from one corner to the next before beckoning for the rest of the group to follow her.

However, this changed when a door slid open and the sound of gunfire was heard from beyond it. "It came from that way." Hayes said, pointing towards a nearby junction and Willis waved his men forwards. The squad moved quickly to the corner and the sergeant in command peered around it. "Body." he said.

"Let me see." Thundercloud responded as the others followed the marines.

"A pilot." Hayes said when she looked around the corner to see a man in a flight suit sprawled out face down on the floor with blood pumping from a wound to his chest.

"That explains this." the old man's granddaughter added as she picked up a pistol from nearby, the empty bullet casings on the floor indicating that the weapon had been fired, "It'll be his issue sidearm."

Thundercloud crouched by the body and began to roll it over, at which point the man let out a gasp as his eyes opened and he stared up at Thundercloud.

"Captain this man is alive!" Thundercloud exclaimed, pressing his hand to the wound to the shot man's chest, "I need a field dressing, quickly."

Despite all wearing dress uniforms, the members of the marine squad still had several pouches for equipment on their belts and as well as extra ammunition for their weapons each man also carried a field dressing in one and the nearest marine handed his to the doctor, "Thank you. Hopefully this will do until we can get him to a proper medical facility."

Another burst of gunfire from close by then caused everyone other than Thundercloud to turn and point their weapons in the direction it had come from.

"Sounds like someone's putting up a fight." Willis commented.

"Yes, but who?" Reeves added before a woman came rushing around a corner ahead of them.

As soon as she saw the armed troops all pointing their weapons in her direction she flinched and let out a brief scream before she raised her hands above her head.

"Please don't shoot me!" she exclaimed, "I surrender."

"Who are you?" the old man's granddaughter called out to her.

"Jansen, lieutenant, thinker. Station technical department." the woman replied. Both the old man's granddaughter and Hayes had already guessed much of this from the woman's appearance and reaction. She lacked the physical stature of a warrior and although she could have passed as a leader at first glance her timid behaviour instead pointed towards either a thinker or a worker and a worker would be unlikely to hold a commission.

"Okay thinker Jansen, tell me what's going on here." the old man's granddaughter said.

"The marines, they're rounding everyone in the section up. I tried to get out but the doors are all sealed." Jansen told her before she frowned, "Wait, how did you get in here?"

Before anyone could answer the woman though there was the booming of a shotgun blast from around the corner and she was struck in her side, falling to the floor and screaming as she clutched at the wound. Moments later a Genex marine stepped into view and was just about to fire another blast at Jensen from close range with his shotgun when he became aware of the others in the corridor and he turned towards them.

"Contact!" he yelled before the old man's granddaughter fired her pistol and put all three rounds from the burst into the warrior's chest. Two of the relatively low velocity bullets were stopped by the lightweight body armour he wore as part of his obvious role in station security but the third was able to penetrate the armour and this single round passed right through his heart, killing him instantly.

The warrior was not alone though and three more warriors armed with personal defence weapons came charging around the corner as well. They immediately took what cover was offered by the contours of the walls and aimed their weapons towards the Commonwealth marines at the other end of the corridor. However, instead of opening fire immediately they hesitated, remembering their orders not to initiate hostilities with the Commonwealth party.

Neither the old man's granddaughter nor Hayes had any such hesitation though and both women fired their pistols down the corridor. Once the shooting had begun Reeves saw no reason for his men to hold back either and he called out an order to attack.

"Open fire!" he yelled as he too fired his pistol but the sounds of pistol fire were soon drowned out when the marines fired their rifles and the high velocity fire echoed down the corridor. Against the full powered seven millimetre rifle rounds the body armour worn by the Genex warriors was next to useless, especially at the relatively short range of the engagement and the bodies of all three men shuddered under repeated hits. The marines ceased fire when the warriors fell and the only sounds left in the corridor were the cries of Jansen.

"Someone see to her." Willis ordered, seeing that Thundercloud was still busy with the injured pilot and a pair of marines moved to the woman who was bleeding profusely from the shotgun wound. At the same time Willis and another pair of marines made their way to the corner that the warriors had appeared around to make sure that there were no further hostile forces coming from that way. Taking advantage of this the old man's granddaughter beckoned for Hayes to come with her,

“We should get their weapons.” she said, “I take it you know how to use a PDW?”

“Of course.” Hayes replied, frowning as if she was offended and the two women hurried down the corridor to pick up a pair of the personal defence weapons dropped by the warriors. Checking these they found that the weapons were fully loaded and appeared undamaged and they grabbed what extra ammunition they could. Each of the warriors was wearing a communication headset and as she was collecting ammunition for her newly acquired weapon Hayes saw that these were fitted with the standard issue camera that allowed their superiors to see everything that the warriors could. Knowing that these could still be sending footage to whoever was in command of these marines she ripped the headset from the dead man’s head and tossed it to the floor before stamping on it. Realising what Hayes was doing right away, the old man’s granddaughter copied this and between them they quickly destroyed all four of the cameras.

“I guess we’re involved in whatever’s going on now captain.” Thundercloud commented, glancing at Reeves who nodded back at him.

“Yes and I suspect that might not be a good thing.” he replied.

“Admiral you should see this.” Denning said and he handed a tablet to Newsom while around them marines were exiting the armoury with an assortment of weaponry.

“What is it?” Newsom asked and he looked at the tablet. This had already been set up to play back a video file that was obviously taken from the headset camera of a warrior.

“One of the security patrols caught near the air lock where the *Enigma* is docked captured this before we lost them.” Denning told him.

“Lost?” Newsom commented.

“Perhaps you should just watch it sir.” Denning replied and Newsom started the video.

He watched as the video showed the shotgun armed warrior shoot Jansen only to be fired on by the old man’s granddaughter. The camera continued to film even after the warrior had been killed and from the way he had fallen it was able to continue recording as the clearly identifiable Commonwealth marines opened fire on the other warriors

“So the Commonwealth troops fired on ours. Make sure that copies of these are kept safe and spread the word, Captain Reeves and his party are to be considered hostile. If they are encountered then they can be treated as any other target would be.” Newsom ordered as he handed the tablet back to his subordinate.

“Drop the weapon!” one of the Commonwealth marines guarding the air lock leading to the *Enigma* called out when the old man’s granddaughter rounded the final corner with a personal defence weapon carried openly. “It’s alright marine, she’s with us.” Willis responded when he followed the young woman out into the open and the marines on guard duty lowered their weapons.

“Sorry miss, I didn’t recognise you.” the marine guard said, looking at the old man’s granddaughter again.

“At least your men are smart enough not to just open fire on a target they can’t identify.” she said to Willis.

“Has anyone else tried to get aboard?” Willis asked and the marine shook his head.

“No major. You’re the first people we’ve seen since the Genex marines took off.” he said.

“What about Captain Schaar?” Reeves added.

“She’s still aboard sir. Probably on the bridge.” the marine answered.

“Captain we need to get these casualties to the *Enigma*’s infirmary.” Thundercloud said as the injured pilot and Jensen were also helped around the corner.

“Yes, take them.” Reeves replied before he looked at the old man’s granddaughter and added, “I think we should check in with the captain.”

“Agreed. Grandfather has probably kept her up to date with what’s happening.” the young woman said and she and Reeves headed for the air lock.

“Hey wait for me.” Hayes called out from behind them, rushing to catch up before they boarded the *Enigma* together.

Along with Willis, the trio made their way quickly to the *Enigma*’s bridge where Schaar was standing behind one of the bridge crew instead of sitting in her chair on the raised platform.

“Ah Captain Reeves, I’m glad you made it back here safely.” Schaar said when she saw him descending the steps leading from the back of the platform to the lower section of the bridge.

“Thank you. We ran into a little trouble but nothing Miss Dalton and my marines couldn’t handle.” he replied.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Hayes asked.

“Admiral Newsom’s marines have assassinated the secretary. The honour guard from the conference room made it to his office and found him and his security detail dead. The lock down is keeping most of his men trapped but some are obviously equipped with breaching charges.” Schaar explained.

“How many marines does he have?” Hayes added.

“There were about two hundred and fifty in total when this began although he’s lost about forty, including the squad stationed outside the command centre.” Schaar said, “Against that we’ve got about fifty of my marines and a similar number of the secretary’s personal security detail.”

“What about the rest of the crew?” Reeves asked.

“This isn’t a Commonwealth facility like the *Warspite*.” Hayes said, “You may have arms lockers in key locations as a defence against boarding actions but to the Genex they are just a source of weapons for mutineers.”

“So you’ve got thousands of personnel you might be able to call on but no weapons to give them.” Willis commented, folding his arms. Then he looked at Reeves and added, “Captain our men could really help even things up. This Admiral Newsom would still have an advantage but not quite so overwhelming as he has now.”

“Used properly they could turn the tide.” the old man’s granddaughter said.

“You’ve already got a plan haven’t you?” Hayes asked and the younger woman smiled.

"Of course, don't you?" she replied.

"How about we get out of here and head back to the Commonwealth fleet. Then we forget all about fighting the machines and just look out for ourselves?" Hayes said.

"You'd risk sacrificing the entire Empire?" Schaar said in amazement and Hayes stared straight at her.

"After the way I've been cast aside and used by the old man? You bet I would." she said sternly.

"The Commonwealth has already accepted my grandfather's offer to settle our differences." the old man's granddaughter reminded Hayes.

"Yes and that's not a pledge I take lightly." Reeves added, "Major Willis I'm going to commit your platoon to helping put down this insurrection. You and the honour guard squad should equip yourselves appropriately."

"Yes captain." Willis said and a smile spread across his face, "What's our mission?"

"That will be up to Miss Dalton I think." Reeves told him and Hayes groaned.

Ignoring this the old man's granddaughter looked at Reeves and Willis before she began to explain her plan.

"Admiral Newsom obviously wants to replace LeClair as Secretary of the Empire. His men are loyal to him but unless he gets that position then there's nothing in this for them. My plan is straight forwards, we find Admiral Newsom and kill him. Then we offer an amnesty to his followers, otherwise we wipe them out while they're still trying to figure out who's in charge without him." she said.

"And if they do surrender? Will the amnesty be genuine?" Hayes asked.

"That will be up to the new secretary to decide." the young woman answered.

"Captain Schaar do you have communication with Admiral Dalton?" Reeves said and Schaar nodded.

"Yes, the hard line between the docking port and command centre has remained intact." she said.

"Then perhaps you'd like to let him know that I'm committing my troops to the fight and explain his granddaughter's plan to him." Reeves said.

Once the squad of Genex marines outside the command centre had been dealt with by troops sent from the *Enigma* their weapons had been used to arm a number of the leaders present, enabling the *Enigma's* marines to be sent to deal with other units of Newsom's troops at large while the bridge remained protected. However, the news that the just over thirty Commonwealth marines from the *Warspite* would also be made available came as welcome news to the old man.

"At last reports Admiral Newsom was using charges to force open doors between the marine barracks and the engineering section. I suspect he intends to try and take control of the reactors." the old man told Schaar after she had relayed the basics of his granddaughter's plan to him.

"That's quite some distance from the barracks." Schaar replied and the old man nodded.

"Yes, fortunately it ought to give Captain Reeves' men chance to get there first. Although Newsom is able to force his way through doors, each one slows him down. My granddaughter will be able to open the way for the Commonwealth troops to get into a position where they can ambush him before he gets to his destination. Tell them that I approve of the plan." he said before he shut off the channel.

"All according to your own plan admiral." Kane said softly from close by, looking around to make sure that none of the station's officers were close enough to overhear.

"Admiral we're receiving a tachyon signal from the *Armageddon*, one of our-" the duty officer announced suddenly from beside one of the communication consoles where he had been co-ordinating the actions of LeClair's remaining personal guards and the marines from the *Enigma*.

"Yes, I know the name of our dreadnoughts commander." the old man interrupted, "To be using a tachyon signal indicates that he has something important to say so what does the admiral want?"

"Admiral Braun is asking to speak with Admiral Newsom sir." the duty officer responded and the old man and Kane looked at one another.

"He could have given orders for the fleet to send reinforcements if he didn't tell them not to at regular intervals." Kane suggested and the old man turned back towards the duty officer.

"Commander have there been any signals sent to the *Armageddon* since the *Enigma* docked?" he asked and the duty officer looked down at the console beside him and its worker caste operator.

"A tachyon signal was sent just as you were docking sir. It didn't come through here though, it looks like it was sent directly from Admiral Newsom's office." he answered.

"He didn't mention anything about this to me sir." Kane said softly.

"Obviously he didn't trust you. Rightly as it happened but now this is most inconvenient. Even if it's just the crew of the *Armageddon* supporting Newsom's coup attempt, that's still two full companies of marines that they could deploy." the old man said.

"So what do we do?" Kane asked.

"We lie of course. With any luck we may just be able to turn this to our advantage as well." the old man responded and he looked back at the duty officer once more, "Commander give me a line to the *Armageddon*." he said.

"Yes admiral." the duty officer said and the old man looked at the command console he was sat at just as an image of a man in an admiral's uniform like his own appeared on one of the monitors.



"Where is Admiral Newsom?" the man demanded.

"Dead." the old man said simply and the man on the screen frowned, "Before you make any rash decisions admiral you should know that the late Admiral Newsom assassinated Secretary LeClair in his office. Although the secretary's security detail were too slow to prevent this they were fast enough to kill the admiral in retaliation when the marines that were supposed to support him failed to arrive as scheduled. We are currently in the process of rounding up the rest of his men so we can determine how far this conspiracy spread."

"If the secretary is dead then who is in command?" Braun said and the old man smiled at him.

"I am." he said, "Until enough senators can be convened to select a new secretary I am taking charge of this situation. I will be ordering my agents to investigate any signs of involvement with Newsom's plot. In the meantime the Sovereign will be enforcing a blockade of Haven to all our ships. I won't allow any conspirators here to escape into space or among the fleet to try and rescue them. Now what was it you wanted of Admiral Newsom?"

Braun hesitated for a moment, obviously trying to think up a convincing reason why he would be using a priority communication system to contact someone who had just been labelled a traitor.

"The admiral told me he was concerned about a Commonwealth plot to assassinate the secretary. I was told expect regular updates and instructed to fire on the Commonwealth fleet should I not hear from him." he said eventually.

"Obviously Newsom planned to pin the blame for assassinating Secretary LeClair. He did make his opinions clear when the secretary announced his intention to accept the Commonwealth's terms for peace." the old man replied, "Order the fleet to stand down admiral. Remain in position but recall all fighter and drone patrols. I do not want any rogue elements firing on the Commonwealth."

"Of course. Will there be anything more?" Braun said.

"Yes, just one thing. Given current events the Commonwealth delegation here is understandably nervous about their security. I may need to allow Commonwealth ships through the blockade to either reinforce or evacuate them. Make sure the fleet knows not to treat this as a hostile act admiral. We can't afford to be fighting the Commonwealth as well as the machines. This is Haven Station out." the old man told him before abruptly closing the channel.

"Do you think that will work?" Kane asked.

"Perhaps but we should work on getting some insurance against Admiral Braun deciding to chance a blockade that doesn't exist." the old man responded.

"What sort of insurance?"

"Why the Commonwealth of course, just as I told Admiral Braun. He might like his odds of taking out the *Sovereign* but I'm sure he'll think twice about challenging a squadron of Commonwealth warships. I'm going to need to speak with Captain Reeves again, oh and Commander Kane?"

"Yes admiral?"

"Remind me to have Admiral Braun killed when we're done here. He may cause us more problems down the line if we let him live." the old man said and Kane smiled.

"Of course admiral." he responded.

Reeves found that he missed being aboard the *Warspite* where he could call up a camera feed from any infantryman deployed from the cruiser. The *Enigma* had had a similar system installed when the Genex repaired the alien built ship but it was configured only for the feed from the Genex marines that it carried, not the troops he had brought with him. This meant that the only means for him to monitor the progress of his men was to listen to the regular reports being made via radio by Willis.

"You look unhappy." Hayes commented when she looked from her seat towards Reeves'.

"I'm just used to having far more information available to me. Aboard the *Warspite* I could have called up the feed from any marine's camera."

"So far they haven't encountered anything worth seeing, they're still heading for the reactor." Hayes pointed out before one of the bridge crew spoke up.

"Station control is calling captain. They're asking for Captain Reeves." he said and Schaar looked around at Reeves.

"I wasn't expecting a call." he told her.

"Worker, put control through for Captain Reeves." Schaar ordered and then she pointed to the arm of the chair he sat in, "Your monitor controls are there." she told him.

Looking down Reeves saw a set of switches labelled with functions for the small display mounted on the side of his chair and he pressed the one that would feed the communication system through to it. Almost immediately an image of the old man with Kane standing right behind him.

"Admiral Dalton, what can I do for you?" Reeves asked.

“Captain I must ask you a favour, I need you to bring the *Warspite* here.” the old man said.

“What for admiral? Secretary LeClair said that any Commonwealth ship approaching the planet would be considered a sign of aggression.” Reeves pointed out.

“Yes but with the secretary dead I am now in charge here. Of course Admiral Newsom would like to think that he is and I suspect that he has allies in our fleet, one of whom I have just told that I have permitted your vessel to come here to ensure your safety during this emergency. I believe that this will dissuade Newsom’s allies from coming here themselves to assist him.” the old man explained.

“And if it doesn’t then all those marines and soldiers aboard the *Warspite* would be a bonus wouldn’t they admiral?” Hayes commented as she listened in on the conversation.

“They would. However, I suspect that Admiral Braun would think twice about engaging the *Warspite*, or any other Commonwealth vessel for that matter. He knows how serious the consequences of that could be.” the old man replied.

“So we’ll be your deterrent.” Reeves commented, “Very well admiral, if I can have a channel to the *Warspite* I’ll order Commander Knight to bring the ship here.”

“Of course. Captain Schaar, please permit Captain Reeves access to the *Enigma*’s tachyon communications.” the old man said and Schaar nodded.

“Of course admiral.” she responded.

"Adam?" Knight said as he peered through the entrance to a maintenance crawlway in the *Warspite's* engineering section.

"Douglas, what brings you down here?" Bernard replied while he made his way to the end of the crawlway and looked out at the *Warspite's* first officer.

"I wanted to know how things looked down here." Knight told Bernard as he got out of the crawlway.

"Which you could have found out using the intercom. I know that's working." Bernard pointed out.

"Okay I admit it," Knight said, raising his hands, "just sitting on the bridge was getting dull. I really wonder how the captain tolerates it sometimes."

"Ah so that's why you've never applied for a command of your own." Bernard said with a smile and Knight smiled back at him.

"Damn, you found me out. Sometimes I do miss being an engineer, even if the *Warspite* is far more impressive than the *Heroic* ever was. Destroyers can be rather pokey." he said.

"Well you can set your engineer's mind at rest. All of the holes that that AI shot in us have been patched, even if some of the antenna connections are still questionable." Bernard said, "One thing my people have noticed though is that a few of the Brekken are taking a close interest in how things work. More than what our marines do. They aren't getting in the way or anything like that but if their countries are about to start joining the Commonwealth then I think a couple of them could be considering career changes."

"Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea. How would you feel about having a few of them shadow your repair teams?" Knight suggested but before Bernard could reply a voice called out towards the two men.

"Commander Knight?" one of the *Warspite's* engineers shouted.

"Yes ensign?" Knight responded.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman is on the intercom for you." the engineer told him.

"See, it works." Bernard commented.

"I'm coming." Knight said before he started to walk towards the nearest console where he activated the intercom, "Knight here." he said.

"Commander we've just received a message from Captain Reeves aboard the Enigma." Goldman told him.

"What did he say?" Knight asked.

"It looks like things are going crazy aboard that space station commander. There's been some sort of mutiny." Goldman said.

"A mutiny?" Knight repeated.

"Yes sir. A Genex admiral tried to stage a coup and now there's fighting all over the station. The captain is unharmed and he says he's safe aboard the Enigma but he wants the *Warspite* to rendezvous with him there." Goldman said.

"We were warned against that." Knight commented, "Are you sure that it's the captain and not a simulation?"

"Lieutenant Lucas is checking now for signs of manipulation but so far she says it looks good commander."

Goldman said, "Thomas already has a jump plotted and Admiral Winchester has cleared us to break formation."

Knight paused to think before he replied.

"Okay let's do it." he said, "But just in case this is a trap I want everyone at action stations while we jump and have an escape route plotted as well. If the Genex think they can just take us without a fight then I want to make sure they find out what a mistake that assumption is. I'll be with you in five minutes."

"Understood commander, we'll be ready to jump when you get here." Goldman said before she shut off the intercom from the bridge.

Knight returned to where Bernard was working before he left engineering so he could tell the cruiser's chief engineer what was happening.

"Something wrong upstairs?" Bernard commented when the first officer approached him.

"Not upstairs, no but there's something very wrong aboard the space station where the captain is and he's ordered us there." Knight told him.

"Run the blockade you mean?" Bernard said.

"Apparently we've been given permission. Goldman's running it by Admiral Winchester now but I'm on my way back up to the bridge. We'll be going to action stations just in case-" Knight began before an alarm sounded.

"Acton stations, all crew to action stations." Goldman's voice announced.

"Looks like they're starting without you." Bernard said and Knight nodded.

"I better go. Just make sure we're ready for a short FTL jump." Knight said as he started to turn to leave.

Returning to the *Warspite's* bridge Knight found the crew ready for their faster than light jump. The cruiser was already moving out of formation without the Genex seeming to react at all.

"All stations ready for FTL commander." Goldman said, "Fighters are crewed and ready if we need to scramble when we get to the station."

"I take our course is plotted." Knight said, sitting in his own chair rather than the captain's as he was entitled to do.

"Yes commander. We should come out about half a light second from the station." Thomas told him.

"Heading is locked into the helm and the hull is charged, we can go to FTL as soon as you give the word sir." Ash added.

"Commence jump lieutenant commander, the captain is waiting." Knight ordered and Ash immediately activated the *Warspite's* faster than light drive, propelling the heavy cruiser the millions of kilometres from its starting point in interplanetary space to less than two hundred thousand from Haven and the space station that orbited it in a matter of moments. Only a computer could make such a precise jump and so as soon as the shell of tachyons surrounding the *Warspite* was dispersed Goldman, Thomas and Ash all worked quickly to confirm that their location was exactly where they wanted to be.

"Looks like we're right on target commander." Thomas said, "Genex station is one hundred and forty thousand kilometres dead ahead." and then he looked at Ash and smiled, the helmsman nodding in response.

"What about Genex activity? Are they responding to our arrival?" Knight asked and he looked at Goldman.

"We're picking up several clusters of drones I think commander. There are also several ships in orbit of significant size." she answered.

"The energy output indicates that most are commercial vessels." Lucas added, "I am reading the carrier that our long range scans picked up as well but no escorts."

"She's a sitting duck." Thomas commented.

"We aren't here to start shooting." Knight said, "However, we also aren't here to take pointless risks. Weapons get a firing solution on that carrier without making it obvious. If the Genex do start any trouble I want to be ready for them."

"Commander we're being contacted." Goldman announced.

"The station?" Knight replied but Goldman shook her head, "No sir, it's the *Enigma*. She's docked with the station."

"Put her through." Knight ordered.

"*Warspite* this is Reeves." Reeve's voice said and Knight smiled.

"Captain this is Commander Knight. Are you safe?" Knight responded.

"Yes commander but there's a problem aboard the station." Reeves said.

"So I heard. A mutiny."

"Exactly. Willis has taken our marine platoon to head off the mutineers' leader at the station reactor. I want you to stand by to provide further support. Have the rest of the marines and the Gurkhas ready to deploy. Other than that take no action unless fired on. Do you understand commander?" Reeves continued.

"Yes captain. What about you? Is your position secure?" Knight replied.

"Don't worry about me commander. Captain Schaar is ready to detach the *Enigma* from the station if it looks like the mutineers are heading this way. Right now Major Willis is the one in the firing line."

The sound of an explosion aboard the space station made the Commonwealth marines come to a sudden halt.

"Breaching charges?" Willis said, glancing at the old man's granddaughter and she nodded.

"Newsom and his troops must be close by." she replied, "I need you to engage them directly. Newsom will fall back to the rear and that will let me get around to hit him directly."

"Okay you heard the lady. Let's show these goons how the Commonwealth won the war." Willis told the marines and the old man's granddaughter frowned at him for a moment before she ran off down a side passage that she expected would enable her to circle around Newsom and his troops.

With their weapons held ready the Commonwealth marines continued to advance once more and they soon came to a junction where the rear elements of Newsom's force was still passing through a doorway they had forced open. The Genex warriors saw the approaching Commonwealth marines and immediately turned towards them, but Willis and his men had caught them by surprise and they fired first with bursts of fire from their rifles,

The Genex threw themselves aside to take cover but not all of them were fast enough and several of them were cut down immediately. Willis' marines continued firing their rifles while a pair of machine gun teams moved to the front and joined in, firing longer bursts from their belt fed weapons that forced the Genex back. Upon hearing this fire Admiral Newsom turned to one of his officers.

"The old man's sent troops to head us off." he said.

"Sir those aren't our weapons." the marine officer replied, well familiar with the sounds produced by Genex issue small arms.

"Then that Captain Reeves must have fully allied himself with the old man. Captain deploy your men to deal with those Commonwealth marines, there's probably just a squad of them but they'll keep picking us off if we don't do something about them."

The other Genex leaders among their marines quickly began ordering their warriors into position, sending troops equipped with portable shields forwards to create cover for those that followed them. The first group that tried this moved too far and too fast though, charging down the corridor in the belief that they were facing a small and lightly armed honour guard. The first suggestion that they were dealing with something more than this was when the machine gun teams opened fire and they heard the continuous rattle of bullets bouncing off their heavy shields. However, already committed to their charge they continued their charge and some returned fire around the shields but to no effect.

"They have machine guns." one of the warriors reported and Newsom and the other leaders looked at one another when they heard this over their radios.

"That's more than an honour guard admiral." Denning said.

"Can we pull them back?" Newsom asked but another of the leaders who wore captain's markings on his uniform shook his head.

"No admiral, it's too late. We just need to hope they make it." he said.

The scale of the warriors' mistake became clear to them only when a Commonwealth marine appeared for a moment from around a corner to hurl something towards them.

"Grenade!" he yelled as the compact explosive flew over the heads of the Genex warriors to land just behind them before it exploded.

The Commonwealth marines were all able to retreat from the blast and fragments while the Genex were caught entirely within it, the two shields held in front of them were the only cover they had and they could not turn these towards the grenade without exposing themselves to fire from the Commonwealth marines and so they bore the full brunt of the explosion.

Now knowing that the Commonwealth marines in fact had significant firepower at their disposal the remaining Genex warriors stayed back, using their remaining portable shields to create small defensive positions at the junction they were firing from while their officers discussed how to break the stalemate.

"We need to send a squad around behind them." the captain suggested.

"How long will that take?" Newsom asked but before the captain could respond Dennings spoke up.

"We don't even know how many of them there are. A single squad could be walking into a trap." he said.

"The lieutenant is right. If we split our force we will only make ourselves weaker." another of the officers said before there was another explosion as one of the Commonwealth marines used a grenade launcher to send a fragmentation round over the shield line. This flew too far though and although some of the warriors were hit by fragments their armour was able to protect them and they quickly recovered.

While the Genex officers were discussing their strategy Willis was also trying to determine the best way to punch through the Genex line and he came to the conclusion that it was better to deploy an excess of firepower than not enough and he turned to one of the marines that had been remaining out of sight.

"Strickson," he said, "get that laser set up."

Man portable free-electron beam lasers were heavy shoulder fired weapons powered from a backpack mounted battery. Intended for use against armoured vehicles, their speed of light attack also gave them a secondary role of an anti-aircraft weapon but now Willis was more interested in the weapon's primary anti-armour function. A weapon capable of burning through a near unlimited amount of armour if it could be held on target long enough would certainly be able to pierce the shields being carried by the Genex troops.

The drawback of the laser was its need to be held on target long enough to burn through a target and this was why such weapons had never entirely replaced projectiles or missiles. In order to give Strickson the time he needed to do this the two marine machine gunners linked fresh belts to the ones already in their weapons and waited until he indicated that he was prepared.

"Go." Willis ordered and the machine gunners opened fire, spraying bullets in sustained bursts along the corridor while Strickson knelt down and aimed the laser around the corner. Using the weapon's optical sight he lined this up on one of the transparent vision blocks set into the shield he was targeting, knowing that this would be weaker than the rest of the composite structure. The warrior crouched behind this shield saw the weapon being aimed at him and immediately turned his head and closed his eyes, knowing that the intense light would blind him long before it could burn a hole in the shield.

"Laser!" he called out but the weight of fire from the machine gunners made shooting at Strickson impossible before he fired the heavy weapon.

The beam struck the vision block just as Strickson intended and he held it in place as he watched this darken before it finally cracked as the beam burned through it. This was immediately accompanied by several simultaneous screams from behind the shield, the warrior holding the shield died silently as the laser burned through his helmet and skull in less time that took for him to draw in the breath needed but other warriors behind him were hit in areas not immediately fatal as the beam continued burning through one man after another.

As the warrior clutching the shield collapsed he dragged it down with him and this created a gap in the Genex defences that the two machine gunners immediately targeted with more fire. This gap did not last long though as another shield bearing warrior slid across to close it and at the same time another of them tossed a vapour grenade down the corridor. Similar to a smoke grenade, this produced a much finer cloud over a sustained period of time that would not noticeably block a person's vision but it would refract significant energy from beam weapons.

"Damn it!" Strickson exclaimed as he retreated.

"What's wrong?" Willis asked.

"One of them was lucky enough to be carrying a vapour grenade sir. I may as well shine a flash light down that corridor as fire a laser, it'd do about as much good." Strickson told him.

"With any luck we won't need to do anything other than keep these guys pinned down anyway. That's assuming that that little lady is as good as she claims to be." Willis replied.

With her phone allowing her to open any of the sealed doors in her path, the old man's granddaughter used the sounds of gunfire to help her navigate as she was circling around Newsom's forces. Hearing voices from around a corner ahead of her she paused to listen, trying to identify Newsom's voice among them and she smiled when she heard it. Holding her personal defence weapon to her shoulder just in case Newsom or one of his warriors was right around the corner just a few metres in front of her she crept forwards until she reached the corner itself. From here she could tell that Newsom was several metres away and from the other voices she could hear there were at least three others with him.

This posed a problem for the old man's granddaughter. Her only ranged weapons fired pistol calibre rounds and although there was a significant chance that Newsom would not be wearing significant body armour he was probably accompanied by marine officers who would be, obviously separating Newsom from the others would vastly increase her chances of successfully killing him and then escaping with her own life. The other alternative was to get much closer. Although the marine officers would likely be proficient in hand to hand combat the old man's granddaughter suspected that the intensive training she had been given since childhood would give her a definite advantage if she was within arms' reach of her target. Unfortunately there was no way for her to get that close without going down the corridor where she would be highly visible. This meant that she instead had to find a way of getting Newsom and the other leaders to come closer to her.

Turning back to the phone she had been using to control the doors the old man's granddaughter brought up a list of all those nearby. As she had expected there was another door not far away that was located between Newsom's group and the reactor section they were trying to reach and if her estimation of where they were standing was correct then none of them would be able to see it.

"Let's see how you'd react being surrounded admiral." she said to herself softly as she ordered the door to open.

Even with the sounds of gunfire coming from the other direction Newsom and the marine officers around him heard the sound of the door's motors as it opened, followed by the 'thunk' as it closed again and turning towards the source of the sound their raised their weapons in expectation of another group of hostile troops appearing.

"Get back!" Denning hissed.

"They must have sent a second group ahead of us." another added as the group began to retreat, one of them ordering a squad of warriors to fall back from engaging Willis and his marines to support them.

From her hiding place around the corner the old man's granddaughter heard the sound of Newsom and the armoured marine officers getting closer and she slid her phone back into her pocket before drawing a narrow blade she had concealed under her jacket, holding it in one hand and her personal defence weapon in the other.

The first person to appear around the corner was one of the marine officers who like the others with him was moving backwards so he could keep the far end of the corridor covered with his rifle and his eyes widened in surprise when he looked to his side and saw the old man's granddaughter standing there aiming a gun at him. She did not attack with the personal defence weapon though, instead while the officer's attention was focused on the muzzle of that weapon struck quickly and silently using the blade in her other hand. Aiming this upwards she thrust tip of the knife in under the officer's jaw to stab him in the throat and twisted it to widen the hole as she pulled it back.

The officer could do nothing but clutch at his throat in a vain effort to try and stem the bleeding but there was no hiding his collapse from the other officers with him and they all turned towards the old man's granddaughter. Before any of them could take aim with their rifles though she fired her personal defence weapon on fully automatic, emptying the rapid firing weapon into them in less than two seconds. Four of the officers were hit during this hail of bullets but only two fell dead, the others protected by the body armour they wore. Both men were sufficiently startled by being repeatedly shot that they could not return fire in time to prevent the old man's granddaughter from diving between them and slashing at one with her knife. Aiming for the inside of the officer's thigh she pushed the blade deep enough to open the artery while also cutting

through enough muscle tissue that he immediately collapsed on the spot. At the same time she lashed out with her foot to kick the other man in the side of his knee, bringing him to the floor screaming in pain as well. There was the sudden sharp 'crack' of rifle fire as one of the two remaining uninjured officers attempted to shoot the old man's granddaughter but she had moved too quickly and the bullets just struck the wall behind where she had been a moment earlier. The two armoured marine officers were now positioned between the old man's granddaughter and Newsom and she knew that he was likely to try and keep this the case. Drawing her pistol she dived at one of the marine officers, slamming into him so that he could not aim his rifle towards her while at the same time she fired a burst from her pistol at the other man. All three rounds hit the officer's armoured chest plate and were deflected harmlessly and there was not enough time for the old man's granddaughter to fire again as she and the first officer both fell to the floor with her landing on top of him. This gave Newsom a clear line of fire and he pointed his pistol down at her but before he could pull the trigger she rolled over and kicked the weapon from his hand at the same time as she raised her own gun. However, just as she fired the officer she had tried to shoot just moments before stepped into her line of fire and again he was hit by the rapid burst from the pistol. This time though one of the bullets only clipped the edge of his body armour and it pierced his shoulder, causing him to let go of his rifle as he staggered backwards.

Quickly slitting the throat of the officer she was on top of, the old man's granddaughter leapt back to her feet before Newsom could recover his pistol and she shot him in the leg. As Newsom fell to the floor the old man's granddaughter looked around her, checking that the marine officers she had left injured but alive were not about to launch any sort of attack. Only the man whose knee she had broken with a kick was doing anything other than focusing on their own wounds, reaching for a rifle that had fallen close by but just as he was about to grab hold of it she stepped on the weapon.

"I'm sorry but I can't let you have that." she said as he looked up and she pointed her pistol directly at him before shooting him in the forehead.

The old man's granddaughter then turned her attention back to Newsom and calmly walked towards him, planning to use her phone to put him in touch with her grandfather before she delivered the killing blow but this changed when she heard the sound of footfalls from behind her as the Genex marines summoned to cover the door she had opened arrived.

"Help me!" Newsom called out when he heard these footsteps as well and the old man's granddaughter knew that she had only seconds before she was facing a squad of warriors.

"Sorry admiral, I had hoped to give you one last chance to ask my grandfather for forgiveness." she said and he scowled at her.

"Forgiveness? Nev-" he began before the old man's granddaughter put a burst of pistol fire into his chest. Then taking one last look behind her she started to run just as the warriors appeared at the far end of the corridor.

Willis first noticed that something had changed when the Genex marines at the junction at the end of the corridor began to fall back. Rather than heading in the direction he had been told the reactor section was in though, they were retreating in the opposite direction.

"Captain Reeves there's something odd going on here. Those Genex marines seem to have given up on the reactor." he said into his radio.

"Major it looks like Miss Dalton has achieved her mission. Admiral Newsom is dead and Admiral Dalton's people are trying to get his remaining marines to surrender." Reeves responded from the Enigma.

"Should we pursue?" Willis asked.

"No, hold your position until Miss Dalton can get back to you. If any hold outs try decide it's still in their interests to try and seize the station reactor then you'll have to hold them off. As soon as the station can be declared secure though I want us all back aboard the *Warspite*." Reeves told him.

"Copy that captain, I don't like being caught in someone else's civil war." Willis replied before he closed the channel.

"It looks like it's working admiral." Kane told the old man as more reports came in from around the station of marines previously loyal to Admiral Newsom surrendering.

"Then I think it's time to complete the transition of power." the old man replied and he looked towards the duty officer, "Commander inform the secretary's emergency council and all planetary and fleet commands that Secretary LeClair has been assassinated on the orders of Admiral Newsom and that I am assuming his position." he ordered.

"Yes admiral – err, yes mister secretary." the duty officer replied before he began giving orders to the communication technicians.

"General Ellis may cause trouble." Kane commented, "I'm pretty sure he was planning his own coup."

"Then I'm sure we can arrange an accident for him as well as Admiral Braun. In the meantime though we are going to need to gather all the senators we can to confirm my position." the old man said.

“Do you think any of them will try to challenge you?” Kane asked and the old man smiled at him.  
“Commander Kane do you really think I don’t have enough dirt on our senate to affect the outcome of this vote? Trust me, I’ve been preparing for this moment for more than forty years, you are a newcomer.” he said.  
“I suppose I should have known.” Kane said.  
“Yes you should. I’ll expect more of you once I appoint you minister of security. Play your cards right Alexander and in a few decades you could be the one manipulating the vote for secretary.” the old man added as he got to his feet.  
“Where are you going?” Kane asked.  
“We are going back to the *Enigma*. Captain Reeves is there and now that I have taken control of the empire I am going to need his help to save as many of its people as possible.”



"Alex, I should have known you'd be sucking up to the old man." Hayes said when Kane entered the bridge along with the old man, his granddaughter and Willis.

"Watch it Jennifer, you're addressing the new minister of security." Kane replied with a smile.

"Minister of security? You've got to be kidding." Hayes said.

"Alexander Kane has been most useful to me since your fall from grace." the old man said, "He and his wife."

"What's his wife got to do with this?" Hayes asked.

"She's a doctor." the old man's granddaughter pointed out, "When grandfather recruited Alex he recruited her as well to help with the gene treatments."

"And most useful she has been as well." the old man added, "Now if you don't mind I'd like to get down to business, more than a billion lives are at stake."

Had they been aboard the *Warspite* then the bridge's central console could have been used while the old man explained his priorities moving forwards but the alien design of the Enigma lacked such a console and instead he, Reeves, Hayes, Willis and Kane had to withdraw to another compartment more akin to one of the *Warspite*'s briefing rooms. In here they all sat down in the front row of seats before the old man used his tablet to engage the large screen in front of them, calling up a representation of the territory of the Genex Empire.

"As I see it there are two systems that we should now focus our attention on." he said, "Haven is, thanks to the Commonwealth's intervention, secure and our forces on New Langley and Refuge are holding for the time being. This leaves Redoubt and Sanctuary."

"I thought Redoubt was overrun." Hayes commented.

"It is. Our last reports indicate that the population has been transported through one of the tachyon gates used by the machines and now they are now using Redoubt's industries to increase their numbers. On the other hand there are close to a billion people on Sanctuary who will soon also face whatever fate waits on the other side of those gates if we cannot stop it." the old man said.

"Did someone actually witness the gate at Redoubt working?" Reeves asked.

"Yes, a worker who operated a commercial ship in the system. He and his crew were able to remain hidden long enough to observe the gate working before they made their escape. Unfortunately the sensors aboard their ship were so basic that all we have are a few energy readings. The worker didn't even know what he'd seen." Kane answered.

"I'd still like all the information you have on it. I don't know anyone who knows more about tachyon physics than Douglas Knight." Reeves said and the old man nodded.

"Alexander, please make sure that Captain Reeves gets a copy of everything we have." he said.

"Of course mister secretary." Kane responded.

"Which system is your priority?" Hayes asked, looking at the display.

"Both." the old man answered, "If we can't take Sanctuary soon then we could lose the entire population like we lost Redoubt but if we take it then we have to hold the system against a counter attack."

"You also need to defend this system." Reeves commented, "That's going to put a lot of pressure on our combined fleet but if we reduce the size of the force sent to Sanctuary then we'll have more ships for the other systems."

"If we don't send a sizeable force to Sanctuary then we won't be able to stop the machines securing the planet." Kane said.

"From what the secretary has just said we don't need to. We can let the AI take control of the planet. All we need to do is prevent it from moving the population through the tachyon gate. Do we know exactly where the gate is located?" Reeves said.

"Yes, about two light hours from Sanctuary itself. Far enough out that none of the planetary defences can target it without being spotted." Kane told him and Reeves nodded.

"Then that's where we deploy. Blockade the gate and stop any traffic heading towards it. We may even be able to inflict enough damage to the gate to stop it working, then the machines would need to rebuild it before they can start shipping your people through it."

"During which time the bulk of our forces can attack Redoubt." the old man's granddaughter said and a smile spread across his face, "A very good idea captain."

"Will the gate just blow up if we go near it?" Willis said, "The others we've seen had a habit of doing that."

"Yes but all those had already served their purpose. It may be different with a gate the artificial intelligence still has a use for." Reeves said. Then he looked back towards the old man and added, "Of course I can't commit to joining any operation without Admiral Winchester's permission. Plus we'll need more than just my squadron to pull this off, without the rest of the Commonwealth task force this plan is worthless."

"Of course your admiral needs to be consulted. Can I leave that to you Captain Reeves?" the old man said and Reeves nodded.

"Of course. I'll speak to him while my people are taking a look at the data you have on the gate." Reeves said.

"We should send scoutships to Sanctuary and Redoubt to assess the enemy's strength at each as well." Kane added, "I'd suggest drones but I don't like the idea of any automated craft operating anywhere near the machines without a living operator ready to pull the plug if it gets corrupted."

"A sound decision Alexander." the old man said, "Now unless anyone has anything else to add I think we should call this meeting to an end, we have a lot to do."

With the *Warspite* also orbiting Haven close to the space station Reeves and his party were able to return to the cruiser directly aboard the same shuttle that had brought them to the *Enigma* and as soon as they docked they were met by Knight and Bernard.

"You wanted to see us captain?" Knight asked and Reeves smiled as he held up a tablet.

"Yes, I have something here you two may find interesting." he said.

"Specifications on that alien cruiser?" Bernard said hopefully.

"I'm afraid not. I'm not sure that Secretary Dalton would go for that. Every government is entitled to some secrets after all. However, the Genex were only too happy to provide us with the sensor readings taken of one of the machines' tachyon gates." Reeves told him and he handed the tablet to the engineer.

"You're kidding." Bernard replied as he took the device.

"No," Reeves said, shaking his head, "these come from a commercial ship that had only limited sensor capacity and there are no tachyon scans but it's more information than we've had up until now."

"I take it you want a full analysis to see if we can determine anything about the gates' operation?" Knight said.

"Exactly." Reeves said.

"Haven't the Genex had people look at this though?" Bernard said.

"Of course they will have." Hayes said as she walked up behind Reeves and hooked her arm under his, "I should think that at least twenty different analyst teams will have been given copies and each of their leaders will then have put more effort into making sure that none of their competitors get answers faster than they can. Trust me, without someone else breathing down their neck and demanding frequent updates none of them will make any progress."

"Do you have a timescale for how quickly you want answers captain?" Knight asked.

"The Genex are sending scouts to the two systems they want us to target. From what we know of their top speed that's about a three day round trip for the journey to Sanctuary and just over five for Redoubt. I expect we'll be going to Sanctuary so I'd like answers before the scouts can get back. If you need more people just ask." Reeves said.

"I'd say Goldman but she's got enough on her plate handling that journalist. Can you let us have Mori?" Knight said.

"Shaw might not be happy about losing her navigator but I think it's doable. If she complains I'll point out that it gives her more time to do wedding planning." Reeves replied and Bernard smiled.

"I'll sound the bridezilla alarm." he said.

"Very good. Now I need to check in with Admiral Winchester and I need input from Thomas first. If you need me I'll be on the bridge." Reeves said.

"And I'll take this to engineering." Bernard responded.

"And if no-one else needs me I'm heading back to my quarters, I'll see you there later captain sir." Hayes added, unlinking her arm and saluting him before she walked away.

Returning to the *Warspite's* bridge, Reeves walked directly to the central console.

"Commander Thomas could you join me? You too Lucas." he said as he accessed his messaging system through the console, bringing up a copy of the information about the tachyon gate on the tablet he had given to Knight and Bernard. This included the position of the gate relative to the planet Redoubt as they both orbited the star Alpha Indi.

"Our target?" Thomas asked as he and Lucas arrived at the console and Reeves nodded.

"No, this is Redoubt in the CD forty-five three-three-eight-three system. These scans were taken by a mining ship there, its crew were hiding in an asteroid belt and were able to observe this structure here." he said and he pointed to the gate.

"One of those giant tachyon gates?" Thomas said and Reeves nodded again.

"Yes. The miners managed to capture scans while it was operating as well." he replied.

"That's brilliant. We've never managed to see that before." Lucas said with a smile.

"Exactly. Unfortunately their scanners leave a lot to be desired. Commanders Knight and Bernard are studying the data now." Reeves said, "The machines have cleared the population of this system and are now using it as their industrial base. This is the proposed target of the bulk of our fleet."

"But not us?" Thomas commented.

"No. It is proposed that we instead go here." Reeves said and he called up a map of a second solar system, "This is Sanctuary in the Alpha Indi system." he added.

"The Genex capital?" Lucas said.

"You'll be able to act as a guide." Thomas commented.

"They didn't exactly give me a guided tour while I was there. It was more a case of being kept naked in a cell before having a feeding tube rammed down my throat." Lucas replied.

"From what I can gather it is home to more than eighty percent of the Genex population and given their apparent interest in collecting captives it's shaping up to be a priority target for the AI and its machines. They haven't secured the system yet though according to the latest reports so there's still time for us to act. What I need from the pair of you is an assessment of where is best to arrive in the system so we can block traffic between Sanctuary and the tachyon gate that's under construction here." Reeves said, pointing out the position of the incomplete tachyon gate on the map, "If the gate is still incomplete then we'll need to engage any construction vessels instead and escorts. On the other hand if it's operational then we need to stop any ships already on their way towards it and take it out of commission."

"Do we know if it will just self destruct like the others we've seen?" Thomas asked, "We'll need to keep our distance if it does."

"I'm afraid that's a question no-one has the answer to as of yet." Reeves said.

"Well since we know that the gates are just built from spacecraft it shouldn't be any more difficult to destroy than one of the ships." Lucas pointed out, "A few well placed missiles should do the trick"

"Or a single nuke." Thomas added, "What do we know about fleet deployment?"

"So far nothing. The Genex are sending scouts though so we should know more when they get back in three days." Reeves said.

"Come in." Bernard said when there was a knock at his office door while he and Knight studied the data collected by the Genex mining crew on the alien tachyon gate.

"You asked to see me?" Mori said as he entered the room and Knight nodded.

"Tell us what you think about this energy trace lieutenant." he said and he handed Mori a tablet that displayed a graph of the energy output of the gate recorded over a period of time that included the initial spike as well as the later increase.

"Is this power output?" Mori said, frowning when he noticed the label on the vertical axis, "What the hell uses this much power?"

"One of those alien tachyon gates." Bernard told him.

"We figured that since you run the sensors for Shaw's fighter you might be able to help us make sense of some of this." Knight added.

"I don't know commander. Even a dreadnought doesn't put out this much power when it engages its FTL drive." Mori said.

"There could have been a dozen dreadnoughts among the ships used to build that thing." Bernard said.

"But it's still not enough." Knight said, "The power output of the gate I mean. There's just no way that that thing generated enough tachyons to send any ships to wherever it is they're going."

"Couldn't this second increase mark the point where the gate began producing them?" Mori asked and he pointed to the steady increased level of power output towards the end of the graph.

"No, just going by the amount of power it takes to create tachyonic mass then the total mass required would need an energy source far beyond anything we can conceive of." Bernard answered.

"You'd have to harness the total energy output of a star at least and there's nothing we've seen about those gates that could do that."

"And yet here it is." Mori said, looking at the graph again, "Is this all there is? Do we have a tachyon scan?"

"No. These readings were captured by a commercial ship using passive EM sensors only. We've got the power output and magnetic resonance from the-

"Damn it!" Knight exclaimed suddenly as he leant over Bernard's desk mounted computer terminal and quickly brought up another set of readings, "It can't be that easy." he added.

"What can't?" Bernard asked.

"The gates, they don't need to generate a single tachyon to work. We've been looking at them wrong." Knight said.

"Then how do they accelerate ships to FTL?" Bernard said, "There's no way that they can store enough tachyonic mass to operate from an onboard supply."

"They don't need to. I don't think that the gates are the source of the tachyons used for transit at all, I think they're just receivers." Knight said, smiling and Mori frowned.

"Receivers?" he said.

"I think I know what you mean." Bernard said to Knight, "The tachyons are beamed in from wherever these gates lead to."

"Exactly." Knight responded, "The gates at our end are just focusing devices that channel the charged tachyons back to the point of origin. That initial spike was probably the gate sending a signal to the other end telling it to engage the stream of tachyons. Then it sits in a standby mode until it detects the incoming stream and focuses them back to the point of origin. There's probably a more permanent gate at the other end that keeps on looping the tachyons back as long as needed."

"But wait a minute." Mori said, "I can see how a tachyon signal could be sent towards a distant star system but sending this stream back and forth again means targeting an area just a few thousand metres across over a distance of hundreds, or probably thousands, of light years. We can't even manage that over five or ten, hell we can't even target a planet in a neighbouring system when we know the orbital mechanics."

"Yes, their ability to accurately target faster than light signals over vast distances is another example of the superior technology of the civilisation behind these gates." Knight said.

"I suppose that the good news is that for these gates to work properly they'd have to be one way. You can't have two streams of equally charged tachyons passing through one another, like charges repelling is just a basic universal law." Bernard commented and Knight nodded.

"Yes, I expect that the incoming stream will be in the form either a hollow cylinder or multiple parallel beams that the gates at our end then turn into the denser stream that carries ships passing through the gate." Knight said.

"Depending on how it's formed that shell of tachyons could make the gate difficult to destroy when it's active." Bernard said, "Just breaking the ring at one point may not be enough. If we're going to do it in one shot then we're probably going to need a nuke. The ring may be able to make up the slack for small gaps in intact areas."

"At least it gets the job over and done with quickly." Mori commented.

"Assuming we can get close enough to the gate to launch a nuke. I doubt that something that valuable would be left unguarded." Knight pointed out.

"It's possible that the gate could also act as its own protection." Bernard added, "We know that they are made from FTL capable spacecraft and that includes warships. If their weapons were left in place then they might be functional. Of course they wouldn't be able to fire through a tachyon shell, just like we can't use our weapons while travelling faster than light but the gate could be built to channel the tachyons around any weapon emplacements and leave them free to fire. Of course that assumes that the gate is active again. If not then any armament fitted to it could engage us."

"That could be a lot of defensive fire." Mori said, considering the number of space craft it would take to create one of the alien tachyon gates.

"Yes, a six thousand metre diameter gate would have a circumference of more than eighteen kilometres. You could fit more than twenty ships the size of the *Warspite* into that and that would give you two hundred turrets. Assuming that they all remained functional of course." Knight said.

"So an inactive gate could potentially shred any ship known to man in a single volley if it got too close. We're assuming that the gate wouldn't just self destruct of course. None of the ones we've seen so far have opened fire." Bernard said.

"The captain needs to know, just in case." Knight replied.

"Then let's go tell him." Bernard said.

Reeves was still stood by the central console with Thomas and Lucas plotting the most effective deployment for the squadron led by the *Warspite* when Knight, Bernard and Mori entered the bridge.

"We're not interrupting anything important I hope captain." Bernard said when he saw this.

"Admiral Winchester has given the go ahead for our squadron to take out the tachyon gate at Alpha Indi while the rest of the fleet joins the Genex in attacking their colony Redoubt." Reeves responded.

"Well what we've got to tell you could impact on that captain." Knight said.

"Commander Knight has figured out how the tachyon gates works." Mori added.

"You have? How?" Lucas asked.

"The gates aren't the source of the tachyon streams used to accelerate ships to faster than light speed." Knight began, "Instead they receive a stream of incoming tachyons and channel it back to where it came from. That's why the energy requirement compared to what the components parts of the gate were capable of producing never made sense. We were looking in the wrong place."

"We've also considered the possibility that the gates could be able to use the weapons of any ships that are part of the structure captain." Mori added.

"Yes, we've been considering that as well. That's why we were planning on a long range bombardment with gauss cannons. It's a static target so we should be able to engage it from an extreme range." Lucas replied.

"But if the gate is surrounded by a tachyon shell, incoming on the outside and looping through to head back out on the inside then those rounds are unlikely to be able to hit it." Knight said.

"No," Thomas agreed, "they're charged rounds so given the level of charge of the tachyons we'd be talking about either they'll be deflected away if they have the same charge or just dragged into the stream if it's

opposite.”

“What did you say?” Reeves asked.

“What, dragged into the stream? The residual magnetic charge on the projectiles from our gauss cannons could act like the hull of a ship moving at FTL. They’d just be flung along the stream.” Thomas said and Reeves smiled.

“That gives me an idea.” he said, “We can’t destroy the gate.”

“We can’t?” Lucas commented.

“No lieutenant. That gate is going to be our way of striking back at the aliens who created it. We’ll need the Genex’s help though.” Reeves said as he picked up an intercom handset and used it to connect to Hayes’ quarters, “Jennifer I need you to come to the bridge. I need to discuss something with you urgently.” he said when she answered.

“Okay I’m on my way.” she responded before hanging up.

“Captain what are you planning? You’re not seriously thinking of taking the *Warspite* through that gate are you?” Thomas asked.

“Captain we’ve no idea what’s on the other side of that gate, or even where it comes out. It would be a one way trip.” Knight added.

“Don’t worry, I’m not about to strand us thousands of light years from home.” Reeves said, “Just wait until Miss Hayes gets here, if I’m right then I think we could deal the aliens who are behind these gates a massive blow. We may even be able to prevent them from continuing their actions.”

When Hayes arrived on the bridge she walked straight over to the central console and smiled at the officers gathered there.

“So what do you need to know?” she said.

“What can you tell us about the Genex’s strategic arsenal?” Reeves said, “I assume the Genex maintained a nuclear stockpile.”

“Of course. I don’t how much of it is left right now but our military maintained a full range of nuclear weapons for all our forces as well as an interstellar ballistic missile force just like the Commonwealth and its members do, only smaller since we have far fewer colonies.” Hayes said.

“And these interstellar capable missiles, I take it that they used tachyon storage jars to generate the shell needed to travel faster than light.” Reeves said.

“That’s right. Putting particle inductors in a single use missile would be a waste of resources.” Hayes replied.

“What about targeting?” Reeves added.

“Variable. If you knew exactly what you wanted to hit, say a space station or planetary target then that could be programmed into the guidance system. Alternatively each warhead had enough intelligence to prioritise targets according to a list of criteria. That way you could saturate a heavily defended target with a dozen missiles without wasting any if the first one took it out. The rest would just pick a new one.”

“Okay, now my final questions. How many of these missiles were on Sanctuary when you left and what warheads were they carrying?” Reeves said.

“About fifteen thousand, each with an average of half a dozen five hundred megatonne independently targeted fusion warheads. Why?” Hayes said.

“So if that arsenal was fired towards the gate while it was active they could charge their casings and be carried along by the tachyon stream to the other end.” Reeves said.

“Good God, captain you can’t be serious.” Bernard said.

“The aliens who created these gates have been destroying civilisations for thousands of years judging by the wreck we found at Verne. Who knows how many billions of innocent beings have been abducted? I will rain the fires of hell down on them to put a stop to that.” Reeves said sternly.

“With ninety thousand nuclear warheads? That’s enough firepower to reduce a planet to rubble.” Lucas comment.

“If anyone has a problem with my plan then I’ll understand if they wish to register their objection with Admiral Winchester or Secretary Dalton, we’ll need both of them to sign off on it.” Reeves said, looking around at the other officers not only gathered around the central console but also sat elsewhere on the bridge, all of whom had turned towards the central console when they heard Reeves’ plan to launch the largest nuclear strike in human history. Then when there was no response from anyone he turned towards Goldman and added, “Lieutenant Commander Goldman I’m going to need a channel to Admiral Winchester.”

“Aye captain.” Goldman responded.

“The Genex taken from redoubt are probably at the other end of the tachyon stream.” Hayes pointed out as Goldman was establishing contact with Admiral Winchester aboard the *Sovereignty*.

“I know.” Reeves replied, nodding, “The problem is that there’s no way to know what is happening to them, let alone launch a rescue mission. I have two choices, launch an attack that could kill them all if they aren’t dead already or I can just destroy the gate at this end and let the aliens behind all this continue abducting the populations of entire empires.”

“That God of yours sure likes to put you in positions where there’s no easy answer doesn’t he?” Hayes said.

"You asked to see me Mister Secretary?" General Ellis asked as he was shown into the lounge where the old man sat surrounded by various advisers carrying computer tablets while his granddaughter stood behind him and armed warriors stood guard by every possible entry point.

"Ah yes general, do take a seat please." the old man told him, pointing to a vacant chair facing him.

"Of course mister secretary." Ellis said, walking across the room and sitting down where the old man had indicated.

"Now general I understand that you saw yourself as a potential successor to the unfortunate Secretary LeClair." the old man said. This was a polite of saying that he knew Ellis had been plotting a coup to overthrow LeClair.

"If I was called upon to take the role I would certainly have considered it, yes." Ellis answered, this being the closest to an admission that he would make.

"But now the question must be what you see your role as being under my administration. Does being on the secretary's staff still suit you, or would you rather pursue something else? I can certainly find more suitable work for you should your current role no longer satisfy you." the old man said. Once again this was a coded message, a warning that if Ellis valued his life he should forget about making any moves against the old man.

"I am a soldier mister secretary. I serve our civilian government." Ellis said.

"Even if it is led by a former admiral?" the old man's granddaughter commented.

"An interesting point my dear. Although my confirmation and swearing in is a foregone conclusion it still hasn't formally taken place." the old man added.

Ellis smiled for a moment before he answered.

"I think we can all agree that your career has demonstrated your ability to work with all areas of government. The investigations carried out by your agents must have given you a good working knowledge of most if not every department. I can think of no-one more qualified as secretary." he said and the old man smiled back at him.

"I'm so glad to hear that general." he said, "Now I'd like you to consider your resignation."

Ellis' eyes widened for a moment.

"My resignation?" he repeated.

"Oh don't worry, I'm not proposing to dispense with your services entirely. I'd like you to be my minister of war." the old man said and Ellis' expression lightened. This time there was no hesitation before he replied.

"It would be an honour mister secretary." he said, knowing that holding a cabinet position would make his own ascension to the office of secretary more likely.

"Excellent I-" the old man began before there was a knock at the door and another member of his staff entered the room, "Yes, what is it?" the old man asked the woman who had appeared.

"Minister Kane asked me to inform you that the Commonwealth has asked permission to send a delegation to meet with you mister secretary." she told him.

"Is this from Admiral Winchester?" the old man said.

"The request comes from the admiral yes, but the delegation will come from the cruiser *Warspite*." the woman said.

"Captain Reeves." the old man's granddaughter commented.

"I suppose it does make sense given that his ship is still in orbit instead of a light hour away but I suspect that there is more to this request to meet in person than mere convenience." the old man added, "Tell the Commonwealth that we would welcome their presence here."

## 21.

It was an unarmed shuttle that brought the delegation from the *Warspite* to the mansion and the old man's granddaughter shielded her face with her hand as it came into land in the grounds, kicking up a cloud of fine dirt. Reeves was the first to disembark from the shuttle, walking down the steps before Hayes appeared behind him. In turn she was followed by Knight, Bernard and Lucas and the group lined up behind Reeves. "Welcome to Haven captain. My grandfather is waiting for you." the old man's granddaughter said.

"Thank you. Lead the way." Reeves responded before she turned to lead them into the mansion.

"I was expecting more in the way of security." Bernard commented as the delegation followed the young woman towards the building and he noticed that there were no visible guards.

"Trust me commander, they're watching us." Hayes said as she looked around.

"My grandfather didn't think that a visible security presence was warranted. We are allies after all." the old man's granddaughter commented when she overheard this.

When they reached the doors to the mansion they were opened from the inside and only then did the delegation from the *Warspite* catch their first glimpse of uniformed warriors since touching down. These troops stood at attention as the delegation was led inside and from the entrance to the lounge that the old man was using as his place of work. The earlier heavy security had been lightened, reduced to just four warriors positioned in the corners of the room while both Kane and Ellis were also sat down. Having been made a cabinet minister Ellis had now swapped his army uniform for civilian clothing.

"Ah Captain Reeves, do come in and take a seat." he said as his granddaughter escorted the delegation into the lounge, "Please forgive me for not standing but at my age it can take some time."

"Of course. Thank you for agreeing to see us Secretary Dalton." Reeves replied.

"I didn't think you would request an audience for something trivial captain. That's why I've asked my ministers of war and security to sit in on this. You know Mister Kane of course but I don't think you've met Mister Ellis yet." the old man said, looking at the other two Genex leaders sat in the room.

"That's former General Ellis." Hayes told Reeves.

"The secretary asked me to serve in a different capacity." Ellis said.

"The general's experience made him a logical choice." the old man said, "Now perhaps we can get down to business. What brings you here Captain Reeves?"

"I passed the sensor data you provided regarding the alien tachyon gates to Commanders Knight and Bernard. Both of them are experts in the field of tachyon physics. I'd like them to present their findings to you before I explain my plan for how best to exploit what they have found." Reeves replied.

"Of course. Please continue." the old man said.

"Can I connect this to that display over there?" Knight asked, holding up his tablet and looking over his shoulder at a large wall mounted screen.

"Of course. The system should be compatible with yours." Kane replied, getting up from his chair and walking across the room. Turning on the screen he quickly accessed its setup system and selected the connectivity menu, "There you go, that should make it visible." he said.

"Yes, I've got it." Knight said, linking his tablet to the screen so that everyone in the room was able to see the diagram of the tachyon gate he had displayed on his tablet, "Now this is a representation of one of the tachyon gates we've been seeing in systems overrun by the alien AI's forces. All evidence points to them being used to transport the population to wherever the AI originates from but until now we haven't been able to figure out how they work."

"Yes, the power requirements are just too great." the old man's granddaughter commented.

"I take it you have discovered how the power is generated." the old man himself added.

"In a way, yes." Knight replied, "The issue is that we've been looking at these gates wrong all the time. The energy requirement for them to operate is actually very small."

"How can that be?" Kane said.

"It was all in the data file you provided us with." Bernard told him and Knight brought up a copy of the graph created from the mining ship's sensor readings, "First an energy spike and then later on a constant flow. That was the gate in operation."

"I checked those readings with our thinkers. They confirmed that the steady state power output was insufficient to produce even a tiny fraction of the energy required to produce enough tachyons to send even a single ship." Kane said.

"And they're right." Knight responded, "You see these gates aren't anything like the tachyon gates that humans have built, those simply provide the tachyon shells that our ships need to travel faster than light externally but these gates do something different entirely. We previously believed that instead of wrapping each ship that passes through the gate in its own shell of tachyons the gates created a stream of tachyons more akin to a communication signal beamed over interstellar space. However, that presented us with the

issue of how to generate enough tachyonic mass to achieve that. The sensor readings taken by your mining ship have finally presented us with a solution though, one that now we know it ought to have been obvious." "You'll love this." Hayes said, "Our best thinkers couldn't work this one out."

"Just get on with it." Kane muttered.

"The initial spike was a tachyon communication signal just like one of our own only probably moving much faster." Knight said, "After that the gate probably settles down into a standby mode until it receives a response and it's that response that is supplying the tachyons needed to operate the gate, they're all sent from a remote location where there is probably a similar gate."

"That gate is the one that's supplied with all the power needed to generate the tachyons." Bernard continued and he pointed to the diagram of the gate on the wall mounted screen, "All this one does is act as a focusing system, channelling the tachyons around and through its structure to create a return stream. That's what ships moving through the gate ride along."

"Incredible. So simple." the old man said.

"Can we destroy the gates?" Ellis asked.

"Possibly although it may be difficult. We don't have any information about their defensive capabilities while they're active." Lucas answered, "Captain Reeves has an alternate strategy though, one that requires keeping an active gate operating."

"You want one working?" Ellis said, frowning as he stared at the intelligence officer.

"I'm the one who wants an active gate." Reeves said.

"As far as we can tell any suitably charged object passing through the gate would be accelerated to a faster than light speed and carried to the termination point of the stream. Presumably the place where the AI comes from in the first place." Knight said and Hayes smiled.

"That would include all those missiles we have stockpiled on Sanctuary for launching at the Commonwealth." she said.

"Miss Hayes has told us that you have about fifteen thousand interstellar ballistic missiles with multiple high yield fusion warheads and semi-autonomous targeting capability." Reeves said.

"So you've been passing state secrets to the Commonwealth have you Jennifer?" Kane commented, looking at Hayes.

"I think we can overlook that Alexander." the old man said before he looked back at Reeves, "Please continue captain." he added.

"I propose that we launch these missiles without tachyons for FTL travel and instead guide them through the gate." Reeves said, "Their guidance systems should be set to acquire their own targets once they exit the gate at the other end."

"Are you seriously proposing to use all fifteen thousand missiles?" Ellis said.

"Yes, why not?" Reeves responded and Ellis turned towards the old man.

"Mister secretary using our entire strategic missile force would leave us defenceless." he said.

"As opposed to the situation we find ourselves in now? How badly does the Commonwealth outnumber us now?" Kane said and then he looked at the old man as well, "I like the sound of this plan. Although there is one clear problem." he said.

"You mean how to launch the missiles?" the old man said and Kane nodded.

"Exactly." he said, "Those missiles are controlled from the strategic command centre on Sanctuary and that fell to the machines quickly thanks to the battalion of combat robots stored there."

"We also need an authorisation code that we don't have now that Secretary LeClair is dead along with everyone who maintained that system." Ellis added.

"Then the plan can't go ahead. Even if we could override the lockouts on the missiles we'd have to do it one at a time for all fifteen thousand." Hayes said.

"Not so Jennifer." the old man said, smiling.

"Don't tell me you know the launch codes." Hayes responded.

"Of course I do. As the head of intelligence I always made sure that I had someone near the secretary, they got me his codes and those won't have been changed." the old man said, "However, the command terminal normally taken wherever the secretary goes was not brought here to Haven. It must have been lost on Sanctuary."

"Is there another way of ordering a launch?" Bernard asked.

"Of course there is. Directly from the strategic missile command centre." the old man's granddaughter replied.

"In the complex that's been overrun by the machines." Hayes added.

"Then we need to retake it. Or at least gain control long enough to launch the missiles." the old man said.

"It's one of the most fortified facilities in the empire." Ellis pointed out.

"Perhaps but it is not impregnable. Especially not since we know the layout." the old man said.

"The Warspite currently carries three companies of light infantry as well as a small force of heavy infantry. The other ships in the squadron can contribute another company or so if pushed and we can provide fire



support from orbit.” Reeves said.

“That may be enough and of course the platoon from the *Enigma* will join you as well of course.” the old man said.

“You’re sending the *Enigma* with them?” Ellis commented.

“Of course I am. The Secretary of the Genex Empire can hardly ride aboard a Commonwealth vessel now can he?” the old man said.

“Mister secretary there is your security to consider. You should remain here.” Ellis told him.

“Nonsense. As secretary I’m the only person who can authorise the launch of our missiles, I have to go with Captain Reeves. I’m sure our combined troops will be able to secure the command centre in good time. I won’t be in any real danger, especially with my granddaughter there to protect me if all else fails.”

“We should aim to leave as soon as possible.” Reeves said.

“So when the scout ship returns in two days?” the old man’s granddaughter replied and Reeves nodded.

“Yes. Since the *Enigma* can keep up with the ships of my squadron we should be able to make it to Sanctuary in about thirty hours after that. With luck we’ll be able to arrive unnoticed and be able to remain hidden until the gate is activated. At that point the stealth destroyers in my squadron will take out any warships protecting the gate. The rest of our ships can then head for Sanctuary itself and land our troops as close to your strategic headquarters as we can.” he said.

“If there are any of our forces still fighting on the surface then they may be able to assist you as well.” Ellis suggested.

“I don’t think it would be wise to rely on that. The AI may not activate the gate until the planet is secured. In which case all your forces would have stopped fighting by the time we can execute the plan.” Lucas pointed out.

“Then we fight with what we can take with us and we hope that it is enough. We will only get one chance to do this.” the old man responded.

“Sandra something big’s going down.” Sands’ sound man said as he burst into their cabin and Sands jumped, pushing a compact device beneath a pillow before she realised who it was.

“Christ Nick, warn us before bursting in. Dave and I were just setting up our headcams. Now what’s going on?” she replied.

“I just walked past a bunch of soldiers on their way to the briefing room. There was one of the Warspite’s marines as well as officers from both the Gurkhas and Brekken.” the sound man told her and she looked at her cameraman.

“They’re planning a big operation.” the cameraman said and Sands nodded.

“Yes and it’s not just a ground operation.” the sound man continued, “I’d already heard from one of the engineers that half their department has been ordered to carry out a rearming from one of the fleet’s supply ships.”

“So what?” the cameraman said, frowning, “They’re resupplying the missiles they’ve already used.”

“No, it’s not just that. They’re going to be using the wing mounted pylons.” the sound man said.

“The what?” Sands asked and her sound man sighed.

“Look this ship has a missile system mounted along its upper hull, right?” he said.

“Right. Ninety-six vertical launchers.” Sands said, nodding her head.

“Well there are also thirty-two extra missile pylons under each wing that aren’t normally used. Unless it’s expected that the ship is going to need a whole load more firepower than it already has and Captain Reeves has obviously decided that he’s going to need it because that’s exactly what’s being done. Sixty-four heavy missiles are going to be mounted on those pylons. This ship’s going to be carrying enough firepower to take down an entire battleship squadron in a single salvo.” the sound man said.

“We need to try and get an interview about it.” Sands said.

“But we’re getting ready to start covert filming.” her cameraman commented.

“I know that Dave but I don’t want any of Captain Reeves’ people to figure it out. We’ve been requesting interviews since we left port so it would look weird if we suddenly stopped now that the crew are obviously preparing for something big. We might get a few statements from Goldman but I bet we won’t get a proper interview with Reeves. They can prepare for their operation and we’ll keep preparing for ours.”

As expected it took almost exactly three days for the Genex scout ship sent to Sanctuary to return to Haven and by this point the combined Genex and Commonwealth fleets were waiting eagerly. The results of the scans it had conducted of the system were rapidly disseminated among the fleets and aboard the Warspite Reeves rushed to the bridge when he was informed that they had arrived.

“What have we got?” he asked, making his way to the central console where Knight and Lucas already stood looking at a representation of the Genex capital system.

“Pretty much what you’d expect. The Genex crew didn’t want to hang around so they just ran passive scans and a single active radar sweep before they jumped back to FTL and got out of there. You can tell their

sensors aren't as good as ours though. One of our scoutships would have brought back more detailed data." Knight answered.

"Our ships would have been back quicker as well." Ash commented.

"Do we have a reading on the enemy's strength in the system?" Reeves said.

"Yes captain." Lucas replied, "There are two squadrons of warships in the system. One consisting of ten destroyers and a pair of frigates close to the gate and a second one in orbit around Sanctuary. From the profiles provided to us by the Genex that squadron seems to be based around a pair of assault cruisers and four assault frigates. Then there are a number of light warships acting as escorts."

"Providing support to their forces on the surface no doubt." Reeves said.

"Yes captain." Lucas agreed, "But from these readings I think that they aren't needed any more."

"You think that the machines have secured the planet?" Reeves responded.

"I'm sure of it sir." Lucas said as she used the central console to focus on the orbital space around Sanctuary, "As well as the warships there's a massive fleet of large commercial ships in orbit around Sanctuary. More than a thousand of them at least. The fleet extended over the horizon from the point of view of the scoutship so it's impossible to be sure. What we can tell though is that there's a lot of surface to orbit traffic."

"They're loading prisoners for transport." Knight said, "There are probably more on the surface as well."

"Then we may not have much time. If the machines are already loading captives then they must be close to moving them through the gate."

"That's one thing that seems to be in our favour captain." Knight replied, "As of forty hours ago when these scans were taken the gate was inactive. Of course that could have already changed, it could have already connected to the other end."

"Captain I have Secretary Dalton aboard the Enigma calling for you." Goldman announced suddenly.

"I'll take it here." Reeves responded, looking down at the console in front of him as a window appeared containing an image of the old man.

"Ah Captain Reeves, have you had the chance to review the data gathered by our scout yet?" he asked.

"Yes mister secretary, I was just looking at it now. It's concerning to say the least. We may already be too late." Reeves replied.

"Quite. Time is obviously of the essence. I recommend that we depart immediately and plot a course to bring us out of FTL trailing the orbit of the fourth planet," the old man said and Reeves looked towards Thomas.

"That would put us in eclipse from both the gate and Sanctuary." the *Warspite's* navigator told him.

"So the machines might not notice our arrival. The planet would shield the tachyon burst from them." Knight added.

"Exactly. Then we can take stock of the situation before making a final decision on how to proceed. We have to stop those transports from going through the gate." the old man said when he overheard this.

"Agreed." Reeves said, "I'll order my squadron to prepare to jump. Shall we say ten minutes?" Reeves said and the old man smiled.

"Ten minutes it is captain. Then I shall speak to you again when we reach Alpha Indi." he responded and the window closed as he shut off the channel.

At just over ten light years, the journey to the Alpha Indi system was a relatively short hop for the fast moving Commonwealth squadron and the Enigma and the ships dropped to sublight speed in the orbit of the system's fourth planet. This was a large rocky planet with an unpleasant atmosphere that had limited the Genex's settlement of it. With all of the resources it offered available elsewhere more easily there had been little point to constructing any more than the bare minimum of monitoring outposts and even these were largely automated.

Now though the planet served a purpose, shielding the task force arriving at Alpha Indi from Cordoba Durchmusterung -50 12929 from detection by blocking the burst of tachyons released as the shells surrounding the ship were dispersed.

"Status?" Knight said as soon as the image of the planet appeared on the screen in front of him.

"Assuming the data given to us by the Genex is accurate then we're right where we should be, behind the fourth planet and in eclipse from Sanctuary and the gate." Thomas responded.

"Lieutenant commander Goldman, order the stealth destroyers to move over the horizon and tell us what they see. Have them maintain laser links to us." Reeves ordered.

"Yes captain." Goldman responded before she relayed his order to the stealth destroyers and the triangular shaped vessels all began to move away from the rest of the squadron. With the planet to shield them the warships were able to use their main drives to get them into position as quickly as possible then cutting them before they moved over the horizon so the energy flare would not have become visible to the machines and as soon as the first ship did this they saw something that astounded the crew.

"Captain I've got the *Pitch Black* calling. Commander Patrick says the priority is urgent." Goldman said.

"Put him through." Reeves said before adding, "Commander what can you see?" when the channel opened.

"Captain Reeves this is incredible." Patrick's voice responded, "We're looking at the gate and the tachyon readings are off the chart even just from the stray particles escaping from it."

"The gate's active." Knight said, looking at Reeves.

"Commander Patrick, can you see any other ships?" Reeves asked.

"Yes captain. There's a squadron near the gate with profiles that match the ones we were given but there's also a massive fleet moving from the second planet towards it. They look like commercial ships." Patrick answered.

"The Genex are moving their prisoners." Knight said and Reeves nodded in agreement.

"Then we're just in time." he said, "Goldman send to all ships, our stealth destroyers are to continue towards the gate and engage the enemy vessels there. All other ships are to follow us around the other side of the planet to engage those transports and any escorts they've got. Remember that the transports are likely carrying captives and should not be destroyed. I want precision strikes to knock out their drives."

"Aye captain, sending that now." Goldman said.

"Helm take us over the horizon." Knight added.

"Turning now. Bringing engines up to full power." Ash said before he turned the *Warspite* so that when the heavy cruiser emerged from the shadow of the planet it would be as far away from the stealth destroyers currently heading towards the warships protecting the giant tachyon gate, hopefully diverting attention away from their position and making their detection even less likely before they could launch their attack.

The fleet of transports moving from Sanctuary towards the tachyon gate came into view before the gate and its defensive squadron and as the *Pitch Black's* commanding officer had said it was massive.

"Would you look at that." Knight commented when he saw the fleet for himself, "How many ships are there?"

"The computer can't give us an accurate count yet but it has logged more than one thousand two hundred individual transponder codes." Goldman replied.

"Can you pick out any escorts?" Reeves added.

"Yes captain. There are a number of light warships among the civilian ones. No capital ships though." Goldman said.

"This is going to be easy." Thomas said, smiling.

"Helm take us to-" Reeves began before Cortez suddenly spoke up.

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

"From the fleet?" Reeves said but she shook her head.

"No captain, it's the gate." she said.

As the *Warspite* continued to move towards the transport fleet it also came within view of the tachyon gate and the moment it had a direct line of sight it could not help but pick up the massive flow of tachyons. Only those faster than light particles that broke free of the stream could be detected by the *Warspite's* passive tachyon detector but the sheer number of them required for the operation of the gate meant that it lost more than an entire fleet could expect to without its function being hampered in any way.

"Captain can-" Knight began but Reeves knew what he was going to ask before he could finish. "Petty officer provide your readings to Commander Knight." he ordered, "Goldman have them sent to engineering as well. I suspect that Commander Bernard will be interested. Reeves also glanced over at Knight's console to see the information being sent to the first officer for himself but he found it somewhat disappointing. Most of the data was numerical, the image of the gate being little different from any that he had already seen. The tachyons themselves were invisible, even when trillions of them were passing around the ring shaped structure every second and the only indications of activity were the various lights emitted by many of the space vessels that had been used to construct it. "How far to the fleet?" Reeves asked, looking back towards his own console. "Nine light minutes captain." Goldman said. "They should see us soon." Thomas added. "Helm be ready to turn if they try and evade us." Reeves said, "I doubt they'll manoeuvre too much though, it would take them away from the gate." "Captain what if the fleet opts to scatter? That many ships could get around ours." Ash pointed out. This was an old practice, often used by civilian convoys that had only limited escorts when they came under attack by pirates. The convoy would continually divide and the escorts following whichever group the pirates went after. Meanwhile all the other civilian ships would speed away as fast as they could. "Keep after the largest groups." Reeves told him, "Goldman I want our attack craft out there. Any of those civilian ships that tries to get past us has to be prevented from reaching the gate. The only way those stealth destroyers will be able to stop them is with missiles." "What do we do when we've disabled the ships captain? We can't leave them drifting out here indefinitely." Lucas pointed out. "We'll have to leave them to our fleet. They can put boarding parties aboard while we head for Sanctuary and land our troops there." Reeves said, "I guess they'll just have to take that command centre without the rest of the fleet's marines backing them up."

The attack craft launched by the Commonwealth ships sped towards the transport convoy ahead of their launching vessels and they were soon able to pick out the different types of vessel that made it up. Although they had only limited information regarding Genex commercial vessels it was easy to tell from their design that they had been built with a variety of purposes in mind. Many were boxlike cargo carriers while others had the sleeker lines and numerous viewports favoured by passenger liners or yachts. The sizes of the vessels also varied greatly from small craft less than a hundred metres long to bulk carriers that rivalled battleships and dreadnoughts in their scale.

As well as the civilian craft though, there were numerous light warships among the convoy and as soon as they detected the Commonwealth ships closing on them these escorts turned towards them. "Looks like they've spotted us. We've got fourteen ships breaking off and moving to block our path." Mori told Shaw, "They look like corvettes but they could be scouts. I'm not seeing any attack craft though." "Okay boys they've seen us." Shaw broadcast to the other attack craft squadrons, "Leave the escorts to the fleet, those transports are our primary targets, target their drives and disable them. I don't want anyone going for kill shots against ships that are carrying hostages."

"Captain I'm picking up heat signatures from around Sanctuary." one of the *Warspite's* sensor operators announced when the cruiser's thermal imaging system detected significant heat sources coming from the direction of the planet.

"They look like drive plumes." Goldman commented.

"Genex reinforcements?" Knight suggested.

"They've seen us." Reeves said, nodding, "Lieutenant Lucas can you identify the types of ships?"

"Yes captain. It's the planetary assault squadron detected by the Genex scouts. Two cruisers and four frigates." Lucas responded as she checked the sensor data against her intelligence database.

"Optimised for planetary bombardment. No match for our force." Knight said.

"No, but we can't afford to ignore them. Goldman order our destroyers to move out from our flank to cut them off. Fire as soon as they come within range. Weapons hold our missiles against the escort ships. They aren't worth wasting fire on. Watch for any of the capital ships approaching though. Plot firing solutions and fire as soon as possible if they do. What are the ships by the gate doing?"

"Holding position captain." another of the sensor operators responded.

"Making sure the gate is protected." Knight said, "Kind of suggests that it can't look after itself after all."

"Captain we've got incoming." Goldman said suddenly, "Thirty plus missiles from the escorts."

"They all look like light yields weapons captain." Lucas said as she checked the sensor data on the missiles and saw that they were all relatively small weapons, "Unless they've added nuclear warheads of course."

"This looks like a spoiling attack to me. They're trying to break up our formation. All turrets open fire as soon as the missiles come within range. Mister Ash take us towards the nearest escort ship if you wouldn't mind. Main guns to fire as soon as possible, we don't need to get right down their throats." Reeves said.

The wave of missiles sped between the attack craft rushing towards the convoy and Shaw weaved out of the way of one that otherwise may have slammed into her fighter and obliterated it. "Okay Kaz hold on. Here comes the flak." she said when the light warships escorting the convoy came into view ahead and moments later there were flashes of weapons fire as they targeted the waves of attack craft. Rather than return fire though the various fighters, interceptors, bombers and drones sped onwards through the gaps between the escort ships as fast as they could on their way towards their true targets. Not all of the attack made it past the escorts though and there were several explosions as lucky shots struck them but the vast majority got through, "Break and attack. Fire at will." Shaw broadcast, turning her fighter sharply towards the closest transport ship. This was a mid-sized vessel about two hundred metres long that from the shape of its hull and wing assemblies looked designed to be able to land on a planet's surface. Conveniently the ship's drives were mounted on the tips of these wings and this made them easy targets as Shaw fired rapid bursts from her gauss cannons at them one after another and there were two explosions as the drives were destroyed. The force of the blasts imparted a spin on the transport and it began to tumble through space as Shaw turned again to bring her fighter to bear on another transport.

Having drifted hundreds of thousands of kilometres without doing anything that would call attention to themselves the seven Commonwealth stealth destroyers all launched salvos of missiles at about the same time. Appearing as if from nowhere, the automated warships positioned to protect the tachyon gate were caught completely unawares. The frigates that made up part of the squadron had positioned themselves to intercept missiles fired by the other Commonwealth warships or any attack craft that turned away from the transport convoy so when dozens of missiles came from the formation's flank only one of them was able to fire at them. This was still successful in shooting down several of the medium yield missiles and a handful more were shot down by the defensive turrets mounted on the destroyers but many more sped onwards and slammed into the warships. The closest frigate and a pair of destroyers were destroyed outright in a series of explosions while all of the other ships suffered damage to a varying degree.

Aware of the presence of the stealth destroyers the automated warships by the gate began searching for them frantically, bringing their active radar and lidar sensors online. The ships' active radar would normally have been more effective than these electromagnetic based detection systems, the fast moving particles bouncing off a hull made of stealth composites just as easily as from one constructed of more mundane materials but the massive number of charged tachyons already flooding space around the gate made this ineffective in this situation.

As the robotic warships began their search though another volley of missiles was fired by the hidden stealth destroyers and again these sped straight for the automated warships. Once again the machines tried shooting these down before they could be hit but the sheer quantity of missiles in the volley meant that more than half of these still got through this and as they slammed into the already damaged frigate and destroyers they finished off the work that had been started by the first wave, reducing them all to burning wrecks. With the nearby robotic warships destroyed the Commonwealth stealth destroyers engaged their main drives again, revealing their positions to the other warships in the system and they accelerated towards the active tachyon gate. As they continued towards this they deployed the drones each of them carried and as the destroyers took up positions in front of the gate to block vessels from going through they positioned their drones on the far side of the gate, ready to intercept any of the transports that managed to get that far.

A robotic corvette vanished in a flash as a beam from one of the *Warspite's* neutral particle beam cannons burned along its entire length. The warships assigned as escorts to the convoy were intended to ward off attack by any small combat units that may have been able to evade capture or destruction by the machines in the Alpha Indi system, not defeat a force of capital ships like the one now bearing down upon them. This left the escorts hopelessly outgunned by the Commonwealth heavy cruiser and the four frigates arrayed either side of it while their own supporting light warships held back to cover their remaining heavy picket as well as the *Enigma*. The only saving grace for the robotic warships was that none of the Commonwealth vessels firing on them considered them worth expending missiles on. The *Warspite's* heavy missiles were massively overpowered for the task of engaging light warships while the frigates' armament was focused on direct fire weapons. The few missiles they carried to give them longer ranged killing power were too important to waste on such low value targets. Even without these though, the fixed and turret mounted guns of the Commonwealth ships were both more numerous and more powerful than those of their automated opponents and before any of the robotic vessels could get close enough to fire a single shot half of them had already been reduced to twisted scrap metal.

At the same time as the convoy escorts were being destroyed by the *Warspite* and its accompanying frigates the task force's four conventional destroyers were moving to engage the six automated capital ships approaching from the orbit of sanctuary. Despite being outnumbered though the Commonwealth vessels once again had the advantage in the confrontation. All six of the robotic vessels were designed for planetary assault instead of ship to ship combat and this limited their effectiveness in such a fight. All six vessels dedicated a significant amount of their internal space to free fall weapons designed to be dropped from orbit and these were useless without gravity to pull them towards a target. In addition to this many of the guns mounted on the robotic ships were gauss cannons, weapons ideally suited to engaging planetary targets or fixed orbital facilities but against ships capable of manoeuvring out of the way of unguided projectiles they could only be used effectively from short range where a target would not have the chance to react and the Commonwealth destroyers unleashed a wave of missiles well before they could get that close.

The robotic assault vessels opened fire on these missiles with their turrets but the destroyers had made sure to launch enough that some were bound to get through. These were not enough to destroy any of the automated warships outright but all of them suffered damage to some extent before the Commonwealth destroyers fired again, this time firing a much smaller volley of missiles. Once more the machines did their best to shoot down the missiles but these turned out to be just a distraction as the commander of the destroyer group had deliberately established a pattern that the artificial intelligence governing the planetary assault ships had focused on. In getting the artificial intelligence to anticipate wave after wave of missiles the human officer had caused it to ignore the fact that although they were intended primarily as launching platforms his destroyers also mounted guns of their own, including X-ray lasers in fixed forward mounts and the four destroyers fired these in unison at the two cruisers that formed the core of the robotic squadron. The unexpected energy weapon attacks caught the artificial intelligence off guard and both cruisers were struck twice. One of the beams hit an area that had already been damaged by a missile and was able burn deep within the target ship until reaching the fusion reactor at its core and the seven hundred metre long vessel was consumed by an explosion from its centre. The second cruiser was also rocked by a large explosion as one of the X-ray beams burned through one of its main drive units while the second hit the forward section and penetrated as deeply as the main computer, destroying the artificial intelligence that guided the cruiser and turning it into nothing more than a drifting hulk.

In most circumstances a force of assault frigates that found itself facing an equal number of destroyers in open battle would seek to find a way of disengaging and escaping but the alien artificial intelligence was only concerned with getting the transports filled with captives safely through the tachyon gate and it was willing to sacrifice every one of its warships in the system to achieve this so the four damaged assault frigates continued to accelerate towards the Commonwealth destroyers even as they launched a third wave of missiles. Having already been fooled once by the destroyers using a wave of missiles as a decoy for a salvo from their main guns the artificial intelligence controlling the frigates also had the warships change their heading as they fired on the missiles to prevent the X-ray lasers from being brought to bear on them. Once again though the robotic ships came under unexpected attack. Their course towards the convoy had brought them close enough to the *Warspite* that the heavy cruiser had unleashed four of its own missiles. Already occupied trying to shoot down the destroyer's medium yield missiles the assault frigates were unable to target the incoming heavy missiles as well and each of them was forced to choose which threat to try and respond to. Two of the frigates focused on the medium missiles from the destroyers that were closer and more numerous but in doing so the larger missiles from the *Warspite* were able to fly through the anti-missile fire and both ships were destroyed in a pair of violent explosions. On the other hand the two frigates that opted to engage the more powerful heavy missiles enabled the destroyers' missiles to get through instead and both ships were rocked by multiple blasts before the damage to their structure became too great and they both broke apart in rapid succession.

Even with more than a hundred attack craft working together the sheer number of transport ships in the convoy meant that each of them had to be able to engage several if they were all to be prevented from reaching the tachyon gate.

“Kaz find me another!” Shaw exclaimed as she hunted for another target right after disabling the drives on a converted tanker.

“Bear to starboard sixty degrees, nose up twenty-two.” Mori told her but just as Shaw was about to make the turn the energy emissions from that ship’s drives ceased when a Commonwealth bomber used its defensive guns to disable them, “Wait, check that, target disabled. Turn to – no wait that one’s just gone dark as well.”

“Oh screw this.” Shaw said before she turned the fighter sharply.

“What are you doing?” Mori asked.

“Heading for the gate Kaz.” Shaw answered, “These ships are heading that way so I’m going to cut them off.”

The fighter accelerated towards the gate, weaving between drifting transport ships until finally emerging into open space. At this point Shaw spun the fighter to face the opposite direction and fired its engines again to slow the ship down. While this was happening Mori looked into one of the angled mirrors mounted on the cockpit canopy that allowed him to see behind the fighter and he caught sight of the gate itself, visible by the pulsing lights built into it. And moments later he also saw the drones deployed by the stealth destroyers

“Commander we don’t have much room here.” he said.

“Don’t worry Kaz.” Shaw said before the fighter came to a halt, “Okay, now tell me where those transports are coming from.”

“Err, right.” Mori said, looking down at the sensor readouts and he began to search through the various signals for one strong enough to indicate an active drive, “Okay we’ve got a ship closing from two degrees to port, nose down five. Looks like a yacht or courier.”

“On it.” Shaw responded and she accelerated forwards again, heading towards the ship pointed out to her by Mori.

As expected this was a small vessel that looked like a pleasure craft and Shaw lined her guns up on one of its side mounted engines.

“I’m picking up ionisation.” Mori said, “She’s getting ready to go through the gate.”

“Not fast enough.” Shaw muttered before she fired her gauss cannons and a rapid burst of projectiles shattered the engine she was targetting and caused the ship to twist and veer away from the gate. Then before the artificial intelligence could attempt to rectify this forced course Shaw fired again and destroyed the second engine, leaving it unable to steer back towards the gate.

“Next!” Shaw snapped.

“Turn starboard one hundred and sixty. Large heat source closing.” Mori responded and Shaw spun her fighter again before accelerating in almost the opposite direction.

This next vessel was much larger than the pleasure craft Shaw had just disabled but its configuration made it a much harder target.

“Damn it! It’s just got a single aft mounted drive.” Shaw exclaimed when she got close enough to see that there was a single corona surrounding the ship as it accelerated. This indicated that the main engine was mounted directly astern instead of having multiple drives arrayed around the sides and suggested that the vessel was very old, dating back to before the Genex had access to artificial gravity.

“Target’s closing at point eight-five gee.” Mori said.

“If we just knock that drive out then there’s still a fair chance that that ship is just going to drift right through the gate anyway.” Shaw said, “We need to get it to turn.”

“What about the destroyers?” Mori suggested.

“Destroyers? What destroyers?” Shaw asked.

“I’ve got the transponders signatures of our stealth destroyers between us and the gate. Their drones too. I bet if one of those destroyers puts itself in the way of that transport with its active sensors all lit up the AI will spot it and turn aside. It may be big but it’s not big enough to be playing chicken with a destroyer.”

“Okay send the word. I’m going to line us up for the shot.” Shaw told him.

“This is Lieutenant Mori to any Shadow-class destroyer. I am requesting that one of you blocks the path of the transport broadcasting ID code ending in one-one-three-eight., sensors hot.” Mori broadcast while Shaw manoeuvred the fighter into position and moments later his sensor panel detected the activation of radar and lidar systems.

“Mori this is Nyx, moving into position now.” a voice responded over the radio.

With the stealth destroyer’s active sensors running even the limited detection capability of the oncoming transport was able to pick up the warship’s presence and the controlling artificial intelligence made a course correction to take it around the vessel now in its path. This was exactly what Shaw had been waiting for

though and she squeezed her triggers again to send another burst of projectiles from her fighter's gauss cannons into the transport's aft mounted main propulsion unit. This promptly exploded, leaving the ship without any ability to steer.

"Kaz is-" Shaw began.

"She'll miss the gate by about six thousand kilometres." Mori responded before Shaw could finish her question.

"Good because we're pretty much dry." Shaw said, looking at the ammunition indicator on her console. This showed that although her fighter still had a full load of missiles it was down to fewer than twenty rounds for each of its gauss cannons, "From now on we're just going to have to sit back and watch everyone else have all the fun."

"I don't think so lieutenant." Mori replied, looking at his sensor display, "The only engine signatures I'm picking up are coming from our own ships. The convoy's not accelerating any more. We did it."

From the bridge of the *Warspite* Reeves, Knight and Lucas were monitoring all three elements of the battle as various parts of the Commonwealth taskforce engaged the convoy transports, escort vessels and the planetary assault squadron approaching from the direction of Sanctuary. The status of the enemy warships was easy to keep track of but the transports were far more difficult. As well as the sheer number of targets to be considered, their transponders continued to broadcast even when their engines were disabled and each ship had to be flagged manually as having been dealt with. Therefore, it took more than a minute after the last transport had been disabled to confirm that no more of the vessels were on course for the tachyon gate. "That's it captain, all transports disabled and adrift." Goldman announced.

"Any danger of collisions?" Knight asked, knowing that in their current state none of the transports would be able to avoid one another and that a collision between the larger vessels could result in significant casualties. "Most of the ships appear to be drifting away from one another but there are some that could come into contact." Goldman said.

"Have the rest of the fleet intercept and board them." Reeves ordered, "Any ship too badly damaged to sustain its occupants will have to be evacuated. As soon as the transports have been secured the fleet is to deploy to the orbit of Sanctuary. Now I need to speak with the *Enigma*."

"Putting you through now captain." Goldman responded and moments later the screen in front of Reeves activated to show the bridge of the *Enigma*. However, it was Captain Schaar's face rather than the old man's that Reeves saw.

"Captain Schaar I take it you've been monitoring the battle?" Reeves asked. Given the importance of the old man to the mission to secure the Genex missile command the *Enigma* had been deliberately held back during the fighting to ensure that it was not damaged by a fluke shot and although the alien built vessel had been included in the Commonwealth data sharing network Reeves had not contacted it directly since arriving at the Alpha Indi system.

"Yes Captain Reeves. We've also been searching for any Genex military signals that could indicate the presence of surviving military forces in the system." she responded.

"Did you find any?" Knight asked.

"No but we've sent out a coded instruction to report just in case they're maintaining radio silence to prevent the machines from tracking their location." Schaar said and Reeves nodded.

"Good idea." he said, "Captain we're about to head for Sanctuary orbit now. The rest of the fleet will make sure that everyone aboard those transports is safe."

"Captain I've just picked up an energy spike from the gate." one of the sensor operators reported suddenly. "Is it engaging its self destruct?" Knight said.

"I don't think so." Goldman answered, "The gate's operation looks stable but there was a definite energy spike for a moment. Small in percentage terms but definitely noticeable."

"Let me see." Knight said and when Goldman provided him with the sensor data he immediately turned to Reeves again, "Captain that's the sort of energy spike I'd expect to see in a ship that had just activated its tachyon communication transmitter."

"Could the gate be letting the aliens who created the AI virus know what's going on?" Ash suggested from the helm station.

"I don't think so." Knight said, "If the gate was going to do that then the most efficient way of doing it would be to encode it in the tachyon stream used to send the transports to their destination. I think that it was sending a signal elsewhere."

"But where?" Lucas asked, "The Genex shut down all their tachyon satellites."

"The machines don't need them lieutenant. They have the gates." Knight said.

"Of course." Thomas commented, "If they can target a gate over thousands of light years then targeting one over ten or twenty will be child's play."

"The gate must have been signalling Redoubt." Schaar said as she overheard all this, "How do you suppose the machines will react?"



"I suppose that when the AI at Redoubt finds out that we're here and we've just stopped all those captives being sent through the tachyon gate it will send an overwhelming force of ships to attack us." Reeves said, "Possibly even all of the ships it has."

"Good news for Admiral Winchester, not so good for us." Thomas commented.

"Yes and unfortunately without the tachyon satellite system we can't warn the admiral to divert any of his forces here to support us before he sets off for Redoubt." Knight added.

"It will take about two and a half days for a fleet to arrive from Redoubt." Schaar said.

"Then we have that long to gain control of your missiles." Reeves said, "I suggest we head for Sanctuary at best speed. Dropping into orbit right over the command centre will give the game away as to what we're doing here so I suggest we begin by heading for your capital and spreading out from there as if we're conducting a more general search. As soon as the rest of our ships can join us the *Warspite* and the *Enigma* should move to the target zone."

The Cordoba Durchmusterung -45 13383 system where the Genex colony of Redoubt was located was now almost totally devoid of sentient life. A handful of the Genex inhabitants had been able to escape the purge and mass deportation but those few survivors were not worth the expenditure of resources for the machines that now dominated the system to hunt them down. Instead the controlling artificial intelligence was focusing on the mass production of spacecraft. Some of these were warships to bolster the fleet that would conquer what remained of the Genex Empire before investigating the origins of the Commonwealth forces that now challenged the machines but many of the automated facilities were now dedicated to the construction of transport ships that would be used to move the remaining Genex population in other systems through the tachyon gates that connected to the intelligence's origin.

At the same time as it worked tirelessly to produce new spacecraft the artificial intelligence also acted to repair and rearm the fleet it already possessed. However, when the tachyon signal arrived from Alpha Indi this was suddenly put on hold and instead every warship capable of travelling at faster than light speeds launched from the orbiting dockyards before moving away from Redoubt. Then as soon as they were able to generate the shells of tachyons they needed they accelerated past the speed of light, responding to the call for help as fast as possible.

With the fleet departed the artificial intelligence then continued with its construction program, giving no more thought to what was happening in the Alpha Indi system.

Reeves and Knight were joined by Hayes as they stood around the central console to study the data being gathered about Sanctuary. The console displayed a map of the planet and as new information was gathered it was overlaid on the relevant location.

"There were a billion people here." Hayes said in astonishment at the scans of empty cities and orbital space that was now deserted of the hundreds of spacecraft every hour that travelled it.

"Most of them still are." Lucas said from her station, "I don't think that the machines have got around to transporting them off world yet."

"You've found them?" Knight said.

"I think so." Lucas said, "There's evidence that some of the settlements we've picked up are still consuming power but there are no indications of industry."

"It makes sense." Reeves said, "even a thousand ships couldn't carry a billion people. Are there any signs of planetary defences yet?"

"None captain. I've been checking the list of military facilities that we were given and most of them appear inoperative." Lucas said.

"All planetary defences had living operators." Hayes said, "The robot forces were supposed to be an offensive weapon, not defensive."

"Would the base commanders have destroyed their facilities when it looked likely that they were going to fall?" Knight asked.

"If the commander of the missile command did that then this mission could be a bust already." Thomas commented.

"We're still picking up electronic activity from the missile command." Lucas told him, "Rather a lot of it actually."

"Miss Hayes, was the missile command meant to be a general military command post as well?" Knight asked but Hayes shook her head.

"No. The government always wanted to limit the forces controlled by whoever was responsible for looking after our strategic missile forces." she said.

"Concern that they might find a way to launch the missiles and stage a coup?" Reeves said and Hayes just nodded in response.

"Are there any signs that the missiles are being targeted at us?" Knight said, looking towards Goldman.

"No commander. We are being scanned by both radar and lidar but there are no indications of a weapons lock."

"The missiles have independent lockouts built into their own launch systems. Until they receive a valid code there's no active memory for the alien virus to infect." Hayes said and Knight smiled.

"Very wise. I'm sure Adam would be impressed." he said.

"He'll get his chance." Reeves said, "I'm going to send Commander Bernard down to the surface with the marines just in case Secretary Dalton needs any help getting the missiles under control. Doctor Thundercloud as well. If there are still large numbers of Genex being held captive then our troops might encounter some that need medical attention. But we could do with knowing why there is so much activity at the missile command centre if it didn't have to co-ordinate with other forces." then he looked at Hayes and added, "Did the command centre do anything else?"

"Nothing military. The only the other thing it did other than keep control of our missiles was collate data from deep space sensors and survey missions and that was just to-" she began.

"Captain that's going to need a lot of computing power. Matching long range observations to create models of stellar drift." Thomas interrupted.

"The computers. The AI needs a home." Knight said.

"And it's found one in the missile command centre." Reeves said as he turned to Lucas, "Lieutenant can you map how the data is flowing into and out of that command centre?"

"I'll see." Lucas replied, looking down at her console and bringing up a new window, "Yes captain, watch." she said and then on the main map shown on the central console lines began to spread from the location of the missile command centre to other places on the planet and then back again.

"It's tied into everything." Knight said.

"Get me the *Enigma*, I need to speak to Secretary Dalton." Reeves said, looking at Goldman and she nodded.

"I've been keeping a comm laser on them." she said but the voice that spoke from the communication system was Captain Schaar instead of the old man himself.

"*Warspite* this is *Enigma*." she said.

"Captain I need to speak to the secretary. This is important." Reeves said.

"The secretary had been occupied with matters of state since we left Haven." Schaar responded and Hayes snorted.

"Probably going through the list of everyone he doesn't like and figuring out the best way to take revenge for whatever they did." she muttered.

"I need to speak with him urgently. Have you been scanning the area around the missile command?" Reeves said.

"No, we've been checking what's left of the orbital facilities for any indications of weapons." Schaar answered.

"Well it looks like the machines have turned the missile command centre into their primary server farm for the planet. We can expect it to be well defended." Reeves told her.

"Damn." Schaar said softly, "I'll let the old man know."

"Be sure you do. We'll be in orbit in ten minutes and the rest of our ships are going to be six hours behind us. I'm setting zero hour for the drop at nineteen-hundred hours exactly. That gives us just under seven hours to prepare. *Warspite* out." Reeves said before he closed the channel. Then he looked towards the row of sensor operators and added, "And make sure you check out those orbital facilities as well. I don't want us flying into a trap this close to our target."

Leaving the *Enigma* under the control of one of her subordinates Schaar headed for the old man's quarters where she knew that he was discussing various appointments with the small group of thinkers he had brought along with him. Two heavily armed and armoured warriors stood guard outside the entrance to his quarters but they were used to seeing Schaar enter and leave at any hour and they did not challenge her as she knocked on the door.

"It's Anna." she announced and the door slid open to allow her inside.

Stepping into the old man's quarters she immediately saw the four other warriors acting as his security detail along with his granddaughter who was sat out of Schaar's line of sight while half a dozen thinkers sat around the old man himself while he sat on a small couch.

"We're approaching Sanctuary." she said as the old man looked at her.

"You came all the way here just to tell me that?" he asked.

"Also to tell you that Captain Reeves wants to discuss our mission with you. The *Warspite* has scanned the area surrounding the missile command centre and there are indications that the machines are using it as a command centre of their own. Captain Reeves believes it will be heavily fortified." Schaar said.

"You could have told us all that over the intercom as well." the old man's granddaughter commented.

"I thought maybe you would reconsider going down there yourself." Schaar said and the old man smiled.

"I wish to speak with the captain alone." he said. Then he glanced at his granddaughter and added, "Completely alone."

"Of course grandfather." she responded as she stood up to leave. She paused by the door though, waiting for the others to all leave before her. Then she smiled at Schaar before exiting the room and closing the door behind her.

The old man then looked at the various tablets on the table in front of his couch and sighed.

"So many names to go through." he said as Schaar walked across the room towards him, "You know I rather feel like that mythological being the likes of Captain Reeves tell their children brings them presents every year. Father Christmas they call him. He makes lists of all the children who have been good and the ones who have been bad. Then he rewards the good ones with presents."

"And the bad ones?" Schaar asked, sitting down right beside the old man.

"Some stories say they were given lumps of coal, others nothing so I suppose that is a difference between us. Those on my naughty list will suffer a far worse fate." he said.

"And which list am I on?"

"Oh you're definitely on the nice list. The nicest of lists I would say." the old man responded with a smile, "When I first started planning all this I had hoped to tempt Jennifer Hayes back. I know manipulating her is likely to cause her to have a lower opinion of me than she would have had otherwise but it was necessary."

"You don't think she'll come back to the empire?" Schaar asked.

"Oh no. I rather think that she is happier now than she has ever been. She will stay in the Commonwealth." the old man answered.

"If the empire and Commonwealth are to unify then we're going to need ambassadors." Schaar pointed out.

"Yes we will. But I suspect that a thinker would be better suited to that role. Someone who won't have an interest in undermining relations between us to suit their own purposes." the old man said, "Now tell me more about what Captain Reeves told you."

"Just that the *Warspite's* scans have indicated that the machines are using the missile command centre as a command hub of their own. He still intends to go ahead with the landing though." Schaar said.

"Then we will continue as planned as well. There is no other way." the old man said.

"You don't have to go. Captain Reeves won't be going, he'll leave it to his marine commander." Schaar pointed out.

"Ah but Captain Reeves doesn't have the codes necessary to arm and fire our missiles. Only I have those." the old man reminded her, wagging his finger as he did so.

"Codes that you could give to your granddaughter." Schaar said.

"And violate my oath of office less than a week into it? No my dear Anna I will accompany Captain Reeves' forces to the surface to fire the missiles." the old man said.

"I just don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you Robert." Schaar said.

"I would suggest that you take the *Enigma* and head for the Commonwealth. If we don't defeat the machines here then the Empire will fall. On the other hand the Commonwealth may still be strong enough to resist them, especially now that we have a greater understanding of the purpose and operation of their tachyon gates. All of our crew have been treated now so that their offspring will be ordinary humans so the Commonwealth will probably take you in. Especially when you have this ship to offer them." the old man told her.

"It sounds like you've planned for this, as if you know you're not coming back." Schaar commented.

"Oh trust me Anna I have every reason in the universe to want to return to you. Now how long did you say we have until Captain Reeves wants to commence his landing?" the old man replied.

"Until nineteen hundred hours by his ship's time." Schaar answered and the old man smiled.

"Good. That leaves us more than enough time for me to demonstrate just how committed to you I am." he said.

## 24.

"Sandra it's starting." Sands' sound man said when he rushed up to her in the corridor outside the mess hall she had just exited.

"Now? Damn, I thought we had longer." she replied and her sound man shook his head.

"The marines are all heading for the hangar packing serious firepower and all the Gurkhas and Brekken have vanished. They must all be loading up in their assault pod." he said.

"Then we need to move." Sands said and they both broke into a run as they rushed back to their quarters, causing the cameraman to jump as they burst in while he was hurriedly changing into one of the stolen uniforms.

"How about you knock first?" he said.

"I've seen it before Dave." Sands responded as she grabbed her uniform from inside a locker.

"That's not what I meant. I thought for a moment it was going to be that Major Willis and a bunch of marines to arrest us as spies." the cameraman said.

"Then do a girl a favour and stand watch outside. I'd rather not have the pair of you watching me strip."

Sands told her crew and the cameraman quickly fastened his jacket and pulled on one of the caps that the news team had been given when they came aboard the *Warspite*. These were marked with the ship's name and registration number as well as an image of the ship in profile. Commonly worn by crewmembers from all departments the news team would put them to use in helping to hide their features.

"Don't forget your camera." he told Sands and he pointed to the compact head mounted camera on a nearby shelf before he and the sound man exited the room and stood in the corridor as if they were talking. To any observer it would appear that Sands' sound man was speaking with a member of the *Warspite's* crew.

"Is it running?" the sound man asked softly and the cameraman slipped a compact tablet from his pocket before turning it on to show the feed from the camera watching Sands as she changed.

When Sands emerged from the cabin wearing a uniform and cap her sound man went inside and changed while Sands and the cameraman stood watch. Once all three were disguised as members of the *Warspite's* crew they made their way towards the mission adaptive module that held the additional ground forces as well as their transport craft. All three had a compact camera mounted on their ears that ran to a battery and transmitter pack tucked into the waistband of their trousers, just about visible over the shirts they wore tucked in as well. The transmitters were strong enough to send a signal from the surface of a planet to a ship in high orbit but on the surface their range was more limited by line of sight. Sands' camera and sound men also carried bags that contained their equipment in the hope that they would be able to shoot footage more openly than with the more covert cameras would allow.

After finding their way to the assault module the news team was easily able to enter it and it was here that they caught their first glimpses of the ground troops it carried since leaving their cabin. All of these were fully armed and equipped for battle and heading in the same direction so the news team opted to follow them. As expected these troops were on their way to the module's inbuilt hangar where the various craft intended to take them to the surface were stored. Most of these ships were heavily armed dropships but given the inexperience of the Brekken in modern space-based warfare their company was instead equipped with a single large transport craft known as a lighter. This craft was large enough to transport the entire company of furry troops along with all of their equipment and it offered the news team the most likely way of getting to the surface of Sanctuary without being noticed.

"Okay that's our ride." Sands said, peering around the side of a forklift truck used to load supplies aboard the troop carriers, "It's big enough that it'll have room to hide in and it's stuffed full of Brekken who won't be able to identify us. Let's go." and she suddenly burst out of hiding and ran across the hangar.

A platoon of Brekken was in the process of marching up a large access ramp to the lighter's main troop compartment and the lighter's load master was sufficiently focused on them that Sands was able to slip past him. However, her camera and sound operators were slower off the mark and the Brekken platoon had finished boarding the lighter before they could get even half way from the forklift to the ramp and as soon as he had counted the last of the Brekken aboard the load master turned and closed it.

"Damn no!" Sands' cameraman exclaimed as they both ground to a halt.

"Think we can get aboard another one Dave?" the sound man asked but the cameraman shook his head.

"No, look at them. Just one platoon of Gurkhas a piece. We'd stick out like a sore thumb." he said before noticing one of the ground crew looking towards them, "Speaking of which I think standing here while everyone else is busy is pretty suspicious as well. We should get out of here before anyone checks who we are."

"What about Sandra?" the sound man said.

"That stuck up cow can film her own segments for once. That head cam will send everything back here to us

to process. The only difference is that she won't get to boss us around while she does it." the cameraman told him.

The *Warspite* and *Enigma* both performed rapid course corrections when the other Commonwealth capital ships joined them in orbit around Sanctuary, the lighter corvettes and scouts having been left with the Genex convoy to ensure the continued safety of the occupants and to support the marine forces still going from ship to ship. The frigates and destroyers joined the two cruisers in low orbit while the heavy picket positioned itself further away so that its enhanced sensor arrays would have a much wider field of view. This change in heading was specifically planned to appear as if the two larger ship were simply adjusting to a new, much larger formation while continuing to scan the surface of Sanctuary while in reality it was positioning them so that the missile command centre was positioned just within their line of sight, close to the horizon where their weapons could be used to provide support to the troops that would be assaulting it.

"Are there any signs that the AI is responding to our presence?" Reeves asked as he studied the map on the central console.

"Nothing captain." Lucas replied, "Although we are picking up what looks like an air defence lidar system from the factory complex two kilometres from the landing zone."

"The AI must be turning it into another automated production facility." Knight commented and Reeves nodded.

"Yes but it gives us more cover for our landing. We'll have our bombers hit it from high altitude before our troops land. It will look like we're trying to knock out the machines' production. Lieutenant Commander Goldman what is the status of our assault force?" he said.

"Dropships and lighter ready to go. Fighters and bombers ready to launch in support sir." Goldman told him and Reeves nodded.

"Give the word commander. Commence drop." he ordered.

Knight then glanced at Hayes.

"You used to live here didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes, I had an apartment in the capital." she answered.

"Maybe the marines could swing by and pick up anything you need." Knight suggested with a smile.

"The offer is appreciated commander but having marines rummaging through my closets is something I'll pass on." Hayes replied.

Emerging from the *Warspite's* launch tubes and hangar module, the two dozen superiority fighters assigned to provide air cover to the ground forces were the first to enter Sanctuary's atmosphere, followed shortly after by the bomber squadron. Only after these attack craft had launched did the dropships and lighter carrying the ground troops who would carry out the actual assault follow them.

"*Warspite* this is Archangel we're entering the atmosphere now. We have the lidar on our scopes." Shaw reported as she led her squadron into the atmosphere.

"Understood Archangel. You are cleared to engage." Goldman responded.

"We've got a launch." Mori said when the fighter's sensors picked up a sudden heat bloom from the surface.

"Missile or drone?" Shaw asked.

"Missile." Mori responded and Shaw switched her communications to broadcast to the other craft in the assault force, "We've got incoming. All craft deploy countermeasures and break. Watch for more launches."

With each fighter and bomber ejecting a cloud of reflective chaff the ground based laser emitter that was guiding the missile was suddenly overwhelmed and it lost track of its original target. Lacking guidance information from the surface, the missile flew through the large gaps between the attack craft now that they had scattered before self destructing too far away to inflict any damage on any of them.

This turned out to be just a test shot to gauge the attack crafts' reaction though and there were five more heat blooms in rapid succession as the autoloading launcher fired again, this time enabling the missiles to select their own targets should the ground station lose track of the original one.

"Archangel this is Knockout, we've tagged the lidar. Seeker is armed." the pilot of one of the Commonwealth bombers told Shaw.

"Copy that Knockout. Fire for effect." she replied as she took evasive action to avoid one of the missiles that appeared to be closing on her fighter and moments later a missile dropped from the bomber. Its engine immediately flared into life and the weapon sped downwards, homing in on the emissions from the lidar array being used to acquire targets for the surface to air missile system. Detecting this launch and determining the nature of the threat the artificial intelligence controlling the missile system shut off the lidar in an attempt to fool the missile. However, the targeting system of the incoming missiles had already logged the position of the lidar and even when the energy emissions ceased it continued towards that spot until it exploded several metres above the ground and sent a blast of molten metal right through its target.

Shaw flinched momentarily as one of the fighters was caught in an explosion then breathed a sigh of relief when she saw a parachute open that was connected to the cockpit that had successfully ejected just in time to save the crew.

“Kaz mark that pod’s landing point. One of the dropships will have to recover the crew.” she said.

“On it. Marking pod now.” he responded before adding, “I’m not seeing any more launches or contacts. “

“Okay then the troops are good to go.” Shaw said, “This is Archangel to transports, the way is clear. We’ll be watching from above.”

While the fighters and bombers maintained a relatively high altitude to provide cover just in case the machines had aerial drones that they had been holding back the dropships and lighter all descended right down to the surface.

The dropships paused just long enough for the platoon of light infantry or the single squad of heavy infantry that they carried to deploy before once again rising up into the sky, their weapon bays opening to reveal missiles that could be called down in support of the infantry they had just deployed. On the other hand when the lighter carrying the Brekken infantry landed its access points opened and the alien troops began to march out more slowly.

“Secure this area!” Colonel Garrash yelled as he strode down a ramp and looked around, “I want lookouts on that rise over there and second platoon is to get to work, I want those support missiles deployed in under an hour.”

Although the lighter itself carried only a single defensive turret it had ample cargo space to carry heavy weapons to support the Brekken and in addition to the more conventional mortars and heavy machine guns there were a number of large boxlike launchers that carried missiles identical to those carried by the dropships for ground support. These missiles were designed to be summoned by individual infantrymen and guided to their targets by laser designators built into the optical sights of their rifles. This system gave every infantryman the power to destroy even the heaviest of armoured vehicles without being weighed down by the bulk and mass of weapons powerful enough to achieve this while avoiding the risk of losing this capability by having a specialist operator killed before being able to use his weapon. It was common for the launching boxes to be buried to provide them with camouflage and protection but given the amount of time available to the assault force on this occasion they would be deployed above ground, requiring only a relatively solid surface from which to deploy their contents.

As the Brekken were deploying from the lighter another small craft descended from the sky and landed in the area now occupied by them. This shuttle was not a Commonwealth craft and as Garrash walked towards it a hatch opened to allow a squad of armoured Genex warriors to emerge, followed by the old man himself along with his granddaughter and another pair of slender looking Genex. Given the potential danger for the old man on Sanctuary he wore body armour and a helmet just like the warriors and the other members of his party.

“Ah Colonel Garrash, your men are preparing for battle I see.” the old man said.

“Yes, we should be ready soon. Given the nature of our opposition I expect to need a lot of anti-armour weapons.” the Brekken officer replied.

“That is likely. Our robotic forces included a lot of heavier fighting machines designed to be proof against small arms.” the old man told him.

All of a sudden the conversation was interrupted when the radio operator staying close to Garrash passed his handset to the colonel.

“It’s Major Willis for you sir.” the other Brekken told him.

“Very good.” Garrash replied as he accepted the handset and lifted it to his head, “Go ahead major, this is Colonel Garrash.”

“Colonel what’s your status?” Willis asked.

“My men are offloading and establishing a perimeter now. Secretary Dalton has arrived with his party.” Garrash responded.

“Very good, I’m heading for your location now. The AI is bound to have seen us land and is probably sending forces to engage us. I recommend that your men dig in. Don’t wait for any instruction from me before engaging the enemy, just let loose with everything you have.” Willis said and Garrash nodded.

“Your advice is appreciated major. My men will do us proud I’m sure.” he said.

“I’m sure they will colonel. From now on though there is to be absolute radio silence. My marines and the Gurkhas are going to start our advance towards the target. Our remaining heavy infantry will head for your position to escort the secretary. I don’t want any signals giving our movements away, the machines have to keep believing that our objective is the industrial site to the west while we head south.”

“Very good major. We’ll be ready to join you there. Garrash out.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Thundercloud asked when he heard Willis’ conversation with the Brekken officer. Although he was a fleet officer and technically a non-combatant on this occasion Thundercloud wore

a camouflaged uniform identical to a marine that included body armour and also had both a sidearm and personal defence weapon to provide him with the means to defend himself.

"Is what a good idea doctor?" the marine responded.

"Using the Brekken to hold the landing zone. They've never faced anything like these machines before." Thundercloud said.

"Which is why they'll have a much better chance of surviving if they're trying to hold a defensive position than advancing through enemy territory towards one. Captain Tamang's men are best suited to scouting work so they're on point and we'll be behind them watching our flanks. Once we're in position to assault the command centre then I'll send a runner to bring up the Brekken. In the meantime you stick close to me doc and if we come across any Genex then you can check them out." Willis said before he turned to where Bernard and a small team of engineers from the Warspite who had also accompanied the marines were checking that their equipment had survived the journey, "Are you ready?" he called out to them.

"Yes, it looks like everything is functional. If our Genex friends can't get control of the missiles then this is the best chance we've got of circumventing their security." Bernard responded as he stood up straight, pulling a pack of equipment onto his back as he did so, "Though from what I've been told even this would be a long shot."

"Slim odds are better than none commander." Willis said.

"Maybe, but if it comes down to trying to hack the Genex system I think we might be better off just asking Captain Reeves to pray for one of his convenient miracles." Bernard replied before Willis signalled for the marines to start moving.

As equipment was being offloaded from the lighter it was easy for Sands to disembark without being noticed simply by picking up the smallest container she could find and carrying it down the nearest ramp before setting it down on the ground. Of course this caused some brief confusion as the Brekken and the lighter's load master attempted to locate the container but this did not matter to Sands, instead she focused on getting away from the lighter as quickly as she could.

The navy blue uniform she wore was distinct from those worn by ground forces and it meant that she stood out as she headed into a nearby wooded area. However, those Brekken that saw her just assumed that she was carrying out some task related to the landing and launching process of the lighter that they were not familiar with and none of them attempted to interfere with her. Hurrying deeper into the woods she crouched down beside a tree that was obviously indigenous to Sanctuary, being a species that she did not recognise and looked around.

Although she could hear the sounds of the Brekken preparing their position and the lighter's engines still idling there was nothing to indicate where the human troops were located and she began to worry that she would end up just wandering the woods at random unable to find them. However, this changed when she heard the sound of something forcing its way through the undergrowth. Concerned that this might be a force of machines coming to attack the Commonwealth landing zones she pressed herself up against the tree and peered around it. However, instead of the robotic infantry she expected to see advancing through the woods she instead saw a squad of men in powered armour of a design that matched that used by the Nova Rodinan troops, complete with Cyrillic writing and she breathed a sigh of relief that they were friendly troops.

Sands still did not want to reveal her presence to any of the Commonwealth ground forces and so she remained motionless and hidden, aware that the powered armour worn by the Rodinan soldiers was fitted with an array of sensors to detect movement and body heat. Only when the heavily armoured troops had gone past did she emerge from behind the tree to follow them, still trying to keep enough distance between her and them that she thought their sensors would not detect her.

Disappointingly Sands quickly realised that the Rodinan troops were heading back the way she had come, towards the Brekken position and she stopped before any of the alien sentries could notice her. Fortunately for her the Rodians soon appeared again, this time in the company of a squad of Genex warriors and among them she noticed the smaller forms of the old man, his granddaughter and the thinkers who had accompanied them. The only reason Sands could think of for the troops in powered armour to have come to meet the old man's party was to provide them with an escort to the other human troops and once again she began to follow them, smiling now that she knew she would soon be able to report on what was going on on the front lines instead of just having to wait for whatever brief reports were handed to her aboard the Warspite.

However, the general quiet of the woods as Sands followed the human and Genex troops was suddenly broken by the sound of an explosion coming from behind them.

The artillery shell detonated above the lighter, intercepted by its laser turret but the pilot was unwilling to risk his craft being hit by further shells by keeping it on the ground.

"Okay we're lifting off. Everyone hold on and close us up." he told his crew over the intercom and the lighter's engines roared as it rose up off the ground.

Outside the Brekken rushed for cover, officers yelling orders to their men as they attempted to determine the source of the attack. Having spent a great deal of time listening to the advice given to him by Major Willis, Colonel Garrash knew that his men had an asset available to them now that they had not had on their home world and he grabbed hold of the handset for the long ranged radio carried by one of his nearby men.

"Archangel this is Colonel Garrash. We are under fire. Can you identify the source?" he transmitted.

In the cockpit of her fighter Shaw turned her head.

"Tell me what you've got Kaz." she said.

"Radar tracks the shell as coming from eight kilometres north west." Mori responded.

"Okay boys we've got hostile forces to the north west. I want eyes on and an estimate of their numbers."

Shaw broadcast to the other attack craft pilots and the squadron positioned closest to the north west peeled off from the formation to investigate.

"Archangel this is Reaperman, I have an armoured division strength force approaching from the north west." one of the pilots reported before all of a sudden he added, "Coming under fire!"

The machine force was made up of several hundred armoured vehicles moving towards the Brekken position and from several of these there were flashes of light as they fired at the fighter and the pilot ejected countermeasures before breaking off.

"*Warspite* this is Archangel, I have a fire mission request. Sustained bombardment to north west of landing point alpha. Two thousand metre spread centred at eight kilometres." Shaw transmitted.

"Copy that Archangel." Goldman's voice responded, "Fire mission incoming."

The Commonwealth attack craft veered away from the advancing armoured force before there was a series of rapid flashes from the sky accompanied by claps of thunder as projectiles launched from the *Warspite's* ventrally mounted gauss cannons entered the atmosphere. Moving at speeds intended to allow them to cross thousands of kilometres of space before an enemy vessel had the chance to move out of the way, the projectiles struck the ground just seconds after entering the atmosphere and even though they contained no explosives the massive kinetic energy that was released by the impacts sent shock waves through the ground and air around them. The immediate effect of this was to hurl both debris from the ground and nearby machines into the air before these then came crashing down to the ground again and causing further destruction.

The salvo of projectiles from the orbiting *Warspite* inflicted massive damage to the robotic division but there were units that were able to escape the initial bombardment and these quickly began to regroup. The debris hurled into the air combined with smoke from the multiple fires that had been started formed a thick cloud that obscured observation by visual means as well as disrupting other passive and active sensors. This enabled the regrouped robotic forces were able to use this cloud as cover as they pressed onwards towards the Brekken position.

As this forces emerged from the cover of the cloud it was detected almost immediately both by the orbiting *Warspite* and the attack craft operating in the atmosphere. However, because of their proximity to the Brekken troops another orbital bombardment would have risked hitting friendly troops so the *Warspite* could do nothing but watch.



Many of the Brekken troops stared in awe at the orbital bombardment, beginning with the trails of fire that shot across the sky caused by the extreme heat surrounding the projectiles as they entered the atmosphere with claps of thunder, followed by the succession of loud booming sounds that were accompanied by the appearance of massive plumes of debris created by the impacts. Brekken history described the orbital bombardment that had heralded the arrival of humans openly on their planet more than fifty years earlier but none of those present had witnessed the event first hand so this was their first experience of such a thing. The scale of the destruction left a number of the alien troop openly saying that nothing could have survived the bombardment but the transmissions from the attack craft and troop transports circling overhead told a different story to Colonel Garrash.

"Okay everyone you've had the show." he called out when the bombardment ceased, "Now it's our turn. The enemy is still coming this way. We need to be ready for them."

Knowing the direction that the machines were closing from allowed the Brekken company to concentrate most of their strength in that direction while leaving smaller numbers of troops to cover other approaches just in case the machines attempted to circumvent their main position. The uneven ground provided many places where the Brekken were able to take cover and await the arrival of the robotic forces and they took full advantage of this, deploying in numerous spots from where they could support one another once the enemy finally appeared.

The first of the machines to show itself was an automated wheeled vehicle covered in various sensor and communication antennas, obviously a scout intended to determine the strength and deployment of the Commonwealth troops. The Brekken were not going to simply let the machines gather valuable intelligence about their disposition though and as soon as they saw the robotic scout several of the heavy machine guns they had set up opened fire on it from different directions at the same time. The tripod mounted automatic weapons fired a mix of armour piercing and incendiary ammunition but the armour plating of the robotic scout's chassis was thick enough to resist these and the automated vehicle turned sharply to try and avoid the sustained machine gun fire before a fluke shot was able to cause damage. However, this new heading brought the scout into the line of fire of a Brekken armed with a grenade launcher that he had loaded with anti-armour rounds and the alien soldier emerged from his hiding place just long enough to fire two rounds in quick succession at the vehicle. The first of these missed by a small margin but the second impacted against a sensor cluster at the front of the scout and blew a fist sized hole all the way through its armour plating. The jet of molten metal then spread out inside the scout and there were multiple jets of flame from various small openings as the scout caught fire, burning furiously as it hurtled onwards out of control before it struck a rock, flipped over and exploded.

The scout had still been able to report some of the Brekken positions to the artificial intelligence guiding the machine force though and seconds later there was the whistling of mortar shells as a barrage of explosives rained down on the hills being used by them for cover. The barrage was only a part of the machines' assault though as while the mortar barrage was pinning the Brekken troops down more heavily armoured vehicles appeared along with numerous infantry marching alongside them.

The Brekken were prepared for this though and several of them located in positions that were not directly under fire took aim at the armoured vehicles with their rifles. Rather than fire these weapons that had no chance of damaging armoured vehicles though they simply activated the laser targeting units built into their sights. As soon as these acquired a target a brief signal was transmitted from the rifle sight to the launcher boxes that had been set up in the landing area and a succession of missiles burst out of these, heading skywards. The missiles then angled towards the fighting and began to scan for the lasers designating their targets. Each laser pulsed at a unique frequency, allowing the missiles to pick out exactly which target was theirs and as soon as they located this they homed in from above.

Detonating on impact with the upper surfaces of the robotic tanks the missiles' warheads easily punched large holes in their armour, destroying the vital electronics inside them and detonating stored fuel cells and ammunition. Organic troops may have been thrown into a panic as their armoured support suffered such casualties but the robotic infantry suffered no such problems with morale. Instead they dived aside only to escape the explosions before getting back to their feet and continuing their advance.

Sporadically the Brekken fired at the robotic infantry using every small arm at their disposal. The lighter seven millimetre rounds fired by their rifles and squad machine guns generally required repeated hits against the well armoured infantry before finding a weak point but with dozens of such weapons being fired it was inevitable that some would find such vulnerabilities. On the other hand the heavy machine guns that had been ineffective against the armoured scout proved to be highly effective against the infantry. Some of the armour plates that covered their bodies were able to deflect glancing hits from the high calibre armour piercing rounds but direct hits pierced even these and dozens of the machines convulsed as they fell.

A roaring from overhead heralded the arrival of the Commonwealth bombers. Closing at a low altitude they were able to use the hilly terrain for cover so that they would not be visible to the machines' anti-aircraft units until they were almost in position to deploy the munitions they carried.

Rather than advanced 'smart' munitions this time the bombers deployed simple cluster bombs that broke open in mid flight to deploy clouds of smaller bomblets that were a mix of high explosive, incendiary and shaped charge weapons that exploded on impact either with the ground or any of the remaining armoured vehicles. Combined blasts from these created a cloud of flames that spread along the machines' front line and at the same time a cheer went up from the Brekken as they witnessed the destruction.

"Quiet down and stand by." Garrash ordered, broadcasting his command to the entire company, guessing that there could still be some of the robots functioning and sure enough moments later a number of the infantry models who had been shielded from the worst of the blast by the larger vehicle types emerged from the cloud of smoke. All of these showed at least slight signs of damage and a number of them were missing arms and weapons but they still continued to advance. Those no longer capable of fighting on their own positioned themselves ahead of the combat capable units to act as shields against the gunfire that came immediately from the Brekken positions in the hills overlooking them. The more heavily damaged robots were much easier targets, their armour already split in places and they rapidly fell but the robots advancing behind them quickly plotted the source of the attacks and returned fire with short bursts intended to try and keep the Brekken's heads down while the machines advanced towards them.

This advance was a last desperate act by the machines though, the guided missiles combined with the close air support provided by the bombers had destroyed all of their armoured support and now less than a company's worth of infantry remained. In theory an equal force to the Brekken but the short statured aliens were well positioned and armed with heavy weapons that cut down the robots as they advanced in the open until the last of them fell.

The Brekken remained in their positions still though, not yet certain that all of the machines had been destroyed and Garrash waited until the cloud of smoke left by the bombing run had retreated enough until he took the handset from his radio operator again.

"This is Colonel Garrash to *Warspite*. Enemy believed destroyed, position secure. Will forward casualty data as soon as it is available. Garrash out." he signalled and when his men heard this broadcast over their company communication network as well as being beamed up into space they cheered again.

"Our sensors appear to confirm the colonel's report captain." Goldman said while Reeves studied a map of the area surrounding the landing zone, missile command centre and everything in between. Right now this showed only the positions of the Brekken infantry and the various craft providing air support, the marines and Gurkhas having shut off everything that could give their position away to the enemy.

"I want shuttles on standby to bring the wounded back up here." Reeves said. Let Shaw know that they'll be coming when we get confirmation of numbers and that she is to provide cover for them.

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

"Bearing." Knight asked.

"From the data I've been given I'd say its coming from the direction of CD forty-five thirteen three-eight-three." Cortez answered.

"Redoubt." Hayes commented.

"Confirmed captain." Thomas added as he checked the readings against his navigational database.

"Captain that wave is big." Goldman added.

"It's the AI's fleet." Reeves said, "What's their ETA?"

"I'd say about eight to twelve hours if our information about their maximum speed is accurate." Goldman said.

"Why would we lie about the top speed of our ships?" Hayes said.

"You have no reason to Jennifer, but the AI could have improved things for all we know." Reeves said before he looked towards Goldman again, "Commander alert the fleet to stand by. I want only drones used for the CAPs. Keep our flight crews ready for action as soon as the enemy get here."

Although the marines and Gurkha force advancing towards the command centre were maintaining radio silence they were still able to witness the devastating orbital barrage and they heard the subsequent communication between the other units.

"It sounds like your Brekken allies have acquitted themselves well major." the old man commented when he heard the news of their victory.

"I don't like that there were no casualty figures given. Perhaps I should-" Thundercloud began but before he could finish his sentence a four man fire team of Gurkhas appeared ahead of the marines walking back towards them. The Gurkhas were not alone though, instead they had a number of people in civilian clothing with them. These were obviously Genex and there was a clear difference in the size of the members of the group, with one being large and muscular enough to be a warrior while the others had the look of the other

castes. Some of the Gurkhas also had additional weapons slung over their shoulders but these did not have the look of the weapons Willis was now used to seeing in the hands of Genex troops and he guessed that this was a group of civilians who had been able to evade the machines by fleeing into the wilderness. Although technically the Genex were captives none of them were bound and it seemed unlikely that the warrior who towered over the Gurkhas would have surrendered to them in battle.

“Major Willis, Sergeant Rana reporting.” the Gurkha squad leader said, snapping to attention in front of Willis and saluting him.

“Go ahead sergeant.” Willis responded.

“Sir I must report locating this group of civilians six hundred metres ahead of us. They surrendered peacefully and we confiscated these firearms from them.” the sergeant said and the Gurkhas armed with the seized weapons stepped forwards to present them.

“Hunting rifles and shotguns.” the old man’s granddaughter said.

“We are farmers. They are all we had.” one of the workers among the group of Genex said without making eye contact with any of the Commonwealth officers or the Genex with them.

“Even him?” Bernard said, looking at the warrior and the worker who had spoken nodded.

“Yes sir.” he said, “He is a labourer for me. I would use a robot but they are too-”

“Do you know who I am?” the old man interrupted, stepping forwards and looking at the group of self confessed farm workers.

“I recognise your voice leader.” the lone warrior among the group replied, “You are the new secretary.”

“Yes, very good.” the old man said, nodding his head, “Now as secretary I order you to tell Major Willis of the Commonwealth Marine Corps what you were doing before these soldiers found you.”

“Here, show me on this.” Willis added as he reached for his tablet and bought up a map of the area on its screen before handing it to the warrior.

“The farm was here but we had to leave when the machines advanced that far and the army fell back.” the warrior said, pointing to a point on the map.

“You didn’t go with them?” Thundercloud asked.

“They had transport. We didn’t thanks to them requisitioning what we had.” the warrior said.

“How considerate.” Bernard said sarcastically.

“We knew the area so we hid in caves here by this river.” the warrior continued, moving his finger across the display, “We had a radio so we could listen for official broadcasts but we heard nothing until the secretary’s arrival. Then when we heard your ships come into land we knew that we needed to find you.”

“And during your time in hiding did you see the machines?” the old man asked.

“Yes leader. After the initial force advanced past us we saw several convoys heading along this road.” the warrior said, indicating a main highway on the map.

“Towards the capital or away from it?” the old man said.

“Away leader.” the warrior said.

“So not reinforcements to take the capital then?” the old man’s granddaughter said.

“Could they have been prisoner convoys?” Thundercloud suggested.

“They all turned off the highway close to here. The restricted zone.” the warrior said.

“Restricted zone?” Willis repeated and he looked at the old man and his granddaughter.

“That facility controls our entire strategic missile force major. It is not open to the public.” the old man’s granddaughter responded.

“Sounds like they were taking in extra troops or equipment.” Willis said.

“They have certainly upgraded the communication system it seems.” the old man pointed out.

“There have also been patrols around the perimeter of the restricted zone. Both infantry and armour.” the warrior added, “I spent a day watching and saw a patrol go past me every eighty-four minutes.”

“A time interval perhaps related to the source of the AI computer virus.” Bernard suggested.

“That gives us quite a window to move through. Assuming that they’re keeping to the same schedule.” Willis said.

“With any luck our bombardment and the Brekken have put a considerable dent in the forces they have available for a patrol.” Bernard added.

“Maybe, but I think we should wait until we’ve got our full force available to us before we try making our attack.” Willis said.

“You have a plan?” Thundercloud asked and Willis nodded.

“Yes. We and the Gurkhas will advance to the perimeter of this so-called restricted zone and deploy there. Then we’ll monitor what activity there is from the machines while our runner heads back to bring up Colonel Garrash and his Brekken.” he explained.

“What about them?” the old man’s granddaughter asked, looking at the group of farmers.

“For now they can come with us. If they know the area then they can be our guides.” Willis said.

“I can fight. I did my three years service.” the warrior said.

“And why didn’t you stay in the military?” the old man’s granddaughter responded.

"Because my battalion's leaders were all self serving fools who didn't deserve to be allowed to give orders." the warrior said.

"A honest answer and probably one that many warriors would give." the old man commented, glancing at his own security detail. Then he looked at Willis and added, "Are you prepared to give him one of those weapons back major?" and he glanced at the sporting guns that the Gurkhas had taken.

"Sure, why not?" Willis answered.

"Then it seems you may take your pick. Once you have then you can join my detail." the old man said.

The warrior then walked up to one of the Gurkhas and reached out for the semi-automatic rifle that he held. Although it lacked the ability to fire sustained bursts it would still allow him to keep up a reasonable rate of fire and it fired the same rounds as the rifles carried by the Genex troops so it was the best choice in the circumstances.

Guided by the Genex warrior the Commonwealth marines and Gurkhas continued towards the restricted area where the missile command centre was located, continuing until they reached the perimeter fence where they took cover. The sun was starting to set by this point and the troops spread out so they could cover all approaches.

"I take it that that fence is alarmed." Willis said, looking at the old man.

"Of course." he responded.

"It doesn't matter." the warrior who had guided them to here said and he pointed to where the fence disappeared over a rise in the ground, "The fence has been smashed flat about fifty metres past that hill. Even if the alarm sensors are still working in this section you can just walk around it."

Willis then turned to a nearby marine.

"Head over to Captain Tamang and have him take a platoon over that rise. I want eyes on that opening so we can judge the best way to make use of it. If he spots any machine patrols I want the intervals timing." he ordered.

"Yes major." the marine replied with a nod and he rushed off in the direction of the Gurkhas. Meanwhile Willis turned towards Bernard.

"Commander, do you have that comm laser to hand?" he asked and the engineer smiled back at him.

"Right here." he said, removing his backpack and setting it down on the ground. He then unhooked a long pouch from the rear of the pack and opened it up.

Inside this pouch there was a laser projector. This lacked the destructive power of an anti-armour laser but was still capable of projecting a highly focused beam of light over hundreds of kilometres while still being able to carry readable data, sufficient to establish a secure and virtually undetectable communications link with a spacecraft in orbit. As Bernard set this device up he also unfolded a reflector around this that would channel any responding laser into the receptors set around the side of the projector unit to allow two-way communication. The only limitation to the system was that both parties needed a direct line of sight to one another.

"Here you go." Bernard said when he had finished setting the laser up and he handed the end of a cable that ran from the base of the laser. Taking this from Bernard, Willis then plugged it into his personal radio.

"Okay I'm ready when you are commander." he said, nodding.

Bernard looked up into the sky using a pair of binoculars, searching for the orbiting *Warspite* and reading the bearing from the display of the device.

"Bearing fifty five degrees, fourteen minutes and six seconds by six-one degrees, thirty minutes and forty-six seconds." he said out loud and another of the engineers programmed this into the laser so that could aim itself directly at the *Warspite*.

"*Warspite* this is Willis. Do you read me?" Willis said into his radio when the laser settled into position and he waited for a response.

"Willis this is *Warspite*, reading you loud and clear." Goldman's voice responded.

"*Warspite* we're in position outside the target perimeter. Do you have updated scan data for us?" Willis asked.

"Affirmative major. We have two platoon strength groups of machines within the target area. Nothing heading for you though just yet. Looks like you've been able to keep off their radar for the time being." Goldman said and Willis smiled.

"Thanks *Warspite*. We'll proceed as planned. Willis out." Willis said before shutting off his radio again and disconnecting it from the communication laser. Then he looked towards another marine, "Private you need to head back to the landing zone. Tell Colonel Garrash that we're in position and he's to bring his forces up to support us. It's time that we hit those machines where it counts."

Sands had followed the Commonwealth troops as they advanced from a distance, not wanting to be spotted by any of them and this had limited what she was able to overhear. It was only when the advancing force came to a halt when the light was fading that she was able to risk getting closer, using the darkness for

cover. The troops were showing no light to give away their positions but Sands was still able to pick out their locations and when she heard the familiar sound of Willis' voice she knew that she had found what she was looking for.

Although she could hear only one side of the conversation that Willis had with the *Warspite* it was obvious from what he said that the Commonwealth troops were about to launch an offensive and this was confirmed when Willis began issuing orders for how he wanted his men to deploy. This was exactly what Sands wanted to hear, it meant that she was well placed to be able to report on the attack as it happened from the front line and she reached for the camera clipped to her ear. The compact device was equipped for low light operation and Sands set it down on the ground in front of her, angling it so that as she crouched down it would be focused on her face as she spoke.

"This is Sandra Sands reporting from the planet Sanctuary in the Alpha Indi system. A hundred years ago the Genex fled to this planet, faking their destruction so that the Commonwealth would not think to hunt for them. Now though their adopted home world has been overrun by an artificial intelligence of alien origin, the same intelligence that destroyed the Sissusk Empire and almost did the same to the colony of Verne." she said softly, concerned that her voice would carry and then she pointed towards where she had heard Willis talking, "Right now a Commonwealth led force is poised to strike at the heart of the artificial intelligence's operations on this planet and I will be reporting on this operation as it happens."

As Sands spoke the camera transmitted the footage it recorded up to the *Warspite* where her camera and sound men waited to receive it. Their equipment was set up to monitor the wireless channel that the camera was transmitting on and to sound an alert when it detected the incoming signal.

"Is it her Dave?" the sound man asked as the cameraman checked it.

"Of course. Who else would be transmitting on this channel? I made sure it wasn't one of the military ones." he replied.

"So what have we got?" the sound man said.

"Looks like an intro using the night vision setting of the camera." the cameraman, "Nothing good yet though. She could have recorded this in the hangar openly."

"Another idea turns out to be a bust. What a surprise." the sound man commented and he walked over to his bunk and lay down, "Wake me up when something worthwhile happens." he said.

"Captain we may have a problem here." one of the *Warspite's* communication officers said and Reeves turned towards him.

"What is it ensign?" he asked.

"I'm picking up a radio signal from the surface. It looks like the source is located very close to our troops." the communication officer said.

"Confirmed." Goldman added as she checked the *Warspite's* communications log, "It only lasted a few seconds but it's definitely there."

"The machines may have a surveillance unit down there that the marines have missed." Knight suggested.

"I don't think so captain. The signal was aimed upwards." Goldman said.

"One of the Genex?" Ash asked, glancing over his shoulder, "They do have a reputation for working against one another if they think they can gain from it."

"Lieutenant Lucas check that signal against the Genex encoding methods we've been given." Reeves ordered and Lucas nodded.

"Yes captain." she responded as Goldman sent her the message. Almost immediately though Lucas frowned.

"Is something wrong lieutenant?" Knight said when he noticed this.

"Yes commander. This isn't a Genex transmission, it's a Commonwealth one." she said.

"Our marines and the Gurkhas would never break radio silence." Goldman said.

"What about the Brekken? Maybe they don't realise how dangerous it is." Thomas said.

"No they were briefed. Colonel Garrash knows to maintain communications discipline." Goldman replied.

"Err this signal isn't military. It's commercial." Lucas said, "It's not even encrypted."

"Let me see it." Reeves said and Lucas forwarded the signal to the central console where Reeves opened it. Immediately a window opened on the central console that showed Sands crouched in front of her camera while wearing a Commonwealth fleet enlisted crewman's uniform and explaining what she was witnessing.

"What the hell is she doing down there?" Knight exclaimed when he saw this.

"Isn't she supposed to be in her quarters?" Hayes asked.

"Yes she should be." Reeves replied sternly and then he turned towards Lucas, "Lieutenant arm yourself and take a pair of men to that news crew's quarters. I want all their equipment seized and anyone still there placed in custody." he ordered.

"With pleasure captain." Lucas replied as she got out of her seat and headed to one of the bridge's arms lockers. From here she took a sidearm and personal defence weapon before looking at the pair of marines who were sat beside one of the entrances. Given the risks of using high velocity rounds aboard a spacecraft one of the two men was also armed with a personal defence weapon in addition to his sidearm while the other carried a shotgun instead, "You two with me." she told them.

"Captain we may have another problem here." another of the *Warspite's* sensor operators said.

"It never rains but it pours." Knight said.

"What's the issue crewman?" Reeves asked.

"I'm picking an increase in activity from the target area. I think we weren't the only ones to pick up the signal." the sensor operator said.

"We need to warn Major Willis and his men to take cover." Knight said and Reeves nodded.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman send to our marines that they're about to have company. Send it in a wide angle broadcast so the machines won't know where it's going. The major is bound to have someone listening out for further orders. Then get Lieutenant Commander Shaw to perform a flyover. If the machines are moving in the open then maybe her squadrons can take them out from the air."

Accompanied by the two marines Lucas hurried from the bridge to the quarters assigned to Sands and her news team, the marines yelling at any other crewmembers they encountered to let them past. When they reached the door to the news team's quarters one of the marines simply flung the door open without any prior warning.

"Marines! Stay where you are" the shotgun armed marine yelled as he burst into the room and the two men inside both jumped in surprise.

The cameraman had been reviewing the video footage sent by Sands again on his computer and he quickly slammed this shut before the marines could see what was on his screen but as Lucas followed the two armoured men into the room she smiled at him.

"I take you wouldn't like to show me what you were just looking at would you?" she asked.

"What the hell are you doing bursting in like this and pointing guns at us?" the cameraman responded when he came to his senses.

"Checking on you and your boss. Where is she by the way?" Lucas said.

"She just stepped out to stretch her legs. We were told that we could go anywhere not restricted." the cameraman answered.

"That's true." Lucas said as she quickly looked around, "However, stowing away on a troop carrier is not considered an area where you are free to wander." she said and when she caught sight of the stolen uniforms that the two men had simply left draped over a chair she added, "Especially not when you're illegally impersonating members of this ship's crew."

The sound man winced.

"You two and that bloody laundry idea." he said.

"All we did was take a couple of uniforms. We were sent here to report on your mission anyway. Your own fleet command wants us to tell the people what's going on." the cameraman said.

"Not when it means putting lives at risk by breaking radio silence in a combat zone. Some people might just call that high treason." Lucas responded and the men's jaws both dropped as they looked at one another, the seriousness of their actions dawning on them.

The Commonwealth fighters flew above the heads of the ground forces ahead of the heavier bombers and Shaw glanced down at the ground.

"I don't see them Kaz." she said.

"They're down there. I've got them on thermal imaging with the Brekken moving up behind." Mori told her from the rear seat before there were several flashes in the distance.

"I saw that though." Shaw said.

"Artillery." Mori said.

"Then that's our target." Shaw said as she activated her communications with the other attack craft as well as the forces on the ground beneath her, "The enemy have artillery. Major Willis your boys need to take cover, we'll handle this." she broadcast, "All attack craft follow me in and watch for ground fire."

Even moving at subsonic speeds to enable them to engage slow moving or static ground targets, it took just seconds for the fighters to flyover the advancing robotic ground forces and despite the darkness Mori was able to see them clearly using his and Shaw's fighter's sensors.

"Looks like a mixed bag. I see infantry, light armour, self propelled artillery and – Lynn break starboard!" he snapped and without waiting for an explanation Shaw rolled the fighter sharply to the right just in time to see a small object fly past in the opposite direction.

"What the hell was that?" she exclaimed, "It didn't look like a missile."

"Drone. Maybe a scout or spotter but it could have been a kamikaze hunter killer." Mori said.

"Archangel to all craft, watch for enemy air activity." Shaw broadcast to the other attack craft while Mori scanned for more such drones but moments later there was an explosion from behind the fighter as one of them collided with a drone and the pair exploded in mid air, "Damn it!" Shaw hissed before she spotted a flash of artillery fire from the ground, "Let's see if we can even up the score." she added as she brought the fighter's nose down and turned towards the artillery piece before squeezing the triggers of her gauss cannons.

The high velocity projectiles possessed considerable armour piercing capability and they easily punched through the plating of the automated artillery piece. The path of the projectiles ruptured fuel cells and ammunition stores, causing various volatile chemicals to mix freely and uncontrollably and just as Shaw pulled her fighter up again the sky was lit up by an explosion as the contents of the artillery gun detonated. The artificial intelligence that guided the robotic force had learned from the air strikes against the forces it had sent against what it believed to be the Commonwealth's main landing zone though and this time its forces were spread out sufficiently that the explosion did not trigger a chain reaction and Shaw could not easily target a second artillery gun right away.

There were still more attack craft coming after Shaw's fighter though and these targeted the other artillery guns even as they continued firing. Although the self propelled guns were armed with light automatic weapons for close in defence these were ineffective against the hulls of the fighters and the only air defence that the artillery had were the compact drones that attempted to intercept the Commonwealth craft by ramming them. However, these machines moved too slowly to reach the fighters and there were no more collisions as the fighters strafed the remaining artillery guns, destroying them one by one.

This left the infantry and other armoured units still making their way towards the Commonwealth ground forces and it was against these that the bombers acted. Having expended their wide area munitions the bombers were now limited to precision guided weapons and because these were most effective against the robotic armoured vehicles they became the bombers' primary targets.

The machines' main defence against this assault from the air was speed and manoeuvrability and the automated armoured vehicles accelerated, pulling away from their accompanying infantry on foot. Although this made them harder to target by the bombers it brought them closer to the forward elements of the Commonwealth forces, the Gurkhas and despite the bombardment they had suffered they were still able to

organise their defence. Using the lasers attached to their rifles' optical sights the Gurkhas designated the rapidly closing tanks as targets for missiles that were then released by the loitering dropships. Once again the armoured vehicles were highly vulnerable to these missiles and to defend themselves they returned fire on the human troops directly. This was partially effective as Gurkhas who were hit ceased to mark the tanks and the missiles they had been guiding in lost their locks, slamming into the ground and exploding without doing any damage. More of the missiles did find their targets though and in under a minute the size of the armoured force had been reduced from more than thirty vehicles to just half that number. Some of these were troop carriers, automated vehicles carrying automated infantry that rapidly disembarked to charge into the Gurkhas' lines while the heavier tanks forced their way through to attack the forces behind them.

The artillery bombardment had not lasted long but it had inflicted significant casualties on the marines and Gurkhas and Thundercloud had to rely on the marine corpsmen and Gurkha medics to direct him to those who were most in need but were still savable. However, the sound of powerful engines interrupted this work. "Here they come! Stand to!" Willis yelled as the robotic tanks appeared.

First to respond were the marines armed with anti-armour lasers, firing them at the unmanned armoured vehicles. The tanks had the best armour protection available with Genex technology and this made them highly resistant to attack though. Therefore, although the laser burned deep gouges in the sides of the vehicles they were unable to penetrate the armour entirely before the machines returned fire using machine guns and cannon shells filled with thousands of tiny flechettes designed to rip through infantry.

Willis aimed his rifle at the nearest of the tanks, studying the fighting machine through his sight. The tank had slowed down considerably now to engage the infantry that surrounded it and the other vehicles, its turret rotating so that the sensor receptors mounted on it could provide it with as much data on the surrounding area as possible. These receptors that were scattered all over the tanks' hulls represented a weakness that the marines were quick to try and exploit. Their nature meant that they could not be heavily armoured and the human troops fired rifles and machine guns at them, their weapons set to automatic to increase the chance that they might hit and damage them. The intention was to blind the tanks and make them easier to approach.

"That vehicle is blind on this side." Willis heard the old man's granddaughter say and he looked around to see her pointing at another tank.

"Yes but its turret can still turn towards us." he responded.

"Then get your men over there to distract it." the young woman told him and she looked towards a squad of marines about fifty metres away.

"Fire team Charlie Two One do you read me?" Willis signalled with his radio.

"Loud and clear major." the leader of the unit of marines replied.

"I want you and your men to fire at the vehicle with the big blue diamond marked on it to the east of your position. Get it to focus on you." Willis told the man.

"Understood major. Firing now." the squad leader said and moments later there was a barrage of small arms fire as all of the marines in the squad fired at the tank. The tank reacted by turning its turret towards the marines and returning fire with the machine guns built into it. As soon as she saw the turret start to turn though the old man's granddaughter leapt out of cover and broke into a run, racing across the open ground towards the armoured vehicle. As soon as she reached it she grabbed hold of a handhold on its hull so that she could pull herself up on top of it. She quickly located an ammunition hatch on top of the turret and climbed up to try and get this open. However, the hatch was stuck fast and she quickly looked around for an alternate means of gaining access to the interior of the tank. Before she could find a way in though she heard the sound of someone else climbing onto the vehicle and she turned around just in case it was a robotic infantryman come to get her off it. However, instead of a machine she saw Bernard climbing up using the same handholds she had done.

"Commander Bernard what are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm guessing you're trying to open this tin can up and I came to lend a hand. Well, a torch actually." Bernard answered and he produced a handheld cutting torch from his belt.

"Excellent." the old man's granddaughter said, "See if you can get this open." and she pointed to the ammunition hatch.

Before Bernard could start cutting though the tank lurched forwards as it attempted to shake the two people off its roof and both of them clung on.

"I need you to hold onto me." Bernard said and the old man's granddaughter nodded as he crawled towards the loading hatch with the torch in his hand and she grabbed hold of his webbing with one hand to make sure that he would not fall if the tank suddenly changed course or speed again. This allowed Bernard to activate the cutting torch and use it to burn through the lock holding the hatch closed before sliding back away from it, "Okay it's open." he said and the old man's granddaughter smiled.

"Time to jump then." she said as she took a grenade from her webbing.



"No need to tell me twice." Bernard responded before he jumped from the tank and rolled across the ground. On the other hand the old man's granddaughter primed the grenade and tossed it into the ammunition store before she jumped down from the tank as well and landed beside Bernard. Seconds later there was a 'pop' sound as the grenade went off and a cloud of white smoke began to billow from the tank. This was only the beginning though as the burning phosphorous used to create this smoke triggered some of the explosives contained in the tank's ammunition and started a chain reaction that blew the tank's turret into the air while the rest of the vehicle burst into flames.

Both Bernard and the old man's granddaughter remained face down on the ground as debris rained down around them before looking up as this subsided and they saw that the tank was now nothing but a burning wreck with smaller fires burning around them. Before either could say anything there was another large explosion as a second tank was destroyed and looking towards this Bernard and the old man's granddaughter saw several heavily armoured figures striding past the ruined vehicle as the remaining squad of Rodinan heavy infantry hunted for another target.

The weapons mounted on the powered armour could not penetrate the frontal or side armour of the tanks but the squad split into two groups to surround another armoured vehicle and while the tank engaged one group it came under fire from the second targeting the thinnest armour at the rear where the concentrated fire of grenade launchers loaded with anti-armour rounds and a pair of lasers were able to penetrate it.

While the robotic tanks had pushed deep into the Commonwealth lines the infantry supporting them engaged the Gurkhas in front of the marines, attempting to break through to support the tanks. The Gurkhas were determined fighters though and although the robotic infantry were heavily armoured they persisted in firing their weapons as the machines came closer and several of them collapsed as rifle and machine gun rounds and grenade fragments found weak points in their casings. As the robots came within arms reach the Gurkhas did not fall back either, instead they drew their traditional curved kukris and used them as well. Although a simple steel blade, no matter how heavy or sharp, could not cut through the composite armour plates that protected the robots the kukris could still be forced into the joints between these plates and used to pry them apart before forcing the blade in deeper. The Gurkhas had practised such combat techniques since the introduction of powered armour and they worked just as well against totally automated troops. Not equipped with hand to hand weapons of their own, the robotic infantry were bizarrely at a disadvantage as the Gurkhas counter attacked instead of fleeing and the artificial intelligence directing their actions ordered them to fall back rather than press on. However, this too exposed the robots to damage as the Gurkhas turned back to their ranged weapons, using them from point blank range.

Circling overhead Mori saw the robotic infantry start to fall back while their carriers provided covering fire, preventing the Gurkhas from giving chase.

"Looks like they're pulling back." he said before checking the status of the tanks that had broken through the Gurkhas' line and he saw that all of these were now burning and the same thermal imaging sensors showed a large number of heat signatures advancing as the Brekken finally arrived to reinforce the marines and Gurkhas, "And the Brekken are here."

"Right as the party's ending." Shaw commented, "What's the range between our boys and those machines?" "Seventy metres so far. It looks like they're pulling back to carriers. The Gurkhas can't follow without exposing themselves to attack."

"Then I guess it's up to us." Shaw said as she activated her communications again, "Okay boys follow me in. It looks like we've got one last run to make."

Angling her fighter's nose downwards, Shaw had the craft swoop down towards the troop carriers that the robotic infantry was falling back towards. One of these turned its turret mounted laser and started to elevate it towards the fighter but Shaw fired her gauss cannons before the vehicle could fire its weapon and the hail of projectiles tore through the carrier's upper hull, wrecking the turret and immobilising the carrier.

Pulling up before she crashed into the remains of the ruined troop carrier, Shaw found another of the vehicles in her sights and she fired again, sending a stream of projectiles into its side.. These projectiles struck only the troop compartment at the rear of the vehicle and tore apart the robotic infantry that had already boarded it but the vehicle itself remained operational and Shaw's fighter flew over it before another of her squadron finished it off with a second burst of gauss cannon fire.

This was followed by more fighters performing strafing runs along the line of troop carriers so that there was no chance of stray projectiles going into the Gurkhas' line by accident and as the last of the fighters passed over them all of the armoured carriers as well as the robotic troops they carried were nothing but burning wrecks on the ground.

"Archangel to *Warspite*, targets destroyed. The area looks secure from up here." Shaw signalled as she looked down at the ground from her fighter, the burning troop carriers showing up against the blackness of the surrounding terrain.

"How bad is it doctor?" Willis asked as Thundercloud approached where he stood with Bernard, Garrash, Tamang, the old man and his granddaughter.

"Thirty-one dead. Another forty-six wounded." Thundercloud said, "That's the total for both marines and Gurkhas."

"I want that reporter found. She gave away our position to the machines and-" Willis began before a pair of marines came hurrying towards them.

"Major I think you should see this. All of you." one of them called out and Willis nodded.

"Okay we're coming." he said and the entire group began to follow the two marines as they turned and walked back in the direction they had come from.

This took the group in the direction of someone, obviously a woman calling out for help and as they got closer they saw that there were also two more marines standing guard. As the woman on the ground at the feet of the marines came into view the beams from their flash lights showed that she was wearing a fleet uniform as well as clutching at an injury to her side and at first Willis was puzzled as to how she had come to be on the planet. However, then he recognised her as the reporter Sands and he rushed towards her.

"You!" he hissed, reaching down to drag her to her feet and she cried out in pain.

"It looks like she took a hit from shrapnel sir." one of the marines standing over her said.

"I need medical help." Sands said.

"Medical help?" Willis snapped back at her, "You gave our position to the enemy and now we have more than thirty men who are beyond any help. You're a traitor and given that you're wearing one of our uniforms I think that makes you a spy as well." Willis then let go of Sands and she fell back to the ground, unable to stand unaided because of the shrapnel wound to her side. As she fell Willis brought his rifle to his shoulder and pointed it downwards, aiming directly at Sands.

"Wait!" Thundercloud snapped, pushing Willis' rifle out of the way.

"Doctor she killed those men as surely as if she'd pulled a trigger herself." Willis said sternly.

"I believe that the major does have the authority to carry out an execution in these circumstances." the old man commented and Thundercloud turned to look at him.

"Perhaps he does but I can't just stand by and watch it happen." he said before looking down at Sands, "She should go back to the Commonwealth and stand trial."

"Fine." Willis said and he turned to Garrash, "Colonel could you spare a couple of men to keep her in custody?" he asked and the Brekken nodded.

"I think so major." he responded.

"Okay doc, you've got your wish. I suppose you'd better make sure she doesn't bleed out before we can ship her back to the Warspite though because that would be an absolute tragedy." Willis commented sarcastically and as he turned and walked away Thundercloud knelt beside Sands.

"Let me see." he said, pulling her hand from over her wound.

"Thank you for saving my life." she said.

"I've only just starting inspecting your wound." Thundercloud replied without looking at her directly.

"No, I mean from Major Willis." Sands said and Thundercloud looked over his shoulder at where Willis and the others were walking off into the darkness.

"Oh that. All I did was swap a bullet in your head for the rope around your neck or needle in your arm that you'll probably be awarded by the court martial you'll face. That's what happens when you wear the uniform of a member of the military whether you're entitled to or not." Thundercloud told her and she frowned.

"And you don't have a problem with them killing me? Aren't you a doctor?" Sands said and Thundercloud suddenly looked up and glared at her before he grabbed her by the throat with one hand.

"Listen here lady!" he hissed, "I knew a lot of those men you got killed and you're just lucky that it was Major Willis who was about to shoot you because if it was Captain Tamang or one of his Gurkhas that was about to slice you up with a kukri I sure as hell wouldn't have tried getting in their way. I just think it's better to have a trial to show the galaxy why someone has to die than shooting them out here in the middle of nowhere. Now I suggest you shut up and let me work."

"Captain these tachyon readings aren't looking good." Goldman said when she rechecked the level of the faster than light particles heading towards Sanctuary that the *Warspite's* passive tachyon detectors were picking up. Each particle that was being detected at that moment was just a stray, one of hundreds of billions that would surround a ship the size of the *Warspite* and the number of them showing up on the cruiser's sensors indicated that there was a large number of vessels shedding these particles.

"How far away are they?" Knight asked.

"Current estimate is about point eight of a light year." Goldman replied.

"That puts them about three hours away." Thomas commented.

"Close enough for an active scan?" Knight said, looking at Reeves and he nodded.

"Chief Petty Officer Cortez I'd like to get a better idea of what we're dealing with. I want an active tadar sweep. Maybe we can at least get a count of the ships we're facing here." he ordered and Cortez nodded.

"Activating active tadar captain." she said.

Engaging any active sensor system meant revealing the location of a ship to any other vessel capable of detecting the emissions and doing so with a tachyon based system meant revealing it to any ship within several light years in almost real time. However, the level of detail that could be gathered with active sensors was far greater than what the passive detectors could provide.

The *Warspite* released several bursts of tachyons in rapid succession that spread out from the vessel at a speed of around twenty light years per hour, the current limit for Commonwealth faster than light sensor and communication systems but even at this speed it still took several minutes for the return data to reach the *Warspite* and when it did the news that it brought was not good.

"Captain we're looking at somewhere between five hundred and a thousand ships." Goldman said.

"You can't narrow it down more than that?" Reeves asked as he looked at the collection of blurred shapes shown by the *Warspite's* active tachyon sensors.

"Sorry captain." Goldman responded, shaking her head, "The ships are so densely packed that even with our active scanners we can't differentiate them easily. That figure is a best guess range."

"Best case is us being outnumbered by twenty-to-one?" Ash said, frowning as he glanced over his shoulder.

"And worst case is forty-to-one." Hayes added.

"What sort of size ranges are we looking at?" Reeves said, looking at Lucas now that she had retaken her station after taking Sands' news crew to the ship's brig.

"Assuming that all of them are warships and the machines aren't using transports to make their fleet look bigger than it is then I think we can say that at least a quarter of the ships heading this way are cruisers or bigger. A similar number are light vessels." she responded.

"Captain we're picking up an increased amount of surface activity as well." one of the sensor operators announced, "It looks like large machine forces starting to head towards the target area."

"They really don't want us to take that command centre, do they?" Knight commented.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman, kindly inform Major Willis that he has company coming and so do we." Reeves said.

"What's your strategy for when those ships get here captain?" Knight asked, "Do we make a last stand or do we retreat? Maybe find somewhere to hide and try to pick off any ships that get separated from the main fleet?"

"Right now I'm not certain but I have three hours to come up with something." Reeves said.

"Another miracle?" Hayes asked and Lucas looked up from her console and smiled.

"That's worked for him so far." she said.

In their advance on the Commonwealth troops the machine forces had broken down a large section of the perimeter fence and this left a gap large enough for the human and Brekken forces to pass through without tripping any further alarms.

"In position now." the leader of one of the Gurkha fire teams sent ahead of the main force reported when he and his men reached a point from which they could see one of the possible access points to the missile command complex, a ventilation shaft leading down to the large portion of it that was underground for added security, "No signs of enemy activity."

"Check the entry point." Willis responded via radio and the team leader used a hand signal to tell his men to advance.

Moving in pairs the four Gurkhas made their way quickly and quietly to the top of the shaft, a one metre high block of concrete with a set of metal grills set into it. When operating the sound of fans used to either draw in or expel air would have been audible from this point but there was no noise at all coming from the shaft, suggesting that the ventilation system was now turned off. This was not unexpected, for machines that

needed no oxygen to breathe keeping the system running would be a waste of power. Checking the gratings the Gurkhas saw that there were no security sensors and they were held down only by simple locks that were easily broken off. The Genex had counted on the spinning fan blades to keep intruders out whereas the artificial intelligence had placed its faith in the forces patrolling the perimeter instead. Now that neither of them were present the shaft offered a means to penetrate to the deepest levels of the facility.

"Entry point is clear." the team leader reported after the gratings had been removed to expose the top of the shaft and he peered down it.

"Copy that. We're on our way. Set up lines for us to use to get down." Willis replied.

While two of the Gurkhas kept watch the team leader and one other began to unpack ropes and other climbing equipment from their packs, laying this out on the ground ready for use. For now they refrained from deploying any of the ropes down the shaft though, just in case this might alert the artificial intelligence below. However, by the time the rest of the human and Brekken troops arrived everything was ready for them to descend.

"Any signs of enemy activity corporal?" Willis asked.

"No sir." the Gurkha corporal responded as he snapped to attention, "Our position is secure."

"Very good. Deploy the lines and lead the way. Let us know as soon as the bottom of the shaft is secure."

Willis said before he turned to the old man.

"Will you be okay going down there?" he asked.

"We'll get the secretary down." one of the old man's warrior bodyguard said before the old man himself could respond.

"Don't worry major, remember that we are more familiar with what is down there than you or your men." the old man added and he glanced towards the squad of men in powered armour, "What about them?"

"They have their own descent gear." Willis replied, "In fact I'm sending them down next."

The Gurkhas Willis sent down the shaft first emerged through a hatchway into a darkened and deserted hallway and they took up positions to cover both directions, waiting to see if there would be any response to their presence. However, the soft background noise of beeps and humming remained constant and the corporal reached for his radio.

"Down and clear. The shaft is secure." he signalled.

"Understood. Stand by for reinforcement." Willis responded.

As Willis had told the old man the next unit down the shaft were the Rodinan heavy infantry. Their powered armour including a winching system that allowed them to descend the shaft rapidly before being detached and abandoned once they had been used. If the Rodinans wanted to leave in the same manner as they had entered the complex they would have to return to this shaft to reconnect to their winches.

"We are down and safe. Moving out." the squad leader reported as his men moved through the hatchway slowly, making sure that their bulky armour did not get jammed.

More infantry units then followed the Rodinans and as each one left the shaft they advanced, expanding the area of the complex that they controlled and once about half the force was already down the shaft Willis took his own command group down along with Thundercloud and Bernard's engineering team. They then held their position just inside the hatch while the Genex descended, the old man's granddaughter coming down first with the old man himself being lowered down in a harness between a pair of his bodyguards.

As soon as the old man exited the shaft he took out his computer tablet and called up a floor plan of the complex.

"The main command centre is two floors up from here." he said.

"And the main computer core?" Bernard asked.

"Adjoining the command centre to limit the ability to intercept priority data." the old man answered.

"This is Willis to all units. Does anyone have eyes on any enemy units yet?" Willis broadcast and he waited to listen to the responses. However, all of these were negative, not one of the units of soldiers already deployed had seen a single one of the machines since entering the command complex.

"Surely not all the machines could have been sent to attack us." Thundercloud said.

"I doubt it doctor." Willis replied.

"At the refuge station the defending units were concentrated near the main entry point and the computer core." Bernard pointed out, "Perhaps that's been repeated here."

"Then we should proceed with caution." the old man said and he tapped the screen of his tablet to highlight several points on the floor plan, "There are emergency stairs and ladders between levels at these six points. There are elevators as well that have emergency ladders in the shafts but those might be blocked by the cars."

"Then we'll just take the stairs and ladders. We've got a platoon on the surface to cover our escape route and we'll leave another here to guard the bottom of the shaft." Willis said.

"That still leaves us with almost two hundred men." Garrash commented and Willis nodded.

"Enough for a platoon at each entry point to the upper levels. Each group will have to leave one squad on the level between us. The last thing we need is to have our only route out of here cut off." he said.

"So which route will we take?" Bernard asked and Willis looked at the old man.

"Which of these comes out closest to the command centre?" he asked.

"This staircase here." the old man answered, pointing to one of the marked points.

"Stairs, good. Will they hold powered armour?" Willis said.

"Of course." the old man replied.

"Good, then that's our route. The Rodinans will take the lead, they're the equivalent of a light platoon in firepower and we'll follow them right up to the floor the command centre is on. We'll only go in once the other platoons have moved in first to check the level's defences. After that we make right for the command centre." Willis said.

Splitting into groups of platoon strength the assault force headed for the stairs and ladders that would allow them to ascend to the level where the command centre and computer core could be found before cautiously ascending them. At each access point the first squad to go up stopped at the next level rather than continuing up to the one beyond that, just in case there were machines positioned here that could cut them off from the shaft they had entered the complex by. Only after this did the rest of each group make their way to the target level, pausing once they reached the landings in the shafts and stairwells rather than opening the hatches to enter the level and radioing their readiness to Willis. When all of the other units had radioed that they were in position Willis finally activated his own radio and responded.

"Go. Go. Go." he ordered and in unison five hatches were thrown open so that the marines, Gurkhas and Brekken soldiers could burst out, spreading out rapidly to cover all approaches to their positions. If there were any combat robots present though they continued to ignore the presence of the intruders and again each group indicated to Willis that their positions were secure and clear.

"I don't like this." the old man's granddaughter said, "This facility was one of the most secure in the Empire and now it seems undefended."

"We did have to fight our way through rather a lot of machines to get here my dear," the old man pointed out, "and as Commander Bernard reminded us, the machines have previously concentrated their strength at critical points. They lose little by allowing us to control stairs and ladder shafts."

"Time for us to find out whether they think the corridor out there is worth defending then." Willis said and he looked at the power armoured troops standing right beside the hatch, "Go." he told them simply.

Rather than open the hatch the lead Rodinan soldier made use of the amplified strength that his armour provided him with to smash it open before stepping through. The soldier then moved to one side to allow the next member of the squad to follow him as he searched the corridor for any signs of hostile forces. As had been the case with the other units when they entered this level though there was no indication that there were any combat robots present.

"Clear." the squad leader announced.

"The command centre is that way." the old man said as he emerged from the stairwell and Willis waved his hand in a signal for the Rodinans to advance once more, acting as a shield against any ambush while the Genex warriors brought up the rear.

As the old man had said the command centre itself was just a few metres away from the stairwell, located around a corner and it was as the first of the Rodinans stepped around this that the assault force finally met resistance when there was an almost deafening roar of automatic fire and the soldier's thick powered armour burst open, tearing the occupant apart in the process. Instantly the rest of the group stepped back from the corner.

"What the hell is that?" Thundercloud exclaimed, thankful for the earplugs he like the other members of the assault team wore to protect their hearing against such loud noises that were common in battle.

"Gauss cannon." Bernard said, "The rounds were too powerful for a machine gun and there was no flash from burning propellant."

Another of the Rodinans started to peer around the corner to try and identify the source of the attack but he quickly retreated before another burst of fire could decapitate him and they struck the wall behind him instead, blowing several fist sized holes in it.

"Does anyone have a signal mirror?" the old man's granddaughter said.

"Yes, right here." Willis responded, taking his survival kit from his belt and tossing the compact package to her.

Opening this up the old man's granddaughter removed the palm sized piece of metal that had been polished to give it a reflective surface. Then she took a knife from her own belt and then used tape to fix the mirror to the end of its blade. This crude assembly allowed the old man's granddaughter to extend the mirror around the corner and look along the corridor towards the command centre. In the mirror she saw a construct that resembled the turret from an armoured fighting vehicle that had been detached from its chassis and transplanted down into the underground facility where it had been set up to guard the command centre itself.

"Looks like someone stole the turret from a Raptor IFV." she said, recognising the outline of the turret and she pulled the mirror back around the corner.

"Do we have anything that can penetrate it?" Willis asked and the old man's granddaughter looked around at the weapons the unit possessed.

"Those lasers should do it from this range." she said.

"The problem is going to be holding them on target long enough to burn through the armour without the gauss cannon shooting at you." the old man added.

"Is there another entrance?" Thundercloud asked.

"Of course, though I doubt that it will be any less heavily guarded." the old man answered.

"How far away is it?" Willis said.

"About five metres." the old man's granddaughter replied and Willis winced.

"Damn, That's a bit close to be using a man portable anti-tank missile. How far in the other direction does the corridor extend?" he said.

"About another twenty." the old man said.

"That's far enough." Willis said.

"Someone would still have to expose themselves to fire from the cannon." Thundercloud pointed out.

"How thick is this ceiling?" Bernard then said, looking up at the ceiling above them.

"You think we can attack it from above? Bring the ceiling down and bury it?" Thundercloud said.

"There won't be enough mass to destroy the turret if it is from one of our IFVs. Plus the rubble would block our access to the command centre." the old man said.

"Actually I was thinking that the Rodinans could use their anti-armour grenades just to punch a hole through from above at a point where the cannon can't elevate far enough to engage them while avoiding damage to the command centre. Then they'd be free to use their lasers." Bernard said and Willis smiled.

"Good thinking commander." he said.

"They'll need a guide to make sure they get to the right spot. I should go with them." the old man's granddaughter said and the old man nodded.

"Of course my dear." he said.

"Corporal, go with her. Take out that turret." Willis ordered.

"Captain we're down to an hour before the enemy fleet arrives." Goldman announced.

"If you're going to produce a plan then now would be a good time to let the rest of us know what it is." Hayes added, looking at Reeves.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman what is the condition of the rest of our fleet?" Reeves asked.

"Our stealth destroyers are still holding position near the gate at a distance of two light minutes. Our light vessels are providing support to the transport convoy and the other ships are all in orbit of Sanctuary with us captain." she told him and he nodded.

"Tell all light vessels to go dark. I doubt the machines will fire on the transport fleet but they may still be needed to provide support. I want our stealth destroyers here with us though. Aside from us and the *Existence* I want all our ships to retreat over the horizon. The *Existence* is to pull back to a higher orbit though as far from the predicted arrival vector of the enemy as possible and also go dark."

"A targeting relay?" Knight said and Reeves nodded again.

"Yes. Our other ships will fire their entire stock of missiles blind and the *Existence* will provide them with targeting data." he said.

"While we have a bullseye painted on us for a thousand ships." Thomas commented.

"Shoot and scoot captain?" Ash suggested, "I can have us over that horizon as quickly as necessary."

"Exactly. Though I'm hoping that our missiles won't be needed, or those of our fleet." Reeves said, "Right now I'm just making a contingency plan."

"By launching every missile the fleet has in one go?" Hayes said.

"That's more than four hundred. Not counting the point defence missiles on the Shadow-class ships." Lucas pointed out, "It's unlikely that the machines will be able to shoot them all down."

"So best case scenario we're still facing about a hundred enemy ships with only guns to protect ourselves with." Hayes said, "Why not just retreat and wait for Admiral Winchester to get here with the rest of your fleet?"

"Because I'm hoping that we can destroy the AI fleet entirely and if we run now then we lose our only chance." Reeves replied and then he smiled at her, "Trust me Jennifer. Do you think I would ever let you down?"

The floor above the command centre was as devoid of hostile forces as most of the rest of the facility had been so far and the old man's granddaughter led the Rodinan heavy infantry to the exact point directly above the turret protecting the entrance to the command centre without them encountering any resistance.

"Here." she said, pointing to the floor at her feet, "If you put a few grenades right here then you should be able to hit the turret."

The power armoured soldiers armed with grenade launchers aimed their weapons at the floor where the old man's granddaughter stood and she backed away to get clear. The Rodinans then fired their weapons and the old man's granddaughter clamped her hands over her ears and turned away as the shaped charges went off. Each of these blasted a deep furrow in the concrete floor before punching through to the floor below and a small section of the floor around this collapsed to widen the hole to about half a metre across.

As soon as they saw this the Rodinans stopped firing grenades and the two soldiers armed with anti-armour lasers rushed forwards until they saw the turret on the floor below through the hole. As well as the gauss cannon the turret mounted a machine gun on its upper surface and this was able to elevate to a steep enough angle that it could fire back at the Rodinans through the hole in the ceiling. However, the targeting system of this automated weapon had been damaged by the collapsing ceiling and this prevented the weapon from being precisely targeted, instead it could only fire a sustained burst of rounds randomly at the two power armoured soldiers. Most of the shots fired up through the hole still managed to hit the soldiers but the machine gun was unable to pick out any of the more vulnerable points of their armour and the bullets all bounced off harmlessly.

Although they were under constant fire the two soldiers maintained their own attack, their lasers burning deeper into the armoured turret until reaching the internal mechanisms. One of the beams burrowed into the gauss cannon itself and as the mechanism failed the barrel suddenly drooped towards the floor. Meanwhile the second beam struck part of the turret's power supply and there was a brief flash as this was destroyed. The loss of power shut down the machine gun as well and the weapon ceased fire and froze in place.

The cessation of shooting alerted the troops on the floor below that the turret had been damaged and Willis risked a quick look around the corner towards it. At the end of the corridor ahead of him he saw the disabled turret, its weapons now pointing harmlessly at the floor while the turret itself remained motionless.

"I think they took it out." he said before he stepped out into the open.

"Wait!" Thunder cloud exclaimed, concerned that the turret would suddenly spring to life while the marine officer was exposed but nothing happened and Willis looked at him and smiled.

"It's safe doc. Let's go." he said before he advanced along the corridor.

The turret still blocked much of the entrance to the command centre but there was more than enough room for Willis to clamber over it. However, just as he reached the top of the turret and looked over into the command centre he saw two bizarre machines on the other side. Each of these was about the same size as one of the German Shepherd dogs carried aboard the *Warspite* for a variety of purposes and they shared the same quadrupedal structure. However, these were no ordinary mechanical facsimiles of a canine, instead their bodies consisted of nothing but a pair of machine guns fed from drums mounted on either side of them while a sensor system was mounted on a turret mounted midway along the top and these turrets both turned towards Willis.

"Contact!" he yelled as he tried to bring his rifle to bear on the two machines but they were able to turn towards him quicker and they opened fire together. The hail of bullets struck Willis as he tried to roll out of the way and he fell backwards from the turret, landing back in the corridor, "I'm hit." he gasped as Thundercloud ran towards him with the rest of the group who had been following him.

"Let me see." the doctor said as he crouched beside the marine officer and he began to examine him.

Because Willis had been in the process of climbing over the damaged turret when he was fired on only his armoured head and torso had been exposed to the machines and all of the hits he had suffered were in these locations. His chest plate had stopped all of the rounds that had struck it but it had been shattered in the process, rendering it of no further use while two rounds had struck his helmet. One had been deflected away by its curved outer surface but the second had penetrated to graze the side of his head before lodging in the inside of the helmet and now Thundercloud saw that there was blood pouring out from beneath it, "You're bleeding." he said, reaching to remove the helmet.

"Major what's in there?" Garrash asked as the helmet was being removed.

"I don't know. They look like robot guard dogs but they're just machine guns on legs." Willis replied and then he winced as Thundercloud lifted his helmet off.

"That is not something I am familiar with. It must be a creation of the artificial intelligence." the old man said.

"Well let's see how well they can resist rifle fire shall we?" Garrash said.

"I suggest approaching from multiple sides at once." Tamang added and the Brekken nodded. "You and I should be small enough to get around the sides of this thing captain." he said as he looked back towards the wrecked turret.

"Wait. Let my warriors go as well." the old man said and he waved two of his security detail forwards. The large warriors began to climb over the turret just as Willis had done, both men keeping their rifles out in front of them and at the same time the significantly smaller Garrash and Tamang began to squeeze themselves into the gaps either side between the turret and the walls.

On the other side of the turret the two machine gun carriers waited, focusing on the path over the turret and as soon as they spotted the two Genex warriors they opened fire.

One of the men was sufficiently exposed that several rounds hit him in the head and neck and he immediately slumped forwards dead before his body slid back off the turret and landed beside Willis and Thundercloud, causing the startled doctor to leap back for a moment. On the other hand the second warrior was able to use the turret for cover, holding his rifle over him and firing down onto the far side in the hope that he would hit one of the machines.

The Genex warrior's random fire failed to inflict any damage on the two machine but it did succeed in keeping their detection systems focused on him while Garrash and Tamang manoeuvred themselves into more favourable firing positions before they too opened fire at almost exactly the same time, each one firing at the closest of the four legged machines. The machine gun carriers shook as they were hit repeatedly and the one targeted by Tamang fell when a rifle round destroyed one of its knee joints. Tamang continued to fire until his magazine was empty and the continuous stream of bullets riddled the machine with holes, destroying key electronics inside and causing it to suddenly go limp while wisps of smoke began to seep out through any available gap.

On the other hand Garrash aimed his fire at the turret mounted sensors of the machine closest to him and he quickly shattered the instruments this housed, blinding the machine. Unable to aim its weapons now, the machine gun carrier resorted to random fire of the sort being used by the Genex on top of the turret and it sprayed bullets around the turret. This forced Garrash, Tamang and the Genex warrior to pull back but the four legged machine had no way of knowing that this had happened and it continued firing until its reserve of ammunition was expended just under a minute later.

"Go." Tamang said when the firing stopped and he began to scabble over the destroyed turret with the men of his command section following him. On the opposite side of the turret they saw the remaining machine gun carrier now standing motionless and one of the Gurkhas drew his kukri as he slid down the rear of the turret to land beside it. He brought the heavy blade down on one of the machine's front shoulders and there were sparks as the blade cut through wires and shorted them out before dark fluid began to spurt out when a pneumatic line was severed. The loss of pressure in this line left the machine unable to stand and it collapsed to the floor and began to thrash about wildly as it tried in vain to regain its footing.

A second Gurkha then jumped down from the turret and thrust the muzzle of his rifle against the side of the machine and fired a short three round burst that destroyed its main processor.

"Clear." the Gurkha announced as the rest of the command section climbed down from the turret as well. From here the Gurkhas could see clearly that the turret had been set up partially in the entrance to the command centre and this prevented the armoured door that could be used to seal it off from closing. With the way open to them Tamang led his men forwards into the command centre itself and they looked around, searching for any further defences.

There was nothing surprising about the layout of the command centre, with rows of consoles all facing towards a wall dominated by numerous large displays and a raised section to the rear with what were obviously several command consoles mounted on it. One the far side of the room was a second entrance the same size as the one the Gurkhas had just entered through and this was also defended by a turret taken from an armoured vehicle that was positioned to prevent the armoured door from closing. The size of the turret's main gun prevented it from turning to fire into the command centre but the machine gun mounted on the upper surface could still turn all the way around and the Gurkhas took cover behind control consoles before it could fire on them.

Bernard also quickly took cover when he followed the Gurkhas over the turret and he crawled towards Tamang.

"Was it facing this way when you entered captain?" he asked.

"No commander. The gun turned towards us when we entered." Tamang responded.

"But it's not firing. Interesting." Bernard commented and he peered around the side of the console. He immediately saw the machine gun turn towards him but it did not fire, instead just pointing towards him, "It won't fire while we're hiding behind these consoles." he said, smiling as he realised why the machine gun was not shooting at him and he looked around the console again to examine the turret.

Although the front of the turret and its mounting were heavily armoured the rear of the mounting on which it stood was open, the mechanism to turn the turret as well as the control electronics were all exposed and this gave Bernard an idea.



"Stay here and make sure nobody stands up in the open." he told Tamang and then he turned to where one of his engineering team had just climbed over the turret behind him, "Fischer, with me. Stay low and move where I move." he ordered before he began to make his way across the command centre using the consoles for cover so that the automated machine gun would hold its fire. Bernard still had to come out into the open when he reached the far side of the command centre but this close to the wall the machine gun could not turn far enough to target him and he was able to walk all the way up to the turret with the other engineer following him. Once here Bernard crouched down so that he could crawl into the turret.

"Pass me some cutters." he said, holding out his hand and Fischer took a set of cutters from his bag that he gave to Bernard.

With these in his hand Bernard began to cut through wires as quickly as he could, severing one data and power line after another. While he did this he listened to the sound of the machine gun turning back and forth above him as it hunted for a target and when the sound stopped Bernard stopped cutting.

"You did it commander." Tamang called out as he emerged from behind the console he was using for cover and the turret did not react.

"Okay we're clear. Everyone can come in now." Bernard called out.

"Captain, Commander Bernard is signalling that the command centre has been secured." Goldman announced.

"Put him through." Reeves said before adding, "Go ahead Commander Bernard."

"Captain we've secured the command centre and our forces are moving in to establish a cordon around it. Colonel Garrash and Captain Tamang are organising that now." Bernard responded and Reeves exchanged looks with Knight.

"What happened to Major Willis" Knight asked.

"He took a hit, don't worry though Doctor Thundercloud says he'll be fine. Fortunately the bullet hit him in the head and you know that marines have no vital organs there." Bernard said and both Reeves and Knight smiled.

"What's your initial assessment of the command centre commander?" Reeves said.

"Right now the Genex are taking a look at it. They've got data on what it was like before and they're assessing what changes the AI has made." Bernard told him. Then before Reeves could ask any follow up questions Cortez called out a warning.

"Tachyon burst. Captain it's huge, the enemy fleet is here." she said.

"Show me." Reeves said as he, Knight and Hayes all looked towards the section of the central console that showed a diagram of the Alpha Indi system. On this there was now a large area shaded where the tachyon burst had originated when the machine fleet dropped to sublight speed. Because of the distance between the *Warspite* and the enemy force this was the only information available at that time, the conventional energy emissions from them would still take some time to reach the Commonwealth heavy cruiser.

"Range is twenty-two light minutes captain." Goldman said.

"Are they scanning us?" Knight asked.

"No further tachyon signals detected commander." Cortez answered.

"Then they're looking at us as we were twenty-two minutes ago." Hayes commented.

"Captain do you want a firing solution?" one of the gunners asked.

"Yes but hold fire for now." Reeves replied before returning to the communication channel connecting him with Bernard, "Commander Bernard the enemy fleet just arrived. Let me know as soon as you have control of the missiles."

"Did you hear that?" Bernard asked, looking towards where the old man sat with his granddaughter standing beside him. As soon as he had entered the command centre the old man had made his way to the seats on the command platform and sat down on one of them while the thinkers he had brought with him hurried to various consoles to begin their analysis of the systems and how they had been modified.

"Yes, time is obviously of the essence." the old man replied and he looked to the nearest thinker, "What can you tell me?" he said.

"Mister secretary, apart from additional communication bandwidth there appears to be little physical difference to the specifications we have. The only other change is the addition of extra memory capacity to boost computation capacity." the thinker told him.

"Has the missile command system been compromised?" the old man said.

"No leader. It remains secure but all other systems appear to have been co-opted for communications processing."

"So this is a communication hub." the old man's granddaughter said.

"That could work for us." Bernard added as he walked over to one of the consoles that a thinker was working at, "Is this what's being sent out?" he added.

"Yes leader." the thinker replied.

"I'm not a leader. I'm Commander Bernard." Bernard said.

"I'm sorry lead- commander." the thinker said, unused to addressing senior officers who were not part of the Genex leader caste.

"What is your plan commander?" the old man asked.

"I was just thinking that if this place is a central hub for the machines' communications then we could use it to disrupt their command and control." Bernard said.

"I thought that an analysis of the way the machines operated indicated that they did not need a central command post. If we destroy this then won't they be able to replace it by combining the processing and communications ability of other units?" the old man's granddaughter asked.

"Yes, probably. That's why I wasn't thinking about destroying any of this but if we introduce a random data pattern into the communication stream then it would blot out the genuine data that the machines were trying to exchange with one another. It could prevent them co-ordinating their actions and let us pick them off one by one." Bernard said.

"Can you investigate this while we attempt to access the missile controls?" the old man said and Bernard nodded.

"I think so, I know what I'm looking at here." he said.

"Then continue. In the meantime I think it's time that we carried out our primary mission just in case you are unable to prevent that machine army that's on its way from getting here." the old man replied as he got to his feet and walked over to a nearby console. Unlike many of the consoles in the command centre that had screens that were either inactive or displaying uninterrupted streams of hexadecimal data this one showed the emblem of the Genex Empire instead. The old man then entered a long passcode using the console's keyboard and the emblem was replaced with a command interface that gave a list of options regarding the Genex strategic missile arsenal.

"The system is operational. We have control of the missiles." he said before he began to type again, "I'm going to check their status. Just because the command system works doesn't necessarily mean that the machines won't have tampered with the missiles themselves."

"Missile away." Shaw said as she fired one of her fighter's missiles towards the automated aircraft that had appeared less than a minute earlier over the horizon. From the high signal output it seemed that the craft was a scout of some kind moving ahead of the main force that was closing in on the command centre from all sides and Shaw did not want it feeding back any intelligence to that force.

Unsurprisingly the craft detected the missile launch and immediately both activated its electronic defences and took evasive action, turning sharply. This turn may have been enough to take it beyond the arc in which the missile could track it but before it could get very far a second missile was fired by another fighter of Shaw's force and this triggered another manoeuvre that brought it back towards Shaw's missile that struck the craft head on and it exploded.

"Any more out there Kaz?" Shaw added.

"No specific contacts yet but I'm picking up emissions from multiple directions." Mori answered and Shaw activated the fighter's communications.

"*Archangel* to *Warspite* we've got machine units closing in on us down here. Any chance you could give us some indication of their numbers from up there?" she signalled.

"They're going to be heavily outnumbered captain." Goldman said to Reeves when she received Shaw's transmission and he checked the map on the central console that had the various enemy units moving towards the command centre marked on it. Many of these were still unidentified, bizarre creations of the artificial intelligence at the heart of the alien computer virus but others were marked as tank units, mechanised infantry transports or self propelled artillery, all of this with massive air cover. One thing was for certain though, this army was vast, large enough to have conquered a world of more than a billion people and a single regiment of infantry and a small air wing would be no match for it, no matter how well fortified their position was.

"We can buy them some time." Knight pointed out and Reeves nodded.

"Lieutenant Commander Goldman I want you to order our fighters to withdraw. Get them back aboard, rearmed and refuelled." he said. Then he turned towards the *Warspite's* gunners, "Weapons, I want our turrets targeted against the enemy's ground and air forces. Gauss cannons for surface targets, beam weapons for airborne threats. Acquire targets and fire at will."

"Do you want our heading changed captain?" Ash asked.

"Yes commander. Put us facing the planet so as many of our weapons can be brought to bear as possible." Reeves responded and immediately the helmsman began to turn the *Warspite* so that relative to the surface of Sanctuary the heavy cruiser was pointing straight down. This meant that eight of the vessel's ten light

turrets and both medium turrets could target the planet as well as its main guns. For now the gunners held their fire though, waiting for a clear line of fire while the Commonwealth attack craft withdrew.

"Shouldn't we be more worried about that fleet? Hundreds of warships are on their way towards us after all." Hayes commented.

"It will only take a few seconds for us to turn back towards them if we have to. Right now we need Commander Bernard and Admiral Dalton to be able to finish their task and get us control of those missiles." Reeves replied.

"Fourteen thousand eight hundred and sixty-two." the old man said, "We have control of fourteen thousand eight hundred and sixty-two strategic missiles. Or put another way eighty-nine thousand one hundred and seventy-two warheads, each with a yield of five hundred mega tonnes."

"How long to launch them?" Bernard asked, looking up from the console he was working at.

"About five or six minutes. I just need to set their targeting system so that the missiles will fly towards the gate, charge their casings and enter the tachyon streams. Then they have to release their warheads at the far end and these need to be set to search for their own targets. What about you commander? Can you jam the enemy communication network?"

"I could, yes. But I've noticed an interesting pattern to what's being broadcast from here and I think that we can use it not to prevent the machines from talking to one another but to get them to start attacking one another." Bernard said.

"Then I think it's time that we let your Captain Reeves know what we have achieved." the old man said.

"You have the missiles under your control?" Reeves said when he was contacted from the underground command centre.

"Yes captain. They can be launched in a matter of minutes." the old man responded, "I'm already programming in a course towards the tachyon gate. It's builders should get quite a surprise out of this. I only wish there was some way that we could watch the effect on the other side."

"I'd like you to hold your fire for now mister secretary." Reeves said and on the bridge his officers looked at him.

"Did you just say to hold fire?" Hayes asked, "I thought firing those missiles through the gate was the whole reason we came here."

"It is, but we also have a fleet of hundreds of warships to worry about." Reeves replied, "Secretary Dalton, ca your missiles target ships in space?"

"Yes, yes they can." the old man said.

"Good. Then we're going to send you a firing solution that we've plotted towards the enemy fleet. I want you to launch two thousand of those missiles at them. That should be more than a dozen warheads per ship." Reeves said.

"And it'll only take one hit on each to turn it into a cloud of radioactive debris." Thomas commented and Reeves smiled at him.

"Exactly." he said, "And after that we'll still have more than twelve thousand missiles to send through the gate."

"That just leaves the machines on the planet to deal with." Knight said.

"And I think I may have a solution for that." Bernard said.

"Go ahead and explain commander." Reeves responded.

"The computer system here is being used as an IFF system captain. Every one of the machines we're facing here on the planet has a unique transponder ID signal and this is the only system complex enough to manage them all. If we disrupt the system then the various units will stop co-operating with one another but they'll still just come at us piecemeal. On the other hand I should be able to rig the system so that every ID query it gets it returns a hostile response." Bernard explained.

"You mean that the machines will destroy one another?" Knight said.

"That's the idea, yes." Bernard said.

"It can't be that easy." Hayes said, "Don't they have a firewall on their system?"

"I'm inside their system." Bernard responded, "I can write a quick program that will alter the incoming data before it's run through the AI's database and every one will result in it being tagged as hostile."

"Do it." Reeves told him, "We're picking off small groups of enemy units but we can't take them all out. Your plan has the potential to wipe out pretty much all the machines without any cost to us."

"I'll get right on it captain. It should take me about twenty minutes." Bernard responded.

"And I will set the missiles for launch against the machines' fleet as soon as I have the firing solution data." the old man added.

"It's on it's way now secretary. *Warspite* out." Reeves replied before he closed the channel.

As soon as the targeting data was passed from the *Warspite* to the assault team the old man used this to instruct two thousand of the Genex's strategic missiles to attack the approaching fleet of robotic warships. Once this was complete he did not hesitate to issue the command for these missiles to launch and in a period of just a few seconds they burst out of the underground launching silos they were stored in. The old man had selected these specific missiles for their location, positioned on the continent facing towards the approaching machine fleet.

The fleet was still a considerable distance from Sanctuary and by the time the missile launch was detected the missiles had already built up considerable speed and spread themselves out to approach from multiple directions, preventing the machines from concentrating their fire in any one direction.

Even when they were aware of the missiles heading towards them the artificial intelligences directing the warships did not adjust their course, continuing to head towards Sanctuary intent on destroying the Commonwealth squadron it knew to be in the system.

"Got it!" Bernard exclaimed the moment he completed his program.

"Will it work?" the old man's granddaughter asked.

"It better had do or we'll all be up to our necks in killing machines in a few hours." Bernard said.

"Then perhaps you should set it running commander." the old man suggested and Bernard smiled at him.

"I already have." he said, "I think we should check in with the *Warspite* again." Bernard then turned to the marine radio operator who had remained close beside him while he worked and the man passed Bernard the handset to his radio, "Bernard to *Warspite*, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear commander. Connecting you to Captain Reeves now." Goldman's voice responded.

"Commander what's your status?" Reeves then asked.

"I've just uploaded my program to the AI. You should be able to tell soon if its had any effect." Bernard said and on the bridge of the *Warspite* Reeves turned towards the rows of sensor operators.

"Can anyone tell me what's going on down there?" he asked.

"We're picking up increased thermal signatures captain." one of the sensor operators responded.

"The same goes for radio traffic captain." a communications officer added.

"They're launching missiles and making requests for support." Lucas said.

"The problem is that all the units receiving those requests are identifying the source as hostile." Bernard added when he heard this.

The effect of the malicious program on the machine army was catastrophic. Every time a unit or even a single machine issued any sort of communication its identity was checked against the central artificial intelligence but thanks to Bernard's tampering the data that this received was scrambled and so in every case the artificial intelligence flagged the sender as hostile and nearby units moved to attack. The effect of this spread rapidly as the attacking units also attempted to alert other friendly forces nearby to the presence of an enemy and the machines' advance towards the command centre descended into chaos. The effect was not limited to units on the ground and in the skies over Sanctuary the robotic aircraft supposed to protect the ground forces from aerial attack began to engage one another, firing waves of missiles before entering dogfights. In some cases machines focused on single targets until they were destroyed while others simple struck out at everything within range. As ammunition was expended the fighting machines began to request resupply but once again their signals were classed as coming from hostile forces and the machines tasked with resupply stayed away. Only when a particular unit of machines was the only one left in an area would they continue to advance towards the underground missile command centre but as they closed in they encountered more machines and immediately began to fight among themselves again. This process continued until the once vast machine army had been whittled down to a tiny fraction of its original size, a handful of scattered units all of which were depleted in numbers and ammunition.

"Targets locked captain." one of the gunners responsible for the *Warspite's* gauss cannons said as the few remaining machines closed to within a kilometre of the command centre.

"Open fire." Reeves ordered without hesitation and a rapid salvo of gauss cannon projectiles fired from orbit finished the job that the machines themselves had largely undertaken.

The approaching machine fleet did not use the same identification system as the robotic forces on the surface of Sanctuary so the warships that made it up continued their advance in good order while two thousand missiles sped towards them. The fleet was still just over five light minutes away from Sanctuary when the first of the missiles came within effective firing range of its longer ranged weapons and the controlling artificial intelligences had had time to plot firing patterns to intercept as many of these as possible. Blasts from a multitude of directed energy weapons lashed out across space at the missiles and one of them exploded, producing a brilliant flash as one of its warheads was triggered. This number began to increase though, from just one to ten and then to twenty and eventually almost a hundred of the nuclear tipped weapons was shot down before it could get anywhere near the machine fleet. But this still left almost two thousand of the missiles racing towards the robotic warships and almost in unison they burst open to deploy the individual warheads that they contained. Now the fleet's carefully calculated firing solutions were rendered worthless as the number of targets was multiplied six-fold along with clouds of decoy chaff to further confuse sensor systems. The more than ten thousand high yield nuclear warheads swarmed through the machine fleet. Many were still intercepted by the close in defences of the warships but these could not offer total protection from such an overwhelming number of missiles. Some of the warheads detonated when they were struck by the defensive fire, the blasts tearing apart nearby warships even those as large as battleships and dreadnoughts. More still found their targets and exploded on impact. No amount of armour protection or thermal shielding could protect against a five hundred mega-tonne blast and any ship struck by one of the missiles was destroyed outright with not even a drifting wreck to show where it had been, only a cloud of tiny particles of radioactive debris hurtling outwards through space.

Because of the great distance involved, the destruction of the machine fleet was not seen by the crew of the *Warspite* for another five minutes after it had begun but a cheer went up across the bridge as the impatient crew finally saw what they had been waiting for. Knight himself slapped Reeves on the back and the two men

grinned at one another as the destruction continued to work its way through the robotic armada in a series of thousands of nuclear explosions, each one with the potential to wipe out a city of millions of people.

"I want a damage assessment as quickly as possible." Reeves ordered when the explosions finally came to an end.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say total destruction." Thomas commented.

"We need to be certain commander." Reeves replied, "That may have been the biggest nuclear strike in human history but it's nothing compared to what's coming and I don't want any enemy ships suddenly popping up to destroy the gate before we can use it to attack whatever's on the other end."

"There's a lot of interference from the radiation of those blasts captain." Goldman said.

"There don't appear to be any active transponders though." Lucas added as she checked her console.

"How long do you want to give it?" Knight asked.

"Not too long if it can be helped. We still don't know how much information about what's happening here is being relayed through the gate to the other side. The connection could be terminated if we wait too long." Reeves answered.

"I think we should just launch." Hayes said, "After all can't we follow the missiles while they're still on this side to make sure that nothing happens to them?"

"Sounds like a plan." Knight added, "The missiles will be able to outrun us but we still have our stealth destroyers by the gate to cover them at the end of their run."

Reeves considered this for a few moments before nodding.

"Okay let's do it." he said, "Lieutenant Commander Goldman kindly alert the rest of the fleet to what we're doing. The *Existence* will remain in orbit of Sanctuary to provide air cover for our troops on the ground but the rest of our capital ships are to follow us at best speed to the gate. Then tell Secretary Dalton that he is clear to fire his missiles. Helm, lay in a course for the gate and get us underway. The missiles can catch us up."

To make sure that the twelve thousand missiles reached the gate within as short a time period as possible their launch times from Sanctuary were varied, with those on the continents facing away from the gate being fired first before they orbited the planet for a short period and then finally accelerated away along with missiles launched from directly below. After this their flight path was a straight line from Sanctuary to the waiting tachyon gate and as they closed in on the structure they began to charge their casings in preparation to travel faster than light. Ordinarily the missiles would use onboard tachyon storage jars to achieve faster than light travel but those jars were empty, forcing them to rely on the stream of tachyons around the gate to make the journey across such a vast distance.

The gate itself obviously had no way of identifying the craft passing through built into it and there was no change in its activity as the thousands upon thousands of nuclear-tipped missiles flew through the gate and were almost instantaneously accelerated to a speed far greater than human technology could achieve. To observers aboard the Commonwealth ships monitoring the passage of the missiles through the gate this was all somewhat anti-climatic though as they simply disappeared without any immediate change to the gate.

"So now what do we do?" Ash asked when the *Warspite* came to a halt as close to the gate as the crew dared get, having already seen more than one of the massive structures explode.

"Now we wait and see." Reeves answered.

Close to the core of the Milky Way galaxy the stars were so densely packed that even space was brightly lit and it was into such a system that the tachyon gate led. Here a second gate, one connected to a vast a powerful energy source harnessing the output of the local star directly created the tachyon stream along which the missiles had travelled and now managed their deceleration to sublight speed. The system was designed to decelerate transports filled with captives but it worked just as well to slow down the missiles. The idea that the gate could be used to attack the civilisation responsible for its construction had never occurred to its makers. Had it done then they would have likely taken to steps to prevent what now happened.

Twelve thousand eight hundred and sixty-two missiles emerged from the gate and right away they deployed their warheads. Hurling away from the gate and spreading out these warheads began to search the system for targets. With no way of knowing exactly what they would face there the old man had instead assigned the missiles criteria for selecting targets. The only specific target given was the tachyon gate itself and several of the warheads arced around so that they struck the gate only once the entire missile force had come through. Just one of these was enough to rip apart the gate and the combined blast of several made sure that the destruction was total. With nothing to control the vast flow of tachyons coming from the Alpha Indi system these instead spread across the system, overwhelming every tachyon detector and communication system present. This was the first indication that most of the system had that something was wrong, the gate was too far from the settled worlds and most of the space stations or vessels in the system for the arrival of the missiles to have been seen by detection systems that were limited to speed of light.

Meanwhile the vast majority of the warheads continued to spread out across the system, homing in on energy sources and artificial transmissions that matched the target profile they had been programmed to

seek out. The vast array of energy collecting satellites around the systems sun was an obvious target and hundreds of the warheads flew towards it, destroyed large portions of the network leaving those systems that relied on power from it without the means to operate.

Elsewhere in the system spacecraft, orbital stations and planetary targets all came under attack from the thousands of remaining warheads. Lacking the military intelligence necessary for precise target identification no distinction could be made between military or civilian targets and the warheads were just as likely to strike at freighters or civilian population centres as they were to destroy military dockyards or bases. Some of the military targets were able to activate their defences and scores of warheads were shot down but the majority of them were overwhelmed and the spacecraft, stations and surface bases were consumed in nuclear fire. By the time the holocaust came to an end the entire system was devastated, none of the settled planets were left untouched by the missile barrage and the advanced industries that had existed there were all but gone. Most importantly to the people who had launched this unexpected attack though, the tachyon gate and the means to bring billions of captives from across the galaxy had been destroyed.

The tachyon gate in the Alpha Indi system continued to channel the stream of tachyons directed at it back towards its source even after the gate at the other end had been destroyed. This continued until the last of the tachyons sent to it had been sent back and when the gate detected that the stream had been cut off it simply shut down and became dormant, a vast ring of dead ships drifting in space.

"So do you think it worked?" Knight said when the gate ceased operation.

"There's no way to tell commander." Lucas responded.

"It did. The missiles destroyed whatever was at the other end and now my people can start to rebuild." Hayes said, "Subject to the new treaty with the Commonwealth anyway."

"You seem very certain about something we know nothing about." Knight commented and Hayes looked at Reeves.

"Let's just say I've learned to have a little faith in miracles." she said.

"As my father once said to me when I asked him about them, we make our own miracles." Reeves said before he looked towards Ash, "Lieutenant Commander Ash take us back to Sanctuary to pick up our people from the surface. I think our job here is done."

## **EPILOGUE.**

They called themselves the Synasar and throughout their history the strongest of them had preyed upon the weak, compelling them to undertake the labour they considered beneath them. As their skills in automation improved they had less need for forced labourers to maintain their society but by this point having power over others was ingrained in their culture. Therefore, when they first discovered that they were not alone in the galaxy their instinct was to repeat this pattern on an even bigger scale. The effort of raising armies to invade distant worlds was considered largely beneath them though and so instead they opted to alternative strategy that would bring them the slaves they desired to expand the empire they maintained near the galactic heart.

By sending out probes across the galaxy they were able to spread their malicious computer program, taking advantage of the desire of many species to establish contact with civilisations other than their own. Only once they began to make use of the technology this program promised would its true purpose be revealed and the machines created by it turn on that civilisation, bringing it to its knees so that the population could be transported en masse to the constantly expanding Synasar Empire.

Now though the unthinkable had happened, a victim species had not only been able to defeat the machine army created by the computer virus but it had also been able to take advantage of the tachyon gate to strike back at the Synasar. Word soon spread of the devastating attack that the empire had suffered and the billions it had left dead and this enraged the survivors. Now the Synasar began to search for the source of the attack while they undertook construction of a massive fleet of warships, intent on doing something that had not been necessary for tens of thousands of years.

Now the Synasar themselves resolved to go to war.