

Setharum Legalis

Chapter One:

1459 hours May 22, 2237 [Alliance Military Calendar]

Bridge, UTEC Cruiser *Resolute*, Sol System, Inside Terra Nova Shipyard/Repair Station
T-2 months till Invasion

As the bridge crew of the *Resolute* went about their duties performing repairs and refitting new components, the front bridge monitors showed a blond-haired woman, speaking into a microphone: “This is Commander Charsi Diargo aboard the UTEC Control Ship *San Taigas* and this is the Terran Network News, the Combined Fleet departed Luna’s Oleron Command Station earlier this morning, en route for the Manufacturing Hub of Debola Prime with a special cargo. The UTEC Interstellar Cargo Cruiser *Sutherland* contains critical components necessary to repair the Debolian Intersystem Jump Gate. These components will bring the outer ridge of the network online after it was disabled during a futile attack by the Freedom League against elements of the Ninth Fleet during the closing stages of the Pirate Wars. The round trip to Debola is estimated to take five years; however, the fleet is scheduled to be out of port for close to a decade, resupplying loyalist outposts and reinforcing the frontiers from possible Freedom League reprisal. First Lord of the Admiralty Fleet Admiral William J O’Connor, Commander-in-Chief of Alliance Space Forces aboard the Alliance Flagship *Aristotle*, made a statement before leaving port...” This had been the third time the recording had been played, as it was on continual loop on one of the large Hologrid screens. The remainder displayed technical readouts and communication uplinks with repair crews located throughout the rest of the ship, as well as projecting the image directly in front of the large craft. While diminutive in comparison to the mammoth Vindicator Class Carriers, or the Flagship *Aristotle*, the largest vessel ever to be commissioned under the UTEC’s banner, she was still one of the most powerful ships moored within the massive skeletal superstructure of the shipyard.

If anyone was paying attention to the recording, it wasn’t apparent. The news that a significant bloc of the Deep Space Fleet of the United Terran Exploratory Command was leaving port to transport supplies and equipment to some of the United Terran Alliance’s fifteen colony systems wasn’t news to them. The war had badly damaged the infrastructure of most of these systems during the bloody nine-year conflict known as the Pirate Wars, with Earth-led UTEC forces battling those rogue elements and isolationist groups collectively known as the League of Free Worlds; they had also been given the colloquial title of the Freedom League by those in the Propaganda Division. The Fleet was also tasked with deploying occupation forces to those colonies that had been forcibly returned to the UTA, and to lead surgical strikes against Freedom League strongholds within Loyalist systems. That mission, however, was not public knowledge. This information meant little to the crew as the *Resolute* was in port undergoing much-needed repairs and refit from damage she sustained during the war and was not joining the fleet in either its humanitarian or military missions.

“...From the ashes of the Old Order, we will bring forth a new period of peace and prosperity to all Terran Worlds. There are no illusions that this will happen overnight. The next few years will be difficult and more blood may be shed in the interim, but Humanity will grow and become stronger as a result. And, in time, we will be able to put this horrible war behind us. Those who believe our way to not be the right way will see the light from our example and join us in creating a society of all human races. Our path may be difficult, but our future is bright, as it was at the Unification of our great Alliance,” concluded Fleet Admiral O’Connor before the report repeated itself; however, his statement was more for the civilian media services than the military.

Captain Louis Augaard, the *Resolute*’s grizzly veteran Commanding Officer, was less optimistic than his superiors, especially with the notion of leaving the defence of the Home System to a handful of Comanche Class Destroyers and smaller Aegean Class Frigates under the command of the *Resolute* herself.

“Why send all the Dreadnaughts on a milk run, and leave picket ships holding the fort in case the Freedom League decide to steamroll right over us; typical bureaucratic overcompensation,” he muttered gruffly, causing some nearby newly appointed junior officers and technicians to look up in surprise from the upgrades they were performing. They soon realised that the Captain was talking to himself and they returned to work, but not before discreetly sharing concerned glances with each other.

However, one person, a woman in her mid-thirties with the three bars and chevron rank insignia of a naval Commander on her black uniform jacket, stepped forward without hesitation and stood by Augaard's side. The neutral glow of overhead lights glistened off the silver tips on her collar, denoting her position as a Psi-Ops Officer, one of the telepathic eyes and ears of Alliance Intelligence; in her hand she was clutching a report on the status of the upgrades.

"It could be, sir, that Lord O'Connor believes that such a mission requires his personal oversight. The Fleet Admiral recognises your ability to command crucial sectors, especially in the event of an outbreak of hostilities, sir; that is probably why he assigned the *Resolute* to command the home fleet. Otherwise we wouldn't have been left in this position. This is possibly the start of a more permanent Fleet Command, or perhaps a posting on his personal staff," Commander Eloise Salisbury commented almost deadpan before handing him the report and standing at ease beside the raised dais bearing the Captain's command chair.

Louis looked at his executive officer oddly as if she had made a joke before dismissing the thought as soon as it occurred. Commander Salisbury *never* made jokes, let alone laugh when someone else did; it wasn't in the nature of the often-reclusive officer. To the best of his knowledge, in the twelve years she had been his Executive Officer she hadn't even smiled.

"XO, now would not be the time to start your career as a comedian," he remarked dryly, reading over the report before looking up concerned. "How the hell did this happen?"

"Number Two Reactor suffered complete core failure immediately after it was installed, currently the cause is unknown to the engineering staff. Thankfully all systems that would normally rely on this reactor were already on auxiliary station power so nothing has been directly affected at this point. Mr Kyshamoto has been working on it since 0215 hours and expects some results within the next four hours," Eloise reported quietly as technicians went about their duties.

"I have every confidence that Aruku will find what's wrong, especially with most of the station's engineering department at his disposal; inform him that if repair time is longer than his initial estimate, then he should requisition another reactor to replace the faulty one that they installed," Louis ordered before signing off the report and rising from his chair. "XO, you have the bridge, I'm going to check in on our guests."

"Understood, Captain."

Deep within the recesses of the *Resolute's* primary hull, its main cargo hold was abuzz with activity as the 1/1st EHO, or Extreme Hazardous Operations Unit, the *Seth Legion*, was busy setting up its base of operations. Due to Constitutional amendments prohibiting military assets being deployed on the Capital World – Earth -- the *Resolute*, as the Sol System Command Ship, was assigned one of the UTA's eight Extreme Hazardous Operations Units in proxy of the planet itself. EHOs were elite peacekeeping forces, picked from the best and brightest soldiers available to the United Terran Exploratory Command. They were trained to deal with any crisis, any situation, military or civilian, in the multitude of environments on which UTA and non-aligned human colonies resided.

While *Legionnaires* were considered the elite of the elite, and were deployed to regions of space known to be potential powder kegs, it was widely known to the crew that the *Seth Legion* was assigned here as part of leave, rather than as a force multiplier.

At the centre of the cargo hold, Major Travis Winters, the *Legion's* executive officer, stood overseeing the transfer of men and equipment from their outbound Command Ship. Around him, soldiers were hurrying about in apparent chaos, shuttling crates and lockers from the ship's hangar bay to storage bins located within the cargo hold before returning to the hangar to collect more. Beside the Major stood Master Sergeant Miguel Chavez, the *Legion's* senior NCO, assisting the Major with the transfer.

"Sir, the hangar bay reports that there will be a slight delay with our transfer. It seems that the Phantoms are proving a problem to unload from the Peregrines due to upgrades on decks nine and ten, the cargo lift is inoperable, there is simply no way of getting the Phantoms, or any of our equipment palettes from the hangar bay to more dedicated storage areas, and as a result there's a backlog," MSgt Chavez reported, referring to the *Legion's* small reconnaissance and support transports. "Compounding that problem is fact that the *Resolute's* vehicle garage is also at capacity with the repair crews using that space for storage while they upgrade the airlocks."

The Phantom reconnaissance vehicles were nimble craft, with a capacity for a fully equipped squad of soldiers plus any cargo the *Legion* needed for their operation, its oversized wheels perfect for almost any terrain. Their defensive armament was both a .57 cal. chaingun and a 20-mm cannon on a powered turret behind the driver's compartment along with comparable strength armour plating.

Travis shook his head in disbelief. “We’ll have to get them down to the hold another way. The techies’ support cranes should be able to take their weight, unless you want to drive them down the elevator shaft, through the variable gravity, though I’m not exactly sure, just how that would turn out,” he remarked, checking the list of *Legionnaires* on the blue semi-transparent Tactical Acuity Integrated Control and Operations (TAICO) screen that covered his right eye, and marking off those who had already arrived. However, he was slightly concerned at the absence of one soldier in particular. Just below the list sat his radar sphere and a green ‘friendly’ officer blip appeared at the far corner. In response the device’s computer read the neural transmitter attached to the officer represented by the blip and accessed its archives as well as the ship’s main computer and labelled it.

“Major, haven’t we already had a discussion about performing field experiments on our equipment in non-controlled situations?” remarked a familiar voice from behind the pair, causing the two to turn. At that point the blip’s ID tag became visible on a clear panel below the TAICO’s inactive ammunition counter [Col. Julian Stevens]. “Don’t you recall what happened when you thought it a good idea to test the mobility of the old exo-suits after you removed their external stability plates?”

“Yes, sir. I also recall the damage that the suit caused when it fell off the side of that canyon,” Travis replied before saluting the Colonel. “Master Sergeant, notify the marine CO attached to the *Resolute*, as well as the Flight Deck Controller; let’s see if we can get the techies to stow their equipment elsewhere so we can park our trucks in the garage.”

“Aye, sir,” Miguel replied before saluting and exiting the room, heading towards the *Resolute*’s Marine Barracks. “How’s our transfer coming along, Major?” Colonel Julian Stevens asked, before handing his rucksack over to a subordinate trooper.

“Smoothly, sir, Bravo and Delta Companies are aboard, as are components of Alpha and Echo. Charlie Company is still en route, and we’re waiting for our techs and support crews to be transported to the Luna facility. Aside from the delay caused by the Phantoms, which will be compounded as the *Cairo* ships out to Titan for Service Life Extension in little under an hour and we still have over two hundred people aboard,” Travis reported, using the TAICO’s retina tracking ability to access the compiled report from the already large number of lists he had cascaded across one portion of the screen.

“We’ll get it done, Major, just make sure everyone has their equipment, the last thing we need is what happened on the *Saratoga* happening again,” Julian replied sourly, before unzipping his armour jacket and letting it sit loosely at his sides.

Another blip appeared on the Major’s TAICO as a new officer entered behind him. The TAICO accessed the *Resolute*’s main computer and identified the individual in question. Due to the nature of the activity and the Major’s own inquisitive nature he had discovered how to isolate the TAICO’s radar sphere to display only officers and naval personnel. He had instructed it to not display the rank and file *Legion* troopers so the device was not rendered useless by the constant motion around him. He found a sombre note in the device’s operational capacity, considering the chaotic nature of combat.

“Captain on deck,” Travis remarked, before jumping to attention, as did those soldiers around him. This sudden act caused the Captain to flinch as he entered the cargo bay behind the Major, and theoretically he wouldn’t have been able to differentiate the footsteps of the Captain from those belonging to the other members of the *Legion*. It took a few moments for the Captain to connect the Major’s statement to the TAICO that covered the Marines eye. As a Naval officer, he wouldn’t be assigned one of the experimental devices.

“I’ll never get used to that,” Louis commented bluntly, “As you were, gentlemen.”

“What warrants this visit, Captain?” Julian asked turning and nodding a greeting to the Captain.

“Just seeing how your move is progressing, Colonel,” Louis replied, before crossing the bay to join the two officers.

“To schedule, sir, but we could use another Peregrine Bay, so that we could bring aboard our men and equipment at the same time, not to mention an empty vehicle garage to store our equipment,” Julian remarked as the Captain approached a nearby weapons locker and inspected its contents.

“I’ll see what I can do but, due to the refit, the techies seem content in taking over my ship, so I am not making any promises,” Louis remarked as one of the *Legionnaires* handed him an AR-91 Legion Assault rifle from the locker so he could inspect it closer. “Yes, very impressive. Colonel, is there anything else you require?”

“The three weeks R&R on Titan Colony I was promised for taking this assignment,” Julian remarked candidly. “No, sir, there isn’t anything we require that isn’t been shipped aboard other than access to the mess hall when this is all over.”

“I’ll arrange for my executive officer to fit your men into our mess roster,” Louis replied before the ship’s intercom beeped.

“Bridge to Captain Augaard,” blared over the ship’s internal speakers.

Louis approached a nearby wall mount and depressed the mic button. “Augaard here, what is it, Eloise?”

“Captain, the fleet is about to enter Rift Space. Also, sir, Fleet Admiral O’Connor wishes to speak with you,” Commander Salisbury reported.

“Understood, Commander, I’m on my way, Augaard out,” Louis replied, releasing the button to end the channel before turning to the Colonel and his executive officer. “Have either of you seen a fleet-wide Rift Launch? I’ve observed them at this scale before, they are quite impressive.”

Julian nodded curtly. “I saw two during the New Berlin campaign, after an EM pulse knocked the Gate offline, but I don’t think my XO has.”

“That’s right, sir, well not one up close before.”

“Then come with me, Major, we can see it perfectly from the bridge,” Captain Augaard replied, before heading towards an inter-ship lift.

“Main Bridge,” Louis commanded once they had entered the inter-ship lift car, the doors sliding shut behind them. As the lift made its way to the very front of the ship, travelling through alternating regions of gravity and zero-g, the Captain stroked his non-regulation beard and observed the young soldier. Major Winters was a tall well-built man, with grey eyes and short cropped brown hair, and a scar down the left side of his face that had only recently been inflicted. His black EHO fatigues also seemed to absorb all light around him, giving him an unnaturally long shadow.

“To have never seen a fleet wide Rift jump in person makes you rather inexperienced to be a Trooper, let alone its second-in-command,” Louis remarked curiously.

“The war aged a lot of us, many of us managed to accumulate our hundred operations quite easily, often on the same planet. I attended AST and was then shipped right back to where I was stationed. There I joined the *Legion* as head of Echo Company. It was during the attack on New Harridaios that Major Antilles, the former 2IC, was killed during one of the Freedom League’s abortive raids on our compound while we tried to evacuate a group of refugees; in the end he held them off single-handed until the last transport took off. Colonel Stevens appointed me to the position for the remainder of the war,” Travis replied as the lift car reached its destination. The Major turned and held the door open for the Captain, who stepped onto the bridge and approached his Executive Officer.

“Major, you can see the Jump from the Main Viewer,” Louis remarked, heading into his annexe office.

“Eloise, I’ll take the Fleet Admiral in my office.”

“Aye, sir.”

Once the door closed behind the Captain, Louis stole a moment to fix his uniform and pour himself a cup of coffee from the pot on a pedestal near his desk. He sat at his desk and tapped a button, causing two small emitters to rise and a small Hologram screen to form between them. “I’m ready, Commander.”

The Fleet Admiral, First Lord William J. O’Connor’s image filled the small screen. His weathered features clearly displayed a lifetime of service to the UTA, as clearly as the rows of medals that adorned his white jacket.

“Captain, the Home Fleet is yours. I have heard your reservations about leaving Earth under-defended, and they have been taken into consideration but Psi-OpsCom and FleetIntel tell me a different story. Captain, the Freedom League has been crippled beyond the chance to mount anything more than a simple nuisance response to the Alliance, and they don’t have any bases in the Core to pose any significant tactical threat to Earth. This mission requires delicate attention and a show of force that only the Cruisers and the *Aristotle* can project. This is the only way we are going to reinforce morale and keep the frontiers on our side, and that’s why we are utilizing the Carriers to transport supplies and additional forces instead of taking cargo haulers away from their duties. But by the slim chance, Captain, that your fears are well founded and the Freedom League has developed a way to fool our operatives, and they are indeed a threat to us, I’ve given you complete control of all Orbital Defence Installations and planetary garrisons in the Central Systems. However, the fleet will be out of communications range for the next two years, at the least. You will be on your own during that time. I have already contacted the Fleet Commanders within the sector, and they will provide any assistance you may require,” Lord O’Connor remarked, leaning back in his chair while resting a clear glass cup of tea in his hands.

“I thank you again for this honour, sir. I can think of at least five other Flag officers in the fleet that are more than capable for this task,” Louis remarked, still not entirely sure as to why he was being left in charge of the most prestigious piece of real estate in the known galaxy with little more than a picket fence in the way of would-be invaders.

“Captain, it is no accident that you were chosen for this position and not those other officers. Your actions during the war, particularly the way you handled the Twelfth Fleet following the loss of the *Anchorage* during the Perseus Nine Campaign, makes you more than qualified for a Fleet posting, but the bureaucrats in High Command are talking of downsizing the number of fleets, in the hope of preventing another war so such an action isn’t currently possible. This was the best I could do within the constraints of peacetime.”

“What of the vessels the Titan Fleet Yards are producing? Will they be joining you on the frontiers, or will they be staying here?” Louis enquired, quietly hoping that the new Peacemaker Class ‘Battlecruisers’ would be staying to shore up the Home System instead of joining the *Aristotle*.

“Since the first four will be completed before we reach Debola, they will be of no use to me, they will be under your direct command. If necessary you may transfer your flag to any of them. However, once we reach Debola and the Gate is activated, all Peacemaker Cruisers will be deployed to their assigned anchorages. Now, there is one more thing before the fleet leaves port: I have made an executive order. Congratulations, *Rear Admiral*, you have been placed in charge of the Sol Sector Defence Fleet in my stead, O’Connor out.” The image on the screen in front of him faded to nothing.

After the Fleet Admiral’s image had faded to a faint outline, Louis leant back in his chair. ‘*Rear Admiral, whoever would have thought that would happen when I enlisted,*’ he thought to himself, before standing and leaving his office.

“Status of the Fleet, Commander,” Louis asked, returning to the bridge and taking his command chair, which the Commander relinquished once he approached it.

“The Cruisers have already entered the Rift, the Carriers and the *Aristotle* are about to enter the Flight Range. The rest of the fleet is either in port undergoing repair and refit, or out on exercises near the Serion Fleet Base,” Eloise reported before standing behind the new Rear Admiral, in that brief moment she skimmed his mind, to determine what had happened in his office. [Congratulations, sir,] she telepathically communicated to the Flag Officer.

“What’s the report on that reactor, XO?” Louis asked, turning his chair to face her.

“Number Two Reactor has sustained total core failure. It would appear that the technicians unwittingly destroyed one of the distribution nodes when they installed the new one. There has already been a requisition form for a new reactor dispatched to Supply, along with a rather strongly worded reprimand to the technicians at fault who installed the faulty reactor and damaged the couplings,” Eloise reported, standing behind her CO.

“When is the new reactor scheduled to arrive?” Louis asked, taking the cup of coffee his aide handed him. Due to the ships’ proximity to Earth this was real coffee, not the simulated goop that was normally provided to Alliance craft.

“Due to orders direct from Lord O’Connor, the Quartermaster Office will have a Type Seven Reactor unloaded and installed within the next two weeks,” Eloise reported.

“Excellent news, we may yet be able to join the rest of the fleet for live trials at the end of the month,” Louis remarked before Travis turned from his place at the front of the bridge.

“The Carriers are entering the Rift,” Travis commented, causing the bridge staff to look in his direction.

“Excellent, seeing a Carrier Task group Rift Jump is always an interesting spectacle,” Louis remarked, joining the Marine officer.

The after-effects of the Cruisers entering Rift Space caused the Luna Gravity Well to distort, sending a spiral of red, blue, green and magenta outward from the pole in massive spirals. The normal effects of a single Basilisk Class Cruiser’s 375-metre size would last around fifteen seconds, but the effect of one hundred and fifteen Cruisers entering simultaneously caused the light show to last for several minutes. While it was possible for the entire fleet to Rift Jump at the one time as was the standard operational procedure, to arrive in the thick of battle as one Battlegroup; this trip was staggered more for its propaganda than its tactical value.

UTEK Carrier *Belepheron*

Captain Horatio Braggins stood next to his Command chair, unlit corn pipe sitting in the palm of his hand, as his Command crew went about the large bridge performing their duties.

Like the smaller Basilisk Cruiser, the Bridge of the Vindicator Carrier was a larger room that took up a bulk of the front portion of the topmost deck of the ship. Unlike the Basilisks whose command centre comprised the entirety of the front sections of deck 1, the Command Centre of the Vindicator’s was on an additional superstructure above the bulk of the craft.

“Helm, take us to the Flight Range, speed one third,” Commander Kyle Anthradge ordered from his position between the twin Flight Control consoles at the front of the bridge. Before them hung the massive Hologrid screen that displayed the area of space just above the Luna Northern Pole directly in front of the craft, which was still overcome by the effects of the Cruisers entering the Rift. At times, the gravity ripples would strike the *Belepheron*, causing the massive ship to shudder slightly.

“Aye, sir, speed reading one third, compensating for gravity disturbance, ETA three minutes,” reported the chief flight control officer from the left console.

“Mr Henderson, activate the Rift Generators, commence feed from gravity well,” Commander Anthradge ordered. Standing opposite his Captain with one hand on the armrest of the Command Chair he noted his commanding officer’s unease, but then that could have been anyone on the Bridge.

“Aye, sir. Collectors at 25%, we will be at sufficient power to jump in seven minutes,” Engineer First Class Joseph Henderson reported from his post at the rear of the bridge.

“Is the array ready to receive the output from the others?” Horatio enquired, before signing off a situation report and handing it to his bosun’s mate for transmittal to the *Aristotle*.

“Affirmative, sir.”

“Bridge to all decks, prepare for Rift launch, secure all external antennas and hatches,” Horatio ordered before leaning on an armrest. He didn’t need to be a telepath to tell that the crew was uneasy; it was expected, as the Rift Jump technology, while the backbone of UTEC exploration since before the formation of the Alliance, was still one of the more dangerous forms of transportation.

Almost as one mammoth body, the twelve Vindicator Class Carriers used their powerful Hylieon thrusters to move their massive 675-metre-long frames into a tight wedge formation above Luna’s Northern Pole and activated their Rift Generators.

Light emanated from their large parallel engine booms, reaching to their wide blunt noses, causing them to glow iridescently.

“Captain, the Battlegroup signals they are in position, Rift Generation at 100%,” Henderson reported before placing his hand against his earpiece. “The task group reads as ready, sir.”

“Prepare to relay triangulation coordinates to the rest of the Battlegroup. Helm, plot a course to Debola Prime,”

Horatio ordered, biting down hard on the end of his pipe, taking his seat and locking it in place. This was the most dangerous part of the process, due to the fact that few if any of the bridge staff had ever completed a Rift Jump in their careers, in recent memory the only time the Rift Generators were ever powered was in dock during the ship’s tri-yearly performance review.

“Captain, all compartments read ready, sir, engineering reports greens all cross the board, ready to commence Rift Jump at your word,” the System Operations Officer reported from his station on the sublevel of the Bridge.

“Prepare to channel Grav-energy from the task group to the focusing array,” Braggins ordered, chewing the end of his pipe rather hard, as this was the most dangerous part of the jump.

“Aye, sir, commencing Grav-feed,” Henderson reported while inputting commands into his console.

The lead Carrier - the *Belepheron* - channelled the energy generated by her sisters to her massive focusing array, which projected it in front of them to the centre of the Cruisers’ entry point. Initially the point was small, but it slowly grew in size until it was large enough to accommodate the Carriers, close to two kilometres in diameter.

“Captain, the Rift is at maximum capacity,” reported Engineer Henderson from his post.

“Helm, you may proceed when ready,” Horatio ordered before locking his chair in place.

“Aye, sir.”

As one body, the Vindicator Carriers fired a powerful burst from their thrusters, propelling them into the swirling vortex of light and colour. In an instant they were gone, leaving behind a light display as their massive forms used the moon’s gravity well to propel them at three times the speed of light through a small rift in the fabric of space.

UTEK Cruiser *Resolute*

The crew stood slightly awed at the spectacle that played out in front of them; few, if any, of the enlisted personnel had been in the service of the Alliance long enough to have seen an individual Rift Jump, let alone one the size they had just witnessed. Louis even speculated that few of his veteran officers, those with whom he had served during the

Pirate Wars, would have seen the fleet-wide Rift Jump before. Louis resumed stroking his beard as he leant against a guardrail. Although he had seen plenty of Rift-Jumps in his forty-five-year career, he was impressed at the scope of the venture; however, not as much, it would seem, as the marine officer who stood on his bridge, who hadn't appeared to have blinked since the Admiral had returned to the bridge.

"Impressed, Major?" Louis remarked.

"Very much, sir, I can see why the media creates such a circus whenever they occur," Travis replied, clearly showing just how raw he was.

"Major, the only thing the Rift System is, is an extremely dangerous form of transportation; all this activity will render transport between Earth and Luna impossible for about a month while it's at it. But since the Gate Network is a shambles, it's the best we can do," Louis replied, his voice stressing the reason why Rift-Jumps had fallen into disuse.

Travis did not know how to respond to this rather insolent comment, especially with a Psi-Ops Officer, one of the eyes and ears of the UTEC High Command, standing behind the Admiral so he decided to remain silent and keep his mind blank, and turned to watch the screen.

For several minutes the bridge was devoid of conversation barring what was required for the running of the ship until the silence was broken. "Rear Admiral, Luna Command reports that the *Aristotle* has left her moorings and is about to enter the Flight Range," Warrant Officer Gregory Saunders reported from his communications console.

"This should be interesting, the *Aristotle*'s never had to use her Rift Generators; they became obsolete before she was designed, and the designers debated at length whether or not to even install them on her. Not to mention that the Gate Network was in operation long before she left the slipways," Louis commented, resting a boot upon the dividing step, and taking a sip of his coffee.

UTEC Flagship *Aristotle*

The twin-level command deck of the jewel of the UTEC crown, the Liberty Class Flagship *Aristotle* was a mass of activity as officers of various ranks rushed about bearing status reports on the *Aristotle*, the last transmitted reports on the rest of the fleet before they entered the Rift, and the status of the Flight Range orbiting one of Debola Primes' three moons.

Fleet Captain Chenoa Webster stepped out from her annexe office and onto the lower level of the command deck clutching a series of reports in her small gloved hands.

"Mr Miller, are we underway?" Chenoa asked, taking the command chair from her executive officer.

"Yes, ma'am, we've disconnected from Oleron's auxiliary generators and are under mains power. We will be entering the Flight Range in five minutes," her executive officer, Commander Anthony Miller, reported, walking over to check the readouts from the System Operations Monitor.

"Excellent, what is the status of the Rift Drive?" Chenoa queried, tapping her armrest console to upload the contents of the report disks that she was cradling in her lap to the main computer.

"Still in standby mode, ma'am. Unlike the Rift Drive on smaller vessels, we will need to be within one hundred kilometres of the Gravity Well before we can commence energy feed," Chief Engineer Benjamin Von-Gallus reported from the engineer's console, situated just before the second level of the command section.

Chenoa nodded slightly, before resting her chin on an open palm. "Understood. Once we are in position, commence gravity feed."

"Aye, ma'am."

"Comms, contact Luna Observation Posts, notify them of our progress. What's the ETA for our meeting with the tenders?"

"The Fleet Tenders will be in place to guide us to the Departure Point in twenty seconds; from then on, we'll be under their control," reported the Chief Flight Control officer, standing behind the twin helm stations in a sunken well below the lower command deck.

"Perfect, that's one thing we have to worry about. Put the Tenders on the main screen," Chenoa ordered as a series of heavy thuds could be heard as the Tenders latched onto evenly spaced sections of the hull by way of magnetic clamps in order to effectively manipulate the flagship's course.

The small four-person Fleet Tender craft buzzed around the mammoth 1250-metre long hull that was the *Aristotle* like worker bees tending to their queen, cradling her if she was a newborn as they guided her carefully to the very

centre of the Flight Range, aiming her angled nose towards the Departure Point, which was still under the effects of the carrier's departure. While the *Aristotle* was powerful and manoeuvrable for her size, pinpoint actions required the assistance of more agile and responsive craft to guide her.

"Captain, we are ready to begin to bring the Rift Drive online," Von-Gallus reported, inputting a series of commands into his console.

"At your discretion, Lieutenant, I am not about to make any mistakes," Chenoa ordered, leaning forward in her chair.

"Understood, Captain. Bringing primary coolant tanks online, preparing to bring reactors six and seven online. Engineering, prepare to shunt drive plasma to the Rift Drive from the fusion generators. Bringing Grav-Accelerators to full power. We'll have enough power to jump in six minutes," Von-Gallus communicated to his staff deep in the recesses of the flagship.

"Understood, notify all decks: secure all external hatches and antennas, lock all weapon emplacements into standby position and secure all ordinance. This is the first time a ship of this size has performed a Rift Launch so we're going to be performing this by the book," Chenoa commented before her bosun's mate approached to collect the reports she carried to deliver them to their specific destinations.

The *Aristotle's* four massive engine pods glowed bright red, as the gravimetric energy flowed through them, arcing out from Luna's Northern Pole, into collection tanks deep within her hull. Due to the size of the *Aristotle*, it wasn't practical, or environmentally safe, for it to use the conventional Rift Drive found on the Basilisk or the Vindicator, simply because the power collection requirements would tear any planetoid it collected from to pieces. In order to combat this, the *Aristotle* utilised a modified version of the Jump Gate Network system, while still referred to as the Rift Drive, instead of creating a tear in space bridging the two regions together, it created a wormhole-like vortex, bridging the *Aristotle's* location, and its destination, via a corridor in subspace.

"Ma'am, Collectors are at full capacity," Von-Gallus reported as the command deck lighting darkened as power was diverted to more critical systems.

"...*Aristotle*, this is the UTNS *Santa Monica*, we've been monitoring your progress, give the word and we'll cut you loose," reported over the *Aristotle's* speakers.

"Fleet Admiral, we are ready to depart, any final orders?" Chenoa asked before turning to face the Fleet Admiral, who stood in front of the large open observation level that separated the main command deck from the wardroom, which took the entire upper level.

Fleet Admiral O'Connor placed a hand on the guardrail, and retrieved the glass that sat on a small pedestal nearby.

"You have a go, Captain, take us into the Rift," the Fleet Admiral ordered, before bringing the glass to his lips, and downing a portion of its clear contents.

"*Santa Monica*, this is the *Aristotle*, detach as soon as possible, we're about to enter the Rift, so get the hell out of here, we don't know how your little ships will fare from the shockwave," Chenoa ordered, before locking her chair into place. "Helm, take us in."

"Aye, ma'am."

The front portions of the *Aristotle's* engine pods started to glow electric blue, before all four points fired a steady stream of neutrinos and anti-protons into four precisely targeted sections. Each of these four points marked the outline for which the Rift portal would be created. Once these four points were secure, a fifth beam, emitted from the craft's large navigational deflector fired a single pulse towards the very centre of the four other points. Once the pulse had reached its programmed distance from the ship, it exploded.

Initially it appeared to have failed, as nothing happened, before, seconds later the area of space between the four points appeared to tear itself in two, and erupt in a giant swirl of colours. For a split second, the *Aristotle* hung in space, before her massive thruster banks roared to life and propelled her into the small wormhole which closed in on itself as soon as it entered.

UTEC Cruiser *Resolute*

The entire bridge crew stood, or sat in silent awe at what they had witnessed, before one after another they returned to their duties, each bearing embarrassed expressions as they realized that those around them had already done so, as they still gazed at the dissipating gravimetric residue.

Rear Admiral Augaard stood next to his command chair in amazement; nothing in his forty-five year career had prepared him for what he had just witnessed. Running a hand over his face, he returned to his normal state, “Well...that was interesting,” Rear Admiral Augaard remarked before closing his open mouth and fixing his jacket, “Okay people, back to work...why in the blue hell are you all still standing about lollygagging for? You all have things to do.”

Chapter Two:

Twelfth Age of the reign of the Great Mistress, Great Hall of the Dark Ones, Supreme Command Spire, Kalonardra exact coordinates unknown

[]= Telepathy

Naira Seville, the self-proclaimed and uncontested Queen of the Night, Mistress of Destruction, ruler of the Greater Kalon Swarm, sat atop her throne, residing for the most part, in darkness, her throne constructed from the dismembered limbs and skeletons of those who have fallen before the might of her warriors, be they enemies or unworthy minions glistened in the flickering light of torches. Her clawed hands clasped together in delight as her loyalest followers updated her on their progress of the Great Cleansing. Her six principal Swarm Masters stood before her with their accompanying Lysarian guards, great hulking brutes of muscle and spines, but they possessed the comparable intelligence of a stump. To make up for their lack of judgement they possessed zealot-like genetically imprinted loyalty to their Masters over all others. They had their bodies augmented to give them unrivalled strength, and a series of spikes running from the tops of their shoulders to the tips of their short, serrated tails. The Swarm Masters themselves were massive seven-foot creatures, with great heads lined with rows of dark razor-sharp teeth, their backs and shoulders covered in rows of sinister-looking spikes from their neck to their tail. Situated on their shoulders was a set of smaller arms, which at their tip were scythe-like claws. Their eyes, were dark, heavysset, and blood red.

[My Queen, the Lythar are on the run, my minions have wrought great destruction upon the Wretched Ones; their outer colonies lie in flaming ruin, and their fleet in disarray. I must ask why the Greater Swarm is being recalled to the Homeworld,] remarked the largest and oldest of the Swarm Masters, the fact that he referred to the hereditary enemy of the Swarm by name, clearly showed his frustration.

[The reason is simple, My Dear KriTora, it is because I have decreed it, which should be enough reason for you. I have discovered something rather alarming within our space. I have discovered a small primitive craft invading our domain, it did not stand long and we destroyed it. Now, my children, tell me what you see?] Naira remarked as a twisted series of tentacles descended from the recesses of the high vaulted ceiling. They carried a large piece of alien-looking dark grey hull armour, with an emblem painted on one side in white paint. The tentacles dropped the hull plating on the spongy ground before returning to the recesses.

The Swarm Masters walked around the large hull fragment conferring between themselves before they assumed their original positions standing at the foot of their Queen's throne.

[It is a hull fragment from a small vessel, non-Lythar in origin; it is also a compound non-indigenous to our area of domain.] Swarm Master LoqToza remarked scientifically as he ran a scraping of the material around in his claws, sniffing it tentatively.

[It bears markings, an arboreal-type planetoid surrounded by fifteen additional stellar objects, a governmental body spanning a number of star systems perhaps?] Swarm Master JakMoraz suggested, shaking his great head.

[My Queen, were any of the craft's inhabitants taken alive?] KriTora queried before grabbing a small unidentified creature from a pouch on his waist and devouring it whole, purposely making loud crunching noises, to show both his delight with the indigenous delicacy and his disdain about having to endure this pointless venture.

[They are an insignificant but resilient race, yet many survived the encounter; those we captured proved *useful*.] Naira replied, looking over her shoulder to a section of wall that fell away forming a doorway; in its place stood a pair of Lysarian Guards. Once the doorway had completely formed, they entered the Great Hall, by the time they had reached the central dais, the wall had reformed.

The brutish forms of two Lysarians quickly filled this opening, pushing a small creature into the Great Hall before them. Between the two towering sentinels stood a pitiful-looking creature, its small weak pink body appeared comical when put beside its handlers. His black tattered jumpsuit bore little reminder to his previous vocation. The creature tried to escape but was felled due to a sharp snap of the heavy chains attached to its puny neck. Its presence caused many of the Swarm Masters to disbelievably shake their heads; how could something so pitifully small and physically inferior pose the great Kalon Swarm a threat?

“Please, this is all unnecessary. I assure you, I am Captain Nathaniel Goldstrom of the United Terran Alliance; we are here on a mission of peace, we’re trying to locate other life in the galaxy,” the form called out, trying to free itself from the grasp of its handlers, but failing miserably.

[It is a physically inferior species, lacking any natural-forming defensive systems worth mentioning other than rudimentary telepathic ability. Collectively they call themselves Humanity. They do appear to have one thing going for them; they refuse to die.] Naira remarked as the Lysarians paraded the human captain around as if he was a show dog.

[My Queen, why bring this...this thing into our presence? This abomination is an insult to the greatness of those warriors whose cranial crowns adorn the walls of this Great Hall,] KriTora scoffed as the other Swarm Masters inspected the human.

[Because, KriTora, this is the future of our enemy, not the Lythar, and its pitiful Imperium. They may be weak now but if they are left unchecked they could pose a greater threat than the Wretched Ones.] Naira stated, rising from her throne to walk among what in humanoid cultures would be her War Council. At 5’9” the eight-foot Swarm Masters towered over her, but they all were inferior compared to her powerful presence.

[My Queen, were we able to ascertain the location of their Homeworld?] LoqToza enquired, inspecting the captive as if he was a piece of livestock.

[We were, however, it took some ‘convincing’, it would seem that this species’ latent telepathic ability is difficult to dominate.] Naira replied before projecting the collective memories of the human crews to the grouped Swarm Masters.

UTEC Explorer, *Ophelia*, in orbit Polaris Resupply and Command Station, Hartonis Prime.
May 17, 2237 [Alliance Military Calendar]

“Captain, we keep losing Rift Probes in the Singari Expanse, it might be because of some natural-forming phenomena or someone pilfering our probes when they return to realspace; I want you to find out why so we don’t waste any more resources charting an area of space we can’t get to,” the holographic representation of Admiral George Yeager ordered from a small monitor near the captain’s chair, as the small explorer left the confines of the Polaris Resupply and Command Station. The station was in orbit of the remote Tridium Mining colony of Hartonis Prime, one of the few loyal colonies this far from Earth.

“I will do what I can to find the missing probes, and if we, like the probes, can’t enter the Expanse?” Captain Nathaniel Goldstrom asked, seated in his small command chair, as his five-person Command Team went about their duties.

“If after the five days you’re scheduled to be out of port that you still cannot find a way in, return to base, and we’ll commence exploring other areas.”

“Captain, we are clear of the station’s gravity well, and we’ve been cleared to enter the Pulse Stream and commence core start-up,” Pilot First Class Charles Burgundy reported from the front console.

“Admiral, we’ll be seeing you, sir, we’ll be in touch in a week, whether we find your lost probes or not. Keep a candle in the window for us. *Ophelia* out,” Nathaniel replied before swivelling his chair to face the front screen.

“Helm, engage Pulse Generators, take us to the probe’s last known location.”

“Aye, sir, entering the Pulse Stream,” Burgundy replied, inputting the commands on his console.

The small Atlantis Class Explorer manoeuvred away from the large orbital military complex and activated its small Pulse Thrusters. Too small and underpowered to use the Rift Drive used by larger craft, the Atlantis class scouts used pulses of antimatter to propel it through space known as the Pulse Drive. While effective, and a safer method of exploration compared to the Rift Drive, it did not protect the crew from the effects of time dilation and as such could only be used for short-haul trips no greater than a few weeks before the crew would start succumbing to the effects of hyper-accelerated aging.

The small craft’s interior was filled to capacity with all manner of equipment and sensors. Due to its size it was a little on the cramped side but the twelve-man crew and twenty-four man marine team didn’t complain; the Atlantis Explorers had been at the forefront of exploration along with the Basilisk Class Cruisers since before the foundation of the UTA.

Captain Goldstrom leant back into his chair as his Command Crew went about their business. His Helm Officer made minuscule course corrections when the *Ophelia* momentarily veered off its programmed course; his astroscientific/executive officer was hunched over her console studying every single piece of information the ship's powerful sensor array was acquiring. His communications and Psi-Ops officers were going over the records received from the now-lost probes and his Gunnery Control Officer stood to the side of the bridge and coordinated with his staff in the Armoury, preparing the ship's defensive armament.

"Charles, thanks for coming out with us. I know you're technically a civilian now, but we won't be out here long and you'll be back to married life, speaking of which, you haven't said much, how is your new life treating you?" Nathaniel queried as his Helm Officer sat upright after programming another course correction.

"Well, sir, Caroline's relieved that I've received the discharge so that we can return to Sirius Major and start our new life," his Helm Officer replied, turning his chair around to face the rest of the bridge.

"Well, you've done us one hell of a service, you've earned it. I'm glad it was approved," Nathaniel replied, his Astroscientific Officer turning her chair also.

"Sir, we have an object coming up on our scopes. Not sure what it is, but it could be our missing probe," she reported, bringing up the object on the main viewer.

"Take us out of the Stream, Mr Burgundy," Nathaniel ordered, leaning on one armrest, pushing his thoughts out of his mind.

"Aye, sir."

The object was roughly twelve metres in length with long wings at each side ending in a pair of sharp hooks; under each wing was a pod of unidentified origin, its front ending in a great gaping maw. It appeared to be damaged, as it was leaking a blue fluid from under one wing. It had a series of running lights that ran the length of its organic hull, which were, for the most part, non-functional.

The space in front of the *Ophelia* split in two as the small craft exited the Pulse Stream, small wisps of matter and energy flaring behind the ship before the rift closed in on itself.

"Analysis, Ms Havilland," Nathaniel ordered, leaning forward as the ship grew closer. "Helm full stop."

"I take back my comment about it being ours, I'm reading biological and metallic components thrown together into one form. I'm not picking up any engines or weapons in the conventional sense. Or definite lifesigns for that matter, but then the object itself gives the appearance that it is alive," Commander Sarah Havilland reported, pressing buttons on her console bringing up her readings onto the main viewer. Once there she highlighted the different sections of the alien craft as best she could against the human sense of what a ship was.

"Mr Sovora, attempt communication with the alien craft," Nathaniel ordered, standing and walking closer to the screen to get a closer look at the unknown craft. "What the hell are you, my little friend?"

"Aye, sir," Ensign Mikhail Sovora replied, inputting commands into his console. "This is the UTEC Explorer *Ophelia* to unknown vessel. Please identify yourself. Do you require assistance?" he enquired, pressing his hand against the receiver earpiece.

After a few minutes Mikhail turned to his captain. "Sir, I'm getting nothing from them, not even background chatter. I've never heard anything so quiet," he reported.

"Mr Burgundy, bring us alongside; Mikhail, continue trying to raise them," Nathaniel ordered before turning to his Gunnery Officer. "Steve, I want a firing solution ready should we require it. Prep the Ares Cannon for firing, but do it quietly, we have no idea the level of their scanning capabilities."

"Understood, sir, I'll get onto it," reported the Chief Gunnery Control Officer before relaying the information to the Armoury.

"Expecting something, sir?" Sarah Havilland asked, turning her chair to face the captain.

"I'm hoping to be proved wrong XO, but until we can determine their stance we can only prepare for the worst," Nathaniel replied as the *Ophelia* approached the alien craft which hadn't appeared to acknowledge the larger craft's presence.

"Range reading 100 metres," Burgundy reported. "Still reading nothing from them."

"Prepare a boarding party, I want to know what's over there," Nathaniel ordered, turning to face his Gunnery Officer.

"Aye, sir. Bridge to the Armoury, prepare Marine Infiltration Team 7 to board the alien craft," Lieutenant Colonel Steven Alchin relayed to his subordinates.

Suddenly the alien craft appeared to notice the *Ophelia*; its front pair of running lights flashed a venomous red before it attempted to assume a defensive pose.

“Captain, we’ve got movement with the other ship, I don’t know what it is, but I think we pissed it off,” Sarah reported as the craft started to move its wings as if to keep it aloft in space.

“Mr Burgundy, back us up. A conflict is the last thing we need right now,” Nathaniel ordered, leaping over the guardrail that separated the front of the Bridge and his Command Chair before bringing up his own console.

“Aye, sir,” Charles replied, entering the commands, as the pods on the alien craft started to glow.

“Captain, I’m detecting a power build-up in the alien craft but I’m not able to determine its purpose,” Sarah reported, studying the readings on her console.

“Mikhail, tell them our intent. Charles, bring us to a defensive position. Take us to Level Two Battle Stations,” Nathaniel ordered, resting his chin on an open palm.

With his call of increased preparedness, all the consoles on the Bridge, and those throughout the ship, pulsed orange, informing the crew of the possibility of hostile or hazardous action. All over the ship men reported to battle stations, power was diverted from sensors to the ship’s weapons systems and engines and the ship’s marine contingent reported to the armoury to be equipped in case the *Ophelia* was boarded or they were required to perform boarding actions themselves.

After a few seconds, the pods on the craft powered down and returned to their previous state.

“I think we convinced them we don’t want a fight,” Charles commented, seconds before a pair of green bolts of energy rocketed away from the craft’s underwing pods.

“Incoming energy discharge, impact in 5,” Sarah reported before grabbing hold of the handrail attached to the bottom of her station.

“Brace for impact. Mikhail: inform Polaris Station; tell them what’s happened. Armoury, prepare three rounds across their bow, warning shot,” Nathaniel ordered before the green bolts struck the *Ophelia* amidships, causing the entire ship to shake, followed by another volley, then another.

“Scratch that order Armoury, Steve, I want you to target that damaged pod. Fire three rounds full force, I want an updated firing solution immediately,” Nathaniel barked while gripping the arms of his chair. Those on the Bridge unlucky enough to not have a firm handhold were thrown about by the force of the impacts.

“Damage to decks seven, eight and ten, section fifteen through twenty, minor casualties,” Mikhail reported.

“Firing the Ares Cannon, sir,” Steve reported pressing a firing button on the guardrail console in front of him.

The *Ophelia*’s main gun, the Ares Cannon, was a magnetically accelerated gauss weapon, which fired three large 10-gallon drum-sized projectiles towards the alien craft’s damaged weapon pod at an equivalent speed of Mach 12. Two of the three rounds struck home on the outer covering, breaking it open; the third missed and struck the seam attaching the wing to the body, and severing it.

The craft fired off a round from its one remaining weapon pod before turning and attempting to flee, leaving a long trail of floating viscous fluid.

“Cease fire, get repair teams to damaged sections. Mr Burgundy: plot a pursuit course, but let’s keep our distance. Bring that wing aboard, I want it studied. Sarah, what have we got on long-range sensors, what’s in front of us?” Nathaniel queried before discovering that somehow, during the skirmish, he had been cut along the side of his face.

“The alien craft appears to be heading towards a binary star system, with five planets orbiting the larger of the two stars. There also appears to be a nebula cloud at the terminus of the planetary belt. I’m picking up Keblonite, and a number of radioactive heavy metals I can’t identify without close up intensive analysis. It would, however, be enough to mask our presence,” Sarah replied, bringing up the requested information and displaying it on one of the many screens that comprised the main viewer.

“The question remains, are there anymore of these things where we’re headed?” Nathaniel asked, cleaning his wound with his jacket sleeve.

“I’ve tied the aliens bio-signature into the sensors, sir. There appears to be a group of them, numbering about a hundred, maybe more, meaning a colony, or a staging ground, I couldn’t tell you for certain since we know nothing of this creature,” Sarah replied before the inter-ship intercom beeped.

“Hanger to Command Deck, Commander, the salvagers have left the hanger, you’ll have your wing in 10 minutes.” Sarah stood, “Sir, I’ll be in the Sci-Lab.”

“Understood. Mikhail, have we received a response from Polaris?” Nathaniel asked as his aide handed him a cup of coffee.

“Yes, sir, we are to continue with our orders, but we are also to discover what exactly that thing was,” Mikhail replied, pressing his hand to the earpiece.

“So much for that early discharge,” Charles commented to himself, before monitoring the ship’s course.

“You’ll get it, or I’ll personally transport you to Earth,” Nathaniel remarked before leaning back in his chair. “Do we have enough in the tanks for one more jump?”

“Aye, sir, we have enough power to get us to the planetary system, but that will be about it,” Charles replied, updating the course into the ship’s main computer.

“Then by all means, you’re not a civilian yet. Once that wing is aboard get us underway, plot an overtake course, I want to be there before it does. Bring us as close to that nebula as you can, and give us enough speed to drift into it,” Nathaniel ordered before downing the remnants of his coffee, and making a disgusted face, signifying the beverage had gone cold.

The *Ophelia* hung motionless as four small salvage craft left her underneath hanger bay and sped towards the wing that was slowly rotating, propelled by the fluid leaking from its nearly destroyed weapons pod.

“Okay, Beta Four, grab the extreme edge. Beta Three, Heath, assist him. Raoul, latch on near the weapons pod, set your radiation shields to maximum. I’ll guide you guys in,” Beta One ordered as he carefully manipulated the controls of his small salvage craft, before thumbing his own radiation shields to maximum. *How in the hell are we going to get this bloody thing into the hold?* he thought as small pieces of debris ricocheted against the massive transparent Tridium composite cockpit dome, causing small dents to form in the reinforced covering that took up the entire front of the fragile craft.

“Hey, boss, how in the hell is this hunk-o-junk gonna get inna the hold, it’s gotta be at least a mile long,” Raoul asked as the two claws attached to the underside of his craft latched onto the alien’s wing.

“You just take care of moving it, Raoul, let me worry about how it’s going to fit.”

“Warrant Officer, I’ve got a bad feeling about this, the claws are cutting right through this thing,” Petty Officer Heath Freeman remarked as the claws penetrated the spongy substance that the wing was made of, causing it to seep a blue liquid, “Good lord, sir, the wing, it’s...it’s *bleeding!*”

“You’ve always got a bad feeling about everything,” one of the others muttered.

“Say again, Petty Officer, you say the wing is ‘bleeding’?” Beta One queried as his salvagers slowly moved the wing underneath the *Ophelia* that was drifting towards them.

“Affirmative, sir, the wing is bleeding; blue fluid is seeping from where we punctured the surface. What should we do? Sir?”

Beta One sat there stunned. *How can something live out here in no atmosphere?* “Yes...oh of course, get that thing to the cargo hold. Let’s get the hell out of here, this is starting to freak me out,” he ordered before tapping his controls.

Sarah buzzed around the science lab like an agitated bee, checking every instrument that she had at her disposal. While her subordinates scrutinized over the shreds of information the ship had recovered of the alien ship and the following brief engagement it had.

“John, tell me what you’ve found. I’m a little sceptical about Warrant Officer Gerges’ comment that this thing was alive. Hell, I’m sceptical about my own sensor data,” Sarah ordered as she remotely dissected the alien wing, which now took up the entirety of the *Ophelia*’s cargo hold, via giant robotic arms. Due to the unknown nature of the alien craft, the hold was sealed off from the rest of the ship.

“I don’t know what to say, ma’am, Warrant Officer Gerges’ assessment was close, but not entirely accurate.

Analysis of the liquid contains [hemolymph](#) as a major component, as well as a hydrocarbon retardant compound I have never seen before, in a sense, this is blood. That, coupled with your early scans, does support the fact that it was, for the most part, alive,” John replied, as the console he was working on ran checks on a vial of the alien liquid.

“I’m still not convinced by what I’ve found, but even if we can’t perceive it possible, it doesn’t mean that it’s not.

Relay what we’ve discovered to the Science Council, maybe they can figure out what the hell it is,” Sarah ordered as the intercom beeped. “Science Lab here.”

“Sarah, we’ve reached the planetary system. Report to the bridge,” Nathaniel ordered.

“Understood, sir, I’m on my way,” Sarah replied before turning to her subordinates. “Keep monitoring the alien craft until it leaves range, transmit all tactical data to the Armoury, everything else to the Science Council,” Sarah ordered before leaving the lab.

The *Ophelia* exited the Pulse Stream just outside the fringes of the Planetary Belt. At the speed they were travelling, if their presence had registered on the alien sensors, it wouldn't have made any difference as seconds later the *Ophelia* had entered the safety of the Keblonite and radioactive fields within the nebula.

"Engine cores are cold, sir, we're drifting; it will be at least 25 minutes before we can jump again," Charles reported, facing the rest of the bridge. Until the ship's Pulse Generators recharged from the ever present radiation of space there was nothing he could do, outside using the ship's chemical rockets to make minor changes to their position when the errant Keblonite in the nebula strayed too close to the ship.

"Understood, I don't think we're going anywhere anytime soon anyway. Those aliens we picked up before arriving would pose a problem," Nathaniel commented before rising and walking around the bridge to regain circulation while under the pretence of inspecting the bridge systems. "Deploy the Sensor Drones; send them to the periphery of the nebula."

"Aye, sir. Drones away," Sarah reported from her console. "Drones will reach the extreme edge of the nebula in 36 seconds."

From an underside launch tube, the *Ophelia*'s high-speed Sensor Drones sped towards the edge of the nebula and out of the interference of the radioactive materials. While the Keblonite, a substance used in UTEC power cores, generated enough electromagnetic radiation to cancel out the magnetic resonance signature created by the ship herself, it also flooded the sensor arrays, rendering them useless, while the Tridium/Titanium/Uredinium Composite Hull Plating was dense enough to protect the crew from the radiation. The Sensor Drones, utilising point-to-point direct communication, acted as the eyes and ears of the *Ophelia* as she hid in the nebula.

"Drones at the limit of the nebula, sir, receiving telemetry now," Sarah reported before displaying the images the Drones transmitted back to the *Ophelia*.

"I don't like all this hiding, we know these things are weak at the wings. I propose we gather as much data as we can and then blast the hell out of them," Steve commented. The seasoned marine tended to keep his thoughts to himself; the mere notion that he was voicing his opinion was enough to cause the Command Crew to pay attention.

"Need I remind you, Major, that we have been ordered to observe the aliens, not slaughter them en-masse. Now cool yourself before you say something you can be tried for," the softly spoken Psi-Ops Officer, Sub-Lieutenant Alexandra Serapova commented, standing in the corner of the bridge. Her words and her telepathic presence quickly silenced the Marine.

"Still wishing you were home? And miss all this?" Mikhail commented sarcastically to Charles who glowered sullenly as his duties weren't necessary.

Charles laughed hollowly before turning around, "What in God's name is that?"

"I don't think any of us could have said it any better, Mr Burgundy," Nathaniel remarked dryly, leaning against the bulkhead.

The system was filled with hundreds of the small alien craft, flying in groups amongst the rings of the third planet or in the gassy mass that was the second giant, chasing one another, almost playing games. But these small ships weren't what concerned the Command Crew.

A series of larger ships appeared, each one easily hundreds of metres in length and with massive, almost tusk-like appendages on either side of their cavernous gaping jaws which were lined with rows of metre-long teeth. While the smaller craft had one pair of wings, these larger monstrosities possessed two, which counter-beat each other. Under the first pair of wings, two massive weapons pods nearly as long as the smaller craft resided. Above the mouth was a pair of sinister red running lights and a series of spikes along the ships' dorsal plane. These craft travelled alone throughout the system at whim; if any of the smaller craft got in their way, they were simply devoured.

"Transmit this to Polaris Command; tag this as a Priority Alpha Threat. Charles, how long until the Generators are fully charged?" Nathaniel enquired. He knew if it came to engaging these aliens, the *Ophelia* would be destroyed with no trouble, this was an outcome he didn't particularly want to face.

"The cores are at 21% charge, it will still be at least 20 minutes before we can make a jump back to Polaris. At the current charge we'll get to just outside the system, but who knows how many of these things are out there. Not to mention that once we leave the nebula we'll be quite royally screwed unless we are at least half charge, and a miracle removes these *things* from our drive plane," Charles replied, checking the outputs from his console.

"I'll let the profanity slide this time, simply because I believe the same thing. How soon should we be able to jump if we're discovered?" Nathaniel queried.

“We can jump in 15 seconds without a set destination. If we stay in the nebula, we run the risk of hitting a Keblonite deposit and being ripped to shreds. If we jump out of the nebula, we’ll be a nice little pile of smoky debris when we emerge from the Stream,” Charles replied.

“That’s an option I don’t really want to have to consider. But should we be discovered and we have to jump, I want the maximum distance we can reach. We may have to call on your piloting skills to keep us intact.”

“Then you’re lucky, Cap’n, cause I have the best hands in the fleet,” Charles remarked, leaning back in his chair and cracking his knuckles.

“Captain, the damaged alien has entered the system,” Sarah reported as she manoeuvred the Drones to buddy off each other to strengthen the signals.

“On the viewer, Commander,” Nathaniel ordered, slumping into his chair.

The damaged alien craft slowly entered the system; its closest brethren approached it carefully, as if querying what happened to it. They then proceeded to surround it; some even briefly touched it with their wings. *Are they ships, or creatures? Since they’ve clearly shown signs of independent thought?* Nathaniel thought.

One of the larger ‘beastships’ approached the damaged alien, moving its tusk-like appendages in agitation. The small colony closed ranks around their damaged clancreature, flapping their wings in an attempt to ward the beastship away.

After a few minutes the larger ship lost interest and moved on and the smaller damaged craft flashed its running lights in a seemingly random pattern.

“Uh oh,” Alexandra commented before placing a gloved hand across her mouth.

“What is it, Lieutenant?” Nathaniel asked, turning to face the psychic officer.

“It’s talking about us, it’s updating the rest of the aliens about *us*...It saw us head in this direction. I don’t want to take a page out of the Lieutenant Colonel’s book, but destroying it when we ran into it doesn’t seem to be that much of a bad idea now,” she replied. Her voice didn’t falter, but the look in her eyes clearly displayed the terror she picked up from the aliens and the crew.

“Do they know we are here?” Nathaniel asked. Despite his years in service to the UTA, this whole sequence of events disturbed him greatly.

“I wouldn’t put it past them, one or two of them did mention seeing something enter this area of space,” Alexandra replied, utilising her powerful telepathic abilities to ‘listen’ in on the alien’s communications.

“We’re screwed, aren’t we?” Mikhail asked, looking at the other officers.

“Not just yet. They may have spotted us for a second, but it doesn’t mean that they saw us enter the nebula. We may still not be in trouble,” Alexandra reported before severing the link and falling to her knees.

“Problem, Lieutenant?” Sarah remarked, leaning against her console, clearly amused with the Psi-Ops Officer’s distress.

“None of your concern, Commander. Captain, the aliens don’t seem that interested with us, but their emotions were too strong for me to continue to monitor them,” Alexandra remarked, taking deep heavy breaths while sweat stained her black jacket, glistening off her silver-tipped collar.

“Well at least that’s something to be thankful for,” Nathaniel remarked before walking over to the Officer and helping her to her feet.

“I would not be too sure of that, Captain,” Sarah remarked as a pair of the large Beastships turned and headed towards the nebula.

“Commander, can you confirm they have spotted us?” Nathaniel asked, sounding concerned.

Sarah studied her instruments furiously, praying to all that was holy in the universe that they were malfunctioning, before stopping and looking at the captain. “Confirmed, sir, their trajectories will intercept our current location.”

Nathaniel’s response was predicted but necessary, “How?”

“I don’t know, sir! The Keblonite should have masked our presence, there is no way they could have penetrated the radiation field...unless,” Sarah stopped and glared at the Psi-Ops officer. “You! You brought them onto us, didn’t you! Of all the things you could have done, alert them to our location is by far the dumbest you could think of,” she berated the Lieutenant, as the image of the beastships grew closer.

“I did no such thing,” Alexandra stated before looking at the captain and the frown that now adorned his face.

“Honest, sir, I didn’t leak our location to them, I...I...I...” She stopped as her pupils dilated before rolling back into her skull, standing there motionless, pupil-less eyes staring at the bridge crew before her mouth started to move. The voice that came out was not her own, its timbre was dark, sinister, multivocal, and the only limb that seemed to move under her control was her left arm, as her hand slowly encircled the haft of the dagger she kept at her hip

“...*You have encroached on the Domain of the Great Swarm and wilfully fired upon our brother, these actions are*

repugnant and judgment has been made, your punishment will be imparted...” Alexandra seemed to be fighting her own body as she brought her hand up to her throat. “...*Your craft will be destroyed, and your personnel will willingly offer themselves to the Great Swarm as recompense for your crimes against the Whole...*” Just as abruptly as it started, it was over as Alexandra embedded the dagger into her own throat, severing her carotid artery. She stood motionless for a few more seconds, before collapsing, blood streaming out of her neck.

“Medical team to the Bridge!” Nathaniel ordered as several bridge crew ran over to her, others simply sat at their posts, stunned. Mikhail grabbed the medkit strapped to the wall closest to him as he ran past it.

“Lieutenant? Lieutenant, can you hear me?” Nathaniel called, grabbing the medscanner from the kit and running it over her with one hand and clamping the other tightly over the bloody wound in her neck, in a futile attempt to keep his officer alive. “Where the hell is that medical team!”

“They’re en route, sir, ETA two minutes,” Sarah reported from her console after slaving the Communications console to her own to issue the summons.

On the Viewer, the beastships appeared at the lip of the nebula before the telemetry of one probe after another was reduced to static.

“Helm, start up Pulse Generators, reverse course, take us out of the nebula the way we came in, then go to Stream, course at your discretion. Firing Control, prep the Ares Cannon for immediate firing, we’ll probably have to fight our way out of here,” Sarah ordered, using her status as Executive Officer as Nathaniel and Mikhail tried futilely to save Lt Serapova.

“Aye, ma’am,” the officers reported as the medical team reached the bridge.

“Captain! Command your ship, leave the Lieutenant to the Medics,” Sarah barked at the Captain as he continued to administer aid to the dying Lieutenant. It took a moment for the captain to register what she had said to force him to stand up and return to his Command Chair, as the Medics fought a losing battle in the far corner.

“Helm, get us out of here,” Nathaniel ordered sullenly before the ship shook violently as a Keblonite deposit detonated nearby.

“The Beastships. Sir, they don’t seem willing to enter the nebula, so they’ve resorted to shooting into our previous location, in the hope of hitting us,” Sarah reported from her console.

“Helm, how long until we’re out of the nebula?” Nathaniel asked as the Medics wheeled Alexandra’s body off the bridge, but not out of his concern. *‘They seem able to remotely take control of psionic-sensitive personnel; who knows what else they can do?’* he thought to himself as the *Ophelia* quickly made its way through the dangerous anomaly.

“Ten seconds, sir,” Charles replied as his hands danced across the movement pads which took up the majority of his console. Sweat was glistening on his brow, dripping onto the console as he concentrated heavily on piloting the craft.

The *Ophelia* rocketed out of the nebula, shooting past a group of the smaller alien craft and straight towards a pair of the larger Beastships, who turned instinctly attempted to fire on it as it passed. However, most of these shots went wild and harmlessly detonated near the nebula.

“Firing Control, blast anything that gets too close,” Nathaniel ordered as a group of the small ships appeared to be herding the *Ophelia* into the waiting maws of the Beastships.

“Aye, sir,” Steve reported as his hands danced across his firing control panel, in response the ships forward firing Ares Cannon fired round after round, rotating on its central axis, slamming into the smaller ships with impunity, tearing wing from body and leaving massive jagged wounds in their bodies, spewing biomatter and turning the battleground a milky blue.

“Captain, we’ve got two of those big alien ships on an intercept course, 219 mark 23, range, three hundred kilometres,” Sarah reported bringing up the display on one of the many Hologrid screens that made up the main viewer. The larger creatures came from above the nebula cloud on a high arc.

“Then I believe it’s time we made our exit, Mr Burgundy, get us out of here,” Nathaniel ordered as the ship shook slightly as it was struck by bolts of bioplasma.

“Understood, sir. Entering the Stream in five, four, three, two, one. Activating Pulse Generators,” Charles reported pressing the responding keys.

As the *Ophelia*’s engine pods flared, the Beastships entered range of the craft and opened fire, striking the Explorer just above its engines, twin explosions detonated on the engine struts.

Instead of entering the Stream, the *Ophelia* lurched forward before her engines went black and the craft started to drift.

“We’re cold, the Beastships struck us right in our collection tanks, we’re stranded, sir,” Charles reported trying repeatedly to bring life back to the adrift craft, often resorting to slamming his hands on to the controls or swearing at the computer.

“Well it seems that our location wasn’t the only thing they ascertained from the Sub-Lieutenant,” Sarah commented bluntly while cycling through the various different displays her sensors generated.

“Arm Hyperion Pods Alpha through Charlie, target the Beastships, keep the Ares Cannon on those smaller ships, those guns go silent, we’re all dead.” Nathaniel ordered as the small ships swarmed around the front and sides of the *Ophelia*.

Three recessed pods at the rear of the craft emerged from their bays, rotated 180 degrees and opened fire, firing volleys of high yield subnuclear missiles straight at the larger craft. However, all this appeared to do was to infuriate them even more as they continued to pound the *Ophelia*. The smaller ships quickly discovered the inherent shortcomings of the Ares Gun and its 275-degree firing arc and the unfortunate fact that it was the only weapon on the ships ventral side resulted in many of the small craft latching onto the *Ophelia*.

“Captain, I have localised hull breaches underneath those ships, these readings don’t make any sense,” Sarah reported before switching the image to one of the many cameras that dotted the hull. One of the small craft had latched itself onto the side of the *Ophelia*, by way of small hooks on its wings, and appeared to literally eat its way through the hull.

“Now that makes no sense, that’s four metres of Tridium Tri Composite, it takes a welding team with shipyard level equipment two hours to cut through that, and that things eating it up,” Mikhail commented as a long thin clear membranous tube extended from the alien craft and attached itself against the hole it had made, inside large creatures could be seen scurrying down it and into the ship.

“Sound Intruder Alert, despatch Marine Teams to those locations,” Nathaniel ordered as the alien ships stopped firing. “Well at least that is one thing to be thankful for.”

Marine Security Team Delta, Service Shaft A2C, Deck 12

1st Lieutenant Kara Mendez crawled on her hands and knees through the cramped access crawlspaces that shadowed every corridor, behind her, was her two-man security team, lights from their J-17 Combined Combat Rifles casting long shadows on the overhangs of the small area. Like the other seven Marine Teams had been hunting the alien borders since their forced arrival on the ship. Delta Team had picked up foreign bio signatures in this section and went out to deal with the aliens. While Kara had yet to see one of the dangerous creatures, what she was able to ascertain from over the comm. channels amid bursts of gunfire and terrified screams for assistance, that the boarders were insect-like, roughly a metre and a half in length, fast moving, and had arrived on the ship in three groups of twelve. However, they did not stay together long; breaking up to take the fight to more sections faster than the marines could counter. What she also coldly realised when she failed to raise the other teams was that the aliens controlled most of the ship and that her three-man team was the only trained armed resistance left.

The sharp sound of pointed implements rattling on the metal deck plates heralded the presence of one or more aliens in the junction ahead of them. Kara stopped suddenly, causing her subordinates to run into her. Using her hands she brought them up to speed on what was ahead of them and what they were going to do. While both of them were reserved in their response, they also realised that it had to be done. Kara then removed a flash-bang from her belt, primed it and threw it into the tunnel ahead, seconds before turning her head away from the loud bang and bright light that followed its detonation. Once it subsided, Private Lonard and CPO Jennings rose to their haunches and ambled awkwardly into the next junction. Kara followed quickly after. Only after all three stood in the two-metre-tall room did they realise the folly of their action as two of the alien boarders rose on their serrated tails, towering to three metres over the security team, their ridged heads scraping against the roof. Their six multi-jointed limbs writhed in agitation, their massive eyeless heads growled sinisterly at the three humans that dared stand before them. For a moment the two groups just stood there, each momentarily stunned by the presence of the other until the Marines raised their Assault rifles and opened fire at the closest alien. It roared in pain before lunging at the team. CPO Jennings and Lt Mendez managed to jump clear of the heavy carapace; Private Lonard, however, was not so lucky, taking the full force of the creature and becoming impaled on the creature’s front scythe-like claws.

The remaining Marines did not have the time to mourn for the death of Private Lonard as the second alien moved towards Lt Mendez. The first alien turned and focused its attention on CPO Jennings, carelessly throwing the dead body of the Private against a bulkhead.

Kara jumped to one side of the creature, ducking out of the way of a swipe from its scythes. She rolled to its side before grabbing a leg joint, and used it to pull herself onto the alien's back. Once there, it started to buck wildly as its legs could not reach her. Grabbing her field knife, she embedded it to its haft right under its massive head, beneath the creature's large armoured cranial ridges and above its torso armoured plates. The alien screamed before thrashing violently, dislodging the knife, leaving a gaping wound in its place. The only thing keeping her from being thrown against the bulkhead was her rifle, which she quickly lodged in the wound, which seemed to close around the barrel and slowly dissolved it. Yelping in surprise she reached for a grenade only to find her pouch missing. Looking past the alien she saw the grenade pouch in the dim light on the ground, which had become dislodged when she rolled out of the way of the alien's incoming attack.

Realising her options were minimal, she grabbed the trigger of her assault rifle and squeezed it, knowing full well that the barrel and most of the magazine had disintegrated. Once the round was struck by the hammer it detonated inside the remains of the weapon, the explosive force of the detonation ripping the alien apart, killing it. The shockwave reverberated upwards, engulfing the Lieutenants body as well. She had a brief moment to look at the Chief Petty Officer who had his hands full with the remaining alien before the blast ripped her to pieces as well.

CPO Jennings looked past the alien that seemed content in consuming him as the other alien exploded, sending biomatter, exoskeleton and Marine armour throughout the junction. Jennings shook his head slightly before lunging out of the way of the alien's attack. However, while in mid-flight the spikes that adorned the outer edge of the scythes cut into his torso and legs. Jennings landed heavily before clutching his chest with one hand, holding his rifle unsteadily with the other. He fired rounds erratically into the alien as it methodically approached him, most of the rounds reflecting off the creature's seemingly impervious cranial ridges. As he tried to get away from the alien it dug into his leg with one scythe, pinning him to the metal deck plating. Screaming, he emptied his magazine into the creature's face, of which most refracted off its armoured crown. The alien brought its face close to his, hissing malevolently at him.

The smell that assaulted Jennings' senses was almost overpowering as the alien dislocated its lower jaw, as if preparing to devour him. With a free hand he reached into his grenade pouch and primed a fragmentation grenade, using the weight of the others to keep the safety lock in place.

"Well aren't you one hell of a scaly bastard, but you're probably not such a bad freak of nature..." he started before he began coughing; the creature, however, had no inkling to what he was saying as its long forked tongue darted over his face, "...the thing is, you're just so damned ugly." He then spat at the creature, which seemed to infuriate it; in a swift motion it impaled its other scythe into his stomach, causing him to scream again before he heard the sound of something rolling across the deck. "You hear that, you son of a bitch, that sound is your death; tell Satan, Bobby sent you!" Jennings remarked before the collective grenade detonations converted the two of them to mere piles of muscle and exoskeleton.

The Bridge had quickly resembled a hastily constructed defence bunker with a detachment of the ship's remaining Marines manning makeshift emplacements. Word had trickled up through the ship that the aliens were controlling over 90% of their vessel, with the exception of small pockets of armed resistance near the Armoury, Medbay and Engineering sections. However, all contact between the bridge and those areas had been cut some time before the aliens broke into Engineering. The marines stationed inside the large double blast doors of the bridge knew it was only a matter of time before they too came under attack. Since all but automated systems and those on auxiliary generators were offline.

-- With the exception of Sarah and Mikhail, whose systems ran primarily on battery power -- the other bridge crew sat behind hastily erected barricades clutching J-17 assault rifles tightly. A pair of marines managed to lug two .57 cal. machine guns from the Armoury moments before it was overrun.

"Captain, internal sensors are now offline, external sensor batteries at 42%," Sarah reported before heavy thumping could be heard against the doors.

"Transmit our logs and all information on these aliens to Polaris Command. Sarah, transfer the battery power from weapons control to the communications array. We may be overrun, but we can give Polaris time to formulate a defence..." Nathaniel ordered as large dents appeared in the thick Tridium blast doors.

"Aye, sir," Sarah and Mikhail responded as they worked to compile the data. Once Sarah gave the word, Mikhail sent the gigagquads of data to the distant Resupply and Command Station.

Mikhail managed to transmit all the data just seconds before the console blacked out. “That’s it, sir, mains are out completely, we running solely on reserve battery power, but only enough to maintain life support and gravity plating.”

“That will have to do, Mr Sovora, but do we have any idea if Polaris Command received our transmission?”

Nathaniel asked while walking around the bridge, as the thumping noise got louder.

In response Mikhail looked at his captain and shrugged as the main lights failed, to be replaced by blue emergency lights at the roof and floor. While these lights provided some illumination, for the most part the bridge was in darkness. “I couldn’t tell you, sir, I attached a brief message to it informing them we were lost, and sent it first and if Polaris follows protocol, and I’m hoping Admiral Yeager does, they’ll send a task group to find out what happened to us,” Mikhail explained before the blast doors caved in as a pair of aliens burst into the room. In response the two machine gunners opened fire, injuring them mortally.

In a last-ditch attempt the aliens threw their bullet-riddled bodies at the machine guns, using their carapaces to block the field of fire. Even though dead, their bodies proved difficult to move as another three aliens entered, using the corpses of their fallen brethren to scale the barricade, hissing and snarling at the marines that stood in their way. The nine Marines interposed themselves between the aliens and the command crew, who had retreated to the front of the bridge. The marines were for the most part successful in holding the aliens at bay, at one point they almost forced them back over the barricade simply by force of firepower. Until another alien leaped over it, careering into the fire team, sending them reeling. The three marines directly underneath the alien were killed instantly as the creatures’ scythes impaled two of them. The centre marine came up close and personal with the aliens’ jaws, however. He did not have much of a chance before he was ripped to pieces. The remaining six marines scattered around the bridge as the four aliens clambered through the cramped confines.

In the dim light it seemed the aliens had the advantage over the Marines as they stalked the soldiers. Their sharp, multi-jointed legs rattled along the deck, the sound echoing through the bridge. The light at the edge of the walls made long shadows, increasing the ominous appearance of the aliens. However, instead of attacking, the aliens seemed to herding the bridge crew into the centre.

“Are you okay, Mr Daniels?” Nathaniel asked as he noticed one of the marines was walking with a severe limp before the marine sat down with the others around the Command Chair.

“I’ll be fine, sir, considering...” the Marine replied as a strange new set of footsteps could be heard approaching. These were different from the aliens’, they appeared bipedal, almost humanoid, but with a sharp clinking following every footstep. They then seemed to be joined by another two bipedal sets of footsteps; however, these were heavier than the soft footfalls that belonged to the first person.

The footsteps slowly approached the remains of the blast doors and entered.

Two of the three figures were large hulking brutes with spikes from their shoulders down to their tails, and great heads lined with rows of razor-sharp teeth. Each carried a long, pike-like weapon that seemed to glow from an interior source and they wore helmets that barely covered their heads, as if they were designed for another species entirely. Once they were clear of the door, they climbed over the barricade and stood like ominous sentinels, their presence causing many of the bridge to murmur in fear.

“Oh please, don’t get all excited about those two, they are the least of your concern,” a voice commented as the third figure entered the room; it had the appearance of a humanoid female in stance and silhouette. However, that was as far as the similarities went, as a single red eye shone through the dim light. ‘She’ climbed over the barricade by way of four thin multi-jointed appendages that appeared from the centre of her slender back. Once she was standing before the Command Crew, the limbs retracted back into her spine, and she now stood in the light arc created by the staves of the two guardians, only then did the crew get a good look at her. She wore a black, open chested halter that ended in a pair of claws over her ample bust; over her slender waist, she wore a simple looking metal skirt, covered in chains and various skeletal remains. Her arms were for the most part bare with the exception of a pair of spiked gauntlets, and her right arm was a black sinister claw. She also wore black knee-high boots, ending in jagged cloven feet, with spikes curving up at the knee. Her dark attire was topped with sinister spiked pauldrons and a long shimmering black cape. Her skin was for the most part deathly pale, with large patches of venomous green skin that appeared to move of its own accord. The reason she possessed only one eye was that the entire left side of her face had been covered by the growth, her long waist-length black hair was wild and sinister, as it itself was alive, it whipped across her face of its own accord.

Nathaniel didn't need to be telepathic to tell the appearance of this new woman terrified most of the crew; even he was terrified by her sinister appearance. Standing carefully he took a step towards her. The aliens snarled threateningly and the two guards crossed their pikes defensively in front of the woman.

"There is no need for all of this, I am Captain..." Nathaniel tried to speak further, but there was little he could do before one of the aliens knocked him cold with a well aimed swipe to the back of the head.

Kalon High Throne Room, Supreme Command Spire, Kalonardra

Naira severed the connection between her Swarm Masters and the human before turning to face them; from their agitated state she could tell they understood the severity of the situation. They appeared to have ignored the cowering human Captain, who had stopped professing his people's innocence and was weeping softly to himself after one of his Lysarian Handlers had ripped one of his arms off. Satisfied that the creature was no longer a threat, they dropped the chain attached to his neck.

[KriTora, I hope for your sake that you understand the severity the threat Humanity possess.] Naira remarked before returning to her throne.

[Understood, My Queen. But what will be done with them? Any divergence from our grand scheme will allow the Wretched Ones the opportunity to regroup their forces. Prolonging the Cleansing moments before our imminent victory.] KriTora replied reverently. He knew that it was important to stay on his Dark Mistress' good side this far from sympathetic forces, lest he fall prey to her wrath, while the Swarms all served Naira without question, it did not guarantee that the competitive Swarm Masters wouldn't kill each other to get to the position of Chief Swarm Master, or to increase the size of their own forces, hence the reason why that even at the heart of Kalon Controlled Space, far from aggressors, the Swarm Masters were accompanied by their bodyguards.

Naira closed her eyes briefly, before projecting the new plan into the minds of her Swarm Masters.

[My Dear KriTora, you will oversee the elimination of Humanity, the Wretched Ones and our other slain enemies called you the Great Destroyer, now is time to live up to your title. Use whatever means you deem necessary. I want it done!] Naira demanded, growing irritated with the human that was slowly pulling himself together.

"Humanity won't just lie down because you wish it, *my queen*, the UTEC will stop you, and we'll parade your mutilated corpse through the streets of the Capital!" Nathaniel professed while grabbing the stump that was once his arm and struggling to pull himself to his feet.

Naira turned to face him, and using her telepathic powers searched his mind for the most sinister being his mind could manifest.

"You fool! The Great Swarm has existed for eons, long before your pitiful race emerged forth from the primordial ooze! Once my children have wrought their terror on your miserable race's existence, you will welcome your inevitable death as an escape from my brutality!" Her thin metallic, multivocal voice assaulted him. She stood in front of her throne, looking down contemptuously while extending her four bone spines and causing her visible eye to glow blood red, giving her a form more at home in the human officers nightmares.

Nathaniel recoiled as Naira's telepathic voice boomed at him, but he tried to remain resolute. "You have never faced anything like humanity, we will stop you..."

"Oh give it up, captain," an eerily familiar voice called from behind him, causing him to turn quickly and shudder, as Commander Sarah Havilland entered the chamber. However, she only barely resembled her former self. A menacing dark dripping spike covered claw now replaced her right arm and the same growth that adorned Naira started to fester on her olive skin, the only link to her former appearance was a tattered UTEC uniform that barely managed to cover her bust and hips.

"Sarah? What have they done to you?" Nathaniel asked, appalled at the abomination his executive officer had become. Sarah shook her head dismissively, before walking past Nathaniel and standing respectfully at the foot of Naira's throne.

"They haven't done anything to me; I volunteered for this. All they did was make me see that humanity is a lost cause, and that we need to serve the Whole in order to continue our existence," Sarah replied. Her voice was slowly turning to one similar to Naira's: dark, sinister, unhuman.

Nathaniel shook his head unbelievably before placing his hand on her remaining shoulder. "No, that's not true, that's not the Sarah I know. They have turned you against the Alliance," Nathaniel stated, hoping that she still contained some trace of humanity.

However, the face that looked back at him did not show the compassion it once had, only contempt for what Nathaniel stood for.

[My Child, remove this...*thing* from my presence as a sign of your unwavering loyalty to the Whole.] Naira demanded, clicking her long claws together, clearly amused by her order.

“At once..., My Mother,” Sarah replied, nodding and stepping towards Nathaniel, bringing her clawed arm closer to her face. In response Nathaniel stepped back.

“No, I won’t fight you, Commander, and you won’t fight me. I’m ordering you to stand down,” Nathaniel ordered, trying to reach the human underneath the alien perversion.

“Now, now, *Captain*, what makes you think that I care what you have to say anymore? I serve powers far greater than yourself, or your pitiful Alliance,” Sarah remarked before lunging at him, bringing the spiked outer ridge down past his head. The swing went wide and missed any vital organs, and only managed to connect with his leg, as his arm had already been severed on that side.

Nathaniel screamed in pain but stayed true to his statement and refused to fight back, moving as best he could with a now heavily bleeding leg away from his former executive officer. He rolled out of the way of another swipe and came up close to his original handlers who appeared to be enjoying the spectacle, so much so that one pushed Nathaniel towards Sarah. The other turned to its offside and made what would be close to a demonic laugh. Sarah smiled, showing off newly grown fangs as Nathaniel fell in front of her. Pinning him to the ground with her boot, she raised the spike covered claw into the air. She looked into his eyes and smirked mockingly. “You should have joined us, Nathaniel, but you were always about duty and sacrifice, you poor fool. Oh well,” Sarah remarked before dropping her hand. Nathaniel turned his head and squeezed his eyes shut as the final blow decapitated him.

[Very good, My Child, you have proved your worth to the Whole.] Naira commended before turning to her Swarm Masters. [KriTora, take our newest servant with you on your conquest, she should be able to assist you in your Cleansing,] she ordered, leaning back in her throne.

[At once, My Queen, these filthy creatures will trouble you no longer,] KriTora replied, before bowing and leaving the chamber, crushing the now-dead Captain’s head underneath its large clawed foot. Sarah followed behind him obediently.