

Introduction

Dark Haven - By Stuart Thacker (crunn)

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DARK HAVEN

Chapter 1 (Fate of the Armadeaus)

Argon M6 deep space patrol vessel Armadeaus

Captains Log ... Final entry:

'We were patrolling an outer sector when we picked up a faint power signature on long range scanners.

As we neared the target we could see it was a small station of no known type.
Scanners couldn't penetrate the hull of the station.'

...

"Hail the station."

"No answer, Captain.

But if it is fully automated, it should recognise that we are too big to dock and ignore us."

"Yes Lieutenant, I am aware of automated docking procedure.
Helm, swing us slowly around the station. Keep scanning."

"Captain, that looks like a docking hatch on the left side there."

"Yes, I don't like it, it's too quiet."

"Perhaps we could take the M5 out and try to dock with that."

"Maybe.

Swing around once more then come to a stop above the station."

"Yes sir."

"I will take the M5 myself, I don't get out often enough."

...

"Captain, you are cleared for departure."

"keep the scanners peeled, I don't want any surprises."

...

"Now requesting permission to dock.

No response.

I'm going to fly a little closer, see if I can find another way in.
I see something.

A small hatch of some sort, a maintenance hatch by the look of it, and a glass panel. What was that!!??"

"Captain, are you alright?"

"Yes, I thought I saw something, something moving inside. Like a black shape, a shadow.

Perhaps just a reflection, the mind playing tricks. I'm not sure now."

"Captain, maybe you should come back."

"Not yet. I'm going around the other side."

...

"Another hatch, the same as the first. The control panel on this one is lit up. I think I will hop out a try to open it."

"Captain, I really think you should come back. We can report this and they will send in a properly equipped team."

"And let them have all the fun?

I don't think so."

"You may have seen someone inside, they may be hostile, even if they are not, they won't be too happy at you breaking into their station."

"Don't worry, I'm armed."

"And you are alone."

...

"I'm outside the M5 and approaching the hatch.

There is writing, of a sort, on the panel. I can only describe it as pictorial, though nothing I recognise.

There are five columns of five buttons. Each column a different colour, and each row a different symbol.

I'm not sure I should just start punching buttons here."

"Captain, we are picking up a disturbance, an energy spike, getting stronger."

"From the station?"

"No. It's non-localised. It's coming from all around us."

"I'm returning to the M5, I'll be docking with you shortly. Keep me posted."

"Yes sir.

Jump points forming all around us. Captain, there are thousands of them."

...

Lieutenants Log ... Final entry:

'The Captain has taken the M5 out to explore an unidentified space station. After he believed he saw movement inside the station he left the M5 (against my protests) to investigate a control panel on a maintenance hatch. We detected a non-localised energy disturbance all around us. The Captain is now returning to the ship.'

'There are jump points forming all around us. Thousands of ships are emerging. The ships are black, hideous and unlike anything I have ever seen. They look like they came straight from hell. Their ships are small in comparison to the Armadeaus, but there are so many of them. They are closing in fast, swarming around us, like insects. Hails have been ignored. We have armed weapons and raised shields but we can't hope to survive if they attack. The Captain won't even make it back to the M5 in time. God protect us.'

'As we started to pull away from the station they opened fire on us. Their weapons pass right through our shields. We lost main weapons with their first strike. Our secondary weapons seem to have no effect on them, and we can't lock on to fire missiles. Fires throughout the ship. Manoeuvrability is gone. We are dead in the water.'

'I have ordered the crew to abandon ship. But I fear there is not even time for that.'

'We are going down.'

...

Captains Personal Log :

'I don't think it wise to just start pressing random buttons.'

'The Lieutenant called me a moment ago, something about an energy disturbance. Doesn't seem to be coming from the station so I'm heading back, see what's going on.'

'Then we can call those damned experts to take a look at MY station.'

'I can see jump points forming all around. Everywhere. Ships, blacker than space its self. And ugly, damn ugly. There must be thousands of them.'

'The ships are closing fast. They look as if they are going to attack the Armadeaus.'

"Get out of there Lieutenant."

'She didn't hear me, they must be jamming the comms. Good, the Armadeaus is moving off.'

'Damn EVA suit, I'll never make it back to the M5 at this speed.'

'The Armadeaus is taking fire. Why is she not returning fire? Ah the secondary weapons are, don't seem to be doing much though.'

'Oh hell!!'

The Armadeaus is going down.'

"Get out of there, abandon ship, abandon ship!"

'No one could have survived a fireball like that.

The alien ships are gathering in a cloud around where the Armadeaus was. One is breaking off and heading this way. Another thirty sezuras and I'll be at the M5, I don't think I'll make it.

The alien ship is almost upon me, it is putting itself between me and the M5.

It's just sitting there.

It seems to be watching me.

I will try to go around it.'

...

'It keeps moving to block my path.

It is slowly turning, I assume away from me. A momentary glowing on the other side of the ship tells me that it is powering weapons.

A flash and the M5 is gone. The shock wave sends me sharply backwards, I use the thrusters to stabilise myself and stop.'

'The alien ship quickly turns back around to face me.

It moves in closer until we are nearly touching.

It's skin is black, mirror-like. I can see my reflection in it.

As I stare into it I notice something, something disturbing. The station looming behind me is not reflected.

Just then the skin seems to ripple and the image changes to the face of my Lieutenant.

I was thinking of her moments before and how this murdering bastard ship had killed her.

Was this thing reading my mind?'

'The ship's surface smoothes again. I brace myself for the end.

It starts to turn again, then as quickly as it arrived, it darts off back to the rest of the group.'

'I wonder, why did it spare me?'

...

'I've been watching the cloud of ships for several mizuras now. They seem to be gathering up the wreckage of the Armadeaus.

Also, they haven't taken any further notice of me.'

'I'm stranded in deep space, no ship, less than two stazuras of oxygen, and the nearest Station is in Teladi Way, almost twenty stazuras away travelling at EVA speed.'

'Well, I seem to have few choices, wait here for two stazuras, go fly over to the cloud of ships, or try that station hatch.'

...

'I've arrived back at the hatch.

'Twenty five buttons, where to start?
Top left sounds good, yellow with an odd looking squiggle.'

'A moment after I pressed it there was a hiss and the hatch slid open.
I pulled myself inside and almost immediately it slid closed behind me.'

'Suddenly I hit the ground as artificial gravity comes on. Then I feel my suit go a little slack as the airlock fills with air, I can't assume it will be breathable.'

'The small window looking into the station interior gives nothing away as there is nothing but blackness inside. The only light is from a control panel in front of me, the same as the one outside.'

'Well, into the station I go.
I press the same yellow squiggly button and the interior door slides open...'

Chapter 2 (Portents)

Argon Fleet Command

Admiral Ornov stands in the conference room, alone, he stares out into the blackness of space contemplating his retirement. Still a couple of jazuras away, but nothing could be better than being back on Argon Prime doing a little fishing in some remote lake. He thinks to himself,

'Just me and the fish, no politicians no people no...'

(A knock at the door)

'...no interruptions, I might not even bait the line.'

Commander Reamus enters the room.

"Admiral Ornov, we received the latest log update transmission from the deep space patrol vessel Armadeaus a little over a stazura ago."

"Yes Commander Reamus, there's nothing unusual in that. We receive the log update automatically from every ship every stazura."

"Yes, but we didn't receive the next update ten mizuras ago, the computer alerted us to this and we..."

"What! Another communications malfunction. I swear if I get my hands on those bureaucrats who keep cutting our budget. They figure that with the Xenon virtually eradicated they don't need us anymore. We can barely afford repairs and maintenance. It's only a matter of time before the Boron and Split flare up again, and guess who will have to step in. With our ships in this state we might just get our butts kicked this time.

Commander, do you know what happened last wozura to the Argon One ?"

"No Admiral, but this is..."

"Well I'll tell you. One of the GHEPT's fell off. I mean can you imagine, the pride of the Argon fleet patrolling home world and it just falls off. Some kind of damned space fungus, the lab boys are analysing it.

If this were ever to go public ... I don't know what I'd do."

"Admiral, we've been looking over the last log entries from the Armadeaus, it doesn't look like a malfunction. In fact they might have run into some trouble. We haven't been able to contact them."

The Commander places his personal data pad (PDP) in a slot on the conference table then manipulates the appropriate controls.

A holographic three dimensional star map appears in the air above the table as the lights dim.

The Commander zooms the image into a particular solar system.

"This is the system the Armadeaus was patrolling at the time"

"This is one of the newly discovered systems?"

"Yes Admiral, discovered almost a mazura ago. Currently known as X8.

As usual we sent a in scout to take a look around the vicinity of the gate, seeing nothing of interest, we sent the Armadeaus in for a more thorough search."

"The Armadeaus, if I remember correctly is one of the new M6 Corvettes. Nice ships, pity we could only afford to build ten.
Who is the Captain?"

"Captain Jack Monroe."

"Never heard of him."

"Recently promoted, the Armadeaus is his first command."

"Well Commander, what did you find in the logs that is so troubling?"

Commander Reamus presses another button on the PDP and the 3D map zooms in further.

"You can see the gate in the bottom corner and the dotted line shows the path of the Armadeaus. As I zoom the image further you can see the Armadeaus at its last known position."

"Is that a station it is parked next to."

"Yes."

Reamus zooms further until the station and Armadeaus fill the view. The Stations hull is black in colour and very smooth, creepy looking, and size compared to the ship shows that the station is not large.

"What do we know about this station, Commander?"

"Sensors couldn't penetrate the hull. So the logs can't tell us anything but size and shape. We compared it to all known structures and got a fairly close match. The Teladi Solar Power Plant is an eighty eight percent match on shape and size. Though the material the hull is made of clearly isn't a match."

"Looks like we've found some pirates here. They've got themselves a Teladi SPP, made a few minor alterations, slapped on a bit of black paint and stuck it out in the middle of nowhere."

"And the sensor blocking?"

"No doubt some new Paranid tech they have stolen. We know the Paranid have been working on sensor jammers. They really should be more careful with their prototypes. There should be nothing to worry about, a station that size couldn't hold more than about 3 fighters, an M6 and its M5 are more than a match for eight times that many. Commander, where is the M5. It should be attached to the underside of the M6, I don't see it on the image there."

"According to the logs, the Captain took the M5 for a closer look." Reamus walks around the table. "You can see the M5 and the captain in his EVA suit round the back of the station here."

"Damn it Reamus, I'm not walking all round there. Rotate the image."

The commander returns to the other side of the table and presses another button.

"I see. What the hell does Monroe think he is doing floating around outside a pirate station!"

If he's not already a slave I'll make him wish he was!"

"The last thing the Armadeaus' sensors detected before this log update was sent back was the beginning of an energy spike."

"You mean weapons fire?"

"No, much bigger. Almost enough to disrupt the update transmission, we received a lot of static with it."

"Any idea what would have caused that?"

"A Wormhole is enough to cause a little static but no disruption unless you are actually inside it. So no."

"Very well, what is the nearest ship to X8?"

The Commander zooms the map back out to the large star map view showing all the known systems, dots show the positions of all Argon Fleet ships.

Then he zooms in to an area showing sectors near X8.

"There is the nearest." He zooms in on Ocean of Fantasy. "A patrol currently flying through Ocean of Fantasy en'route to X10, another newly discovered sector."

"Which Ship is that?"

"The Jubilee under Captain Jessica Hall, another M6 on its maiden voyage, it is being escorted to X10 by two Elites."

"Contact Captain Hall, send her and the two M3s to investigate the 'missing' Armadeaus and the station. And tell her to be very careful"

Commander Reamus takes his PDP and leaves the room.

...

Admiral Ornov leans back in his chair.

The Admiral thinks to himself -

'I hope it's only pirates.

I've been hearing about things, nightmarish things, moving like ghosts in the outer sectors.

I hoped just rumour, but as they say "every rumour has at least an element of truth".

No, wait, I seem to remember seeing something in the old records.

No, it couldn't be...

I must go down there and check.

But first..."

Admiral Ornov taps a control on his console, a moment later the face of an old friend appears.

"Argon Titan, General Kaar."

"Kaar you old menace, how are things?"

"Ornov, It's been too long.

I'm well, all the better for being back out in the field, that desk job was killing me.
And you still owe me a bottle of space fuel."

"I should know better than to gamble with you.

Anyway, I called because I may have a mission for you."

"About time, I've been patrolling this same sector for mazuras, starting to get a little
dizzy."

"I can't give you any details at this time, but sufficed to say prepare yourself and your
ship for battle. I may call you at a moment's notice."

Chapter 3 (Passing of a Fantasy)

Argon M6 deep space patrol vessel Jubilee

Captains Log ... First Entry:

'This is Captain Jessica Hall of the Jubilee, a new M6 class Corvette on its maiden voyage.'

'We are currently flying through Hila's Joy. We are being escorted by two Argon Elites. Our destination is one of the newly discovered sectors, X10. Once we arrive the M3's will return home for their next escort mission and we are to explore and map X10 reporting anything of interest.'

"Lieutenant, what is our ETA to X10?"

"Six stazuras. We will be entering Ocean Of Fantasy in a few mizuras."

...

Captains Personal Log ... First Entry:

'I've never been out this far before. No one has been out as far as we will have been in six stazuras. This is a little daunting. I only hope we won't have the opportunity to push the Jubilee to its limits on our first trip out. I like things quiet and uneventful.'

...

"Now entering system Ocean Of Fantasy"

As the bright flair of the wormhole jump subsides the Captain walks around the consoles and right up to the main observation window.

She stares out and thinks to herself. 'Space is beautiful. The stillness. Peace, tranquillity.'

She glances to one side then the other to see her fighter escort, then back to the front. There is very little traffic. Her mind wanders for a moment and she is puzzled by the lack of other ships. Then she comes back to herself and knows that it is usually quieter in the outer sectors.

In the distance the Boron Shark glides quietly past a stott mixery. Nearby on the right a plankton farm rotates gracefully as the light from the dim blue sun dances playfully on its surface. Further to the right can be seen the trading station and beyond that the shipyard. If Jessica didn't know better she might have thought it surreal that stations just seem to hang there as if by a string.

The shattered planet can be seen leaving view on the far left. The Captain wonders what it might have been like before the Xenon destroyed it. Being a Boron sector the

planet may have been ideally wet, aquatic, for the strangely pleasant race. The atmosphere, thick cloud covering most of the surface. Underwater cities spread throughout the oceans.

The Captain had never visited an alien world before, if time were not pressing she might have been tempted to make a short stop at one of the many intriguing planets they had passed along the way. 'Well' she thought to herself 'X10 might have a planet worth visiting.' She continued to gaze out at the stars.

...

Argon Fleet Command

Commander Reamus had just left the conference room where he had been discussing the 'missing' Armadeaus with Admiral Ornov. He was on his way to his own office where he was to contact Captain Hall of the Jubilee and issue her with new orders.

As Reamus walks down the corridor, troubling thoughts running through his mind.

'Ornov didn't seem his usual self. He seemed to be trying to convince me that was a pirate station, maybe trying to convince himself more than me.'

I don't think that was a pirate station. The shape and size was only an eighty eight percent match to a Teladi Solar Power Plant, Ornov said 'a couple of minor alterations'. Twelve percent change on something the size of a Solar Power Plant is no minor alteration, that's some major structural reengineering, the whole thing was a couple of feet wider not to mention it being almost bulbous around the bottom. Who buys a station then widens it by two feet?

Besides I've never known pirates to buy or steal whole stations, they build them from scavenged parts and freighters. Also they like them much larger to accommodate large numbers of ships.

Then there's the hull, that was no black paint, I don't know what the hell that was. And the sensors couldn't penetrate it. Paranid prototype stealth or sensor jamming tech? perhaps.'

'I know Captain Monroe, he may be a little cavalier in his methods, well down right crazy at times, but even he wouldn't be floating around outside a pirate station.'

'I'm convinced the Admiral knows more about this than he is telling.'

Reamus arrives at his office, enters, closes the door behind and sits at his desk. He inserts his PDP into its slot on the desk and presses a few buttons. The translucent view screen in the centre of the desk comes to life, a moment later a face appears.

"Corvette Jubilee, Ensign..."

"Hello Ensign, this is Commander Reamus of Fleet Command. I need to speak to Captain Hall immediately."

"I'll put you through, just a moment."

"Thank you."

...

Argon M6 deep space patrol vessel Jubilee

"Captain, we are getting a priority transmission from Argon Fleet Command. Captain?"

Hall, still transfixed by the stars, slowly returns to herself.

"Yes? Yes Ensign, I will take it in my office."

The Captain leaves the bridge into her office.

...

As she sits down the view screen lights up, first with the Fleet Command logo, then the familiar face of Commander Reamus, the very same who gave her this assignment not twenty four stazuras ago.

"Commander Reamus, nice to see you again.
We are approximately six stazuras from X10. As you may know from our logs, things have been blissfully quiet so far."

"How does the old Xenon sector look? I've never actually been there."

"Looks good. Ever since that brave young trader cleared out the Xenon almost twenty five jazuras ago the place is slowly becoming populated, eight stations now."

"Yes, I believe the sector was named after the trader.
I called because I'm afraid we have to change your orders.
We need you to go to X8 to investigate the possible disappearance of the Armadeaus and the presence of an unusual station. There may be pirate involvement. You should exercise extreme caution, try not to get into a fight if you can help it. We don't know what we are dealing with yet. Take the M3's with you.
I'm sending an encoded transmission containing the final logs we received from the Armadeaus. They show some sector information including the location of the station."

"Transmission received Commander. We'll keep you posted."

"Reamus out."

Reamus' face disappears and is replaced by the AFC logo.
Captain Hall stands and returns to the bridge.

...

"We have received new orders.
Helm, set course for X8.
Comms, inform the M3's of our new heading.
Lieutenant Pierson come with me."

After several 'Yes sir's' the Captain, followed by the Lieutenant, leaves the bridge and returns to her office.

...

They sat either side of the desk.

"Being second in command, Pierson, you need to be here for this."

As she taps a few controls the translucent display screen on the centre of her desk lights up. Even though apparently translucent, the display still shows the images and text appropriately for viewing from either side. The Lieutenant, still impressed by this, gives a little smile.

The first page appears. They both read the text, which was almost word for word what Commander Reamus had said to the Captain mizuras before. She then opens the file containing the log. The sector map of X8 is first. She zooms in on the Armadeaus and the station.

"What do you make of that station, Lieutenant?"

Pierson presses a button on the display screen and the information, statistics and sensor logs of the station are displayed along-side the image.

"The sensors couldn't penetrate the hull. Sensor jammers perhaps? I didn't know such tech existed yet.

Commander Reamus may have been right in suggesting pirates. Though it is smaller than they usually go for, the dark colour and location fits. It does seem rather quiet to be a pirate station, no fighter patrols, no laser towers, no freighters coming and going. Maybe it's abandoned."

"Yes Lieutenant, abandoned was my first thought, but if it were why has the Armadeaus gone missing?"

"Two unrelated incidents?"

"Well, we are going there to find out."

Chapter 4 (Fissures in the Dark)

Captain Jack Monroe, Personal Log :

'I'm about to enter the interior of the station. As I step forward into a corridor the airlock door slides closed behind me. I can't afford to use my oxygen tank unnecessarily, so having checked the ambient oxygen level on my sleeve readout I know that it should be safe to remove my helmet.'

...

'I have now removed it and I take my first breath reluctantly and prepare for the worst.

I am still slightly surprised that the air is breathable. Reasonably fresh too. So life support must still be working, or has been recently.

Though fresh, there is an odd smell in the air, nothing I can place, but it's not pleasant.'

...

'Having collapsed my helmet and stowed it on the rear of my belt, I proceed.

It is dark, all but a few dimly glowing control panels at the far end of the corridor. I turn on my EVA suit lights as I make my way down the corridor.

I have a vague feeling of familiarity. I'm not well aquatinted with the interior layout of many stations outside the Argon sectors, but the shape of the doors and corridors suggest Teladi.

But why would the Teladi be out here? It doesn't add up.

I continue down the corridor, about halfway now. There is a door on the left, closed. As I shine my light across the top half of the door I see some text. I can't read it, but it is clearly Teladi, damn, if the Armadeaus or M5 were still here I could get a translation. I'll try the touch pad to open it. Nothing, but with the power out that was expected. I don't see a manual over-ride, but I don't want to be trying every door I come across. I should try to find Command and Control. A diagram of the layout might help, if I can find one.

I'm continuing down the corridor to the lit panels.'

...

'These panels have similar pictorial writings as the ones at the airlock. One of them green, the picture something like an arrow pointing up. The familiar wavy line, this time red.

Now I see them closer with my helmet off I can see some sense in the pictorial language. It seems to be simply descriptive, the wavy line may be a door in motion. The arrow, a direction perhaps for an elevator. A circle with four lines out of the top could be lights or comms. I could take a guess at one or two others. The rest, I have no idea. I've never known the Teladi, or anyone else, to use pictorial writings like this, handy though.

If I'm right, the green arrow... ah yes, I hear the elevator descending, so not all the power is out. Now the door open button has turned yellow. In I step and press the green arrow, up I go.

This is really easy. They should have a system like this on every station. For those of us who haven't the time to learn the languages of all the other races, we need to take

a translator pad everywhere just to find the bathroom. I must remember to mention this when I get back.

Yes, when I get back, or if.'

...'

'The elevator comes to a stop, I open the door and step out. There are a few lights in this corridor, though most are flickering it is enough to see by so I turn off my lights and walk onward. As I'm about to pass the first door, again on the left, I decide to try the touch pad all the same, this time it works.'

As the door half-heartedly slides open, a great sense of urgency grips me and I reach for my pistol. But for nothing. I'm almost disappointed, it seems to be just a small storage room. A few crates, a stack of chairs and a tiny window halfway up the opposite wall. I don't know what side of the station this window looks out on to, but I can't see the cloud of black ships, I feel a little better for that.'

...'

'I'm back in the corridor. It's curving to the right.
As I continue, I see more doors on either side.
I'm over half way now and the end of the corridor is in sight.
The door at the end may be another elevator, a little larger than the previous.
As I near the elevator I see the control panel is cracked, I try the buttons, but as I expected, nothing.
I will try to force the doors open.'

...'

'With some effort I am able to part the doors a little, I don't want them to close again behind me. I will need something to jam between.
One of the crates perhaps. No, the control panel will do nicely. As I tear it out of the wall sparks crackle behind.
It is sturdy enough to hold the door open a little under a metre.
I look through to see the lift shaft. The emergency lights are barely enough to illuminate the shaft. It drops down five metres or so, I assume to the lower level.
About three levels above I see the underside of the lift.
A ladder running throughout the lift shaft is to the right. It would be within easy reach if the doors were open fully. I can swing round a grab hold though.'

'As I climb I see two elevator doors beneath the elevator itself. Assuming Command and Control is on one of the upper levels I need to get as high as I can.'

...'

'I'm at the highest door. A small runner at the base of the doorway means I can get a little balance with the toe of my right boot as I reach across to open the door.'

'Damn this isn't easy.
I'm holding the ladder with my left hand and foot, stretching across to the door with my right while trying to balance myself on the runner. They sure designed this place well.
Yea yea, ok, I suppose if I were a maintenance worker I'd have a line attached and the door would already be open.'

'I can get my fingers between but I'm just not getting the leverage to open it.'

...

As the Captain is trying to rebalance himself between the ladder and the runner, the lift shaft suddenly starts to shake. A metallic creaking noise, like metal fatigue, as if the whole shaft or more, maybe the whole station, were under great stress, coming from all round, getting louder.

Something shakes loose, a nut or bolt, from somewhere above and falls down past Monroe into the darkness below. It clatters as it hits the bottom.

The Captain looks up, hoping that the lift isn't about to fall.

As the vibrations worsen he loses his footing and swings down, held only by his left hand. More debris falls, narrowly missing Monroe as he dangles for a moment.

The Captain manages to swing his right arm up and grab the ladder just in time for the tremors to worsen briefly then stop.

...

'Whoa there! what's going on? What's happening to this place?

I'd better get out of this shaft quick. I'll not be able to open the doors like this. I need to find something. Ah, perhaps... Yes a small panel. The door mechanism perhaps. I've opened the panel, inside is a lever, looks like a manual release for the door.'

...

'There was a gaseous hiss when I pulled the lever.

Nothing seems to have happened, I'll try the door again.

Yes, the door has slackened. I've managed to pull it open a little now.'

...

'I've made it into the corridor.

This one is much larger than the corridor below and was until recently more pleasantly adorned. This may be a public passage, where the one below was maintenance. It is strewn end to end with fallen debris, ceiling and wall panels, lighting fixtures and further up, a door. Wires and pipes hanging out everywhere. It looks like a war zone. I carefully pick my way through the corridor.

As I reach the door lying across my path I see that it's not as it should be.

The whole door, five centimetre thick solid steel, has been twisted and bent out of its doorway. Looking at the doorframe where it used to be, I see that too has been twisted. I think I should take a look in the room.

The room is simple and small, it looks more likely to be crew quarters than that of a paying customer. The bed has not been made, there are a few personal trinkets on a table and more fallen on the floor. Shards of glass lie beneath a shelf, perhaps from a vase or ornament.

I look back to the doorway and trace the line of twisted metal along the wall then up to the ceiling and curving across in the direction of the room next door. As the distorted metal of the ceiling ends at the far wall it is beginning to separate, light can be seen from the room above.

I'm going to take a look in the room next door to see if this deformity continues.'

...

'The door to this room is slightly ajar, I push my way through. The lights are off or broken, but the twisted crack in the ceiling is larger and light is shining through from above.

This room is identical to the previous and in the same mess.
As I follow the fracture in the ceiling from right to left, it grows gradually wider.
I see something, it's...
An arm. A blood soaked arm dangling limply through the gap.'

Chapter 5 (Reminiscence)

Argon M6 Jubilee

"What is our ETA to X8, Pierson?"

"Thirty mizuras, Captain. Only two jumps to go now."

"Very good.

You have the bridge Lieutenant. I'll be in the mess hall. If I'm not back call me before we reach X8."

The Captain leaves the bridge and the Lieutenant takes her chair. He taps a control and brings up the system map, scrolls through the list of contents. Seeing nothing of any particular interest he scans the first factory, a Crystal Fab. Having been a trader for a couple of jazuras before joining the Argon Fleet, Pierson has some knowledge and interest in the economy. The Crystal Fab, other than being a little short on energy cells, is fairly well stocked and is charging predictable prices. He goes back to the sector map and calls up the information on a Silicon Mine a little further down the list. 'Four hundred and fourteen credits, that's a good price!' he almost says aloud.

Back to the sector map and he watches the movements of the freighters for a moment. Pierson easily spots two freighters heading towards the Silicon Mine, a Ganymede and a Dolphin. Both about the same distance. A quick scan of each, yes, both are going to buy the wafers. The Ganymede having travelled eight sectors probably deserves it more. 'I bet I know what he'll be thinking now.' Pierson wonders which will win their race, a check of their speeds tells him the Ganymede has had no upgrades, which ever wins it will be close.

...

The Captain arrives in the Mess hall. As would be expected at this time it is closed and the lights are off. She touches the pad and the bright lights come on. Jessica walks across the small room, behind the counter and reaches up. She brings a bottle down from a shelf and places it on the work surface, and a short glass from under the counter. As the captain pours the liquid into the glass she breathes in the thick vapour, it smells quite strongly of stott spices. The slightly viscous liquid has a vague green hue to it, she places the glass in the Food Molecule Stimulator (FMS), closes the door and turns it on.

As Jessica awaits her warm tasty beverage she looks around the room, not large but nether is the crew of the Jubilee, three tables each having four placings. With the crew on rotational shifts this will never likely be more than half full at the busiest of times. A series of windows line the wall with the tables against. The FMS chimes its completion and She removes her drink. Jessica walks back around the counter, before she sits she dims the lights.

The Captain takes a sip then nurses her drink as she stares out into the distance. A speck of green barely moving past a distant station, probably a Paranid Ganymede, 'Mmmmm wonder where it's headed, probably not a care in the world, where we may be heading into a war zone.'

After a few more sips the familiar sight of a wormhole surrounds the ship, ripples in the bright light, darker shades of light, colours, blue swirling against the endless sea of white. Then a slight shake and back to the blackness of space. 'This would be the last sector before X8. A quiet Teladi outpost.' She thinks to herself.

...

"Captain"

A voice comes over the comms.

"Captain, we are detecting Xenon forces attacking civilian transports."

Standing up, she places her unfinished drink on the table and presses a control on the communications panel.

"Set an intercept course.

I'm on my way to the bridge."

...

Jubilee

Bridge

"Now entering sector, Teladi Way"

As the flash from the wormhole subsides the Lieutenant calls up the sector map. A very lightly populated sector, Teladi mines mostly. The Teladi, who quickly claimed it, first discovered this sector six jazuras ago. It is very densely packed with asteroids and several nebulae. The Teladi have been mining the sector intensely since they moved in, and many of the asteroids have been depleted.

Since the asteroids began to dry up, the miners have been gradually moving away leaving the sector less and less populated. The vast abundance of asteroids makes it difficult to build other stations and obviously makes navigation a little hazardous. So in a jazura or two this will likely be little more than a ghost town.

The gate to X8 was discovered amidst one of the densest areas of the asteroid field by an Argon scout only a few wozuras ago. The Teladi were happy enough for the Argon to investigate the new gate as long as they get a share of anything of value. The asteroids were so densely packed around the gate the Armadeus had to destroy several just to reach it.

Pierson notices a cluster of red dots moving south on the sector map.

"Set course for the X8 gate"

"Yes Lieutenant"

Pierson brings up the list of sector contents and sees the red dots are Xenon. Three Xenon M and two Xenon L, no match for the Jubilee and her two escorts.

The Lieutenant thinks to himself 'Ah the old foe. The Xenon have been beaten back so many times, will they never give up?

Well, the universe would feel rather emptier without them.'

"We have Xenon in the sector folks, but as we are under orders to avoid any fights, we will avoid them.

Helm, display our course to the gate on the main screen."

A line, seemingly in real space, meanders its way out in front of the Jubilee. It continues to curve right until a little way ahead where it meets the edge of the asteroids. The line then weaves in amongst the huge slowly spinning rocks where it quickly becomes lost to view.

"Good, that keeps us well away from the Xenon."

...

"Lieutenant, the Xenon have opened fire on a Teladi Vulture... it's breaking up."

"Damn! Any survivors?"

"Negative.

The Xenon have changed course. They are going to intercept another Vulture."

"System security?"

"None, Xenon may have destroyed them already."

"What's the Xenons ETA on the Vulture?"

"Three mizurass"

The Lieutenant taps a control.

"Captain.

Captain, we are detecting Xenon forces attacking civilian transports."

The Captains voice is heard over the comms

"Set an intercept course.

I'm on my way to the bridge."

The Jubilee, closely followed by the two Elites, veers forty degrees to the left and ten degrees upward.

...

Captain Hall enters the bridge.

The Lieutenant stands and returns to his seat behind the weapons console.

The Captain does not sit, she walks forward and stands next to helm control.

"What is our ETA on the Xenon"

"One mizura and ten sezuras. The Xenon will reach the Vulture in forty seven sezuras."

The Captain brings up the display of the Xenon formation in relation to the Vulture. The three M's are slightly ahead of the group with the L's lagging about nine sezuras behind.

She then walked to the Communications console.

"Ensign, open a channel to our escort.
This is Captain Hall, as you know we are about to engage the Xenon.
If you can deal with the three Xenon M's we will take out the two L's."

"Affirmative."

"Good luck. Hall out."

"We are receiving a distress call from the Vulture."

"Put it through Ensign."

A slightly crackley message could be heard. The voice unmistakably Teladi.
"Thiss iss Teladi Vulture of Ore Mine Alpha calling Argon shipss. I am under attack
from Xenonss. Please asissst."
The message begins to repeat, the voice much more desperate.

The Captain looks to the Ensign and motions her hand. The Ensign understands and
opens a comm channel to the Vulture.

"This is Captain Hall of Argon Fleet to Vulture. Hold tight, we are on the way."

"The Xenon are nearing firing range of the Vulture.
Five sezuras, four, three, two, one.
The Xenon M's have begun firing at the Vulture.
They have gone past, swinging around for a second run.
The Vultures Shields are down to ninety five percent.
The L's are nearing firing range of the Vulture, slowing to match its speed."

"Lieutenant, bring the main guns online, target the lead Xenon L."

"Yes sir. The M's have made a second pass, shields down to eighty percent.
The L's have fired their first volley, fifty percent.
We will be entering firing range in six sezuras.
Five, four, three, two, one."

Chapter 6 (Things that go Bump...)

A tear shaped droplet falls in slow motion downward. Down and down, rippling slightly with the air resistance. Until it finally reaches the pool at the bottom. The crescendo rises upward around as the droplet becomes one with its predecessors. A moment of perfect beauty. Symmetry.

Then once more, stillness. Before the next bead of liquid begins its journey.

Monroe stands transfixed on the scene, watching the arm, watching the drops of blood, watching ripples in the pool.

'Pull your self together Jack, you've seen death before.
I should probably take a look up through the gap, see what's there.
Standing just past the arm, where the gap is at its widest, I see very little. The brightness of the room above is dazzling.
I let my eyes adjust a moment. I see nothing more than the ceiling of the room above, no wait, lines, that ceiling is also fractured.
Has there been an attack on this station?
There was no visible damage on the exterior.
Hmm, well something has torn great gashes throughout this place.
I'll try to get to that room above. The body might give me some clue.'

...

'I'm back in the corridor, continuing to the end. I expect the door at the end is another elevator. The panel is lit, good.'

As I near the elevator I notice, to the left, an opening. A stairwell leading up.
Excellent!

I step through the opening and look up, the stairs lead half way to the next floor turn one-eighty degrees then up the rest of the way. Hard to tell from here but they must lead up at least three or four floors.

At the bottom of the stairs there is a diagram. It shows the layout of the stairs and the contents of each of the floors it connects to. The writing is Teladi, but each floor has a pictorial description. My guess is that this floor and the one above are staff quarters and the two above that are rooms for rent, finally above that there is a "no entry" sign. I guess staff only, that's where I need to be.

Anyway, up I go.

The stairs are on the outer side of the station. I see windows halfway up, if I'm right they should face at ninety degrees to the first window I looked out.

I look out as I reach the window, nothing, just black, odd. Maybe it's not a window after-all.'

...

'I have reached the next floor. The stairs continue up but I want to look at the body first.'

Out into the corridor. Other than the pattern of debris, it looks identical to the floor below. Numerous doors on either side, each leading to small rooms. The lights are mostly working, one has crashed to the floor mid way down.

I proceed. I count the doors on my left, one, two, three, four. This is the one.

I open the door and prepare for the worst.

But I couldn't have expected this.'

'Just an arm. No body. I've seen a few corpses before, but not disembodied limbs.
I walk nearer and look down at it and into the room below.
Surprisingly little blood. A small spatter around the arm. The blood in the room below
must have dripped directly from the limb. So where is its owner?
Suddenly I feel something touch my ear. Startled, I jump forward over the fissure
while pulling out my weapon. I spin around to check behind me.'

'Nothing, no one.'

'I dart back into the corridor to find it just as empty as I left it.'

'Then something dawns on me. The place where I was standing.
I reach up with my gloved hand and touch my ear. Bringing it back down I see blood,
not mine. I holster my pistol as I return to the fissure. This time looking up at the
twisted metal, there is more dripping from the room above. The arm must have fallen
from there.'

...

As the Captain makes his way back to the staircase the vibrations then violent
shaking starts again. The metallic creaking noises, more obvious this time, new
fractures being torn and old ones being widened.

Monroe tries to steady himself too late and falls to his knees just as a ceiling panel
crashes down on him.

Electricity crackles as lights shatter. Louder and louder the metal groans as if the
station itself were crying out in pain.

Then suddenly silence.

A few mizuras pass, then something under the rubble begins to stir. Monroe, having
been unconscious briefly, crawls out and holds his head in his hands.

...

'Damn that hurts!
More blood, this time mine.'

'I need to get out of here. Up to the top, C&C should tell me how to get to the docking
bay. If there are no ships there I'm screwed.'

I would still like to take a quick look at the body first, maybe give me some indication
of what happened here, or what is happening here.'

...

Halfway up to the next floor Monroe stops and crouches clutching his head.

'Ahhhhh, feels like my head is split open. Still bleeding, that's not good.
Ok, no more running up the stairs, just walk.'

...

I've reached the corridor of the next floor. Much the same as the previous, all but
fewer doors wider spaced.

From the left, one, two, three. I guess this is the one.

I touch the pad, the door opens.

Uughhh.

The scene is nothing short of a nightmare.
The room is rather larger than the staff rooms and in partial shade as only the small light at the bed side is on. The bed a double, the cupboard a little larger, a set of drawers and a small view screen for comms and watching movies or Interstellar News.

The paint, what little can be see of it, is magnolia, not the usual military grey.
The floor is awash with blood. The walls, little better.
As I look up I see that in several places there is even blood dripping from the ceiling.
No cracks up there though.
Still no body or entrails, it looks a though someone exploded a bag of blood in the room.
I'll check the cupboard and under the bed. I tread carefully across the room trying not to slip, stoop to look under the bed, nothing. Hand on pistol I open the cupboard, a few clothes on hangers, otherwise empty. I close it again'

'As I head back to the door a sense of dread creeps over me, a feeling like... like someone is watching me, someone is in this room with me... behind me. I tear the pistol from its holster and spin as fast as I can.
But nothing. As I'm about to tell myself to get a grip I see movement in the corner of my eye, the opposite corner of the room, the corner least well lit.
I turn my head toward the movement too fast and the burning in the back of my skull re-ignites. I grit my teeth against the pain and blink away the tears welling in my eyes, to see once more nothing.
I walk to the corner, gun in hand.
There was something here, I swear to it.
There is something here, a tiny crack in the corner of the wall no more than a millimetre or two wide. It runs almost the full length, floor to ceiling.
Was it light that I saw shining through, there's no light there now.
No It wasn't light, it was dark movement, a definite shape.
The odd unpleasant smell I noticed earlier is very strong in this room now, and wasn't a moment ago.'

'There was something here.'

Chapter 7 (The Rocky Road)

Argon M3 Elites escorting Jubilee

"Lieutenant Commander, as you just heard from the Captain, we are to engage the Xenon M's.

Lock onto my target, the lead Xenon M, we will concentrate our fire on it first. Once destroyed we separate and each take one of the survivors."

"Yes sir."

"The Xenon have begun firing at the Vulture, its shields are down to ninety five percent.

We'll be entering firing range in a few sezuras, the M's have made a second pass, TS shields down to eighty percent."

The Elites closed the gap quickly and opened fire simultaneously on the first Xenon M. Each firing off two shots in quick succession.

The eight bolts of green plasma tare their way through space, the intense heat visibly giving off vapour. Inside each bolt, the careful observer could see the plasma swirling in an angry fury, almost as if it were desperately impatient to reach the target.

A moment later all eight AHEPT shots hit their mark dead on. Far more than enough for a kill.

The plasma overwhelms the Xenon M. Fires erupted from within the ship as it blows apart, fragments of burnt metal are sent outward explosively. Several of these shards impacted on the shields of the Vulture.

"Nice shooting Commander"

"You too LC.

Two to go, I've got the one on the left."

As the Lieutenant Commander targets his Xenon M he glanced upward to see the Jubilee destroy the first Xenon L, the fireball from its explosion engulfing the front ten meters, or so, of the Jubilee. 'Shields should hold that fire out.' the Lieutenant Commander thinks to himself.

He looks away from the Jubilee back to the Xenon M which is twisting and turning trying keep out of the crosshairs. It is flying away from the Vulture towards the centre of the sector. The Elite enters firing range and lets loose, enough of the shots hit the Xenon and it quickly brakes apart.

...

The Commander gives chase to the evasive Xenon M. As it flies dangerously close to the Vulture it swoops around in front of the TS then under, turns one-eighty degrees and slows. The Xenon M opens fire, but not at the Vulture. The shots hit the Commanders Elite as he comes around the TS.

"Damn, sneaky bastard! Shields down to ninety two percent.

I swear these Xenon are getting smarter. Much less of them around these recently, but their AI has certainly improved."

The Xenon M fires again as it begins to accelerate towards the Elite, The Commander also lets loose a few shots as he strafes to avoid the Xenon's plasma. The first of the Commanders shots hit before the Xenon M veers over him and back behind the Vulture.

"This is getting annoying."

The Commander turns his ship and flies beneath the Vulture towards its rear end. He sees the Xenon M above him and pulls up hitting the boosters. The Xenon ship begins to slow and turns, it also hit the boosters. The two ships collide head on, the Xenon splintering around the Elite.

"Attention, twenty five megawatt shield damaged."

"That got you.
Lost a shield though, third this mazura, AFC won't be happy."

...

Jubilee

"Lieutenant, bring the main guns online, target the lead Xenon L."

The main weapons of the Jubilee are two GHEPT's aligned so close that the two spheres of plasma merge upon entering space.

Pierson smiles having never fired a weapon of such extraordinary power. He thinks 'I wish I could have had one of these on my old Lifter, I'd have had no trouble from the pirates then. I'd like to see the new Delta High Energy Plasma Thrower in action. Still in the experimental stage and an M6 would never be able to mount one, but nice to see I'll bet, I hear they are a vivid blue colour.'

"Yes sir.

The M's have made a second pass on the Vulture, shields down to eighty percent.

The L's have fired their first volley, fifty percent.

We will be entering firing range in six sezuras.

Five, four, three, two, one."

"Hold fire Pierson.

Wait until we are right on them.

Target the second Xenon L with the turrets."

"Fire main guns.

Fire turrets."

The violent eruption from the main guns of the Jubilee is enough to send a small tremor through the ship.

Over such a small distance the Jubilee travelling at full speed seems almost enough to keep up with the plasma burst. As the ball of plasma nears the Xenon ship it is clearly almost half the size of the L.

The sphere engulfs the Xenon L.

"Bring us hard to port and reduce speed to one quarter, try to cut off the second Xenon L."

Too slowly, the Jubilee turns. Even before the first L has fragmented the M6 crashes through the wreckage, a fireball from the explosion surrounds the front ten meters of the Jubilee.

"Shields are holding at eighty four percent. The second Xenon L is firing at us. We are taking hits, shields at eighty percent, seventy eight."

...

Moments after the GHEPT's fired, so did the turrets.

The two twin-Gamma Particle Accelerator Cannon turrets fire as they track the second Xenon L. Many of the shots hit but the lower powered weapons aren't able to do much damage.

The Jubilee continues turning towards the remaining Xenon ship.

Long before the main guns are in line, the Xenon L starts to move around the side keeping out of shot and still getting off as many shots of its own as possible.

"The Xenon's shields are down to sixty percent now, ours at seventy four. It is ducking below us, now out of sight of the upper turret. Fifty five percent to sixty five."

"Roll the ship, try to get the top turret back into play."

...

"The Xenon is out-maneuvring us we can't get more than one turret in sight at a time.

Forty five percent to fifty four.

Captain this isn't going well. Perhaps we should launch the M5, see if it can distract the L long enough for the Jubilee to kill it."

"No Lieutenant, If an M6 can't take out an M3 the boys at the shipyard have some explaining to do.

Where are the Elites?"

"Still in combat with the Xenon M's. One down, the second is about to fall, the Commander seems to be having a little trouble catching his though."

"Very well, Put us back on a straight course away from the Vulture increase speed to two thirds.

"Yes sir."

'Ah, the old run>turn>fire trick perhaps.' he thought.

"Captain, the L has broken off and is heading back to the Vulture."

"Prepare to launch two silkworm missiles at the Xenon L. Launch."

The missiles streak from the rear launchers, the vapour trails leaving two vivid white lines against the black background of space.

Moments later the missiles strike their target and the Xenon L is destroyed.

"Captain, target destroyed.

The second M is down and, yes, the Commander has crashed into his. All Xenon Destroyed."

"How is the Commander?"

"Lost one shield, otherwise ok."

"We are receiving a transmission from the Vulture."

"Put it through."

"Thankss to you Argon shipss you have ssaved me much losesss.
May all your journeyss bring good profitss."

"Glad to be of help."

...

"Set course for the X8 gate."

The Jubilee with fighters back in formation, head in an easterly direction towards the asteroid field.

The Captain takes her seat then brings up the sector map. 'No hostiles. The gate, sixty seven kilometres.'

Pierson notices the two freighters were now headed away from the silicon mine. A quick scan of each from his console tells him the Dolphin had arrived first. The Ganymede now returning home empty handed.

...

The Jubilee enters the asteroid field, the Elites taking the lead.

The giant rocks gracefully rotating, some drifting slowly.

Jessica thought to herself 'I wonder how often the asteroids collide.' She then amended 'Most likely they have long since established themselves in a pattern that no longer collides, many probably destroyed or combined in these collisions of old.'

"Ensign, track any of the drifting asteroids that will come near our path, we don't want to get in their way."

Lieutenant Pierson scans several of the nearby asteroids for mineral content. All very low, several having obvious and deep scarring from being mined by the Teladi.

...

As the ships proceeded further into the asteroid field it grows ever more claustrophobic. Rock is much more the predominant visible feature, rather than the blackness of space.

A little way ahead there can be seen a nebula, pale yellow in colour, and though quite large, the paleness allows visibility for some distance inside.

Pierson comments. "This nebula is oddly still, normally they are more like that one to the north east."

On the display screen to the side of the main observation window he shows the north-easterly nebula. Very deep blue, a frenzied swirling of gasses. Probably couldn't actually damage a ship, but it certainly wouldn't be a comfortable ride.

"I don't think it is anything to worry about, Lieutenant. Besides this is as close as we will be getting."

The Jubilee and escort, now travelling less than ten meters per sezura, makes a sharp right turn. Facing almost due south the gate could be seen nestled tightly amongst the rocks.

Chapter 8 (Escape Plan)

'Ok, now I'm getting a little nervous.
Right enough side tracking, I need to get out of here fast.
C&C should tell me how to get to the docking bay and whether there are any ships docked.
I will have to assume the worst, that the power is out in the docking bay. C&C should be the easiest place to open the launch bay doors.'

...

'I'm in the corridor making my way back to the stairs.
The awful stench has lessened since leaving the room. It doesn't smell like rotting but it gives me the same feeling. The feeling of death and decay, the end of life. The source of the smell must have been from whatever that thing, that movement was.'

...

'I've now reached the next floor on the stairs.
A quick glance through the opening, I see that it's much the same as the floor below, again less debris.
This should be the top floor of guest quarters.
Hmm, guest quarters, perhaps being so close to C&C these might be the command staff quarters.'

'The next flight of stairs is blocked by a small metal bar a little below waist height, easily stepped over. On it is painted a No Entry symbol.
The bar and paint have numerous scuff marks where clearly it has been stepped over many times before.
I pull on the catch and swing the bar open. I notice where the bar swings open to meet the wall there is a dent. The paint on the wall around it having flaked off long ago. Obviously this has seen much use, through haste or lack of care. No Argon station would have been left in this state, the slightest chip of paint is seen to within the tazura.'

...

'I've now arrived on the next floor, which is also the top floor.
As I step out into the corridor I notice that it goes in both directions, left and right. It is much wider than any of the previous. I don't expect it matters which way I go, both directions curve around, they probably meet the other side. This whole floor, if anything like Argon stations, is probably a ring running the full circumference of the station.
My head seems to have stopped bleeding, but the pain is no less.'

...

'Both directions look pretty much the same.'

'I'll take the left.
As far as I can see, before the curving obstructs my view, there are no doors on the right wall, just a diagram and a communications panel further up. The left wall has one door, which I'm now approaching and another just past the comms panel.'

This corridor is fully lit, the one panel I can see is still working. There doesn't appear to be any damage, no debris, no twisted fractures. It would seem that whatever was or is happening to this station hasn't reached this level, or hasn't yet.'

...

'I'm now standing at the first door on the left. It's open, no not open, there is no door nor is there supposed to be, it's just a doorway. As I look in I see a small mess hall, soft seats around a low table, a counter with an FMS, more seats with tables near the windows. A little bigger but a similar layout to that aboard the Armadeaus.'

'The Armadeaus... first trip out and lost with all hands... I wasn't even on board... So many of my friends... and Lieutenant Cardain... Cellone... my lover.'

A single tear runs down Jacks face. He wipes it away with his blood stained glove.

...

'The light on the FMS is flashing. I'll step over and take a look.
As I open the small door of the FMS a familiar smell hits me. Coffee, Boron if I'm not mistaken. Ahh, I see the container on the shelf above. "Boron Seabean Coffee Richest Blend". It's the good stuff too, the royal seal stamped on the label. Expensive and not easy to come by.
The cup and its contents are cold and the FMS shows that it completed its run. So it must have been sitting there a couple of stazuras at least.'

...

'I'm proceeding further along the corridor. Reaching the diagram and comms panel. Excellent, the diagram shows the layout of this floor.
The corridor is a circle. The outside of the circle are sixteen rooms of varying size. The mess hall, conference rooms and offices. The inside of the circle is one very large room, Command and Control. There are three entrances to C&C, one should be just a little out of sight up on the right, one on the opposite side and the third half way between, the third being double doors.'

'Now I'm looking closer, I notice the wall around the diagram is covered in tiny cracks barely visible. I look further along, the same.
These cracks cover all the walls floor and ceiling.
What the hell is that? I can understand the huge fissures on the lower decks resulting from an attack of some sort, but there are just... just, I don't know what.'

...

'The door on the left to the first conference room is closed. I can see the door to C&C coming up on my right now, it's closed.
I press the touch pad and as it slides open the first thing I notice is a corpse lying just inside the doorway.
The corpse is a Split male lying face-up wearing typical security style uniform. There is an insignia on his jacket, I recognise it, Pirate. I don't remember the clan name, but definitely pirate.
Perhaps the pirates attacked this station, that would explain a few things, not those black ships though.'

'As I look closer I see tiny spots of dry blood all over the body.

I look closer still and see something very disturbing. The entire body and its clothes are covered in minute stabbing and slashing marks, appearing like tiny cracks. The very same tiny cracks as on the walls of the corridor. The face contorted in seething agony, teeth showing.

Surprisingly little blood, only that dried over or around the cuts.

The security guard's short plasma rifle is still in his grasp. It might be an idea to take that.'

...

'I take hold of the barrel and lift the weapon, the arm lifts with it, the cold dead hand clutching as if its life depended on it, ironic.

As I try twisting the gun I notice the charge indicator shows empty. Still, I have a spare power clip for my pistol.

A pistol clip won't fully charge a rifle, but fifteen rifle shots is better than an extra thirty for the pistol.'

...

'The damn hand refuses to let go. I could break the hand...'

The Captain looks around for something heavy to use. There is another corpse a little way across the room, partially obscured by a console.

'or... I could take the rifle off that other security guard over there.'

'As I walk towards the other guard I take a look around the room. Large, circular, very similar to an Argon stations C&C deck. Display panels around the wall, desks with control panels at regular intervals, each with a chair. A large table in the center of the room with the standard holographic display interface, off.'

...

'The second security guard is also a Split, same uniform, same insignia, same deadly cutting wounds. His rifle is on the floor next to him.

I pick it up, this indicator also shows empty, so I remove the power clip and replace it with my spare. The quiet hum lets me know it is working and the indicator shows the weapon is now half charged.

I feel a little better having a decent weapon now.'

...

'There are eight other corpses in the room. Two Paranid, one other Split and five Teladi. All fallen onto or near the various consoles around the room, all with the same injuries. I assume they all died the same way at the same time.

All the blood dry, the corpses cold and rigour-mortis set in. So the attack on C&C must have been a good many stazuras ago, maybe a tazura or two, that may be consistent with the coffee. However the arm and the blood in the rooms below were very recent. This suggests either separate attacks or an ongoing attack. Whichever it is I don't want to be hanging around too long.'

'All of these people are pirate, I haven't seen anything yet that specifically indicates civilian. My guess is that this is a pirate station which has come under attack by force or forces unknown.'

Also this being a pirate station explains the pictorial language on most of the consoles. It would make things easier for everyone being of different race. Yes, most pirates tend to speak more than just their own language. But it simplifies things. I'll be suggesting this to AFC when I get back, or maybe I could sell the idea and retire early. *chuckle* Now that really would annoy the pirates.'

...

'I have found the consoles controlling the docking bay. The view camera is out but all the information is displayed.

Most of the text is Teladi but the seven boxes, I assume to be seven docking bays, have symbols attached.

Four are empty and three occupied, the first two are freighters and the third a Bayamon.

The Bayamon will do me nicely, never actually flown one for real but I've had plenty practice with them in the sim.

Hell, a freighter will do if it gets me off this station.'

'The console layout is much the same as that of an Argon station, simple enough.

The air pressure indicator shows green.

This button should raise the force field around the launch bay doors... Yes.

And this should open the doors... Yes.

Air pressure still green, excellent.

Now how do I get to the docking bay?'

...

Monroe walks around the large circular room looking at each display until he finds a screen showing a 3D image of the station interior.

'Ah, this'll do. It looks like the damage reports. Several areas are flashing red, probably hull breaches.

There is the dock right at the bottom of the station, typical, and the launch bay doors at the side.

The main central elevator runs the full length of the station from the dock right up to the floor beneath me, a set of stairs the other side will take me to that floor.'

'Before I go I'll see if I can find log entries, might explain what happened.

...

'At the back of the room facing the table is a large decorative chair, obviously where the boss sits. In the chair is slumped one of the Teladi, a female. I've never really found the Teladi attractive, but this one has something about her, a quality, refinement, a commanding presence.

Her clothes are practical but still very elaborate, they are clearly expensive and display her obvious wealth and power.

She is undoubtedly the leader, the head of this station if not her entire clan.'

'I imagine she has the logs on her console.

Scroll down the list, there we go the station logs.

The time on the final entry is three tazuras ago. I'll play that back.'

'The face of the Teladi female appears on the screen. She is talking, no almost shouting, clearly very distressed. The room around her is shaking much like it did to

me earlier. Her words are Teladi, spoken quickly and desperately. I don't understand what she is saying. I would very much like to know though.'

'I don't have time to find a translator program or pad right now but I can download the last few logs to my wrist PDP.'

The EVA's wrist personal data pad is not exactly designed to hold things the size of A/V station logs, but there should be enough room for the last two or three.'

'I've connected the PDP to the console and the logs are downloading now. Memory will be full in three, two, one.'

Ok, that's three complete log entries and a few seuzuras of the fourth, in reverse time order.'

'Now to get to the docking bay.'

...

'The door opposite the one I came in will take me to the stairs.

The tremors have started again. They seem to be getting slightly more violent each time, I think the time gap between each is getting less.'

'I'm through the door, the stairs ahead of me.

I'll have to hold the handrail to avoid falling with all the shaking.

The noise is louder too.

Nearly at the bottom, my head is throbbing almost unbearably now.'

...

'The main elevator should be around this corner to the right.

The tremors have almost subsided again.

I see the elevator doors, the power is working, I touch the button with the down arrow and I hear it moving up.

The doors open and I step in.'

...

'Less than a mizura later the elevator reaches the bottom floor, the docking bay level.

The doors open and I step back out.

The first thing that hits me is the incredible stench, truly ungodly.

The airlock door ahead leads into the docking bay proper.'

Chapter 9 (Becoming)

'I'm in the air lock, about to open the door into the docking bay.
I can't see anything through the small window, the lights must be off.
The oxygen indicator on the door shows green, so I won't need my helmet.'

'As the door slides open I take a breath. The air is a little cold in here. The chilled air makes me shudder. Creepy. I get a bad feeling about going in.
The stench is the only thing I can sense. Quite overpowering. Far worse than ever before.

I can see nothing in the darkness and there is no sound.
My wrist readout confirms that the air is breathable and not toxic. But the oxygen content is very low, I may need to put my helmet on if I start to feel light-headed, I might just put it on anyway to get out of the smell. No, I need to keep the oxygen for emergencies only. Besides I should be in the ship in a mizura or so.'

'All the power seems to be off, no lights no lit panels, no hum of anything powered.
Darkness. Silence.'

I turn my EVA suit light on. The beam pierces out into the darkness but is not powerful enough to reach the opposite side of the docking bay.'

'I swing the beam around the bay, up and down to get my bearings and sense of the size of the room, occasionally it catches something metallic and glints. My rifle in line with the light.

From what little I can tell in the darkness, though a very large room, it is small for a docking bay.

If the readout in C&C was correct, seven berths. That's including the station owned ships. I imagine the two freighters and the Bayamon belong to this station.

I'd have expected a pirate station to have at least one or two Orinocos, perhaps it did before the black ships showed up.

That would leave two berths for customers and visitors. That sounds about right for a small station. I wonder why the pirates have such a small station and why it's all the way out here.'

'The docking bay is circular, much like the C&C deck but bigger.
Bay1 ahead of me and the numbers increasing clockwise. So Bay2 will be a little distance round to my left and Bay7 the same distance to the right. I'm looking for Bay3.'

...

'The first dock should be right ahead of me, the first freighter should be in it.
I start to walk forward, the beam hitting the ground a couple of metres ahead, gun tracing the light.

In the light I see the painted outline of the first berth. Then the landing strut of the freighter.

I move the beam up the strut and across the nose of the TS. I walk around the nose and start down the side to my left, tracing it with the light. I see now that it is a Teladi Vulture. The hatch coming up on my right.'

'Perhaps I should just get in this now and get out.'

'A Vulture is not the fastest of ships, if the black ships are still there they would have no trouble catching it.
No, the Bayamon is my best chance of escape, assuming even that is fast enough.
It should be only two berths along, I'll keep going.'

...

'I'm nearing the tail end of the Vulture.
My head is throbbing again, this thin air isn't helping. I'm tempted to put my helmet on, no, I should be in the ship soon, I'm fine.
I'm feeling a little weak in the arms and legs and breathing is getting more difficult.
Not far to go.'

'There are crates stacked up along the side of the TS. Unmarked, could be anything.
There are more crates periodically along the dock as far as the light can reach.
I've passed the back end of the Vulture.
Now entering the grid square of the second berth, my unsteady hand moving the light to find the second freighter, gun now at my side.
No sign of it yet, I keep walking, slower less controlled.'

'A few steps further I see the unmistakable front end of an Argon Lifter. The familiarity of a 'friendly' ship and my weariness tempt me to take this ship.
I'm almost decided to get in as I pass the hatch, but silent movement ahead distracts me.
I raise the light a little to try to catch the movement, trembling slightly I bring the rifle up level.'

'Nothing.'

...

'I'm now nearing the end of the Lifter.
I shine my light up at the engines as I pass.
Something very odd stops me in my tracks, the engines, no, the whole back end of the Lifter is black and shiny.
It looks like the skin of the black ships and the outer hull of this station.
Just the back end of the Lifter, the front is normal.'

'With the light I follow the edge of the blackness around the Lifter. Just past the engines it seems to spill off the TS onto the floor.
It looks as if someone draped a huge sheet of black silk over the back of the Lifter and onto the floor behind.
No, not silk, rubber, no not that either it's more shiny, it seems somewhat fluidic, more like oil.
I'm sure this is the same substance the hulls of the black ships are made of, the shape changing stuff. It has partly enveloped the Lifter.'

'I'm taking a closer look at the area of Black that reaches down to the floor near me.
I bend down and shine the light directly on it. It seems to ripple slightly under the light.
Then it takes shape. I stand up quickly and jump back, back against a crate. The Black forms a long spear-like shape and extends, jutting towards me.
I raise the rifle and prepare to fire when it stops and just holds there in the air at eye level. The sharp point rounds off, maybe four centimetre diameter, and starts to sway a little, drawing nearer and nearer, almost touching me.'

'Is it looking at me?'

'Is it reading my mind again?'

...

'Frozen to the spot.

Unable to move or fire the weapon if I needed to.'

'Time passes.

Maybe a miizura, maybe longer.

Then the black spear recedes back into the sheet of black.'

...

'Another mizura or two pass before I find the nerve to move again.'

...

'I'm cold, shaking, breathing more difficult than ever, legs seem a little numb, fingers tingling.

I should put the helmet on, but the Bayamon should be just ahead. I'll be ok, just keep moving.'

'I'm now entering the third docking berth.

Careful not to stand on the Black.

The Black extends into this area. It seems to be covering most of the floor.

It bulges in places, perhaps things underneath, or inside it.'

'The Bayamon is nowhere to be seen yet.

I'm nearing the middle of this edge, I should be able to see it by now.

I shine the light into the centre of the berth. There is a large bulge there, but nowhere near big enough to be the ship.

I see the Black has texture further from its edges, it is not smooth, grainy, more like actual skin, lines as if there may be veins beneath the surface.

Around the bulges there are what appear to be vines or tendrils wrapped around.

Tightly encasing whatever lies below.

This skin is ever moving, rippling, perhaps growing.'

'I should probably run back and take one of the transports and get out now.

But I will continue to the end of this bay to make sure the Bayamon is not here, then I will leave.

The migraine is ever worsening.'

...

'I'm nearing the end of the third bay. Nothing.

The Black is thicker and much more bulbous at this end. It seem to be growing up the wall, pulsating.'

'Just then a rush of air passes my face. I side-step away, turn the light toward the motion and gasp at the sight.

One of the spear-like tendrils originating from somewhere above has shot down and stopped near me. Again, just hanging there, seeming to watch me, then another, stabbing down towards me, and another.'

...

'There are five now. Spaced around me.
They are enlarging, veins or tendons stretching, showing from beneath the black surface.

The surface rippling, dividing.

The tendrils embed themselves in the ground around me. Smaller vines branch off and start to fill the gaps. A moist fleshy noise, a little like tearing, accompanies the dividing process and sends yet another cold chill through me. The smell seems to double with each division. I fear I may lose consciousness.

I try to push my way between them but to my surprise the seemingly soft pliable surface of the black skin is as solid as steel. Even through my suit I can feel the movement beneath its surface.'

'Almost entirely encased in the black fleshy mass I raise the rifle as much as room will allow, and fire off one shot.'

'I hear a scream in my mind. Deafening.'

'Have I hurt it?

It recedes a little where I shot it.

I fire again and again and again around the area, trying to open a way out.
Its screams making it hard to think, hard to do anything.'

...

'I'm out.

The rifle empty.

The tremors shaking the station have started up again. I wonder if this is as before or if my angering the Black has triggered it this time.'

'No time, must run.'

'I'm heading back towards the transport ships.

I could take the Lifter, it's nearer, but the Black, solid as steel, I might not break free.
No, on to the Vulture.'

...

'I'm almost back to the Lifter, hard to stay on my feet, the shaking of the station, and my trembling. I dropped the rifle, now holding the pistol.

I hear the fleshy noises all around, tendrils whipping at my heals, nearer, nearer. One strikes at me, cutting through my suit and my leg, it feels like it has formed many blade-like protrusions, probably what happened to the people in C&C. I feel the thick warm blood run down my leg from the numerous tiny wounds. It whips at me again, more slashing wounds, and more, one grabs me, I crash to the ground, my light smashing, head colliding with some unseen object, I raise the pistol, but don't know where to aim in the dark, down towards my leg, but I can't pull the trigger, I feel the pistol slip from my trembling hand just as I feel consciousness begin to slip from me.' The Black wraps itself tightly around my leg, quickly slithering further and further up, I feel the veins in my leg popping under the pressure, digging in with its blades, tearing

into my flesh, sucking the life from me, I can sense its thoughts, I'm becoming one with it and it with me, I know what it knows, everything, everything.'

'The quaking of the station worsens further, something cracks, loud sparking, and I feel the docking bay decompressing.

I'm being drawn upwards to where ever the breech is, the black vine still holding me, but it seems to be loosing its grasp, I'm slipping from it, I'm free, flying up, and out, it's the force-field around the launch-bay doors that has gone down. I don't know how but I seem to be wearing my helmet now. Blood droplets from my wounds flying out with me, crystallising. And blood from my head welling slightly in the helmet.'

'I'm outside now, drifting away, drifting...

I can't feel my body now.

And the stars are dimming.

A darkness is falling over me.

I see nothing now, nothing...'

Chapter 10 (And it Begins Again)

Argon Fleet Command

"Admiral Ornov." The voice comes over the communicator on the desk.

"What is it Commander Reamus?"

"I have just finished going over the latest log update from the Jubilee."

"Yes Commander, Have they reached X8 yet?"

"Yes, they arrived around fifty mizuras before the log update. This log shows them over half way to the station."

"Any trouble yet?"

"Not really, they ran into a few Xenon fighters in Teladi Way."

"How did the Corvette do in battle?"

"Reasonably well, no damage.

The Elite Commander lost another shield though."

"What!

Another, how many is that now?"

"Three."

"Remind me to have a word with him when he gets back.

We will need to send him on a few training courses.

See if we can curb that impatient brazen attitude of his."

"Yes sir."

"Keep me informed of any more news regarding the Jubilee.

I'll be in a holo meeting with some of the Generals for a while so don't disturb me.

Ornov out."

The Admiral presses several controls and the three-dimensional holographic display over the large conference table comes to life, it displays the AFC logo, rotating slowly.

'Damn logo spinning all the time, enough to make you dizzy.' the Admiral thinks, not for the first time.

He taps several more controls and the logo disappears.

One by one, only a few moments apart, four holographic faces appear above the table, each one a General.

"General Kaar, General Illandas, General Tirnok, General Vos.

You have all had time to look over the logs of the Armadeaus and I imagine you have all come to the same conclusion that I have.

Noting in particular the black substance covering the hull of the space station."

"Yes, worrying indeed." said Karr.

"This 'new enemy', I had hoped to be just a rumour, a fairytale banded about by lonely long-haul transport pilots and drunken pirates.

But seeing this, and knowing what little our intelligence has gathered from the other races, which by the way is only three lines on a small piece of paper. Actually the drunken pirates have far greater information in this case than even the Paranid. I fear the worst."

"What do you suggest doing about this new enemy?"

"Well, General Illandas, I suggest we show them that we are a force to be reckoned with.

"And if they are not hostile?"

"I think we can assume the Armadeaus was destroyed, or at the very least captured. Also, if the rumours are anything to go by, they are far more than simply hostile So until we know differently we can consider them hostile."

"And you sent in the Jubilee knowing this?"

"Captain Hall was aware of the dangers when she signed up with the Fleet. Besides, she has been told to investigate only, not to get into a fight, and get out at the first sign of danger.
It is simply a scouting mission.
If it turns out to be just pirates after all, she will have the firepower to deal with that there and then, no need to send additional backup."

"Hmm."

"You have something to say, Illandas!?"

"No, do carry on."

"Thank you, too kind.
I have sent each of you a Discoverer carrying a Jumpdrive.
As soon as it arrives, have it fitted. Stock up on plenty energy cells.
And I may call at a moments notice with orders to jump to X8, so..."

The communications panel chimes and Commander Reamus is heard.

"Admiral."

"I asked not to be disturbed Reamus."

"Yes, but we are receiving an emergency transmission from the Jubilee."

"Hurry man!, put it through, the Generals will need to hear this too."

...

(Approximately 1 stazura and 30 mizuras earlier)

Jubilee

"There is just enough room to get through to the gate."

"Proceed carefully, follow the Elites in."

The Elites fly past the last few asteroids before the gate, Jubilee close behind. There is an abundance of dust and small shards of rock in this area, most probably from the asteroids which the Armadeus destroyed to get to the gate a tazura or two earlier.

As some of the small rock fragments make contact with the shields of the passing ships they begin to glow, fluoresce then ignite. The shield around the impact areas becomes visible for the brief time of contact. A swirling layer of electrical energy no thicker than an atom. Sparks of electricity seem to be actually attacking the small shards, lashing out, burning, disintegrating.

The three ships, now travelling less than five meters per sezura, reach the gate. The two Elites are first, side by side they enter the ring. A flash as the wormhole vortex opens, and another as the Elites disappear through. A few sezuras later the Corvette follows suit.

Even after the ships have gone the trail they took is left in turmoil. The many fragments and dust remaining wash around each other very much as they would in the wake of a sea fairing vessel, only in space they will never come to rest.

...

A slight jolt and the white disappears.

The two Elites can be seen a little way ahead, almost stopped.

A voice comes over the communications.

"Captain, what is our heading?"

"Bear with us a moment, Commander, while we get our bearings."

The channel is cut.

"Anything within scanner range Lieutenant?"

"No."

"well, I could have guessed that I suppose.

With the absence of an Advanced Nav Installation in the sector we are running on old-fashioned scanners.

Ensign, remind me, what is the range of our scanners?"

"Fifteen kilometres invasive scan.

Sixty two kilometres passive scan.

One hundred and ninety five kilometres long-range.

Long-range will only detect the presence of an object and the approximate size, nothing more, numerous long-range scans may tell us if the object is moving..."

"Thank you Ensign, glad to see the academy is still teaching the old basics. It's been so long since I used the proper scanners I'd nearly forgotten myself."

The Captain brings up the three-dimensional holographic sector map showing all known data from the Jubilee and Elites sensors.

She then overlays the information from the Armadeaus logs. The station, Armadeaus, M5 and Monroe now displayed in the far distance.

She calculates the distance to the station and the estimated time of arrival.

"Almost one and half stazuras at top speed.

Lieutenant, contact the Commander and inform him of our destination."

"Commander, this is Lieutenant Pierson."

"Yes Lieutenant?"

"I'm uploading the sector information to you now, it includes the station co-ordinates. We'll be flying maximum speed, well, the Corvette is a little faster than an Elite, but we will be sticking together, there may be pirate involvement.

As always we need to be careful.

Pierson out."

The Elites quickly reach top speed. The Jubilee a little slower but soon catches up and levels off the speed.

The M6 pulling in-between the two M3's.

...

"An object is now showing up on the long range scanners.

It is the right size and co-ordinates to be the station.

Another object, smaller, a short distance beyond the station."

"What can you tell me about the second object Ensign?

Is it the Armadeaus?"

"No Captain.

Much too small.

Too small to be its Discoverer.

It could be a small piece of rock or debris.

Or it could be Captain Monroe."

"Captain Monroe?

If he is still out there, Captain, that must be over six stazuras, almost seven by the time we reach him.

He can't still be alive surely."

"No Pierson. I don't expect he could have survived all this time on his EVA oxygen. However, as the Ensign pointed out, it may just be a rock.

There are, after all, far more rocks than Monroes floating around in space.

Ensign, is the small object moving?"

"Just comparing the sensor sweeps..."

Yes, very slowly. Away from the station, away from us.
Approximately six metres per sezura."

"Any change in direction or speed?"

"No, well not in the last few mizuras."

"Lieutenant, I have a mission for you."

"Captain?"

"I want you to take the M5 and go see what the object is.
If it is Monroe pick him up and bring him back here."

"Captain, wouldn't Lieutenant Sina be a better choice?
She has far more combat experience, she's training to be a fighter pilot and she has
actually flown the new model Discoverer."

"Don't worry, we'll be right behind you.
Besides you used to own one of the older Discoverers before you joined the Fleet.
And you have had plenty of practice with the new model in the simulator."

"Yes.

No 'real' combat though.

Minor scuffles with the odd Mandalay, nothing serious.

The pirates will see me coming, they will be waiting for me."

"Calm down Lieutenant.

I don't want you getting in any fights anyway.

This is simply pick up and return.

The Discoverer can outrun any thing the pirates have.

You will be fine, and this will be good field experience for you."

"Ok then.

I'm on my way to the dock."

...

Pierson climbs into the Discoverer. Closes the door behind him.
'Much different to the Disco I used to own.
They have updated it several times since its first production model.
Although the volume is virtually unchanged, it does seem much more spacious
inside, perhaps just laid out better.'

He walks through the small living cabin.

'A small fold down bed, single.
An FMS, recessed into the wall.
Several small storage lockers for food and drink as well as clothes and other
personal belongings, also recessed.
A single chair at a small desk.
The desk has all the usual features, control panel, comms, view screen.
As always the view screen doubles for entertainment, movies, news, etc.'

'I'm entering the cockpit now.

Again it feels more spacious.

A simple design, all the controls and displays within easy reach of the pilots seat.
Ahh yes, the seat. Hmm, softer, maybe a little too soft I seem to be sinking into it.
I'll raise its level a little, better.'

'The HUD is laid out much the same as always. Shield, weapon, missile, speed indicators all easily seen. The radar sphere, sensor readouts. All of these can be toggled on or off with the touch of a button.
Control panels either side, joystick between.'

"Requesting permission to launch."

"Granted."

The Jubilee, still at near top speed, initiates the launch sequence.
The docking clamps release the M5.
The two ships continue together as if they were still attached for a moment before Pierson fires the manoeuvring thrusters.
The Discoverer peels off the M6 and accelerates ahead. It only takes a moment to reach top speed where the Lieutenant releases the boosters.

"Launch successful."

"Ok Lieutenant.
Contact us again when you reach passive scanner range."

...

'Well, here I go then.
Shields, weapons, missiles, all active.
Sensors online.
Check heading... correct.'

'A quick touch of the joystick, right a little and back, dive and back.
Handling feels just as I remember.'

'I think I'll take a look through the rear view.
The rear view is displayed in a satellite window in the top left corner of the HUD.
Now this I do like. A great improvement on the old style fighter views.
Capital ships have had this technology for nearly ten jazuras, it's only just this jazura that they have been adapting it for fighters.
I hear that even some of the newest transports such as the Mercury have this fitted as standard.'

'The Corvette and escorts seem to be standing still with the speed difference,
disappearing into the distance.
Check my speed on the display screen to my right, four hundred and ninety meters per sezura.
Very nice.
Well over three times that of the other ships.'

'Ok, long-range sensors show the two blips, well actually they show far more than two, but the two that should be the station and Monroe. Eight mizuras to passive scan range, four more to reach it.
Jubilee little more than a speck now.'

...

"Jubilee, this is Pierson."

"Yes Lieutenant?"

"Captain, I'm entering scanner range now.
The station, and the smaller object... a life form... Argon male... Alive! barely.
I think it's Monroe, some how still alive.
I'm going in to pick him up.
Just under four mizuras."

"Hurry Lieutenant."

...

'Hmmm, that's odd. The station isn't quite the same as in the Armadeaus logs.
The dimensions, it is a little wider at the bottom. More bulbous.
The black colour covered most of the station before. But the upper most deck was
normal, the windows, a few hatches and the launch bay doors were visible.
Now the whole thing is black.
I'm getting a bad feeling about this .
I think I should keep my distance. Swing far around it to pick him up.'

...

'I'm now ten kilometres from the station.
Invasive scan can't penetrate it, just as before.
Monroe, that's if it's him, is eight kilometres from the station almost the opposite side,
a little distance below.
I'm not going any closer than eight K, starting to go around. Slowing.
I can see him, a standard issue Argon Fleet EVA suit.
A touch of the comms panel.'

"Captain Monroe?
Is that you?
Can you hear me?
This is Lieutenant Pierson of the Jubilee, I'm about to pick you up.
Don't move."

'Five K, four, three.
Slowing further.
Two... one.
Opening cargo bay doors.'

"Warning cargo bay open, shields are down."

'I've not heard that in a while.'

"Cargo bay closed."

'I've got him.'

*BEEP*BEEP*BEEP*

'What the??
Proximity alert.
Sensors show a non-localised energy disturbance all around.
There are jump points forming everywhere.'

Chapter 11 (Flight)

*BEEP*BEEP*BEEP*

'What the??
Proximity alert.
Sensors show a non-localised energy disturbance all around.
There are jump points forming everywhere.'

'I'm not hanging around to find out who is coming through.
I'm out of here.'

Pierson turns the M5 one-eighty degrees as he hits the boosters.
Not caring about proximity to the station this time, he sets a heading for the Jubilee
and the gate beyond.
He speeds towards then past the station, less than one kilometre at the nearest
point.

'I'm almost surprised that nothing bad happened being so close to it.
That thing gives me the creeps, how can a station change shape in just a few
stazuras.
More importantly, why?'

'I see through the rear view that the ships are starting to come through the
wormholes.
The station still fills most of the screen, but is a more comfortable distance now, and
getting further.'

'The ships are small,
small and black,
smaller than the Disco,
but so many of them.
Hundreds, maybe thousands,
gathering closely together.
They are coming after me.
Fast.'

'Double check my speed... four-ninety.'

'I'll select one, scan for more information...
Sensors can't penetrate.
No info other than size and shape.'

'The colour, black, smooth, shiny, looks to be somewhat reflective.
And the shape, ugly, creepy, definitely not friendly looking.
Almost oval, egg shaped, not quite.
Several small protrusions underneath toward the front, maybe weapon mounts,
grapples or landing gear, hard to tell.'
They do look oddly familiar, insect like, something I've seen...

Ahh, not quite the same shape, and the protrusions/legs are very different, but they
bear a vague resemblance to the crop mites that swept across Argon Prime a few
jazuras ago.

If it weren't for the orbital facilities and imports a lot of people would have starved that jazura.

I remember the news stories well, ugly looking beasts, near microscopic but so dangerous to the food chain.'

'I wonder how fast they are.
They don't seem to be catching up.
The scan of their ship won't tell me their top speed, but sensors can tell me their current speed...
Exactly three hundred metres per sezura.'

'Well at that speed they certainly won't catch me in the Discoverer.
As for the Jubilee and Elites...
What the hell am I doing...'

"Pierson to Jubilee. Emergency!"

"Yes Lieutenant?"

"You need to head back for the gate immediately.
I'm being pursued by thousands of unknown vessels.
They are fast, three hundred meters per sezura."

"Do you have the Captain?"

"Yes. Well I have someone, haven't had time to check who yet."

"Any sign of the Armadeaus?"

"Nothing but the station and the black ships.
No trace, no debris, not even any asteroids for a huge distance around."

"At 300m/s they will catch us approximately thirty mizuras before we reach the gate.
Pierson, do you think you could distract them, delay them for a while?"

"Ermm, did I mention there are thousands of them?"

"Yes, but you can out-run them."

"Well I guess I could lead them off at a tangent or meander my way back.
That's assuming they are all chasing me alone.
Hold a moment."

Pierson pitches his ship forty five degrees upward.

"Yes they are all after me, they have all matched my new heading."

"Do your best, just don't get yourself killed, Hall out."

...

'Just don't get killed'
chuckle
'My policy on life.'

'Ok I need to buy them at least thirty mizuras.
I'll pitch up another thirty degrees then keep it straight.
When the Jubilee is five mizuras from the gate I'll head back down.
That should buy more than enough time.'

'I've set the auto-pilot to keep the speed and direction constant.'

'Check my speed again... four-ninety.
And theirs... 302.
What!!
Check again 303... 303... 303.'

...

'304... 304... 304.'

'They are accelerating slowly.
Increasing by around one meter per sezura every mizura.'

'That's ok, I should be out of here in a little over thirty, they'll only be doing three hundred and thirty by then.
What if they follow us through the gate?
Lets not think about that just now.'

'Anyway, time to look at my passenger.'

...

Jubilee

Lieutenant Sina is now on the bridge to replace Pierson.
Sina is looking at the sector information, watching the progress of the other Lieutenant.
She is very much the strategist, very intelligent, her mind is always active, inquisitive.
Sina in training to be a fighter pilot and Commander. She came top in every class at the academy, aggressively competitive, which is the main reason she is rising through the ranks so quickly.
They expect her to make Commander very soon, this would make her the youngest Commander in the fleet at only nineteen.
The Captain is sitting in her chair looking out the main observation window, thinking.

'Pierson should be almost at the station by now, I expect he will be calling soon,
hopefully with some good news.'

"Lieutenant Sina, what is our ETA on the station?"

The information already in her head, no hesitation.
"Thirty nine mizuras.
Pierson is at the station now."

"We are receiving a transmission from the Lieutenant."

"Put it through Ensign."

"Pierson to Jubilee. Emergency!"

"Yes Lieutenant?"

"You need to head back for the gate immediately.
I'm being pursued by thousands of unknown vessels.
They are fast, three hundred meters per sezura."

"Ensign, contact our escort tell them to get back to the gate.
Sina, turn us full about,
and calculate whether we can make it back to the gate in time."

"Yes sir."

"Do you have the Captain?"

"Yes. Well I have someone, haven't had time to check who yet."

"Any sign of the Armadeaus?"

"Nothing but the station and the black ships.
No trace, no debris, not even any asteroids for a huge distance around."

"Captain Hall.
We won't make it to the gate.
We'll still be thirty mizuras from the gate when they catch up."

"Oh dear.
At 300m/s they will catch us approximately thirty mizuras before we reach the gate.
Pierson, do you think you could distract them, delay them for a while?"

"Ermm, did I mention there are thousands of them?"

"Yes, but you can out-run them."

"Well I guess I could lead them off at a tangent or meander my way back.
That's assuming they are all chasing me alone.
Hold a moment...
Yes they are all after me, they have all matched my new heading."

"Do your best, just don't get yourself killed, Hall out."

The Ensign cut communications.
Jessica double checks the new heading and that the Elites were still along side.

"Lieutenant, I'm going to my office to call Fleet Command, you have the bridge.

Once the Captain leaves the bridge Sina eagerly sits in the Captains chair.
She brings up an image of one of the black ships from the Discoverers sensors.
The Lieutenant looks it over closely. She zooms the image on the smooth black skin,
rotates it to see the leg-like protrusions.

'Weapon mounts, most likely.
Small ships, shouldn't be too challenging individually or in small groups.'

So, how to separate them?"

'I wonder how Pierson is doing.
I'll display the Discoverer on the small view screen.
He's leading them sharply upward. They are still all following him, good.'

...

Captain Hall enters her office. Hurriedly she sits and brings up the priority comms menu.

Commander Reamus' face replaces the Argon Fleet Command logo.

"Commander, this is Captain Hall.
I have an emergency transmission for the Admiral.
Can you put me through please?"

"I think he's in a meeting with the Generals, hold a moment, I'll try to cut in...
Captain Hall, I'm putting you through now, the Generals are there too, they will be able to hear you."

"Thank you."

The Admirals face appears on her view screen.

"Admiral Ornov, this is Captain Hall of the Jubilee investigating the disappearance of the Armadeaus.
We are being pursued by thousands of unknown black ships. The Armadeaus and its Discoverer are nowhere to be seen, we assume the black ships destroyed them.
We have rescued one member of their crew."

"Do you have any information on the ships capabilities?"

"Not much, sensors won't penetrate, just like the station, but we have their speed, size and shape.
I'm sending you our logs, they contain all this information."

"And the rescued crewman, has he any further information?
What happened to the Armadeaus.
Weapon and defence capabilities.
The enemy's attack patterns."

"We don't know yet, we haven't established who it is.
I will contact you when we do."

"Ok."

Another voice cut in, Jessica didn't recognise it, but guessed that it was one of the Generals which Reamus mentioned.

"Will you make it out of the sector?"

"Not sure.
If we do make it out of X8, it will be close. If they follow us into Teladi Way we won't stand a chance, they are too fast."

You may want to contact the Teladi, everyone in that sector may be in terrible danger very shortly.
If this is just a scouting fleet, by the size of their ships it looks that way, we are all in danger."

"Good luck Captain."

"Thank you, General.
And Admiral I'll keep you updated.
Jubilee out."

...

Argon Fleet Command

"General Illandas! don't butt in like that ever again."

"With all due respect Admiral, you don't seem too concerned with the lives of your subordinates.
You send them into obvious danger, telling them nothing.
You don't ask if they will manage to get out or if they need assistance.
The only thing you wanted to know about the rescued crewman was if he had any valuable information, nothing of his wellbeing."

"General, we have more important things to worry about than pleasantries.
This is war, no, worse, this is an invasion by superior forces.
Lives will be lost.
Any information we can get at this early stage may mean our victory.
And that is all that counts."

"Enough of this Illandas, we all heard the Captain and it looks more likely than ever that we have a hostile invasion on our hands.
As soon as your Jumpdrives arrive and are fitted I want each of you to jump directly to Teladi Way and await further instructions.
I will contact the other races and see if any will get involved."

Chapter 12 (Cut-off)

Discoverer

'Anyway, time to look at my passenger.
Just check the speed one more time... four-ninety to three-zero-four, good.'

'He should be in the small cargo bay at the rear of the ship, that's if he hasn't got up.
Got up, hmm, maybe I should take a gun incase it's not who we think it is.'

'I'm in the living area.
There should be a pistol in one of the storage lockers.
No, food, empty, EVA suit, more food and drink.
Ah yes here it is, pistol extra power clips, ironically the medi-kit too.'

'I'm making my way through to the back of the ship.
Open the hatch into the cargo bay.
It's dark.
The light switch should be around here somewhere...
There, light.'

'Holding the pistol I step through the doorway.
I would have expected the cargo bay to be empty but there are several crates
stacked up along one side and a few more in the centre.
The autoloader missile rack on the other wall has three wasp missiles ready for use.
There will be two already in place in the launch tubes, not yet armed of course.'

'My guest, I expect, will be in the cargo net at the far back of the bay. I'll take a quick
look at the crates on the way past.'

'The stack of fourteen crates against the wall and all but three near the centre are
marked 'Hornet Missile'.
Odd, I wonder why a Discoverer is carrying Hornets.
Well, we do use Discos as fast transports sometimes, maybe spares for the Jubilee.'

'The three crates in the centre are unmarked, mmmm, maybe food, or maybe more
Hornets.
I'll scan them when I get back to the cockpit.'

'Ah, there he is, lying crookedly in the net.
I take the last few steps to him, no movement.
I bend down to take a closer look, he must be unconscious, not surprising with
minimal life signs.'

'After tucking the pistol into my belt I turn him over so he is facing upward.
I notice his leg.
What is left of it anyway.
Torn, shredded.
An almost unrecognisable pulp of flesh.
The bone clearly visible in places, broken.
Without the protection of the suit it has frozen in the vacuum of space.'

I'm no doctor, but I know that the leg is dead. If not from its injuries, then certainly from the exposure to space.'

'He is lucky indeed that his helmet was on, just as lucky that the suits have many safety features.

Sealant gel that automatically plugs any small puncture, the gel freezes when exposed to space, creating an air tight seal.

In this case such extensive damage can not be fixed by the gel alone. The suit constricts tightly around the nearest uncompromised area, here the upper thigh. Then it floods the area with all available gel to create a seal. Thus saving the life of the individual and as much of the limb as possible.

This poor guy has lost almost the entire leg, the top ten centimetres may be salvageable, but that's for the doctors.

Nothing I can do for him here but make him comfortable until we get back to the Jubilee. Argon Prime would be better, but the Jubilee has a fully equipped medical facility, if a little small.'

'Right, so who do we have here then?

Can't see much through the visor, blood smeared across, not a good sign.

I'd best take the helmet off now.

Unfasten the... there we go, off.'

'It is Monroe.

The pulse is weak but steady.

He has a nasty head wound. The bleeding has stopped but it looks like he's lost a lot of blood.

Again, nothing I can do for him here. I'd best not move him. He'd probably be just as comfortable here on the cargo net as on the bed anyway.

I'll get back to the cockpit.'

...

Argon Fleet Command

The Admiral is sat at his desk, his conversation with the Generals ended only a moment ago.

'So, it has come to this.

The great Argon Fleet must beg the other races for assistance.

I hoped I would never live to see this day.

The Boron, maybe the Teladi, not so bad. But to have to ask the Paranid and the Split...

Well it has to be done, I can't put it off.'

"This is Admiral Ornov of Argon Fleet Command, I need to speak to the 'Royal Military Advisor', it is urgent."

The almost musical tones of the Boron who answered came back.

"Greetings our Argon friend, please hold a moment."

A Boron face appeared on Ornov's screen.

'These Boron all look alike to me.'

"Admiral, on behalf of our glorious Queen and myself I greet you.
How can I help you?"

The Admiral explains the situation.

"This is troubling news indeed.
The Argon have been our greatest ally, and so of course we will lend all the support we can.
None of our capital ships are jump capable, we haven't yet been able to adapt the technology to them.
So the only ships that are near enough to be of use are two of our new advanced destroyers currently stationed in Menelaus Paradise, and one of our carriers stationed in Ocean of Fantasy.
The destroyers are battle ready, unfortunately the carrier is very old and run down, its compliment of fighters is in the same state. It is due for decommissioning once the new model is complete.
You can consider all of these at your disposal. I will order them to Teladi Way immediately."

"Thank you Advisor, your help is most appreciated."

...

The Admiral then calls the Teladi 'Director of Military Action' and explains the situation to her.

"War is alwayss good for profitss, especially for thosse who have the foressight to build weaponss.
The loss of ssector Teladi Way would be no great shame, almosst abandoned as it iss.
But more than that would not be.
We will help all that we can.
But we have no ssectors or shipss closse enough."

"Surely you have some jump capable ships?"

"Yess, one Condor and two Albatross Transporters, we will load them up with fighterss and ssend them to meet with the otherss."

"Thank you Director, your help is most appreciated."

...

Next the Admiral reluctantly calls the Split 'Chief of the War Council' and explains the situation.

"We Split not usually refuse fight but we will not fight on side with Boron scum.
You send Boron away we might reconsider.
Now you go away."

...

Finally the Admiral calls the Paranid 'High Priest of Vengeance' and explains the situation one last time.

"We know this enemy of which you speak, the Emperor and the Priest Dukes do not consider them a threat.
We will not get involved."

...

'Well, the Boron and Teladi have joined up. The very least I had hoped for.
Between them, that has doubled the number of capital ships and maybe five times the fighters.'

'I could call the pirates...
No Ornov, that's just the desperation talking.'

...

Paranid Prime

Office of the High Priest of Vengeance

"Send the head of intelligence to my office immediately."

"You summoned me, High Priest?"

"You insult me with your presence.
The Emperor would have your head.
I have just been contacted by the Argon.
They tell me there is a new race on the move and that they are causing some trouble.
There is a war going on out there and I have to be told about it by Argon Fleet Command.
Remind me again what it is that you do?"

"I... I... don't know what to say."

"Then you had better say nothing, lest I behead you myself.
You will personally take a cloaked Pegasus to Teladi Way and find out what is going on."

"Yes... sir."

...

Discoverer

'I'm back in the cockpit.
Heading correct.
Speed... four-ninety to three-eighteen.
Hmmm, their acceleration is speeding up. Now an increase of around one every fifty sezuras.

Still, should be nothing to worry about. Even if they match or pass my speed I should be so far ahead that it won't matter.

I'm so far ahead now that I can't visibly see the black cloud anymore, just on the radar.'

'Well, nothing much to do here for the time-being.
Getting a little hungry, not eaten all tazura.
I think I'll go see what there is.'

...

Jubilee

"Captain, I'm detecting gate activity.
There is something coming through."

"How far is the gate now?"

"A little over eighty kilometres."

"Display the gate on the main view."

The gate fills the main view screen. The white vortex of the incoming wormhole turning in its frame, a whirlpool of focused energy.
A flash and two Mandalay fighters appeared side by side, they move away from the gate and come to a stop.
A moment later and another flash, an Orinoco with a Bayamon on each wing. They also move aside and wait.
Another flash and four Bayamon followed by another four.
The vortex in the gate closes and no more ships come through.
The thirteen pirate vessels start to move off. Staying in formation their heading right towards the Jubilee and the station beyond.

"Pirate ships."

"Yes Captain, a lot of Pirate ships."

"A signal is coming in from the Orinoco."

"Put it through Ensign."

The voice of an angry Split is heard over the communication channel.
(Well I say 'angry' Split, I'm assuming they are capable of sounding otherwise. :))

"Argon ships, I am a Captain of the Blood Moon clan.
You are responsible for loss of communication with our station?"

"No, we are here investigating the disappearance of one of our ships. I had initially assumed that you might be involved, but now..."

"I do not believe you.
The Argon Military has no business being here."

"We are not responsible for whatever has happened to your station and I don't believe you are responsible for the loss of our ship.
If you check your long range sensors you will see a large fleet of unknown vessels."

"... I see nothing but meteor storm. Which is not even heading this way."

"They are ships Captain and they are in pursuit of one of our own."

"You lie!
You will stop your ships and prepare to be boarded.
Your crew will be sold into slavery or executed and your ships will be added to our fleet."

Chapter 13 (Spicy Noodles Under a Blood Coloured Moon)

Jubilee

"Well Sina, do you think we can take them?"

"Yes I think so.

Might not be too easy though, we might take a little damage. They do have forty six guns and an unknown number of missiles all pointing at us.

The Commander has already lost one shield, if he's not careful he might not make it, and we all know he is not the most careful of pilots."

"Yes, I think you are right there.

Open a channel to the Elites.

Commander?"

"Yes Captain. We heard the transmission from the pirates.

I assume we are going to give them a serious butt kicking."

"Not exactly.

The increasing speed of the black ships means Pierson can only give them the run-around for so long. Even if that is several stazuras we still want to get out ASAP, there is Monroe's life to consider."

"Yes, of course."

"As the Elites are a little slower I want you two to keep heading for the gate..."

"But Captain I..."

"Let me finish Commander.

As we pass through the pirates I want both of you to concentrate your fire on the Orinoco, try to destroy it but don't slow down, and get to that gate.

We will deal with the others.

Hopefully with the Orinoco down and one or two of the Bayamons the rest will flee. Good luck, Hall out."

...

Elites

"Well Lieutenant Commander, you heard the Captain, again.

I thought we were here to escort the Corvette not the other way around.

We'll be entering firing range in a little under ten mizuras.

Lock on target."

...

Jubilee

"Captain, I've targeted the three fastest Bayamons. One with the main guns, and one with each turret.

I have also scanned all the ships. Between them they are carrying eighteen Wasp missiles and seven Silkworm missiles.

Our counter-measures are ready, as are our own missiles."

"Very good Lieutenant.
Seven mizuras to target.
Fourteen more to the gate.
I wonder how Pierson is doing."

...

Discoverer

"Nothing but basic military rations!!!"

'Dry nutrition bars, plain and several fruit flavours.
A few single portion FMS meals.
Nothing special. Spicy noodles, an unnamed meat dish, vegetable mix, a few others.'

'I ate better when I was a poorly paid trader.
I think I've lost my appetite now.'

'I'd better eat something though.
But which delectable treat to choose, mmmmm.'
chuckle
'I'm assuming there is a difference in their flavours.'

...

Paranid Prime Shipyard

High Security Military Special Forces Docking Bay

'The High Priest of Vengeance is right, the Emperor would have my head, and rightly so.'

I wonder how this 'New Enemy' got past our detection arrays.
Also why none of our spies have reported anything about this from the other races.'

'I'm about to enter the hanger.
Level six clearance required.
Being head of Intelligence gives me level eight.'

"Access Granted."

'I've only been in this hanger once before.
The door slides silently closed behind me.'

The automated security guns around the large dock track my movements, the green light on each show they are not currently armed.'

'Thirty docking berths, twenty-one occupied, and every one a ship capable of cloaking.

Every Paranid shipyard has a hanger identical to this one.
The nine empty berths are ships out on missions.'

'The ships are an equal number of Pegasus, Poseidon and Prometheus.
Of course each are the very latest models, not yet publicly available.
Each contain the very best quality and most advanced equipment that Research and Development has to offer and our spies have stolen.
There is also one clone of the X-Shuttle, out-dated of course but still kept for research purposes. The alien ship still has its mysteries.'

'Research on a cloak for the Corvette class ship is well underway, I hope to be seeing a prototype in a mazura or two.'

'My Pegasus is docked in berth eight, some distance across the hanger.'

...

'I'm almost there.
I see it now.
I always liked the shape of the Pegasus, rounded front, the rear tapering away, very aerodynamic looking, best of all they are small and fast, very fast.'

'Entering the hatch. I close it behind me.
The cockpit is rather cramped but sufficient.
Power on.
Systems online
Engines and thrusters on.'

"Requesting permission to launch."

"Granted."

'Manoeuvring thrusters only, lift off the pad.
Upward to the inner hatch, carefully through. The force-field around the doors crackle as I pass through.
I'm in the launch tubes, the ship now weightless, steering is easier now.
The tube turns upward and I see the outer doors, they are opening.
Another crackle as I pass and I'm out in space.'

'Shields, weapons online.'

'Turn to the gate, accelerate.
It's quite a distance to Teladi Way but won't take too long in this ship.
Faster than either the commercial or military versions.
These Special Opps Pegasus' can reach one thousand six hundred and twenty two meters per sezura when de-cloaked.'

...

Elites

"We are about to enter firing range, get ready for evasive manoeuvres, there are a lot of them."

"Ready Commander, Orinoco targeted. Lets hope they don't all target us two."

The Lieutenant Commander thought to himself,

'Try to take out the Orinoco, don't slow down and keep heading for the gate, sounds good to me.

I hope the Commander doesn't try anything stupid, he's already lost one shield.'

The two groups of ships flying to intercept, quickly close the gap.

The Elites are first to fire, both lined up on the Blood Moons lead ship.

The Orinoco veers upward at the last moment and manages to avoid all but one of the AHEPT shots. The green plasma impacts on its shields and quickly dissipates.

The Lieutenant Commander strafes left to avoid an incoming barrage from one of the Bayamons, he then continues for the gate as ordered.

"Damn!

We didn't get a kill.

LC, I'm going after the Orinoco, you stay on course, I'll catch you up."

The Commander turns sharply upward to give chase.

An exploding Bayamon only meters away shakes his ship, the red flare lighting up his cockpit blinds him momentarily.

When he is able to see again he is met with the sight of the Orinoco, close up and personal.

The Commander turns sharply again, but too late. Six shots from the Orinoco hit dead on, then two more before he is clear.

The Elites remaining shield is drained, now he is taking hull damage.

The rudder had taken the brunt of the hit, down to eighty nine percent efficiency. Engines ninety seven.

The Orinoco accelerates away again and starts to turn back towards the Commander. Its turning still a little slower than the compromised Elite. The commander already lined up, fires.

Four shots rip out of the Elite and hit the lead Pirate ship, its shields down to twenty percent.

He fires again.

Nothing.

"What!!

Damage report."

The view screen to his left flickered, he punched it and it came back up.

'Weapon capacitor damaged, damn.

Recharge rate almost down to zero.'

The Commander notices one more Bayamon and a Mandalay destroyed in the distance.

The Orinoco is once again lined up on the Elite and accelerating fast. It fires six more shots.

The Commander hit the boosters just in time to dodge them all but the Pirate ship now tracking him, predicting his moves fires several shots in an arc ahead of him, three hit their target.

'Engines this time, maximum speed down to seventy seven meters per sezura.
Boosters destroyed.'

The Orinoco, now giving chase to the near disabled Elite, closes in for the kill.
A huge fire ball tore through the ship.

The shockwave from the exploding Orinoco sent the Elite into a spin.
With the electrics now fried and the controls no longer responding the dizzying Commander could only guess what had happened.

...

Discoverer

'Spicy noodles, I think.'

"A rich blend of Boron spices, mixed together with old grandma Bettsies good old Argon know-how.
Pour contents into bowl,
Add half a kelnar of water,
Place in FMS,
Four mizuras on high power,
stir then leave to stand for two mizuras."

'Ok, I need a bowl.
Try the storage lockers...
Nope, nope, nope...
Hmmm, that's handy, no bowl.
This large mug might do.'

'Open the packet...
Wohha, they don't smell good.
Well, I'll try them now I've opened them.
Tip...
Pour water...
FMS Four miz...'

'Take a quick look in the cockpit while I wait.
Speed... four-ninety to three-thirty.
Still ok for now.
Could start heading back down towards the gate soon.
Woo, pirates, thirteen, mostly Bayamons, Jubilee should be alright with that.
Back to the noodles.'

Chime

'Take them out.
Smell a little better now.
Stir... what with?
I think I saw a fork in here somewhere...'

Ah yes, stir...
And leave to stand...'

'Mmmm, they don't taste too bad, well, I mean I have tasted worse.'

...

Jubilee

"Fire as soon as we enter range, then continue firing at will.
Get as many of the Bayamons as we can first."

"Yes captain."

The Jubilee charged into battle, an Elite on each side pulling slightly ahead as the Corvette slowed.

The main guns fired a few moments after the Elites weapons.

The double Gamma HEPT fired at the fastest of the Bayamon which was a short distance above the Orinoco.

The Orinoco veered sharply upwards past the Bayamon, Elite close behind.

"What the hell does the Commander think he is doing!"

The Commander passed only meters to the side of the Bayamon just as the GHEPT vaporised the pirate ship.

The Elite was visibly shaken.

"Damn lucky to be alive.
Contact the Commander."

"Nothing, he's not receiving."

The Bayamons and Mandalays all targeted the Jubilee.

They fired everything they had, missiles included.

The Corvettes turrets tracked the next two fastest of the Bayamons, most of the shots hitting, it wasn't long before they were both destroyed.

As Sina steered the M6 to aim the main guns at the next target the Captain selected the nearest two pirate ships for the turrets to take out.

The plasma bolts from the pirate ships began impacting the Corvette, low powered weapons wouldn't normally do anything to the shields of an M6 but there were so many and all of them direct hits on the slower moving ship.

"Shields ninety two percent...
Ninety
Eighty eight."

"Missiles incoming.
Counter measures away."

Starbursts flare out from all around the Jubilee. The enemy missiles tracking them, each detonating one after the other.

"All enemy missiles successfully countered."

The upper turret spun around as one of the pirate M4's strafed across the top of the Corvette, the Bayomons fire hit with all twenty shots reducing the Jubilee shields further. The turret finally broke through its shields and ripped off one of the wings. An internal explosion destroyed the pirate ship as it span out of control.

"Captain, the Commander is in trouble, his shield is down, ship taking damage."

"Aim the main guns at the Orinoco, take it out ASAP."

The turrets with their new targets locked in began firing again.
A Mandalay fell almost immediately, another Bayamon a moment later.

"The Commander might not make it, Orinoco lining up for the final kill.
GHEPT away.
I hope this hits..."

The huge fire ball tore through the pirate ship.
The shockwave from the exploding Orinoco sent the Elite into a spin.

"The Commander has lost power but is alive.
One more M4 down.
The remaining three Bayamons and one Mandalay are retreating.
Heading towards the station."

"Let them go."

Chapter 14 (The Dreaming)

'I still can't feel my body, or see, I don't think my eyes are open.'

'Time has passed, I don't know how much but I am sure that I'm not in space anymore.'

'I've been having dreams, or visions of things I have never seen.
I have knowledge of things I don't know.
When the Spore tried to absorb me we exchanged thoughts and knowledge.'

'Yes, the Spore, that is the best way to describe it.'

'I didn't, I don't understand their language, nor do they ours, but I felt what it feels, what it does.
Feelings and sensations attached to each image. Knowledge of what they do, not through words but through feelings.'

'I call it the Spore because that is almost exactly what it is, its purpose the same.
And when it germinates it will be a glorious thing.
No... no... the feelings. A glorious thing for them.
For us it will mean the end of everything. There is no hope, no possibility.
Or is that the dreams talking again?'

'I am drifting away again... I see...'

...

'I am flying through space.
There is a planet.
As I near it I start to slow down.
I see oceans, greenish blue. Several land masses.
Cities, large, very large. Everywhere, covering much of the land.
I'm flying low over the land surrounded by black ships, like the ones that destroyed
the Armadeaus, no, that will destroy the Armadeaus.
The land is bare, dry, cracked, desert. Nothing but sand and rocks.
I feel the heat of the suns above.
I pass over a lake, I see my reflection in it, but not my reflection, I am one of the black
ships.
We continue towards one of the cities. As we get nearer we slow further. It is like
nothing I've seen before, but I know it well, this is home.'

'Giant towers, spires, pierce their way up to the sky. They are the colour of the
desert, reds and browns.
We are in the city now, slow.
There are smaller structures between, round, oval, flat. And between them are great
crevices reaching down beneath the surface, depths which the light will not reach.
I am descending, the others follow. Into one of the fissures.
It is dark, soon the light is gone, but I see everything as if it were still light.
The walls are black, I see it as alive, moving, breathing.
Further and further.
I sense more of my kind deep below, different.'

...

'This is one of their cities, not the homeworld, not even a capital, but it is old.
They take great pride and great care in their worlds and cities.
Most of their population live below the surface, though their buildings often extend for
great distances above.'

...

'An alert.
We are needed.
A Spore may be in danger.

We accelerate upward.
More of us now.
I see the sky again, a red desert sky, dusk.

We join other groups from other fissures.
A black cloud in the sky.
We are ready to jump.

A flash and we are there.
I see the Spore, it is young, nestled in a large asteroid.
We sense danger, we must protect.
There, a ship, we do not recognise it. Green pointed.
It is bigger than us, no matter.
It is moving in on the Spore, it must be destroyed.
It will make good nourishment.
We surround it and kill it, as always its remains are gathered and placed with the
Spore.

The danger is gone, we will return home.'

...

'I didn't recognise the green ship either, not any of the races I know, I don't think even
Earth.
I get the feeling that happened long ago.
These small ships are capable of jumping vast distances. I believe they act as
guardians to the Spores.'

...

'We are needed again.
Still night time, or is this a different night?
Jump.

Atmosphere.
We are at a planet this time.
It is always best when the Spores land on planets, though the risk is greater.
We see it, older, near germination.
Germination is a glorious sight, I have seen it many times now, it brings life.

There is the danger, we must protect.
An army of life-forms with primitive weapons.

They pose little danger, but so close to germination we will not take the risk.

We fly down.

They see us and fire, their weapons like tiny stings, no matter, they will be gone now.
We kill the enemies and their vehicles.

We must now wait and watch over the Spore in its final stage.

Tendrils of the Spore reach out in all directions and down into the ground.

The ground begins to shake.

Tremors, earth quakes, violent shaking, worsening.

Then the body of the Spore erupts.

Oh glorious life, it has begun here.

We are no longer needed, we will return home.'

...

'The body of that Spore was huge and bulbous, ugly knotted tendrils everywhere, all over the area of land.

If any life existed in that area it had been absorbed.

The Spores prefer organic material, it is digested more quickly, but inorganic will do just as well.

This one was big but not much bigger than the Spore on the station.

There can't be long to go.'

...

'Pain...

There is an attack.

We are needed.

Jump.

The Spore is in an asteroid field.

It is not young, but it is still small.

We see them, the enemy we know, they hurt us.

They are attacking the Spore.

Arcs of electricity hit the Spore.

Pain...

Our weapons are resisted.

We can not hurt them as well as they hurt us.

We kill one of them, then another.

More of us arrive.

We kill another, but too late.

The spore is dead.

We are no longer needed, we will return home.'

...

'Those enemy ships, I recognise them...

I have seen one.

Every attempt by every known race to contact them has failed.

They are a mystery but we know them as UFO's'

...

'Our forces have met resistance.
We are needed.
One of our populated sectors is being invaded.
Our Capital ships are proceeding to our gate.
We can get there first.
Jump.

This system has been ours for a little while now.
Two planets have been taken, two others are to be prepared.

We can not see the invaders.
The ones who must be protected at all costs are contacting us again.
The enemy are a distance away yet.
They have come through one of the gates made by The Others.
It is beyond our sight, but we have been told where.

We are on the way, faster and faster.
We can hear the defence ships from our planets, they are dying, this enemy is killing them
Our Capital ships are coming now, faster than us, they will pass us soon.

The fleet of vast ships sleek past silently. Their size equalled only by their power.
No enemy, not even 'The Enemy', has ever stood against them.

We see the enemy now, they have killed all the ships belonging to this sector.
They will not be allowed to proceed.
Silver, they are not alive.
I do not understand.
Understanding is not necessary, they must be killed.
There are seven of them, very big, not as big as our capital ships.
And forty more, small, not as small as us.

We see the killing has begun.
We are almost there, and it is almost over.
Only the small ones remain.
We have swarmed around the remaining few.
They are all dead.
They hurt two of our capital ships, but they will be healed soon.

Our capital ships are to continue through the gate made by The Others to look for more of this silver enemy.
We are to gather the remains of their ships and those of our fallen defence ships.
Then some of us are to remain here until replacements are grown.'

...

'Xenon, a whole lot of Xenon, M1's and M2's, forty assorted fighters, and these guys just walk over them.
Four Capital Black ships, two took minor damage.
The Argon Fleet would have problems with Xenon like that, what chance have we against these... I still don't know their name... These Black.'

'Those Xenon ships were the old style, so that puts this incident at least fifty jazuras ago.'

'The Black Capital ships are not capable of jumping like the small ships. They need a gate. It seems they can use gates made either by The Black or by The Others.
I wonder if 'The Others' and 'The Enemy' are one in the same. I feel the same hostility when they are mentioned. Or maybe they are just related or allies.
Could one or both of these be the UFO's?
Maybe they could help.'

...

'An alert.
We are needed.
A Spore may be in danger.

We accelerate upward.
I see the sky again, a blue, afternoon, clear across the ocean.

We join other groups.
A black cloud in the sky.
We are ready to jump.

A flash and we are there.
We sense the Spore inside an alien structure, floating in space.
It is maturing, a little while yet before germination.
We sense danger, we must protect.
Three small ships circling the structure, firing in at the Spore, they try to hurt us.
We do not recognise them. Grey.
They are a little bigger than us, no matter.
They must be destroyed.
They will make good nourishment.
We surround them and kill them, as always their remains are gathered and placed with the Spore.

...

'Pirates, two Orinocos and a Mandalay.
And that looks like the station in X8.
This must have happened three tazuras ago.'

...

'An alert.
We are needed.
A Spore may be in danger.
Jump.

This is the same place, the same structure.
We sense danger, we must protect.
There, a ship, we might recognise it, similar to the previous. Grey, near the structure.
It is much bigger than us, and much bigger than the previous, no matter.
It must be destroyed.
It will make good nourishment.

We surround it and kill it, as always its remains are to be gathered and placed with the Spore.

Wait, there is another ship, smaller.

I will kill it while the others collect the remains.

It is a small ship almost as small as me, it is not alive.

And a life-form behind.

I have killed the ship

This life-form interests me, I can feel it, I see its face and its thoughts.

It is thinking of another of its kind, I sense a loss, hurt, pain.

I sense that it will go into the structure. The Spore will deal with it.

The danger is gone, we will return home.'

...

'The Armadeaus.'

Chapter 15 (Room With A View)

Argon Prime Shipyard

Argon One, Docked.

General Illandas is in his office sat behind his desk.

The room is large, luxurious. Similar in size to the Admirals office at Fleet Command, something Illandas is always quite pleased about.

A painting hangs on the wall behind the chair.

A beautiful sunset across a mirror-like ocean. A small cluster of rocks just breaking the surface. The silhouette of a bird can be seen perched on one of the rocks.

The colours of the sun, the reflections and shadows are so vivid, so strikingly realistic you could easily imagine being there.

A careful eye would spot the signature, 'F Illandas'

The Grandfather of the General. Painted over one hundred jazuras ago. This is his only memento of the man who meant so much, who took him in and cared for him when his parents died so many jazuras ago.

The painting often brings a tear to the ageing General.

'Ten tazuras we've been in dock. They still haven't finished checking us over for more of that space fungus which ate through the Gamma HEPT. With this priority mission the checks will have to be finished some other time.

They replaced our lost weapon and are now running system tests while we await the arrival of the Jumpdrive.

The replacement weapon is the first off the production line of the new Delta HEPT. They tell me that the prototype testing showed it to far exceed initial expectations. We will be lucky enough to be the first to test it in the field.

Eventually all our weapons will be exchanged, but we haven't time for that now.'

'Having gone over the Armadeaus' logs again and hearing the stress, almost panic in Captain Halls voice makes me redouble my concern over this 'new enemy'.'

'That damnable Ornov never changes, no regard for life.

He is a living commercial for 'the old school teachings', the mission comes first, lives can and will be lost, honour and duty above all else, Captain goes down with the ship, no greater honour than dying in battle. Ornov is all too willing to endanger and sacrifice people.

A man like that has no place being Admiral of the fleet.

Of course the mission is more important than the individual but every precaution should be taken. Caution and safety should be exercised, the job IS about protecting the lives of the civilians and military alike, if a life can be saved every effort should be made to do so.'

'Knowing what he knew at the time I'd have sent a single fast scout, a Discoverer or better still one of our Paranid Pegasus'. Either that or the whole fleet.

Well, to his credit, he is doing the right thing now, in contacting the other races and sending in the fleet.'

The comms panel chimes and a voice is heard.

"General?"

"Yes Commander?"

"All the tests on the DHEPT that can be done, short of firing it, have been completed. Everything looks good.

Also our Jumpdrive is due to arrive in five mizuras."

"Ok Commander.

We will test fire the weapon if we get the chance.

As for the Jumpdrive, meet me in the dock, I want to see one of those things before it is fitted."

"Yes General."

Illandas steps from behind his desk, lifts his uniform jacket from the back of the chair. As he is about to leave the room his eye catches the window.

"Ha! even Ornov doesn't have a window."

The struts of the shipyard can be seen extending from the body of the station and disappearing from view, ending somewhere above the Argon One.

A small maintenance drone makes its way back to its dock inside one of the struts.

The General leaves his office and walks to the elevator at the end of the corridor. He presses the appropriate button for the docking bay level and it descends quietly. On the way down Illandas thinks again about the black ships described by Captain Hall.

The elevator comes to a stop and he exits.

The doors ahead lead into the large carrier's docking bay where Commander Jalat awaits.

As he approaches the Commander he looks around the hanger.

'Other than the one or two empty berths and the one Lifter, we have a full compliment of fighters.

I don't remember the last time we had so many on board.

That must be the Lifter that brought the energy cells a stazura ago, I imagine it will be leaving before we make the jump to Teladi Way.'

"General, just in time. The Discoverer is about to dock."

The noise from the thrusters is heard first, getting louder.

When it comes through the force-field around the inner launch bay doors the crackle of electricity drowns out all other sounds.

The General and Commander look up towards the incoming fighter.

Its sleek aerodynamic shape turns and approaches the nearest available berth.

Even in the artificial gravity of the hanger the pilot keeps the M5 flying as gracefully as if it were in space.

The thrusters glow brighter as it slows, the roar showing its obvious power even for a small ship.

The Discoverer descends into the berth two along from where the two officers stand.

The landing gear takes the weight of the ship and the pilot cuts the thrusters and turns the power off, the cargo doors open.

Ilendas and Jalat make their way past a Buster to the Discoverer. Ahead they see two dock workers steering an anti-gravity pallet truck up into the back of the M5. As the officers arrive the dock workers are on their way back out carrying a crate.

"Is this the Jumpdrive?"

"Yes sir." one of the workers replies to Jalat.

"Stop a moment, we want to take a look."

The other worker unlatches the lid and removes it.
All four peer into the large crate.

'Not as large as I might have expected.' the General thinks to himself.
'In fact it is a little disappointing. Grey, cuboid, all the corners and edges are rounded off. A few holes where I assume it is to be attached to the power and the main engines.'

All four look back out, each looking rather disillusioned at the large grey box.

"Very good. Get that over to engineering, it has to be fitted immediately."

"Yes sir."

...

Commanders Elite

'Ohhhggh, I'm getting a little dizzy, nauseous.
The ship is spinning a little too fast for comfort.
None of the controls are responding, everything is dead.
I can't see much more than a blur through the cockpit window as I spin, but it looks like the fight is over.
I guess we won.'

Suddenly a loud crash as something hit the Elite. It shook the ship. The sound reverberating throughout.

"Whaa...?"
'Debris? maybe a grapple?
Well, at least I'm not spinning so fast now.'

The Elite then spun near instantly around two-seventy degrees. Stopped and pulled sideways, dragged.

'Grapple it is then. I hope that's the Jubilee.'
"Careful there.
This thing isn't nailed together as well as it was."

...

Jubilee
(a few mizuras earlier)

"Let them go.
I wish them luck, they will need it heading further into the sector.
Lieutenant, what is the condition of the Commanders Elite?"

"Disabled, entirely.
Not even communications."

"And the Lieutenant Commander?"

"He is fine, well on his way to the gate."

"Well at least someone knows how to follow orders.
Bring us closer to the Commander and fire a grapple, we will have to tow him out."

"Yes sir."

As Sina navigates towards the disabled Elite the Captain looks at the sector map.
'How is Pierson doing I wonder.
Hmmm, some distance from the black ships now but their speed is catching up with his.
He is still quite a way from the gate.'

The Corvette passes the drifting Elite.
Sina, confident enough to not need to slow down, fires the grapple.
The large electro-magnet attached to a long line shoots out from the rear underside of the Jubilee.
It contacts perfectly, though perhaps a little violently, with the top of the left wing of the M3.

"Nice shot Lieutenant.
You've done that before haven't you?"

"Thanks.
Yes, hundreds of times... in the sim."

"Set the heading back to the gate.
Full speed, lets see if we can catch the Lieutenant Commander."

As the Jubilee continued and sped up the grapple line grew taught and the Elite suddenly whipped round and was being dragged behind.

"Ensign, contact Pierson.

Tell him to start towards the gate now, we are far enough ahead, only eight mizuras to go."

"Ok...
He is not responding."

"Try again."

"Nothing...
There's something coming through now...
Captain, I think he is in pain."

"Put it on the speakers, let's hear it.
...Pierson, are you ok?"

Chapter 16 (Clearing the Way)

Teladi Way

Argon Titan (General Kaar)

The huge Argon battle ship enters the sector.

The few transport pilots going quietly about their business immediately notice its presence.

"Looks like we're first here.

No sign of the Jubilee.

First thing's first, not all the ships are jump-capable, we will need to clear a path through the asteroid field so we can get to the gate.

I'm sure you can manage that Commander, I'll be in my office."

The General leaves the bridge.

The Commander stands and walks to the large 3D sector image in the centre of the room.

He brings up the path which the Armadeaus already cleared.

'Too narrow for a capital ship, but it is a start.'

"Lieutenant, set course for these co-ordinates at the edge of the asteroid field.
Arm the Hornet missiles."

'I don't like using up so many of our Hornets even before we enter battle.

Well, we are carrying far more than our usual compliment and the other ships will have theirs too, but still.'

The Titan reaches the edge of the field and comes to a stop.

"I've targeted the first three we need to take out.
Open the launch tubes and fire."

Three of the large red missiles streaked out from the front of the Titan and quickly met with their targets.

The impacts destroyed the three asteroids, small fragments of rock exploding outward.

"Move us forward three kilometres and prepare to fire again."

This time the Commander selects two asteroids. A moment later they too are gone.

...

Discoverer

'Mmmm, they don't taste too bad, well, I mean I have tasted worse.
The texture is a little soggy for my taste, but the spices are just about perfect.
I'll try adding less water next time.
I might as well take a seat to enjoy these, put my feet up.'

chuckle

'Sitting here, feet up, eating noodles with thousands of enemy ships after me and the Jubilee in battle with the pirates.
What would the Captain think, well, what she doesn't know...'

*Beep*Beep*

The comms panel in the cockpit chimes.

"Lieutenant Pierson, this is the Jubilee..."

Pierson almost falls backwards off his chair as he tries to jump to his feet.

"Ahh, I swear that woman must be psychic.
Owwwch, Ahhhhaaaa.
Spilt noodles.
All down me.
Hot.
Ahhh, they burn."

"Lieutenant Pierson, this is the Jubilee, please respond."

Pierson, now in some considerable discomfort, reaches the cockpit and taps the button.

"Yes, ouch, hello, ahhh, Pierson here."

"Pierson, are you ok?" The Captains voice came back this time.

"Yes Captain, it's nothing, what can I do you for?"

"Start towards the gate, we are only a few mizuras away now."

"Yes Captain."

The channel closed.

'Speed... four-ninety to four-eleven.
Hmmm, still ok.
Adjust heading... back to the gate... ok.'

'Now to clean up this mess'

...

Pegasus

'One jump from Teladi Way.
I'll cloak the ship now.
It does use a huge amount of power, and in a ship this small it means turning almost everything else off.'

"Shields offline.
Weapons offline.
Life-support to cockpit only.
Unnecessary lights and consoles off.
Engines full stop.
Engage cloak."

The Pegasus glows briefly as, what looks like a shield, forms all around. Then the ship and glowing sphere disappear together.

'Ok, the cloak is working perfectly.
I still have full sensors and communications.
Unfortunately I can only get a top speed of two hundred and sixty three meters per sezura without compromising the cloak.'

'Now, on to Teladi Way.
Nearing the gate, but I don't want to go through just yet. If anyone is monitoring gate activity they will find it suspicious when nothing comes through, and might come looking for me.
The cloaking device is good but not perfect. A short-range invasive scan can pick up a faint energy reading and if close enough even the pilots life-signs. Fortunately people don't tend to fly around doing invasive scans on empty space.
I'll wait for another ship going through and follow.'

'I see two transports heading in this direction, one is certainly heading for the gate the other may be. The first is six mizuras away.

...

'Hmmm, a Boron shark, an old one, has just entered the system, heading this way.
I'm sure it's here because of this new race too.'

'Teladi Vulture now approaching the gate.
I'll pull along side and fly through with it.
Jumping.'

'An Argon Titan.
It's blowing away asteroids. A brutish show of force no doubt, never would I have dreamed that such an arrogant race could have advanced so far, someone should have killed them off long ago, ah well, too late for that now. Besides, all these Hornets they go through make us a fortune in profit.'

Ironically our entire covert operations division is funded by the Argon Military, if they ever found out... I'd like to see the look on their faces.'

'I will just park near the asteroid field and watch for now.
When they jump into the unnamed sector I'll follow them.'

...

Jubilee

"The Lieutenant Commander is through the gate, we are only a few sezuras behind now.
Pierson is still a few mizuras away."

"Jumping.
Now entering sector Teladi Way."

"Lieutenant, retract the line most of the way, we don't want the Commander swinging around back there crashing into asteroids.
And contact the Titan."

"Yes sir, Titan on."

"General Kaar, nice to see you."

"And you Captain Hall, we weren't sure you'd make it out.
Have you taken any damage?"

"No General, but the Commanders Elite has, disabled."

"When the Argon One arrives it can take him onboard.
The rest of the fleet will be arriving within the stazura.
The Boron and Teladi will also be joining us."

"If the enemy ships follow us into Teladi Way they will be around ten mizuras away. I don't know how effective they might be at taking on a capital ship like the Titan, I just hope the rest of the fleet get here soon."

"Very well Captain, we will move to high alert.
You get out of the asteroid field for now and behind us.
Kaar out."

"Captain, the Titan has stopped firing on the field to let us pass."

...

Pegasus

'An Argon M6 Corvette, very nice.

I saw the blueprints for these over two jazuras ago, never seen one in person until now.'

'Picking up a transmission from it...
Decoding...'

'Interesting, Boron and Teladi, this might be quite an impressive battle.'

...

Discoverer

'That's that cleaned up, uniform still a bit of a mess though.
Back to the cockpit.'

'Good the Jubilee and the Elites are out now, just me left... oh, and a few pirates survived, running towards the station.
Maybe I should warn them... Maybe not.'

'Speed... four-ninety to five-seventeen.
Oh dear. They are catching up now.
Still a good distance away and I'm less than ten mizuras from the gate, should be fine.'

...

'Now three mizuras from the gate.
Speed... four-ninety to five-forty eight.
No problem, they are still over thirty kilometres away.'

'I'm detecting an energy spike from one of the ships.
Nothing on sensors.
Rear camera, zoom...
There...
An object travelling fast...
A tiny sphere...
Sensors don't see it.
I see another... and two more.
Coming right at me.
They must be travelling far more than a thousand meters per sezura.
Missiles perhaps? Like nothing I've ever seen, but so are their ships.
The first is almost on me.
Evasive manoeuvres.
It has gone past.'

The first of the tiny spheres passes the Discoverer and a moment later it explodes.
An ever increasing sphere of white light expands outward from the centre of detonation.

The Discoverer is swallowed up by the outer edge.
The sphere of light then dissipates.

'Ahhh, what the hell was that!!
The shock-wave seemed to pass through the ship, through me, without any physical impact or damage.
We seem unaffected.'

"Weapons offline."

'What?
Rebooting weapon systems.
Nothing.
The actual weapons are still there, sensors show them to be undamaged. They just don't respond.
Two mizuras to the gate.'

Another of the tiny sphere weapons detonates, a little behind the M5 this time catching only the rear half of the ship.
Then another, this one too far above and misses.

"Docking computer offline."

'These things seem to be disabling the ships systems but not causing any actual damage.'

Four more hits.

"Trading system extension offline."
"Shields offline."
"Life support offline."
"Boosters offline."

'This is not good.
Twenty sezuras to the gate...'

Chapter 17 (Nasty)

Discoverer

"Ecliptic projector offline."

'Speed... four-ninety to five-seventy.
Distance, twenty two kilometres.'

'Time to gate, five sezuras.'

"Jumping.
Entering system, Teladi Way."

"Pierson to Jubilee... And Titan.
They are only a few miz behind me, not far off six hundred meters per sezura."

Captain Hall's voice is heard. "Lieutenant, your shields are down, were you hit?"

"Yes, they have some sort of long-range EMP artillery.
No physical damage, I just can't reboot the systems."

The General this time. "What sort of range do they have on this weapon?"

"They hit me at thirty two kilometres.
Also, they are area affect and have some limited tracking ability. I was manoeuvring evasively and they still managed to hit with most of the shots."

"That puts us all well within range. I imagine they also have destructive weapons,
Armadeaus and all.
Get out of the asteroid field Lieutenant."

"Yes General."

"Captain Hall, ready weapons.
We may be in for a fight sooner than I had hoped."

"Pierson, dock back with us, we need to take a look at Monroe."

"I'm on my way Captain."

Pierson navigates the field rather faster than he normally would have, especially having no shields.

'Damn black ships, I don't want to be anywhere near here when they come through.
I'd like to be heading for Argon Prime right about now, but we all have our orders.'

'Good, the Titan has stopped firing at the roids and is backing off. Faster getting through that way.'

...

Argon Titan (General Kaar)

"You heard the Lieutenant. All hands to battle stations.
Commander, cease fire on the asteroids and back us off, we want some room to
manoeuvre."

"Yes General...
The Discoverer is passing us now, about to dock with the Corvette...
All weapons ready.
We are clear of the asteroid field."

"Detecting gate activity..."

"What!! Already."

"No, the other gate.
It's a Boron Shark coming through."

...

Pegasus

'Hmmm, six hundred meters per sezura.
At least I can still outrun them.
Long range area affect weapons, I don't like them, I'd best back off too, don't want to
get hit in this ship.'

'Ahhh, here comes that Boron Shark.'

...

Discoverer

'No docking computer now, I'll have to do this manually.'

"Request permission to dock."

"Granted."

'It's starting to get a little stuffy in here with the life-support offline. Still plenty oxygen.'

'Carefully, carefully.
External camera in the satellite window, check I'm lined up.
Ok.
Docking clamps on.
Airlocks around the hatch and cargo bay secured.
Power off.'

'I'll go wait with Monroe in the back.
Get the cargo doors open.'

...

Jubilee

"Granted.
That is Pierson docking now."

"Send a medical team down to get Monroe.
And an engineering team to see what can be done about the disabled systems on
the M5."

"Yes sir."

"Also, set the Commanders Elite loose so that he drifts very slowly towards the other
gate.
We don't want to get tangled with him if we are going into battle.
Must remember to inform the Argon One to pick him up when it arrives."

"Detecting gate activity.
Boron Shark.
Incoming signal."

The almost musical voice of a Boron came over the speakers.

"Greetings Argon friends, we are here to help."

"Welcome and thank you for your assistance in this matter." The General is heard
replying.
"Take up position behind us and prepare to launch your fighters, the enemy ships
may be here at any moment."

"Very well, General.
The two mark five Rays inform me that they will be here in around thirty mizuras."

"Excellent.
I have no idea when the Teladi will show up, lets hope soon.
And the rest of the Argon fleet will be here within forty-five mizuras.
General Kaar out."

The comms are cut.

...

Pierson is sitting with the still unconscious Monroe on the cargo net.
He looks closely at the almost thawed leg.

'I'm glad I didn't have the meat dish.
That leg looks worse now, flesh hanging from the shards of bone.'

The now liquid blood pooling under the net, a trickle running down the cargo ramp into the Jubilee.'

"What did they do to you Captain?"

The medical team arrives in the docking area, the Doctor and two assistants. Pierson stands and walks halfway down the ramp.

'Up here Doctor.'

Pierson stands aside then walks down the rest of the way as the medics attend to Monroe.

A miz later they bring the Captain down on an anti-gravity trolley and head for the medical bay.

Pierson is about to follow when he is stopped by the engineering team arriving.

"What seems to be the problem here sir?" They ask.

"Some sort of EMP weapon has taken out many of the ships systems. I tried shutting them down and restarting, but nothing."

It doesn't look as if there is any physical damage."

"If it was a standard EMP it will be simple enough to bring things back online. Do you remember which systems were disabled?"

"Ecliptic projector, docking computer, trading system extension, shields, weapons, life support, I think that was all."

"Ok, we'll take a look and let you know how we get on."

...

Jubilee

Medical Bay

"First thing's first, this suit will have to come off.
Pass the scissors."

"There we go.
We'll take a look at that head wound now.
Nasty.
Need a few stitches.
Scan it first for fractures."

An assistant brings over a bulky looking piece of equipment, holds it above Monroe's head and presses a button.
A moment later an image appears on the view screen.

"Hmmm.
Nasty.
A fracture runs up the back to the top where it forks into two small hairline fractures.
Also, the brain has some bruising.
Possible brain damage, but we can't tell until he comes round."

The wound itself isn't as bad as it looks, but it is nasty all the same.
Seven or eight stitches should do it.
Now the leg."

The assistant now scans the leg.
The image appears.

"Nasty."

The two assistants snigger to each other.

"Do you see anything funny here?"

"No Doctor."

"Then share the joke with us, I'm sure Monroe would like to hear it."

"It's nothing Doctor, you are right, it is [i]Nasty[/i]."

"Yes it is.

The bone is nothing more than shards, worse still the flesh is merely torn pulp.
Even if it hadn't been frozen in space this leg would be un-saveable.
It must be removed.
Actually, still being partially frozen will make that easier, additional loss of blood down
to a minimum."

"Prepare the leg for amputation while I stitch up the head wound.
Also, get a prosthetic interface out of storage, it needs to be attached during the
amputation."

"Yes Doctor."

One Assistant left the room heading for storage, the other smeared an antiseptic
solution over most of the top half of the leg while the Doctor worked on the stitches,
then bandaged the head.
A couple of mizuras later the three were ready to operate on the leg.

"Pass the las-saw.
Now, to line this up just right.
Into the healthy flesh but not too far up.
There, that's just right."

Wafts of smoke rise from where the saw meets the leg.
A stench of burning flesh fills the room.
The Doctor seems to revel in the odour, where as the younger assistants clearly start
to turn a little green, one covers his nose and mouth.

"Don't let it bother you.
You will soon get used to all the smells and oddities that the body is capable of.
I find most of them rather pleasant.
Lets you know you are still alive."

"That's all the way through.
The laser has already cauterised the leg stump and the nerve-endings are dying so
we must work fast.

Pass the interface.
If one of you could raise the stump a little...
Good.
Now, I'll place the prosthetic interface on and fire the..."

The six-centimetre thick metal interface disk is placed against the stump, the concave shape curving slightly over it.
Hundreds of tiny hot needles burn their way into the stump and contact with the nerves.
An indicator light blinks off.

"That's it.
All done.
It's all up to the Captain now.
As you know, a mechanical leg can be attached to the interface and will, with practice, be just as good as the original.
Soldiers would say better because it feels no pain. I wouldn't, that's half the fun.
Take him to the recovery room."

As the assistants leave with Monroe the Doctor walks across the room and washes his hands.
He then goes to the comms panel and presses a button.

"Doctor to the Bridge, Captain Hall."

"Yes Doctor, how's your patient?"

"All fixed, we just need to wait for him to wakeup now."

"Already? My, that was quick. What, four or five mizuras?"

"Well, like I say, 'No messing around in my lab.'
It was four fifteen.
But I'm a little off today.
I may be getting a cold."

"Nice work, let me know when he wakes up."

"Will do, Medbay out."

'Now to take a look at my mucous, I hope it is a cold.
I have a new experiment in mind.'

Chapter 18 (The Gathering)

Jubilee

Docking Bay

Pierson leaves the M5 in the capable hands of the engineers and enters the elevator. He almost presses the button for the bridge then changes his mind and picks the floor for the medbay. The door opens and he steps out.

Pierson walks through the small reception room into the doctors treatment room.

'So Doctor, how is Captain Monroe?'

'We won't know for sure until he regains consciousness. But physically he should be just fine with a few wozuras rest and his replacement leg.'

'Did the suit or remains of the leg give any clues as to what happened?'

'We ran the leg through the scanner first. Nothing unusual, except the nature of the injury itself, which you've seen, I'd like to know what did that. Whatever it was left no trace behind, no fragments, no machinery oil, no organic matter, nothing. I didn't scan the suit, it's been bagged, over here.'

'May I?'

'Help yourself.'

Pierson takes the suit out of the bag and lies it on the operating table. He then lifts the scanning device and takes a shot. Replacing the device he turns to the view screen.

A flashing box says 'Warning, it is recommended this space suit not be used.' Otherwise, nothing of interest.

Pierson unclips the suit's PDP and notices its battery charge is low and memory is full.

'Doctor, I'm going to take this with me, keep the suit for now.'

'Well you can put the suit back in its bag before you go, Lieutenant.'

Pierson does so, then as he is leaving says 'Let me know when Monroe wakes up.'

'Very well.'

The doctor gets back to his microscope and Pierson re-enters the elevator.

...

Jubilee

Bridge

"If they are coming through it should be any second now."

Pierson enters the bridge with a crisp replacement jacket picked up from his quarters en-rout.

"Ah, Lieutenant, did you enjoy your trip out?"

"Yes Captain, it was lovely. I thoroughly recommend it.
I'm sure you'd like to take the M5 out next time Captain."

"I might just do that.
What have you there?"

"It's Monroe's PDP.
I'm about to see what's on it."

Pierson walks to a console at the back of the bridge and inserts the small device into the slot.

"Hmmm, personal logs.
Ahh, there's what's taking up all the space, A/V logs. Not Argon, Teladi by the look of the file names.
From the station I would guess."

"Play them back then, Lieutenant."

The main view screen changes to the image of a Teladi female. She starts to speak, in Teladi.

"Hold on, I'll run it through the translator."

Sina spoke while Pierson was pressing buttons,
"Her insignia shows her to be a member of the Blood Moon Clan.
That adds up with those pirates that attacked us.
Her appearance and clothes show she is the leader, maybe of the whole clan.
Though she seems a little young.
Maybe the younger sister or daughter of the clan leader."

The recording starts up again, this time in Argon.

"Thiss object we found drifting towardss the sstation and brought onboard seemss to be alive.
I think it iss growing.
It's sslightly bigger than a Bayomon so we can't move it into the medical bay's isolation chamber.
The dock workers don't like it being down there. Two of them have gone missing and the rest refuse to go back down there, they tell me it ssmells like..."

The image cuts off early. Pierson starts the next log entry.

"The black thing, what ever it iss, hass killed, we think eaten, the doctor. He tried to take a ssample for analysiss after all sscans of the entity failed to penetrate. The

ssecurity guards with him fired on it with no noticeable effect, but we all heard it's pain in our mindss before it quickly killed them too. I have ordered our three remaining fighters to launch and attack it with their more powerful weapons."

"Thousands of tiny black shipss arrived all around us, they destroyed our shipss then left.

Power is out through much of the sstation, it is sshaking us apart.

Communicationss are out but we think it has killed everyone in the sstation. It has left C&C and the upper deckss alone for now.

We need to escape.

It has covered almost all of the exterior of the station in it's skin.

It is eating us, the whole sstation."

"Structural integrity is badly compromised. The tremorss are worsening.

It is huge, forcing the sstation out of shape, all the time consuming it.

The black entity is coming sstraight through the wallss.

No way out.

No where to hide.

It is all over..."

The final entry stops and Pierson puts the sector map back on the view screen.

The Captain spoke first.

"This doesn't exactly fill me with confidence at all.

Send a copy of these to Fleet Command and The Titan."

"Still no sign of them, no gate activity, nothing.

They are long overdue."

"Good, Sina. Let's hope they don't arrive until the rest of the fleet get here."

"Boron shark is in position and I'm detecting something else coming through the other gate.

Argon One."

"Excellent. Contact..."

"General Kaar already has."

The Conversation is heard by all AFC ships.

"Welcome to Teladi Way General Illandas.

Glad you could join the party."

"Thank you General Kaar.

Glad to see you well Captain Hall."

"It was close, Sir, but we got out in time. They don't seem to be following us out.

We have two Elites if you have room to take them onboard. One is badly damaged, disabled.

Also we are transmitting you some information which Monroe collected."

"Very good Captain.

How is Monroe?"

"He should be ok."

"Good. We will pick up the Elites and pull along side the Shark.
We will, of course, need a path cleared through the asteroid field. I see you have
already started General."

"Yes, we pulled back when we heard the black ships might be on the way through."

"Ok, we'll wait five mizuras more then I'll send in a wing of Elites to finish the job.
For the moment everyone hold position and keep scanning.
Oh, one more thing. General Vos will be joining us shortly, however General Tirnok is
having some trouble with his jumpdrive, they are sending additional engineers to take
a look. But he might not be able to join us.
Any sign of the Teladi?"

"Not yet.

The Boron Rays will be here in a little under forty mizuras."

"Ok, Illandas out."

...

Pegasus

'Transmission from the Corvette.
Hmmm, encrypted files.
Soon have them decoded.'

'There, done.'

'Open.
Play it back.
Teladi Pirate, Blood Moon...'

'I don't like the sound of these black things.
I'll report this back as soon as I get chance. Don't want to be detected, so I'll not
transmit just yet.'

'And here comes the Argon One
It's looking well considering the little 'experiment' we conducted on it.
It was just a minor trial of course.'

'Oh, another conversation coming through.
And another transmission from the M6.
Ah, the same files again, oh well.'

'So, they are going to start shooting asteroids again. This is getting a little boring.'

...

Argon One

"Bring us within five kilometres of the disabled Elite and stop.
Send out the tug to bring it in.
And have the other Elite dock for refuelling.
Then bring us along side the Boron Shark.
Also have all fighters prepped for launch, and ready one of the fighter wings with Hornets to take out the asteroids."

"Yes General." The commander replies

...

The Argon One slows as it nears the Commanders Elite, the Lieutenant Commander still stands guard over the crippled ship.
Once at rest, a small tug vessel leaves the launch bay of the colossal carrier. It makes its way slowly to the M3. Then it too comes to a stop and turns around. A grapple on a line, exactly the same as the one on the Jubilee, fires out from the back of the tug and connects with the Elite.
As the small vessel accelerates back towards its home it draws the line in, closing the gap between the two ships to almost nothing.
The Lieutenant Commander follows at a safe distance.
A few moments later the three ships disappear into the Argon One and it resumes its journey towards the other carrier.

Around five mizuras later the Argon One pulls into position and comes to a full stop facing the asteroid field.

"Any sign of the enemy Commander Jalat?"

"No, nothing."

"That's been almost ten mizuras longer than we were expecting them to be, I don't think they are coming.
Launch the wing of Elites to clear the asteroids."

"Yes Sir."

Chapter 19 (Duty Calls)

Argon Fleet Command

Admiral Ornov types his pass code into the panel in front of him.
A retinal scanner does its work then announces "Access Granted".

'I was only in here a stazura ago, but I must take one more look before...'.

He steps under the sign saying "Secured Records Authorised Personnel Only" into the long narrow room and looks around.

Ornov walks the length of it to a door at the far end.

"No Access" is written in large red lettering across the door.

'Well, not quite true. Three of us have access. Myself, Illandas and the President.
Although our current President has never seen it, not sure he even knows about it.'

The Admiral goes through the laborious process for the second time today.
Insert key card, type fifteen digit pass-code, palm scan, retinal scan, voice
recognition and bio-scan.

'The bio-scan is checking for signs of stress, I'm not sure how that works, I'm always
stressed when I need to come here.'

"Access Granted"

The door slides open.

The Admiral steps quickly into the dark room before the door closes again.

Once the door is closed behind him the light comes up. The door is heard to re-lock
itself.

The room is small, little more than a cupboard. Only big enough to comfortably fit one
person at a time, which was specifically part of the design.

The back wall is a bookcase with glass doors, filled with old books and papers.

Against the wall on the right is a standard console with view screen, though this one
is independent of any network.

A chair is tucked under the console. He pulls out the chair, sits and types yet another
password to access the console.

Once in, he runs through the menus to find the file again and presses 'play'.

'This was recovered fifteen jazuras ago. It was found in a piece of wreckage
embedded in a comet passing through Treasure Chest.'

It took wozuras just to identify it as being of Xenon origin beneath all the charring
melting and disfigurement.

We think this small piece of wreckage was from a Xenon satellite. It had obviously
been there for many jazuras.

This is a partial video record from that wreckage, no audio.

We still haven't been able to identify the solar system, the star formations in the
background are unfamiliar.'

The view screen shows an image of a planet.

We are in orbit. As we slowly travel around, the surface far beneath can be seen
intermittently between the clouds.

Obviously a Xenon planet. Striped bare of its resources, baron. Several vast cities, no, not cities, construction facilities. Small ships buzzing around far below. A hive of activity.

Suddenly the camera turns to face the gate and zooms in. Capital ships can be seen in the distance, gathering, heading towards a gate.

There is another planet not far behind the gate. Dark patches on the planet show it is also colonised by the Xenon.

Fighters rush past, probably from the planet behind, more, more. Recognisable as being old style fighters, placing this around, or more than fifty jazuras ago.

There is obviously something bad going on, all military ships rushing towards the gate.

The two carriers and two destroyers are now positioned near the gate. All fighters launched and now split into three groups, the first is with the capital ships and the other two behind the gate.

The gate activates. One huge ship comes through the gate, vast. Almost too big. It is quite possible the ship was designed to fit through and no more. Black spherical, no, more oval, a little like an egg but tapering equally both front and back. On the front and back ends of the ship are many spear-like protrusions. They look small compared to the ship, but in reality they are perhaps twenty to thirty meters in diameter and perhaps thirty to forty of them on either end.

Each spear begins black like the hull, but around two thirds of the way out the colour starts to gradient towards clear. The last few meters are completely transparent, until they start to glow. Arcs of glowing energy run between the spears, brighter and brighter. Then one almighty burst of energy is released from the front end. The energy arcs like electricity from the ship to its target momentarily connecting the two ships, but somehow it just doesn't look electrical, plasma perhaps, perhaps not. It hits the nearer of the two destroyers and tears its shield completely away.

As the Black ship is firing its first shot the Xenon all open fire on it. Capital ships holding position and fighters moving quickly towards and around. The shear number of shots from the Xenon seem truly overwhelming, but the Black ship seems barely fazed by it.

The alien ship continues forward towards the destroyer and fires again. Its rear weapon fires this time, differently, each spear seems to be firing independently. Arcs of energy spiralling outward in a multitude of directions, most hitting and destroying a fighter. It is obviously far less powerful this way, but to take out as many as thirty or forty fighters in a single volley is more than impressive.

The Xenon continue their barrage on the ship with still no noticeable effect.

Twenty jazuras later the front weapon hits the same destroyer again mostly on the right side, away from the camera, but fires can be seen erupting even from this distance and angle. The badly damaged Xenon ship begins to loose stability and starts rolling, the fires becoming more obvious, though it manages to continue firing as before.

The second starts to move off, slowly at first, gaining speed, around the side of the alien ship turning to bring as many guns as possible to bear on the enemy.

Now with the Black ship a sufficient distance from the gate, a second joins the first. It fires the moment it arrives, its forward weapon sparking in every forward direction taking out many of the remaining fighters and reducing the shields of the capital ships a little. A moment later the rear weapon in the same manner taking the remaining few fighters.

Finally the Xenon weapons seem to be having some effect on the first of the Black ships. It is slowing and the tips of rear spears return to translucent. The concentration of plasma from the second destroyer along its side has managed to cut through the hull in several places. A black liquid starts to ooze from its 'wounds'.

The first ship fires once more at the damaged Xenon destroyer before it appears to die. Its forward weapons go out and it begins to drift slightly, sideways.

Its final discharge of energy was more than enough to shred through the near-crippled destroyer, little more than shards of metal remained.

The remaining Xenon change target to the second of the Black ships.

A third Black ship arrives. The second now lining up on the second destroyer. The third already firing on the first carrier.

The first Xenon carrier begins to turn, probably trying to retreat, but is hit head-on by the energy weapon, stripping it of its shields and causing some minor damage to the hull.

The Xenon destroyer begins to accelerate, turning around with the second ship trying to stay out of the line of fire while continuing to fire itself. It manages this well, however in doing so it strays behind the gate as the fourth arrives and takes its first shot backwards through the gate. The destroyer is hit full-on on the broadside taking the shields down and destroying a large section of its hull.

The damaged carrier takes one last hit and breaks apart.

The destroyer clears the gate only to be met with a fatal burst from the rear of the third Black ship.

The final remaining Xenon ship, the huge carrier, is clearly dwarfed by each of the three active alien ships. They move closer for the kill. Their weapons glowing brightly.

Then, as one, all three fire.

The explosion is so bright it could be seen for many hundreds of kilometres.

One of the ships then attaches itself to the dead or disabled Black ship and pulls it back through the gate.

The remaining two each head to a planet.

The first arrives at the other planet in only a couple of mizuras. It enters orbit, further, it enters the atmosphere and stops at cloud level. The camera zooms further, the ship and construction facility beneath filling the view.

Its weapon fires, in the individually spread mode, taking out buildings, levelling them to the ground, fire, destruction. In moments there is nothing but craters.

The ship moves north and eliminates another city. Then north-east and another.

Further east and disappears round the back of the planet.

Jump points form near the planet, thousands of tiny black ships emerge and fly in a cloud down to the site of the first destroyed city.

The second Black ship is almost at this planet, its weapons ready to fire. It enters the atmosphere not far from the camera. It passes close by. Even though the camera is zoomed fully out to wide angle the ship still more than fills the view, the shiny black skin, smooth, creepy, evil.

It begins firing on the buildings below, smoke and fire filling the atmosphere.

Then a single one of its rear spear-like protrusions lights up.

A flash and the picture goes dead.

'When I first saw this recording some jazuras ago, I naturally thought that the Xenon got what they deserved, that this was simply a race retaliating against the Xenon. But now, seeing this again and knowing some of the events taking place in X8, it is all becoming clear.

The attack or capture of the pirate station,
the probable destruction of any ships belonging to the station,
the apparent destruction of the Armadeaus and its M5,
the attempted destruction of the Jubilee,
but most of all this recording of the absolute elimination of all 'life' in a Xenon sector.

In my opinion all this points to one thing, a race of hostile expansionists, systematically colonising solar system after solar system, destroying any life that is already there.'

'Maybe I'm wrong. I hope I am. But I doubt it.

There is no doubt that the tiny ships here and in X8 are one in the same.

Those capital ships...

Well, I don't know if we stand a chance.

We can only hope to fight them back before they get established in the sector.'

The Admiral stands and opens the door. Head hung low. A man with a terrible burden emerges from the room.

He is soon back in the corridor with both doors secure behind him.

'There can be no mistakes, no hesitation.

Illandas, despite our differences, I do consider him to one of the best in the fleet. If he weren't he would not be commanding the Argon One.

Even so I wonder if he has the stomach for a fight like this, to do what must be done, no matter the cost.'

Ornov taps a control on a nearby comms panel.

"Reamus, this is Ornov.

Do we have any jump-capable ships nearby?"

"Hold a moment...

You are in luck. Every able fighter was assigned to the Argon One, but we do have one Buster in the shipyard undergoing repairs on a faulty shield generator."

"Good. Have it dock here at Fleet Command immediately."

"Yes Admiral.

But may I ask..."

"I'm joining the fight.

I'll be waiting in the dock for the Buster.

Ornov out."

Chapter 20 (Transition)

Teladi Way

The group of Elites are making short work of the asteroids. More than half way in, though the field gets ever denser.
An obvious path can be seen piercing its way into the field, more than wide enough for the largest carriers to pass.

...

Pegasus

'Another ship coming through. I wonder who this time.'

'The Admiral himself, how very strange. He hasn't left his office in fifteen jazuras.'

'And no shields. I have a couple of missiles onboard, that may be enough.
if i drop the cloak I'd have weapons too.
Oh, the temptation.
But no, I have another mission.
Besides if we really wanted him dead there would be no problem, even at the AFC.'

...

Argon One

'Incoming wormhole.'

'Ah, the Teladi hopefully.'

'No, an Argon Buster, no shields
It's hailing us.'

'General Illandas, this is Ornov, I'm coming onboard.'

'Admiral?'

'I'll speak with you in your office once I arrive'

A few mizuras later he reaches the carrier and docks. The tiny Buster is barely a speck next to the command ship.

...

Argon One

Illandas' Office

The General is seated at his desk looking at the progress of the Elites when the Admiral enters.

"I must say, Admiral, I am more than a little surprised to see you here."

Ornov walks to the window and looks out.

"Yes General, I too am surprised, a last mizura change of plans.
I have decided to command the battle personally."

"You don't think I'm capable?"

"I know you are more than capable of commanding a battle Illandas, you have fought and won against the Xenon countless times, you have brought renegade Split and Boron factions to justice. But perhaps most impressively of all, you have taken down three separate Pirate cartels, the first and largest when you were only a Lieutenant. So I know you are capable.

You have seen the old records of the attack on the Xenon by these aliens as well as I have."

"Not recently, but I remember them well.
I had hoped we might make an alliance with them."

"That doesn't look likely now, but we will try to contact them and give them one last chance to show they are friendly.
Given the importance and severity of this, as well as the involvement of the other races, I feel I should be here personally."

"Very well, you make a good point."

"In addition to taking command of the battle I think it would be best if I took command of the Argon One."

"Admiral, I must protest.
This is my ship, my crew..."

"This is a ship of the AFC.
Besides, both of us commanding separately onboard the same ship may lead to confusion, the last thing we need."

"So you want me off the ship as well!"

"I know you are an excellent fighter pilot, or if you prefer I could give you temporary command of the Jubilee."

The General considers for a moment.
'Another good point about confusing matters if we were both here, damn him and his good points.
Fighter or Jubilee?
I could take a Titan, no a General replacing a General, that won't happen.'

Hmm, well I was a good fighter pilot in my youth, but it has been a while, sure I use the sim at least once a wozura, but I'm certainly not as good as the pilot I'd be replacing.

Jubilee, I don't like taking over command of a ship just like that but I have little choice.'

"Very well Admiral, I will take the Jubilee."

"Ok, get yourself over there, I will inform the Captain."

Illandas take a last look around his office and leaves.

Ornov sits in the Generals chair.

"Ha! Now I have a window."

...

Jubilee

Bridge

"Captain, General Illandas has just arrived, he is asking to meet with you in your office."

"Very well, Ensign."

Captain Hall arrives at her office a few moments before Illandas.
The two sit.

"It is nice to finally meet you in person Captain."

"Likewise General."

"As you know the Admiral has 'officially' put me in command of the Jubilee.
However, I know first hand what it's like to have your command take right out from under you, not nice.

This being your first trip out in your new ship makes it worse.

So I've decided not to take command, I will stay here in a purely advisory capacity.
The Jubilee is still yours Captain."

"Thank you General.
I appreciate that.
And I will take all the advice you have to offer."

"I'd very much like to see Captain Monroe, now that I'm here."

"I'm sure he hasn't regained consciousness yet, but you are welcome to take a look.
That's if you can get passed the Doctor, he's in one of his odd moods."

"Oh dear, well wish me luck."

"Good luck General.
I'll be back on the bridge if you are looking for me."

...

Jubilee

Medical Bay

The Doctor is hunched over the microscope making strange humming and hawing noises.

Then he jumps up exclaiming,

"Pah!!

I was sure that would work, not even a reaction."

'Well, I have a few more ideas.'

The General walks in without the Doctor noticing.

"What seems to be the trouble Doctor?
One of your experiments not work out?"

"Yes General, yet another.
General?!"

The startled Doctor spins on the spot to face Illandas.

"What are you doing here Illandas?
Come for that physical exam at last?"

"No Doctor, I'm just here to see Monroe.
I'll bet his injuries were Nasty."

"Been a long time since I saw worse.
He is through here."

The Doctor leads the way.

"So, how are you enjoying being out in the field, not stuck back at the AFC doing research?"

"So far, fairly exciting. Though I was looking forward to exploring the unknown sector,
I believe they call it X10?
But as it turns out X8 is plenty exciting.
Here we are, Monroe.
Still unconscious.
I don't dare try to wake him with drugs just yet, given the head injuries.
We'll fit his replacement leg once he wakes.
Otherwise, there is not much more we can do."

"His eyes..."

"Yes REM sleep, he is dreaming."

...

Black Ship

'An alert.
We are needed.
A Spore may be in danger.
Jump.'

'A flash and we are there.
This is the same place again, very busy here.
We sense danger, we must protect.
There, a ship, we recognise it, similar to the previous small one. Grey, near the structure.
It is called M5, how do we know that?
It is around the same size as us, no matter.
It must be destroyed.
It will make good nourishment.'

'It is fleeing, beyond our weapon range, we will give chase.
It is too fast, no matter, we will catch it, in time.
Nothing can outrun us forever.'

'We are catching, but it is almost at the gate made by the 'Others'.
It can not be allowed to escape, it might bring more.
We must give a little of ourselves to stop it, to disable it, then we can kill it.'

'We have hit it.
Again and again but it does not stop.
Does it resist us?'

'It is at the gate and gone.
The danger is gone, we will return home.'

'No, the spore is contacting us...'

...

'I am still dreaming.
I can't seem to wake up.
I want to, but I can't feel anything.'

'These events must have happened after I escaped the Spore.
That Discoverer we were chasing...
I mean they were chasing,
I think I'm onboard it now.
There must still be some connection between us.'

...

'The Spore tells us there is further danger.
We must find it.
Back towards the structure.'

'We see them now.
Four small ships. We recognise them. Grey. Like the ones earlier.
Again we know its name, how can this be?
I do not understand.
They are called Bayamon and Mandalay of Pirate...
No matter.
They must be destroyed.
They will make good nourishment.'

'We surround them and kill them, as always their remains are gathered and placed
with the Spore.'

'We must now wait and watch over the Spore in its final stage.
Soon, soon glorious life begins here.'

Chapter 21 (Countdown)

Teladi Way

Argon One

The doors to the bridge slide open and the Admiral steps in.
One of the officers near the door stands to attention and says loudly,
"Admiral on the bridge!"

Many of the other officers followed suit in standing to attention. However Commander Jalat, Illandas' first officer, simply turns his head and gives a brief look of disapproval. Perhaps too brief for Ornov to have noticed, if he had noticed he gave no indication. Jalat makes no move to leave the Generals command chair.

A moment after the Admirals arrival an incoming message sounds, the Commander puts it through.

"This is the Elite First Squadron to Base Ship.
We have cleared the path through the asteroids, awaiting further instructions."

Jalat responds,
"Good job, come on home. Argon One out."

Ornov then speaks,
"I sense some tension in the room. No doubt disapproval at me taking command of this ship.
A matter as important as this I felt I should be here personally.
Now, we are all soldiers and we have a job to do, so let's get on with it."

Several "Yes Sir" were heard, Jalat and a few others were not among them.

The Commander stood and let the Admiral take the chair.

"Any sign of the Teladi ships, Commander."

"No Admiral."

"I spoke to Generals Tirnok and Vos just before I arrived.
Vos will be here in a few mizuras, Tirnok is still having trouble with the Jumpdrive, we will proceed without him if he is not here before the Teladi."

"The two Boron Rays should be arriving any moment now."

"Excellent, I hear these new mark5 Rays are incredible. Still untested in real battle, but we will soon see to that."

...

Jubilee

Bridge

The General is now seated next to the Captain and is going over the X8 sector information again.

A voice is heard over the comms.

"Lieutenant Pierson, this is the engineering team."

"Pierson here, how's it going?"

"We have finally worked out the problem.

You see there are two normal ways that an EMP can disable a system.

The first is where a very powerful EMP simply fries the components destroying the system.

The second is where a less powerful burst leaves a residual charge in the circuits temporarily disabling them.

With the first you need to replace the parts.

With the second you just need to shut down the system for a few seconds to let the residual charge dissipate.

Whatever they fired at the Discoverer is different.

It works in a similar way to the second in leaving a residual charge in the system.

Only it creates its own feedback loop of a sort, so the residual charge never dissipates.

I've never seen anything like it.

We have had to open up each individual circuit and drain this charge off manually.

The shields and weapons are working again.

We are about to start on the rest of the systems."

"Very good.

Let me know when it is all done.

Pierson out."

...

Argon One

"Admiral, I'm detecting three Xenon fighters coming down from the north, one M3 and two M4's."

"What, did they slip through the west gate and come around?"

"No, we would have detected them.

They must have been here since before we arrived.

There are several dense nebulae in the north, they could have easily been hiding there."

"Xenon, hiding in nebulae, that doesn't sound right.

Launch three Elites and three Busters to take care of them."

"Yes Admiral..."

Fighters away."

...

Jubilee

Medbay

'I'm still asleep but I feel, I can feel something, a great heaviness pulling me down, back into my body.

Tired, so tired.

I can't open my eyes, but sensation is coming back.

I feel the weight of the artificial gravity, I feel cold and warmth all at once, I feel tingling in my limbs and a numb throbbing in my head.'

'Senses, taste, the taste of blood in my mouth.

Sound, a low hum, like computer consoles.

Smell, the smell of... of clean, what is that? I know it... medical antiseptic, I think.'

I'm in a hospital or medbay.

'I need to get up, I need to warn them of the Spore. It must be destroyed before it germinates, that is our only hope.

I know there is very little time. How do I know that? The dreams. Yes the dreams, I must still be connected to them somehow.'

...

The Doctor is still in the next room to Monroe's. He is running a computer simulation of a viral infection over and over trying to deduce the pattern of infection.

"It can't be random. I don't believe in random. There is a pattern or reason or mathematical formula for everything if you look hard enough. I'm just not looking hard enough."

He increases the magnification a further ten times.

A loud crash from the next room has the Doctor jumping to his feet.

"What was that?"

The Doctor arrives to find Monroe sprawled on the floor, a trolley overturned beside him.

"Captain Monroe, you really should not be up and about in your condition. Let me help you back onto the bed."

"My leg?"

"Yes, those were some nasty injuries you received.

I had to remove what remained of it.

Now you are awake we can fit you with a replacement leg.

I'd be interested to know what did that to you."

"No, no you wouldn't.

Where am I?

What ship is this?"

"You are onboard the Corvette Jubilee.
We were sent in to rescue you from the station in X8."

"Yes... I saw the rescue, thanks."

"You saw the rescue?
But you were unconscious."

"Yes I was, there is no time to explain now.
I must speak with the Captain and Argon Fleet Command immediately, all our lives depend on it."

"Bridge, this is the Doctor calling.
Monroe is a wake and is asking for the Captain."

"I'm on my way." Replies Hall.

...

Argon One

"The Xenon ships have stopped moving.
Our fighters are ten kilometres and closing...
The Xenon have turned around and are running back to the nebulae."

"What? Xenon running away.
Hiding in nebulae.
There is something wrong here.
I don't like it.
Tell the fighters to pursue and destroy, but be careful."

"Yes sir."

"Contact the Teladi Trading Station."

"Greetingss Argon Fleet.
I am Rurandis Uguras of Trading Sstation Teladi Way.
How can I help you?"

"Hello to you too.
I am Admiral Ornov and I need some information about the Xenon."

"Please ask your questionss."

"Do you often get Xenon ships and attacks in this sector?"

"Yess, but only recently.
I requested more system security shipps but it was denied.
You see thiss system is no longer profitable, almost abandoned it iss.
They have not even sent replacementss for the few ships we lost in the last few tazurass."

"Are they coming in from the west gate or the newly discovered east gate to X8?"

"We do not know.

They come into our ssensor range from all directionss but more so to the north."

"Did you ever think that you might have a north gate hidden in the nebulae or asteroids."

"No, our sscouts that discovered thiss system some jazurass ago did not find one.
Though they did not find the east gate either.
You may be right Admiral."

"Thank you Rurandis Uguras.

You might want to recall all the ships in the sector, if not evacuate the sector entirely.
There will be a fight in X8 shortly and we don't know if it will spill into Teladi Way.

"Thank you Admiral for the warning."

"Commander Jalat, contact the fighters tell them there might be a gate to a Xenon sector up there somewhere.
Don't go through, but if they can take out those few fighters do so. Then get back here."

...

Jubilee

Medbay

The Doctor is fitting the new leg to Monroe.
Making careful adjustments.

Hall and Illandas enter the Medbay.

Monroe sits up in the bed and stammers for a moment as he tries to say more than his lips can keep up with.

He takes a breath then speaks again.

"Captain and General.

General? What are you doing here?

No time.

We must call in the fleet and destroy the Spore,
before it is too late.

It may already be too late.

It is soon, very soon.

It will bring life, glorious life but not for us.

Nothing but death for us."

Illandas speaks.

"Slow down Captain.

What is this Spore you mentioned?

The station, you mean?"

"No, in the station, on the station.

It is or has eaten the station.

It consumes matter to grow and germinate, once it erupts...
We need to contact Argon Fleet Command and get the fleet here."

"Don't worry, the fleet is already here, well most of it. The rest will arrive soon then we will be going in."

"Good, though it may not be enough."

"Ornov thought the same, that's why we have some of the Boron and Teladi fleets with us."

'More lambs to the slaughter.' Monroe thought.
"I only hope... No."

"You hope what?"

"Nothing, I hope that is enough."

"Try moving the leg." the Doctor cuts in.

"Stop.

Again.

Stop.

Now the foot.

Stop.

Ok, that's it.

It will take some getting used to but with practice it will be almost as good as the original."

"Thank you Doctor."

"I want you to stay in bed a while longer so I can check up on that nasty head injury."
The Doctor leaves the room.

"What happens when this Spore germinates?"

"The end.

The small ships can jump point to point as long as they can see where they are going.

So in this particular case they can jump from their place of origin to anywhere this Spore can see.

These ships act almost entirely as guardians for the Spores.

I call them Spores, I don't know their proper name, if they have one. But they behave as a spore would.

I don't even know the name of this race and I've been inside their heads and they in mine."

"Inside their heads?
What do you mean?"

"When it attacked me I could sense its thoughts, there was a connection."

"But you are ok now?"

"Yes, perfectly.

Only their tiny ships can jump like this, something to do with size, shape and mass within the warp tunnel. All the larger ones need jumpgates.
They can use the gates created by the Ancients which we use, and they can build their own.
No... they can grow their own.
That is what the Spores are.
They germinate, they grow and erupt into gates.
They periodically send out these Spores in all directions, they travel through deep space for many jazuras, maybe hundreds, thousands. Until they find a suitable place to grow. They attach themselves to a planet, moon, asteroid, in this case a Pirate station and consume what they need.
The moment they erupt a fleet of their large ships come through and secure the system and any surrounding system joined by the Ancients gates.
Then they send more ships to colonise the system.
They kill any other life they find and use it as nourishment to grow more of themselves, more Spores, expanding ever outward.
Our only hope is to kill it before it germinates."

"Ok, we'll contact the Admiral immediately.
You get some rest."

...

Argon One

"Admiral, I have General Illandas on the line, he needs to speak to you privately."

"I'll take it in the office."

A moment later the General relays the information given to him by Captain Monroe.

"Troubling, most troubling.
Very well.
Vos and the Rays should be here any mizura now.
We will jump as soon as they arrive with or without the Teladi.
The Teladi, I have no idea, I'll call them and see where they are.
Ornov out."

The Admiral then calls the Teladi Military Director.

"Director, the fleet is almost ready to jump.
Where are your ships?"

"Ssoon Admiral.
The last of the fighterss are being loaded onto the ssecond Albatross.
Fifteen or twenty mizurass perhapss."

"Good, thank you again Director.
And please hurry there isn't much time."

The Admiral returns to the bridge.

"Our fighters are nearing the edge of the dark blue nebula.
The Xenon disappeared into it a few mizuras ago."

A barrage of high-energy weapons cut out of the dense nebula and tear the Argon fighters to shreds.

A moment later the unmistakable front end of a Xenon Destroyer can be seen emerging.

Chapter 22 (Untimely Distractions)

Teladi Way

The vast Xenon destroyer clears the nebula. Wisps of the deep blue gas curl around the rear and along its sides, in-between its turrets, so many turrets, clinging momentarily before thinning and vanishing from view.

The nose of another destroyer reveals itself from within the blue cloud, above the first M2.

A number of fighters speed out past the destroyer and take formation along side the lead ship.

As the second destroyer leaves the nebula we see that even more fighters are flanking it, an equal number of each M3/4/5.

Moments after the second M2's is clear, three M6's lead a Xenon M1 out.

Still more fighters come spewing from the Carrier, accelerating towards the front of the group.

...

Pegasus

"Hmmm, I doubt they are here to help. This could get interesting."

...

Argon One

"Admiral, that seems to be all of them."

"How many?"

"One Carrier, two Destroyers, three Corvettes, and thirty three fighters... thirty four, still launching."

"I'd really rather not get into a fight with them at the moment, we have more pressing matters to attend to."

"General Vos' Titan has just entered the system, moving to join us."

"Excellent, that's all the Argon Fleet ships we can expect."

"The Xenon weapons are armed, moving in on an attack vector. I wouldn't think running into X8 would help us any."

"No Commander it wouldn't. We'd be trapped between two groups of hostiles, one of which we know very little about."

"I imagine asking the Xenon for a truce wouldn't do any good."

"It's worth a shot.
Comms, try contacting the Xenon."

"...No response Admiral."

"No real surprise there.
Well, I guess we fight.
At least we out number them, all but Corvettes, and that's without the Teladi.
The Rays will put things further in our favour when they arrive.
Open a channel to all our ships.

"You are on."

"This is Admiral Ornov to all allied ships.
You may have noticed a large fleet of Xenon moving to attack us.
We will need to take them out before jumping to X8.
Launch all fighters now, but hold position.
We will let them come to us, give General Vos time to get into position.
Titans, position yourselves slightly ahead of the Carriers.
Jubilee and fighters above and below.
Everyone target the lead Destroyer, we will concentrate all fire on it first.
Once it falls all Boron fighters target the Xenon fighters.
Argon fighters and Jubilee take on their Corvettes.
All Capital ships take the Xenon Capitals, one at a time, nearest first.
All ships turrets fire-at-will.
And let's make this quick, to quote Kyle Brennan 'These are not the only butts that
need kicking today.'"

General Vos speeds away from the gate towards other Titan to join it at the head of the fleet.
The fleet turns to face the Xenon, each moving into position.
The bulk of the fighters are positioned below the Argon One and Boron Shark. A little over sixty fighters, mostly heavy and medium, with only a few light fighters. All arranged in their separate formations.
The Jubilee moves upward, above the Argon One and comes to a stop. Several groups of fighters pull along side. To the left are six Eels in tight formation, further left are four Elites and four Busters. To the right are twelve Piranhas and eight more Elites. Two Octopus' pull in beside the Busters and stop.

"Time to firing range?"

"Two mizuras. The General is now in position."

"Good.
All ships ready weapons.
Move slowly towards the enemy, we don't want to be stationary.
Open fire the moment you are in range."

...

Jubilee

The Captain is in her chair, General Illandas at her side.
Pierson sits at the helm, obviously a little edgy never having been in or even see a battle on this scale before.
Sina is at weapons control, also on edge but clearly through excitement rather than fear.
All are ready for battle.

"Three against one, that doesn't sound too fair.
Though I think the forty two fighters, mostly Elites, will balance that out a little."

"Let's hope so Pierson." The Captain replies.
"Match the speed and direction of the Argon One.
Time to target?"

Sina answers.
"One mizura.
Lead Destroyer targeted with main guns.
Turrets on automatic.
Missiles and counter measures ready."

"Very good Sina, but I think I'll manually select the turrets targets from here. I quite enjoyed doing that before.
Unless the General would like a shot."

"I'd love to."

"Be my guest."

"Shall we say a turret each."

"By all means."

"Top or bottom?"

"I'll take the top."

"Thought you might."

"Are you pair quite finished?" Pierson jokes.
"Five sezuras."

...

The Two Titans, being slightly ahead of the fleet get the first shots off. Every one a successful hit on the enemy destroyer.
The Xenon's return fire is no less accurate.

The Jubilee fires a moment later. Its double GHEPT barely missing a Xenon M before connecting with the Destroyer.

Commander Jalat on the Argon One thinks to himself.
'Let's give this Delta HEPT a real test now.'
He hits the firing control.

The electric blue colour of the DHEPT stands out even from a great distance.
It shimmers as it travels fast yet gracefully through space.
It seems... no it is faster than any of the other shots criss-crossing in the ever closing gap between ships.
The DHEPT makes its mark on the shields of the M2, the electricity sparking around the impact area.

'Wow, almost three times the damage of the Gamma.
Pity we only have one.'

The rest of the allied fleet are now bombarding the M2.
Fighters in perfect formations fly past the Titans and open fire on the Xenon ship.
In the opposite direction Xenon fighters begin firing on the allied fighters.
And Elite and two Piranhas fall immediately. Two more Elites and an Eel.

The impacts on the Xenon M2 begin to take their toll. Its shields down to sixty percent.

...

Argon One

"The Xenon are concentrating their fire mostly on General Vos' Titan. his shields down to eighty five percent.
We've lost a few fighters to their Corvettes.
The turrets on their M6's are remarkably fast, they have no trouble keeping up with the fastest of our fighters.
No doubt designed with our fighters in mind."

"How are the shields on the target Destroyer?"

"Forty three percent.
It has lost one shield generator and two BHEPT's."

"Continue firing."

The second enemy Destroyer accelerates quickly downward beneath and out of range of the ongoing battle.
It then turns and starts back up directly under the Titans, firing a number of Hornets.

"Vos, look out below you, incoming missiles.
And pull back a little, you are taking the brunt of the attack."

"Thanks Admiral, countermeasures away."

Starbursts flare out from the underside of the M2. The enemy missiles tracking them, each detonating one after the other. Still, three manage to get past and take the shields down another notch. Sixty one percent.

Enemy fighters are now flying among the Capital ships taking every shot they can at the Titans and friendly fighters.
Turrets start to track them.

"First Xenon Destroyer, shields at five percent, four turrets destroyed.
Second Destroyer, re-entering firing range of Vos' Titan and opening fire.
Carrier now opening fire, again on Vos.
They must really not like him."

"What the Hell is that!!!"

The Xenon Carrier fires an orange beam weapon at the Titan.
Missing momentarily, but it moves down in a cutting motion across the M2, taking the
shields down to almost zero.
The beam stops and the HEPT's start their work.

"Scan that Carrier."

"It has one 'unidentified' weapon, nothing like that of a Laser Tower, completely
unknown.
Otherwise, a standard compliment of Beta and Gamma HEPT's.
Fifteen Hornets and all fighters are launched."

"Unidentified! what does that mean?

Never mind."

The Lead Xenon Destroyer takes its last hit and begins to break apart. Loosing
stability it shudders and twists sharply downward. A wing of six Piranhas dart swiftly
aside just in time, only to be shot down by a group of seven Xenon L's.
The Xenon L's then turn and target the Jubilee.

"Ornov to fleet, Everyone engage your secondary targets.

Vos, fall back.

Kaar, try to lay down some covering fire for Vos.

Other Capital ships target the Carrier first, I don't like that beam weapon."

The fleet break formation and go after their designated targets.

General Kaar moves his Titan towards the other trying to shield it from the Xenon
M1.

A moment later he enters firing range and fires his first volley at the new target.

The Argon One and Boron Shark move forward and begin firing again.

Boron Fighters start to engage the Xenon fighters.

Though they are winning easily against the fighters they receive a great deal of
crossfire from the enemy Corvettes.

The Jubilee and Argon fighters move in on the Xenon M6's

The remaining Xenon M2 closes on the Titan, still firing.

"Vos' Titans shields are down.
Taking damage.
The Carrier is firing the beam again."

The beam of orange light cuts into the Titan as it turns to retreat.
It slices deeply into the rear destroying the engine section.

"Fires on all decks, the Titan is breaking apart."

"Have the crew escaped?"

"I'm detecting survivors, some of the crew managed to eject in time, they are slowly making their way here.

Oh hell!, it's going to blow, they won't make it."

An explosion engulfs the remainder of the ship, surging outwards eating up the escaped crewmembers.

"They are all dead, every one of them.

... No wait scanners clearing, there are life-signs. A few have, somehow, survived the blast, some damaged suits, some wounded or unconscious, but alive."

"How many?"

"Forty six."

"Forty six out of five hundred.

Have two of the Discoverers disengage from the battle and go pick those survivors up. Bring them back here."

"Yes sir."

"Boron Shark, their Corvettes are making short work of our fighters, move to assist. Kaar, launch ten Hornets at the carrier on my mark.

Jalat, prepare ten of our own for the same.

...Mark."

The Hornets streak towards the target. Twenty vapour trails converging.

If the Xenon ship has counter-measures it doesn't use them.

All twenty hit and take the shields down to forty percent.

"Forty percent?

That lot should have killed it.

Keep firing, I don't want to waste any more missiles on it than we need to."

"The Rays have arrived in the sector."

"About time.

Rays, can you hear me?"

"Yes Admiral.

We are here for you."

"Could you engage the remaining Xenon M2 ASAP."

"Yes, of course."

...

Jubilee

"First Destroyer down.
You heard the Admiral, target the nearest Corvette."

Sina acquires the target as Pierson navigates around the wreckage of what was several friendly fighters.

"Firing range in eight sezuras."

"Ready four hornets and fire."

"Hornets away."

Another Xenon M comes to a fiery end at the hands of Illandas' turret.
The General selects another.
The upper turret is inactive with nothing in range.

"You are having all the fun General." The Captain remarks.

The Xenon Corvette fires its countermeasures and the Hornets take the bait.

Sina scans the Xenon M6
"Top speed 246m/s, they can outrun us.
Rudder also better than us.
Maximum missile - Silkworm, we beat them there.
Weapons - 16xGPAC, we have 2xGHEPT + 4xGPAC. They beat us in numbers there.
Their weapons are positioned in pairs, a pair on each face, three pairs on the front.
All but the forward firing guns are turrets.
They are very much anti-fighter ships. So hopefully they won't cause us too much damage, but there are three of them closing in around."

"Firing main weapons."

The twin GHEPT roars silently to the target and hits. Again. And again.
The Enemy ship stops and begins turning to face the Jubilee
A group of Busters swoop down from somewhere above making the most of this distraction and strafe a great many shots along its top side. The fighters turn and soar back upward, but too late, the enemy turrets fire and catch two of the Busters before they leave range. The first is destroyed, the second is disabled and spins out of control, the pilot manages to eject.
The Jubilee continues firing but is now receiving shots from all three of the enemy Corvettes.

Pierson speaks up. "Our shields are at ninety two percent.
Enemy number one's shields are at seventy, number two and three both ninety eight."

Sina. "Argon fighters closing on the Corvette from all angles."

"One of the Titans is about to fall. Some unknown weapon from the Carrier just cut right through it...
There it goes now."

"Survivors?"

"Scanning...
Not many, I count forty six."

Six Elites skirt around the Jubilee and fire on the first M6, each launch a Silkworm missile for good measure.

Once more the starbursts eliminate the incoming missiles, but every AHEPT hits bringing the shields down further.

The Busters make a second run, combined with the further shots from the Argon M6 and the Elites, the enemy's shields are now almost down.

The upper turret on the Xenon ship bursts into flames. An internal explosion sends a chunk of the hull plating flying upward.

Several more shots from the Jubilee and two more passes from the fighters is enough to destroy the first of the Corvettes.

"We've lost six more fighters and our shields are down to sixty percent.
The fighters are already on the second M6, target acquired.
Its shields are at eighty five."

"Two more squadrons of Argon fighters have reached it.
We have incoming Xenon fighters now, seven, all M3's, all targeting us."

"Concentrate the main weapons on the Corvette.
We can take the fighters with the turrets.
Contact the Commander of that Elite squadron there, ask him to give us a hand with these fighters."

"Yes Captain...
Elites are targeting enemy fighters."

The Xenon L's close on the Jubilee. The Group of Elites turn from the M6 and start towards the M3's.

The M3's open fire on the Jubilee, each firing three volleys, forty two shots in total.
The mass of green plasma converge on the Jubilee.

"Pierson, hit the boosters now."

The Jubilee jolts forward, all forty two shots miss. The Xenon fighters line up on the M6 again and fire, this time mostly hitting. But they are the last shots they ever fire. The Elites now in range soar up at the unsuspecting L's and deal fatal blows to each.

"Our shields are at forty four percent. Number two at sixty. Three at ninety six.
Five more fighters lost... make that six... seven."

The Admiral is heard. "Boron Shark, their Corvettes are making short work of our fighters, move to assist."

"Good." Remarks Illandas.

The Admiral is heard again. "Rays, can you hear me?"

"Yes Admiral.
We are here for you."

"Could you engage the remaining Xenon M2 ASAP."

"Yes, of course."

The Rays reach top speed near instantly using the boosters.
With the Xenon Destroyer in their sights, they speed towards the battle.

"Ahh, the cavalry." Says Captain Hall.

Sina scans one of the Mark 5 Rays.

"Physical size is less than all of its predecessors.

4x 125Mw shields, less, not much better than a Corvette.

28x GHEPT, more than before. Eighteen of which are forward firing, the other ten are turrets placed all around.

Hornets.

Top speed 646m/s, that is fast.

Acceleration and rudder isn't far off that of the Jubilee.

A fast manoeuvrable heavy attack Destroyer, low shielding and very heavy weapons.

A very unusual ship for the Boron.

I want one."

"A truly remarkable ship." Adds Illandas.

Hall nods in agreement.

A few moments later a volley of high-powered weapons joins the Jubilee's in destroying the second Corvette.

Shark, Jubilee and the twenty-five surviving Argon fighters turn their attention to the remaining Xenon Corvette.

...

Argon One

"The M2 has re-entered firing range of the Titan again. Firing.

Rays will be in range in under a miz.

The Carrier is firing its beam again, it seems to be around twenty sezuras between shots.

Firing at us this time.

Brace for impact."

The Argon M1 shudders as the beam connects.

"Shields at fifty percent."

"I want that thing killed NOW!

Bring us to full speed, continue firing.

Kaar do the same."

The Titan accelerates towards the enemy Carrier. It takes another pounding from the Xenon M2 as it circles up and around behind.

"Very good, the last enemy Corvette is almost down and all the Xenon fighters are destroyed.

Boron fighters, split into two groups and target the M1 and M2.

Shark, Jubilee and Argon fighters, once you are done there, target the nearest and fire-at-will."

"Enemy Carrier is loosing its shields, taking damage."

"Good, keep firing, that thing has much thicker hull plating than we do, it takes a while to get through."

Another Delta HEPT screams to the target. It enters the front fighter launch bay, travels inside momentarily, then strikes something. The plasma impact area melts a great hole through into the ship's interior. A Beta HEPT follows suit and widens the hole, then another.

Power onboard the Xenon ships starts to fluctuate, lights begin to flash on and off. The ship slows and continues to take a pounding.

...

The Xenon M2 pulls in behind the Titan and slows. It begins turning to fire its forward weapons. The Titans turrets and rear guns fire first, but for no noticeable effect.

The Argon One is now between the Rays and their target. They split up. One veers sharply upward, the other down.

A moment later the Rays are directly above and below the almost stationary Xenon Destroyer.

They each turn to face it, weapons ready they accelerate.

They fire as one,

two...four...six volleys each.

Two hundred and sixteen Gamma High Energy Plasma shots hit the Xenon M2.

Once the burst of light from the explosion is gone it is clear that absolutely nothing remains of the Xenon ship.

...

The Shark, Jubilee and fighters take the last Corvette without difficulty.

Only the Xenon Carrier remains, all ships converge on it.

But the Titan gets the kill before the others get within range.

...

Argon One

"This is Ornov to the fleet.

The battle is over.

All fighters return to base.

Will the two Discoverers on rescue pickup any remaining survivors.

Repair crews have precious little time, so work quickly."

"We lost a Titan and many fighters, but we can't stop now.

We must jump right into the next battle.

Into X8."

Chapter 23 (One Last Time)

Teladi Way

Argon One

"Ornov to Fleet, All fighters have landed.
We will now make our way through the asteroid field to the gate.
Destroyers first, Titan take the lead."

"Jubilee, I want you to hang back a while, wait for the Teladi.
The Director assures me they are only a few mizuras away.
Once they arrive guide them through to X8 and catch us up on the other side."

"Yes Admiral." Replies Captain Hall.

The fleet turns back to face the asteroids and the ships arrange themselves in a convoy.

The remaining Titan in the lead, the two Rays next, Argon One and lastly the Shark.
One by one the ships file into the narrow path cutting through the asteroids.
The Jubilee follows to the edge of the field then comes to a stop.

'The Elites haven't left us any room to manoeuvre in here, very snug, but enough to get through. But I'm sure we'll need every last hornet on the other side.' Commander Jalat remarks to himself.

...

Pegasus

'Time to move.
I'll follow the Titan, stick close, jump simultaneously.'

...

Jubilee

Medbay

"Captain Monroe, good you are wake again.
I've taken more scans of your head, there doesn't appear to be any brain damage, a little bruising and swelling, but mostly external. It should be fully healed in a matter of wozuras.
You have elevated levels of adrenaline and electrical activity in the brain, hardly surprising with what you have been through. But what interests me is that it increases when you are sleeping.
Been having bad dreams?"

"No, no dreams."

"Well...

You will probably have headaches until the bruising and swelling go down.
I have some pain killers here if..."

"No Doctor, no pain killers."

"Well they are here if you change your mind.

If you are feeling up to it you should get up and about on that leg to get it settled in.
Just a few mizuras at first until you get used to it."

"Ok."

Monroe sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the bed.

"Carefully, just try to stand at first."

He stands for a moment then the leg twitches and the Captain begins to topple. The Doctor stabilises him.

"Gently now. It is sensitive. Too much effort will cause it to freeze up or twitch like that.

Now try taking a step...

Good. Another...

That's it.

Now walk to the door and back again."

Monroe leaves the Doctor at the bed and makes his way shakily to the door. He picks up speed a little for the last two steps.

As he moves to turn around the leg starts twitching again. Monroe grabs the door frame to prevent falling.

"Don't force it. Try not to think about it."

Monroe takes a breath and tries again to turn, this time with success.

"I see, straight lines are easy, but corners are not so."

"Just a matter of practice.

Now try sitting in the chair over there then standing back up."

The Captain does so, every step more confident.

"Very good.

How would you feel about walking up and down the corridor a few times?"

"How about I walk up to the bridge to see what's going on?"

"A little further than I would recommend on the first attempt, but you are doing very well.

Ok, but be back here in twenty mizuras, you need your rest."

"I feel like I've had enough sleep to last the rest of my lifetime."

"But you weren't even out a stazura."

"Yes, I know.

Ok Doctor, I'll be back in a little while."

Monroe leaves Medbay and makes his way to the elevator at the end of the corridor.

...

Jubilee

Bridge

"Pierson, follow the fleet, then bring us to a stop at the edge of the asteroid field. We will wait for the Teladi there."

"Yes Captain."

Monroe enters the Bridge, now walking reasonably confidently.

He looks around him. A moment of sadness comes over Monroe as he realises the familiarity of the surroundings.

Then he notices the sector display with the list of ships in the fleet on the main viewer,

Titan, two Rays, Argon One, Shark, Jubilee.

"Ah, Captain Monroe, glad to see you up and about."

"For that I owe you my thanks, Lieutenant Pierson, and my life. Perhaps one day I'll return the favour."

"Don't mention it, the most excitement I've ever had."

"Are we not in X8 yet?"

Hall answers. "Not quite, the fleet are about to jump in, we are waiting a few more mizuras for the Teladi then we go in."

"How many ships are the Teladi sending?"

Illandas this time. "An M1 Condor and two TL Albatross', maxed out with fighters mostly Falcons."

'That is far from enough.'

"I hope that is enough."

'The Rays are our best chance, but not...'

"I too hope it is enough.

If their Spore/Gate hasn't opened yet we will only have their small fighters to deal with.

Even if they have over a thousand, they are only M5's. They shouldn't prove too much trouble to the Capital ships. Besides, with the Teladi we will have around two hundred fighters of our own, mostly M3's."

"And if their Capital ships are there?"

'They will be there, I can feel them. They are preparing themselves for the jump as we speak.

Soon, very soon.'

"We may be in trouble if they are.

Still, there may only be four of them, so at least we will out-number them if nothing else."

'Four?

How does he know they only normally use four Capitals. I know that but...

Only four, *chuckle* not that they ever need more.'

"It must be done. It must be destroyed.

The Doctor doesn't want me gone too long, I'd best get back."

Monroe leaves the bridge. He walks down the corridor and enters the Mess Hall then sits in the dark gazing out the window, contemplating.

'I need a plan.

Just incase.

Hell, I need a plan anyway.'

...

Argon One

"Put me through to Fleet Command...
Reamus?"

"Yes Admiral, how are things?"

"We are about to make the jump into X8, so this will be my last communication for a while.

Any word from General Tirnok?"

"Yes, they have been over the whole system, broken it down and rebuilt it, no luck.
He won't be joining you."

"Pity, we really could have used his help now that we've lost Vos.
Well, look after the place until I get back."

"Will do, Reamus out."

Jalat speaks up once the Admiral cuts the communication. "The Titan has reached the gate..."

Jumping.

Fifty sezuras and we will all be through."

"Good."

...

Jubilee

Bridge

"That's the last of the fleet in X8 now."

"We just sit here and wait?"

"Yes, are you actually looking forward to going back in Sina?"

"Well, yes.

Taking on a superior alien force is something of a dream of mine.
I only wish I had completed my training and could be out there in a fighter."

...

Jubilee

Mess Hall

'We are out classed and out gunned, we don't stand a chance.
No matter.
It must be destroyed...'

'Are these my words?
Yes, I must protect.
And it must be destroyed.'

'I have an idea.'

Monroe leaves the Mess Hall and enters the lift.

'Dock.
I hope I have time.'

...

Black Ship

'It is almost time, oh glorious time.'

'We are needed.
The Spore may be in danger.
We must protect.
There is a group of ships coming from the gate made by The Others.'

'Wait, the spore did not tell us this.
The Spore cannot see as far as the gate made by The Others. It sees further than us,
but not as far as the gate made by The Others.'

'How do we know?'

'It is called Titan, Ray, Argon, One, Shark, Teladi, Jubilee, Dock, Plan, Hornets.
How do we know?'

'There are many of them, no matter.
They must be destroyed.
They will make good nourishment.'

...

Jubilee

Docking Bay

Monroe walks over to the hatch into the Discoverer and steps in.
He is a little surprised to see the two engineers inside.

"Captain Monroe!
You are looking much better than when we last saw you."

"Saw me?"

"They were taking you out when we arrived."

"What are you doing?"

"Finishing the repairs.
They messed it up pretty bad with EMP's."

"Finishing?
What is left?"

"Just the Docking Computer. Should be done in five mizuras."

"No time.
Leave it.
You need to go now."

"But Captain, The Lieutenant asked us..."

"You need to go now."

"Yes Captain."

The Engineers replace the circuit boards, collect their tools and leave.

Monroe wanders around the Discoverers cargo bay.

'What have we here?
Hornets, good that will save me hauling them in here.
Three unmarked crates, or at least the markings are facing into eachother so I can't
see them, more Hornets probably.'

Far more than I need, I will use them all anyway.'

'Must hurry.'

...

Argon One

"That's the whole fleet in the sector now."

"Good.

Ornov to fleet.

Form up,

Destroyers take the lead, Carriers behind,

horizontal plane, seven kilometre spacing, match speed of the slowest ship the
Shark.

Humko Mu, your Octopuses are faster than our Discoverers, could you send two
ahead as scouts?"

"Of course Admiral, launching now."

The two Octopuses streak out of the Shark and past the fleet, in moments they
disappear into the darkness ahead.

"Thank you.

We have patched into their sensors, relaying to the fleet.

Pilots, fly sixty kilometres ahead of the fleet then stay at that distance and keep forty
kilometres between yourselves horizontally.

At the first sign of trouble get back here."

"Yes Admiral."

...

Pegasus

'Patching into their sensors.

I think I'll fly ahead with the scouts.

I can't keep up with the cloak on, but I'll catch them when they slow.'

...

Jubilee

Bridge

"We have incoming ships...

It's the Teladi.

Condor and two Albatrosses."

"Comms...

This is Captain Hall of the Jubilee."

"Greetingss Captain Hall, I am Tzessosis Koyalis."

"Glad you could make it.

The rest of the fleet has gone ahead, we will jump immediately and try to catch-up.
Follow us."

"Very well Captain, lead on."

"Pierson, bring us into the entrance to the field then wait for them to reach us."

"Ok, Captain."

"Any sign of more Xenon?" The General says looking at Sina.

"No, General.

Hopefully we won't be seeing them for a while."

"Don't be too sure Lieutenant."

...

"Teladi at ten kilometres."

"Start through the field now."

The four ships make their way steadily between the asteroids.

The huge rocks spaced barely far enough apart to fit the width of gargantuan Condor,
its width far greater than its height.

...

Argon One

"The Jubilee has just arrived...

The Teladi close behind."

"Excellent.

Comms, include the Teladi ships in the fleet communications and radar."

"Done."

"Good to see you Teladi fleet."

"And you Admiral."

"You four ships stick together.

The Condor is a little faster than the Shark. You should catch-up before we reach the station."

...

Black Ship

'Life, oh glorious life, it has begun here.'

...

Jubilee

Discoverer

'The eruption, it has opened.'

'Life, oh glorious life, it has begun here.'

'And it must end here.'

Chapter 24 (Dark Haven)

Black Ship

'Life, oh glorious life, it has begun here.
Our Capital ships are coming now, faster than us, they will pass us soon.'

...

Argon One

A Boron voice is heard. "Admiral, we see something on the long-range sensors."

"Yes, I see it, them.
Four large objects heading this way, fast.
Octopuses, return to the fleet, match the speed of the objects so we can keep an eye
on them.
Fleet, all stop.
We will wait for the Teladi to catch-up.
We will need all our ships together now we know their Capital ships are here.
I would have liked to dodge around their Capitals and take out the Spore, but not
even the Rays are fast enough for that.
Besides we need the Rays here if we stand any chance of taking down the ships.
So we will hit the ships head-on then move on to the Spore after."

"Jalat, how long before the Teladi reach us?"

"Eleven mizuras, now that we have stopped.
The four Black ships will reach us in around fifteen."

"Good.
Launch all of our fighters.
Humko Mu, launch your fighters too.
Again, all fighters position yourselves above and below the Shark and Argon One.
Titan, you have far greater shields and hull than the Rays so position yourself a little
ahead of them.
Carriers at the back."

...

Jubilee

Discoverer

'They are here.
The Great Ones.
And I am not yet ready.'

...

Pegasus

"Woahh..."

'That Octopus nearly clipped my wing as it came back at me.
I thought for a moment it had spotted me.'

'Well there are the enemy ships.
Sensors can't penetrate the hull, just as in the logs of the Armadeaus and the Jubilee.
I'll just have to see them in action to get some readings.'

'Their size is most impressive.
Ugly looking things though, like a giant egg with spikes coming out either end.
I imagine the spikes are weapons, interesting.'

'I wonder if they can see me through the cloak?
If necessary I can drop the cloak and run.'

'To be safe I'll keep my distance.
Ornov has stopped the fleet, I imagine the battle will take place back there.
So I'll take a big side-step and watch them pass.'

The Pegasus makes a ninety-degree turn and stops twenty kilometres out.

'Perfect.
They haven't altered course, either they can't see me or they don't care. I'm happy either way.'

'Just a couple more mizuras and they will pass, a few after that and the battle will begin.
And I have a front row seat.'

'All scanners, sensors and recorders active.'

"Let the battle commence."

...

Argon One

"They have entered scanner range...
Can't penetrate the hull...
On main viewer."

Ornov looks intensely at the image of the four vast Black ships flying in a diamond shape. Two horizontally level with the fleet, one above and one below.
'Just as the Xenon records show, no apparent differences.'
"Close-up on the upper ship."

Jalat zooms the image.

'Same size, same shape, even the same number of weapon spikes.
Let's just hope they are no more powerful than back then.'
"Comms, try contacting the Black ships."

"...Nothing, we don't even know if they are able to receive our communications."

"Try again."

"...Still nothing."

"Teladi four mizuras away.
Enemy eight mizuras."

"Well there are eight mizuras left, keep trying to contact them just incase.
Condor and Albatrosses, please begin launching your fighters now."

"Very well Admiral." Replies Tzessosis Koyalis.

Even with the Teladi ships still in motion the highly trained fighter pilots have no problems streaming out of the docking bays and quickly forming into their squadrons. They stick close-by their motherships matching speed in defensive formations. It doesn't take long for the Condor to empty of its seventy five fighters. The two colossal TL's, however, are a little slower to launch fighters.

...

Jubilee

Bridge

"My goodness that is a lot of fighters!" Exclaims Illandas.
"We all know seventy five for a Condor and average twenty for a TL, I can't remember specifically the capacity of an Albatross, but they are upto sixty each and still launching out there."

Sina comes forward with the figures. "I believe the Albatross is fifteen fighters, ten transports and two tugs normally.
But most Teladi Albatross owners have them refitted to accommodate less fighters and more transports."

"I imagine they are using the main cargo hold in some manor to fit the extra fighters in." The Captain speculates.

"I'm sure you are right Captain.
That's probably why they are taking a while to launch, not ideal in an emergency, but like this where we have a little time to prepare, very good."

"A total of two hundred and ten Teladi fighters in space now, still launching."

"Impressive." Pierson says aloud to himself.

The Doctors voice comes over the internal communications. "Bridge, this is the Doctor. Is Captain Monroe there?"

"No, he left a little while ago, said he was going back to the Medbay."

"Hmmm, odd...

Don't worry, I'll go look for him myself. Probably just fallen over somewhere, I hope he hasn't hit his head again... That would be nasty.

Doctor out."

...

Argon One

"All Teladi fighters have launched." Jalat announces.

"Two hundred and forty five in total, mostly Falcons, maybe three or four squads each of Hawks and Bats.

Add that to the surviving Argon and Boron fighters gives us a total of three hundred and thirteen fighters."

"And the vast majority are M3's.

Excellent!

Far more than I had bargained for, I only wish we had greater strength in our Capital ships.

Still, it is six against four. And no sign of their small ships."

"Tzessosis Koyalis, have your TL's hang back there, I don't want them getting into the fight.

You take up position to the right of the Argon One.

Teladi fighters stay in your squadrons and position yourselves with the Boron and Argon fighters above and below."

"Three mizuras."

"As with the Xenon, I'd like to take down one target first. So everyone target the upper ship.

All fighters, you don't have enemy fighters to worry about this time so take every shot you can. Also at the upper target first. But be careful, if my information is correct these ships have a method of firing to take out fighters, so needless to say, evasive manoeuvres will be in order.

Jubilee, your turrets will be of little use against these ships so hang back with the Carriers, just enter firing range of your main guns and hit them with all you have."

"One mizura."

"Again, we don't want to be stationary so all ships move in on the enemy now, fire as soon as you enter range and continue firing until the first falls.

Good luck."

...

The four enormous ships slow a little as they near firing range.
The translucent ends of the spear-like weapons begin to glow.

...

Jubilee

Discoverer

'The Hornets are ready.
I am prepared to do what must be done.
I will wait in the cockpit and watch for the right moment.'

Monroe takes the pilots seat and powers up the scanners.
He looks out the front of the M5 and sees, upside-down, the underside of the Jubilee.
Ahead are the Destroyers and a little beyond are the four Black ships.

'They are angered.'

'It is not yet time.
But soon.'

...

"Five...four...three...two...one..."

The mass of fighters accelerate upto then past the Titan just as firing range is reached.
The fighters and Titan fire first at the first target.
The battle field is awash with green plasma.
And every shot is a hit. But to no noticeable effect.
They continue their barrage. Fighters weaving in and out of each other, amazingly never crashing and never taking friendly fire.

Sina thinks to herself. 'The skill involved in that is incredible. One day that will be me out there.'

Pierson thinks to himself. 'They must be crazy. Impressive, but crazy.'

The Black ships and the Rays fire all at once a moment later.
The top and bottom Black ship each fire a single concentrated shot at the Titan tearing its shields away and small chunks of the hull.

Kaar screams. "Repair teams, get those fires out, secure the breaches."

The other two Black ships fire the individually spread shots taking out a great many fighters, each vaporised in a ball of flame.

The two Rays once more fire as one. The sheets of heavy weapons fire from each combined with the continued hits from the fighters and Titan begin taking effect on the first target.

It slows a little, the other three taking a slight lead. Noticeable blemishes appear on its smooth black skin where the impacts have been.

"The Titan probably won't survive another hit like that.
Forty two fighters down, mostly Boron." Announces Jalat.

"Titan, pull back a little, let the rays take the lead now.
Carriers, speed-up a little, see if we can distribute their fire more evenly between us.
Fighters, it looks like they can only fire in a small arc directly ahead or behind, see if you can stay out of their line, we don't want to loose any more of you.
Jubilee, stay close to the Argon One, try not to get hit."

'Good plan, not getting hit.' Thinks Pierson.

The fighters are now swarming around the enemy ships staying out of their line of fire and still firing heavily on the first target.

The Black ship at the bottom of the diamond formation stops and begins turning up on its end, an obvious attempt to attack the fighters, the other three continue ahead slowly.

"Fighters, be careful of that lower ship, it is trying to target you."

The three enemy ships that are remaining on course fire again. A moment before the discharge the glowing spikes glow all the brighter, arcs of energy sparked between, then in a single focused burst the energy courses from each of the three and all connect with the Titan.

The Destroyer disappears in a fireball. What little debris remains could be collected by hand.

The shockwave from the destroyed Titan hits all the allied Capital ships physically knocking them a few metres apart, the shields prevent any damage.

The Carriers and Corvette enter firing range and add their firepower to the rest. As before, the single Delta HEPT stands out from all the other spheres of plasma. But this time it seems to make no greater impact than any other weapon.

Having stopped firing for a few seuzuras to allow recharge, the Rays begin again. Now the first target is showing signs of 'death'. It stops and a black liquid flows from the many 'wounds'.

Another bombardment from the Carriers impact on the front end and several of the weapon spikes shatter.

"Almost there.
Just a little more.

Fighters, the fourth target is now in position and preparing to fire, evasive manoeuvres. It will be very difficult to keep out of the line-of-fire of all of them, just do your best, and keep firing."

Many fighters ignite as the fourth ship fires its weapon up at them.

"Twenty five destroyed, six disabled.
Mostly Teladi this time, and one full squadron of Busters."

A group of Falcons make another run towards their target. Strafing shots up its side then across the top. Many of the shots deliberately aimed at previously opened 'wounds'.

Its weapons stop glowing.

"Finally, the first target is destroyed.

Everyone target the one on the left, that's the one furthest north.

Fighters, try to put the second target between you and the fourth, use it as a shield, they are remarkably good at taking out fighters.

They seem to be weaker on their sides.

Rays, break off and swing around to the north of the target, hit it all you can on its side.

We can't lock on with missiles, but if you get a good line fire them manually.

Try to save as many Hornets as you can for the Spore."

The two remaining allied Destroyers leave the group and very quickly leave firing range.

They stop and turn back to face the target.

Black ship two and three fire again, this time at the Shark. The Sharks weaker shields and old style hull have no chance against the incredibly powerful weapons. The Boron Carrier begins to break apart. Slowly at first, then fires break out of the hull all along the sides. The ship falls cleanly in two then both halves are slowly consumed in fire.

There is time for many of the crew to escape in their EVA suits.

"Survivors?"

"Yes, almost three hundred."

"I don't want to call any fighters out of the battle.
Did I see a Lifter in the hanger as I came in?"

"Yes Admiral."

"Send it out to rescue the survivors."

"...Done."

...

Lifter

"Launching."

The Lifter exits the rear launch doors of the Argon One then swings around to face the battle and the wreckage of the Shark.

The Jubilee can be seen not far below the huge Argon Carrier. The twin GHEPT's fire again and again, over and over, each hitting the second target a little way in the distance, this distance grows ever shorter.

"Just go pickup the survivors." he says, he must be out of his mind.
It's a warzone out here, literally.'

The fourth enemy ship fires again at the fighters as it moves in closer.

'More of our pilots lost, I wonder who?
I'm glad I'm not a fighter pilot.
Their explosions seem tiny in comparison to the colossal ships they surround, almost insignificant.
Hell, the Argon One is small compared to them.'

'Target nearest survivor.
Six K.
Good they are all heading this way.'

The second Black ship begins turning north, away from the two remaining Carriers. It has obviously chosen one of the Rays as its next target. All the time it takes hits from all allied ships, most effectively the fighters.

An arc of energy jolts forth from the third and strikes the Condor, its more powerful shields are only reduced to fifty five percent.

Before the second has lined up on one of the Boron Destroyers, the Rays re-enter firing range at top speed. The twin M2's slow as they let loose with every shot they have, once their weapons are drained they speed-up and turn left of the target. It continues turning to track, though slower now, several 'wounds' have opened up. Now the rear weapon of the second enemy ship comes in to play, it fires on the Condor as the fourth fires again on the fighters, the mighty bolts of energy lighting the battle field once more.

...

Argon One

"Another thirty two fighters lost.
We are almost out of Boron fighters, Argon are getting sparse.
The Condor's shields are down to...
The third is firing again.
The Condor has lost shields and is taking hull damage."

"Bring us forward faster, towards the third ship, see if we can get it to change target."

The fourth fires once more at the fighters, almost every hit is a kill. It then begins to speed up in the direction of the second.
A moment later it is parked alongside the second and starts tracking the incoming Rays.

"With almost half of our fighters lost it looks like number four has decided the Rays are a better target. Watch yourselves."

The Rays come back in for another strike.
Maximum speed straight at their target.
As soon as firing range is reached they begin to fire and slow a little. The two Black ships also fire, both on the same Ray.
Wave after wave of GHEPT's hit the target and begin to tear through its skin, chunks of flesh-like material peel from the ship. That same black liquid fills the space around the dead ship.
Simultaneously the targeted Ray receives the two bolts of enemy fire and instantly loses its shields and many ships systems including rudder control.
The second Ray turns left and accelerates away again.

However, the damaged Ray ploughs headlong into the alien corpse. The Ray cuts its way inside the Black ship and lodges there for a moment.

The Admiral looks on hoping that they might have survived. But the collision impact of the two ships is more than enough to shred both. The Ray explodes inside the alien ship, the toughness of the Black hull is enough to keep the bulk of the explosion contained.

"Number two down, everyone target number three."

"Number three is getting a little close for comfort, four kilometres from the Condor.
Firing again.

The Condor is going down... We have a few survivors, not many."

"Lifter, you have more survivors to collect once you are done there, Teladi this time."

"Yes sir."

Jalats eyes freeze on the sector map. "Admiral."

"Yes Commander?"

"We have more company.
I'm reading maybe a thousand... maybe more."

...

Black Ship

'They are killing our Capital ships.
They are powerful indeed.
More powerful than the Silver enemy.
They will be stopped.'

'We will be there soon.
Our other defence ships are already in the system.'

'No matter.
They will be destroyed.
They will make good nourishment.'

...

Argon One

"How long?"

"Ten mizuras.
Maybe less, they are accelerating slowly.
We still have two of their Capitals left."

We are down to one Ray the Argon One the Jubilee and one hundred and fifty eight fighters."

Ornov looks out the front view as if in a trance.

"Admiral...
Admiral Ornov!"

"Yes I see..."

The third Black ship begins lining up on the Argon One. The forth tracks the Ray as it swings around for another pass.

"Jubilee, get out!
Run, there is nothing more you can do here."

...

Jubilee

"Admiral?" Captain Hall questions.

"That is an order!"

"Very well Admiral."

Illandas speaks to the Captain. "He has a point.
They have taken four of our Capital ship for two of theirs.
With only two remaining on either side the outcome is inevitable.
I agree with him on this, there is nothing more we can do."

"Pierson, back to Teladi Way.
Top speed."

"Yes sir!" Pierson exclaims, perhaps too joyfully.

The Corvette swings around under the Carrier and almost instantly hits top speed in the direction of the gate.

The Admiral is heard again. "Illandas, are you there?"

"Yes I can hear you."

"I won't abandon the Jubilee or the Boron by jumping out. We will cover your escape.
So I probably won't get out of this alive. Fleet Command will be yours.
It will be your responsibility to stop this invasion. Hopefully they will only take one sector at a time giving you time to prepare.
Rebuild the fleet, I don't care what the finance department says, you know what fire power is needed here, do whatever it takes.
Take the records of this battle and the other records, you know which, and go to the Paranid and Split. Damn-well get them involved in this.
Good luck."

"Good luck to you too."

"Ornov out."

...

Pegasus

'This is going very badly.

When I return I will be strongly recommending that the entire Paranid Fleet be positioned in Teladi Way.'

'I will wait a little longer to see the end of this fight, then I too will leave and report back.'

...

Jubilee

Discoverer

'Interesting turn of events.

My plan will need amended.

There is still time.'

...

Argon One

"Lifter, forget the remaining survivors you get out too.

Albatrosses, you leave as well. You fighters are needed to cover the escape, I doubt they will survive."

A Teladi voice. "Admiral, the Director will be unhappy at the losss of thesse fighterss, but I agree.

And there iss no profit in our deathss in addition.

We bid you farewell and good luck."

The Two Teladi TL's activate their Jumpdrives and leave the sector.

"Ray, Fighters, forget saving the Hornets, everyone with a clear shot take it now!"

The Ray speeds in for its second run on the third Black ship. Its forward weapons and Hornets ready.

Fighters clear the way for the Boron Destroyer and ready their own Hornets, still firing every shot they can.

"All Hornets away.
Forty eight in total.

That should hurt it."

Number four takes a shot across at the Ray as it turns away.
The Rays shields are reduced to eight percent.

An ever growing sphere of blue light radiates outward from the third Black ship as the clusters of missiles approach. Five kilometres, ten, fifteen, encompassing most of the battle field. Then it fades and disappears.

"The Hornets have just stopped... dead... deactivated."

"Damn...
Continue firing.
Ready another volley of Hornets maybe they can only do that once."

The third is now aimed at the Argon One and fires.
The ship shakes.

"Shields at sixty percent.
Hornets away.
Twenty two in total this time."

Another blue sphere disables the missiles.

"Damn!!!
All ships, it looks like missiles are of no use...
Well, we have no other use for them now, use them at will."

...

Jubilee

Sina. "The Albatrosses have left and the Lifter with the survivors is following us.
We are too fast for it, should we slow down and escort it out?"

Illandas. "No, it can make its own way home.
We have our orders, and a higher mission.
How long to the gate?"

Pierson answers. "Just under ten mizuras."

Captain Hall presses a control and the main viewer displays the battle scene.

...

Argon One

The continual bombardment on the sides of third enemy ship, mainly due to the fighters, is becoming noticeable, blemishes and several small wounds are beginning to show.

The Ray comes in for another shot, this time from above. With weapons fully recharged again and shields up to thirty percent, it lets loose with everything, Hornets included.

Once more the missiles are countered but the shots take their toll.
A large wound is opened up on top, again the black liquid pours out.
But this doesn't stop it.
Number three fires forwards and backwards together. The front weapon taking the Argon Carrier's shields down to zero and causing several hull breaches. The rear weapon eliminating many more fighters.
The Ray swings around and accelerates away just as number four fires, and misses.

"The Damned thing missed?
That's a first.
Time to the small ships arrival?"

"Three mizuras."

"At least let us take this one before they get here."

"There are more...
I have sixteen contacts on the long-range sensors...
Size is almost that of a Titan."

"Nice!"

With the Ray out of range, number four fires at the fighters destroying almost half of the few remaining. Only Teladi falcons remain.

The Argon One fires its final shots into the front of the third Black ship, several weapon spears shatter, but not before it returns fire tearing the front end off the Argon Flagship.

The burning wreckage spins out of control downward spiralling. Fires grow as sections of the hull plating break off. The engines glow bright for a moment then blow. Fragments shear outward.

The fighters deal the last few fatal blows to the dying Black ship.

...

Boron Ray

"This is Kulo Wo of the Ray to the thirty one remaining fighters.
We are all that is left, the only chance for the escaping ships.
Obviously we can't take out the last Capital ship, never mind the rest of their fleet or the Spore.
But I have an idea to buy them a little more time.
We run. We need to make sure they are chasing us and not the Jubilee. So we run at the Spore, make sure we have their attention.
Even we can not outrun their Capital ships once they reach top speed, but it should draw them a little further from the gate.
No... You fighters should try to escape, I'm sure the Ray will be distraction enough for them.

Go now while there may still be time."

"We will not abandon you now.

We will continue firing on the sides of the target for as long as we are alive."

"I thank you, my friends."

The fighters do exactly as promised and continue their attack, no matter how futile.
The Ray heads straight for the Spore and the nearing cloud of small ships.
The fourth Black ship turns and begins to accelerate after the Ray.

"It is working.

It may only give them a mizura or two extra but that may be enough."

...

Pegasus

'Time to go, I think.
Ten mizuras to the gate.
I still don't dare drop the cloak until I'm far beyond the range of any Argon Fleet
ships.'

...

Jubilee

"Time to gate?"

"Four mizuras."

"The Ray is doing a good job of distracting them, leading them away.
We will easily make it out now.
Possibly the lifter too."

Pierson speaks. "Admiral Illandas, I've been thinking..."

"Admiral Illandas... That has a nice ring to it.
Sorry, you were saying?"

"Yes, I think it may be time we gave this system a proper name.
Dark Haven."

"Dark Haven...
Hmm, also has a nice ring to it.
Certainly appropriate...
Very well, consider it done. My first act in Admiralty.
I hear-by name this system 'Dark Haven'."

...

Black Ship

'It is coming to us.
One of their large ships.
Fast.
We will move aside or it may kill some of us in passing.'

'Our Capital ship will catch it soon and our large defence ships are coming too.
It will be destroyed.
It will make good nourishment.'

'We must protect the Capital ship.
It can not kill the small ones, they are too fast for it to kill them.'

'Their large ship has passed us now.
We are almost there.'

'We surround their smaller ships and kill them.'

...

Jubilee

"All fighters are lost.
The Black Capital ship is almost upon the Ray...
Entering firing range...
It is gone."

"Two mizuras to the gate."

"Captain, The Discoverer is breaking away from us."

...

Pegasus

'Just me the Jubilee and the Lifter left.
The Black Capital ship is heading back for the gate and the Jubilee again.
The sixteen smaller Capital ships are still heading this way.
And the cloud of small ships are gathering wreckage and returning to the Spore.'

'The Jubilee is almost out.
It will be a close race between me and the Black ship for second out. The Lifter won't
make it, two more mizuras and it will be caught.
Actually, I might hang back a while, I don't want to get too close to that thing just
incase it can see me.
Changing course, forty five degrees down.'

'What's this?

The Jubilee is launching its Discoverer.
I wonder why.'

...

Discoverer

'It is time.'

"Security over-ride, release docking clamps."

The clamps release and the Discoverer parts from the Corvette.

...

Jubilee

"Scan it, who is onboard?"

"Monroe."

"Captain Monroe, this is Captain Hall, what the hell are you doing?...
Monroe!"

"Twenty sezuras to gate, will we slow down?"

"No Pierson, keep going.
Monroe, answer!"

...

Discoverer

Captain Halls voice is heard. "Captain Monroe, this is Captain Hall, what the hell are you doing?...
Monroe!...
Monroe, answer!"

"Don't worry Captain, everything is fine, just fine...
or it will be.
Get out, now.
I am ready.
There is no time left.
I will destroy the gate."

Monroe turns the communications off.

'This is for the Armadeaus.
For Cellone!'

...

The Jubilee disappears from Dark Haven through the gate to Teladi Way.
Two sezuras later a ball of blinding fire and light engulfs the gate.

...

Pegasus

"Uh-oh"