

KAN GA L'STAR

CHAPTER ONE

Home Time Equivalent: Sunday 24th December 2766 – 0916 hours

Wednesday 14th December 1994 – 0346 hours

The star system in Sector 121 was unlikely to ever have a name. It was presently known by its chart number B9/EL4567934. In reality it was no longer a star system, it was a system of two white dwarfs in a death dance that would culminate in a supernova sometime in the next two months.

Under the guise of researching a Type 1a supernova, the "Denton" had been given the task of monitoring activity within the neighbouring Sector 120 and beyond as these sectors marked a boundary separating known space from the totally unexplored regions of this part of our galaxy. That is, unexplored by members of the Alliance of Planets in the 28th century; of which, Earth was one of the five supervisory councils that co-ordinated the activities of its allies in the areas of research, exploration, and defence.

This same system was located near an aggressive race known as the Laotians. These people, in the sense that all sentient beings are people of equal rights within the Alliance, have continually, as members, used the Alliance when it suits them, but tended to breach its regulations when they conflicted with their expansionary aims. Their current acquisition involved a political move to dominate the Rotans in Sector 43, a peaceful people in early stages of space travel, with little capacity to defend themselves against any space fairing race. The Laotians had so far blockaded their trade routes and hijacked shipments. Distrustful of any technologically advanced civilisation, the Rotans had not joined the Alliance fearing they would simply be exchanging one tyrant for another.

The ensuing political unrest among Alliance citizens combined with escalating civil demonstrations, forced the Alliance to abandon political posturing and adopt a more military stance. Evidence had also been uncovered to imply some other race was stirring up trouble with an unknown agenda. The resulting political outcry among Alliance planets led to a blockade of Sector 120, the home of the Laotians, with fleets facing each other across the border waiting for an excuse to attack.

The "Denton" was under the command of Foster Bryant, a serious man of many years experience, dedicated to the Alliance and its Code and proud of his command uniform of black trousers, grey top with yellow sleeves proudly carrying the Alliance logo of the planet Earth overlaid with a sweeping "A" over the left breast.

His second in command was Michael Phillips, a man who'd been born in the 20th century where he had been a special investigatory agent who found himself caught up in the affairs of the 28th. His experience in this century was limited but he had mixed feelings about returning to the 20th where he had left behind a life he did not want to remember. His usual carefree, take it as it comes, attitude had been stunted by recent experiences. He had come on this mission to prove to

himself and others that he could be a useful member of this society and that his skills as a trouble shooter could also serve him here. He wore the same Command uniform as Foster.

Mike, knowing nothing about supernova, had done some research to discover that a white dwarf results when a G type star the size of our sun runs out of fuel. This disrupts the balance between two opposite forces, the star's gravity trying to collapse the star and the nuclear fuel burning in the stars core creating outward pressure. When the fuel cools gravity wins and the star suddenly collapses within seconds creating an enormous shock wave causing the outer part of the star to explode leaving behind a dense core and an expanding cloud of hot gas creating a nebula.

Two scientists accompanied them on the trip Sol Webster and Neuman Browne who wore the pale blue science uniform. Sol Webster was a noted planetologist of Jewish ancestry. He was an energetic, bubbling man whose enthusiasm was infectious. His age was unknown, and he refused to stifle speculation with fact. Most people put him at sixty Earth years but his grey thinning hair, unusual in a man so young, put doubt on that assessment.

His fellow scientist, Neuman Browne was his opposite, he had no sense of humour, said very little and when he did it was to complain. He was of Anglo-Saxon blood, large build with an appetite to match and tended to work quietly by himself, sharing little with his colleagues but expecting them to keep him informed, thus making himself unpopular. Unfortunately, he was recognised as being the best in his field which Sol would have liked to challenge, just on principal, but like everyone else he put up with him.

Prior to entering the doomed system, the 'Denton', which resembled a diamond shaped crystal, broke from temporal warp and materialised on the border of Sector 120 where it was challenged by the Alliance Fleet on alert there. The main screen of the ship's Control Room revealed numerous ships of various designs lined up along the border probing into the region for any signs of hostility. Beyond that barrier Laotian ships waited tensely for an opportunity to hit back. "Identify yourself, time ship and state your mission."

Time ships were usually, a one-man craft but carried facilities to comfortably support four including sleeping quarters and a separate eating area located in rooms off from the spacious main control room area. The Control Room was dominated by a set of three instrument panels designed to be operated from a standing position. These panels swung in a reverse, three-piece boomerang shape curving around the display screen several feet away. The central panel, known as the *drive panel*, operated the ships tachyon drive and temporal field generator controlling movement through time and space. The right panel, known as the *command panel*, monitored drive controls, operated scanners and communications. The left panel, known as the *systems panel*, monitored life support, damage control and transcorr systems.

Several high-backed chairs were located around the room. These were moveable but sealed themselves to the floor when positioned so they did not move during rough manoeuvres. Mike was manning the command panel and hesitantly activated the commslink. He was unfamiliar with the equipment and concerned about making an error. "This is the time ship 'Denton' on a mission to Sector 121 to study a star system in decay. We are here to notify you of our presence in the area should you require additional assistance."

"We could do with some action here, 'Denton'. Sitting around waiting is putting us on edge. Seems strange that we would divert resources to such an event at this time?" queried the unidentified commander. Mike looked to Foster for guidance in how to reply.

Foster stepped in and took over. "This is Foster Bryant. Would you have us sit around getting bored when we could be out looking at a collapsing star, Commander? Should things liven up here, you can always call us back."

"We'll keep that in mind and try not to spoil your fun just because we're bored. Send us your clearance," the Commander responded, sounding friendlier.

"Sending it through now," replied Foster, indicating to Mike that he should activate the authority link with their computer.

A moment later the Commander checked his read out. "Authority confirmed. You're cleared to pass, catch you on your return trip, Blockade Command, out." The commlink went dead and Foster returned to the drive panel.

As he did Browne peered over his shoulder to verify what he was doing. "If you take that route you'll take longer to reach our destination than is necessary. I suggest you take this route," stated Browne as he attempted to alter course.

Foster grabbed his arm and held it firmly. "This is my ship and I will determine the course. Don't ever try to alter my course settings or interfere with the operation of this ship. Is that clear?" snapped Foster.

Browne stepped back pulling his arm free of Foster's grip. "This is outrageous! How dare you attack me like that! I'll have you reported. In fact I will contact the Alliance this very minute. I'm not going to be treated like this."

"Let me explain some facts to you! This ship is now on comms silence! We are in hostile territory and therefore in danger."

"I'll not have any clandestine mission of yours interfere with my studies," protested Browne angry and defiant.

Foster was equally forceful. "You only got the okay for your study as a cover story for our main mission which is a little more complicated than just visiting a dying star system. We are seeking any link between this Sector and the Laotians. That requires us to scan for any ship movements, communications, or other evidence of contact while we move in to study that star. That is our priority not your disintegrating star!" Foster waited for a response.

Browne stepped towards Foster his face reflecting the storm of emotion that was building within his chubby frame. "You mean you have involved us in a spy mission! You have endangered our lives? We didn't come on this trip for this! I demand to be taken back!"

"Sorry, doctor. You wear the uniform of the Alliance. You go where you're instructed. I require you to man the scanners and search as instructed for anything unusual," replied Foster.

"And if I refuse?" challenged Browne.

"You'll miss your main event because I'll divert your resources to my mission. In the meantime, we'll not reach your star until the scans of the area are complete," warned Foster as he switched his attention to Mike who was watching patiently from his station at the command panel. "Mike! Cut commlink. Begin scan while I plot our course along the border."

"Yes, sir." replied Mike, ignoring Browne who stood his ground. Foster walked around him diffusing his stance and infuriating him further. Sol, a little disappointed at the delay, was beginning to enjoy the entertainment and felt it could be adequate compensation just to see Browne tormented.

Several hours later Browne completed the required scan giving a negative result "I hope

you're satisfied," he snapped. Foster ignored the smug countenance of the scientist and examined the data on his monitor pad. Browne not able to leave the matter rest pressed Foster further. "Now that we have completed this monumental waste of time, can we now move on to our destination?"

Foster was becoming a little tired of this man's complaining. "We will move on when I'm good and ready, Mr Browne. And I'm not ready and the more I hear from you the less ready I become," he replied petulantly.

Browne was taken aback, but only momentarily and he prepared to retaliate. Sol seeing the potential confrontation stepped in. "I suggest Neuman that you sit still and be quiet. You may care to engage in argument, but I wish to study the formation of a white dwarf... Mr Bryant! We're in your hands."

Foster put down his monitor pad, agreeing the scans had revealed nothing. It had been a waste of time in one sense but in this type of operation even a negative result told them something. He glanced across at Browne who sat fuming and smiled to himself before addressing the other scientist. "Thank you, Mr Webster. Computer! Set course for star system B9. Everyone continue your scans and stay alert. I also want a scan done of every orbiting body for signs of intelligent habitation."

"Really, Captain. When are we supposed to get down to our studies," complained Browne, his tone more reasonable but still carrying a sharp edge. "Anyone living in this system would have packed up and left long ago."

"I understand that, Mr Browne. We must be aware, other races, some possibly hostile, may also be here for the same reason you are and perhaps the Laotians or their allies have left evidence on one of these bodies that could be useful to us. Besides, part of those preliminary studies consists of a scan of the system and the effects on existing planets and satellites. Mr Phillips and myself will assist you in taking those readings leaving you free to direct your efforts to your main task."

"I believe that is quite acceptable, Captain." replied Sol, before Browne could say any more. Neuman gave him a vicious glance and walked off.

Mike sat quietly at his station and watched as Foster gave instructions to the ship's computer. "Voice Control! Scan the system known as B9 and supply configuration. Seek anomalies from archives on this system."

A monotonous sexless voice responded. "System has no remaining planets having been absorbed in the system destruction that formed the white dwarfs. There is considerable debris and gaseous clouds no signs of life."

"Voice Control. Take us in slowly and conduct detailed scan for artificial structures or life forms. Mike! Do a scan of that asteroid belt. Doctors, you concentrate on your white dwarfs," ordered Foster. Mike took up his position on the right supp station with Foster on the left. The two scientists huddled together on the command panel as the ship automatically moved into the system to begin its vigil.

Home Time Equivalent: Sunday 5th March 2767 – 0925 hours
Thursday 23rd February 1995 – 0355 hours

The Alliance Control Centre could have been described by anyone from the 20th as being the size of a movie cinema. Above the main floor were balconies where people busied themselves checking equipment and taking readings. There was always a lot of activity up there compared to the stalls where people were seated at a number of control panels performing their duties.

Up front where you'd expect to find the stage and screen was a monitor supplying galactic statistics and providing reports like a web page. Sitting in front of the monitoring screen was the main control panel where Tom Cooper, O'Wen Pinnock and Sandy Michaels sat.

Lt Thomas Cooper was a tall dark skinned man of African descent. He was powerfully built but gentle of nature and had held the position of senior scanning science officer for the Earth based Alliance Command Centre for six years. He was well known for his instincts and his ability to read more into the data than was normally possible.

Jim Farrel Controller of all Earth Alliance Forces had learned to trust those instincts in the past when making decisions. When Cooper wandered into his office with a disturbed look, he knew there was trouble. Inwardly he groaned, he'd enough worries with the troubles in Sector 120 plus the riots that still occupied his security people around the city. "What is it, Tom?" he asked indicating his officer take a seat.

"It's those asteroids, sir. They bother me. Something seems wrong. I can't provide you any proof it's just a feeling. I know Commodore Malcolm told me to stop wasting time on them and concentrate on more important matters but I can't take my mind off them."

Jim knew enough about Tom's instincts to take him seriously. "Explain your concerns."

"They slowly almost undetectably change course. I have not identified the cause of the deviation in their projected flight path; it could be some gravitational force I've overlooked. I'm just not sure but I can't predict their ultimate destination," replied Cooper.

Jim listened. "Is there any danger of impact?"

"No. None of them are big enough to be of concern if they should approach the planet. They'll all burn up on hitting atmosphere ... but I just have a feeling."

"What time have we got?"

"In thirty hours the lead group will come within range of the Earth." replied Tom.

"What do you suggest?"

"I'm not sure. There are too many of them to destroy individually. Perhaps raise planetary shields as they pass as a precaution. It might seem like an over reaction..." he suggested meekly.

"I'll get someone out there to investigate," instructed Jim. Tom nodded, pleased that his concerns were being taken seriously but embarrassed that he had to seek that support on so little evidence. Tom left his office as Jim sat back to stare at his featureless wall and wished they would install that live fish tank he'd ordered. The problem was that no one had the real thing any more, too much trouble feeding them, caring for them, maintaining water temperature. Why do it when a feature holographic wall had the same effect. But it wasn't the same. For anyone who had travelled into the past and experienced a real world, holograms were inadequate substitutes.

Foster approached Mike who was seated at the Command panel watching the scan readings they had operated for the last two months. Mike was almost asleep and the arguing in the background between the two scientists was placing her nerves on edge.

“Anything to report?”

“Other than those two bickering non-stop, the area out there is clear. It would appear we are the only ones interested in this stellar event. I did notice a freighter on the fringes of the system four hours ago but it was just normal traffic.”

“Anything from the border patrols?” asked Foster. Mike shook his head.

Browne approached he appeared worried. “The event is not taking place as expected.”

"What do you mean?" asked Foster concerned.

“I don’t know how much you know about what’s going but these two white dwarfs are spiralling in towards each other drawing material from each other that will lead to a carbon fusion reaction that will trigger runaway nuclear fusion. They will either collide or draw enough material from its companion to cause ignition in the shell igniting the core once it exceeds the Chandrasekhar limit.”

“Stop there! What is the Chandrasekhar limit?” asked Mike.

“A white dwarf cannot remain stable if it is greater in size than 1.44 times the size of our sun,” replied Sol while Browne was irritated by Mike’s ignorance.

Foster pressed on. “So what’s the problem?”

“We had expected it to be unusual but not this!” explained Browne.

"How unusual?" pressed Foster becoming irritated by his evasiveness.

“We have non-standard luminosity,” he replied as if that explained everything. Foster and Mike stared at him blankly.

Sol interjected knowing Browne was not good at explanations. “Type 1a supernovas usually show strong lines of ionised silicon absorption this one is not conforming to predicted models and we are expecting to have highly broadened and blended emission lines indicating very high expansion velocities for ejected material.”

“How does that affect us?” pressed Foster.

“It means that we will only have seconds to escape a concussion blast carrying a lot of very fast-moving debris. We will have to be far away when it goes,” explained Sol.

“And I am sure. This star will go supernova in eight hours and thirty-seven minutes,” announced Browne arrogantly.

Sol stared at him in disbelief. “No one could be that precise or that certain.”

Foster noted Sol's wariness and realised that Browne was simply attempting to impress him with his accuracy. Foster was not to be influenced by what he considered an irresponsible display of petulant pride. In space there was no room for such pettiness, only the certainty of facts. "Complete your studies, gentlemen. I want an accurate safety margin for our departure not calculated guesses. Our lives will depend on it." He gave Browne a warning glance but was ignored.

"Foster!" called Mike quietly, distracting him from attempting to attract Browne's attention. "I think you should look at this." Foster joined Mike examining the readings given. "It

seems to indicate a structure of some kind on that asteroid."

"Voice Control, place on screen, structure being scanned," ordered Foster. What appeared on screen held the four-man crew of the 'Denton' spell bound. Stretched across several square miles of real estate was an enormous Fortress imbedded into a dead asteroid. Its age was unknown, but it was in a state of perfect preservation. Although one could easily imagine the cobwebs and dusty interior. The design was strangely medieval, its walls the musty grey of porous rock with a maroon outline around the turrets and battlements giving a slight Arabic look to its European configuration.

Its roots were deep in a large crater that formed a mote around its walls - walls that stretched some forty storeys into the airless void around the asteroid. The tallest building had an antenna like structure or spire that went another four stories into space. The Fortress dominated the asteroid rising to heights never dreamed of by designers of old; stretching five miles or eight kilometres in each direction from the centre structure, occupying the entire upper surface of the asteroid. Below was a jagged clump of rock that acted as a foundation for the structure. Foster directed the ship to move in and slowly circle the structure

Neuman ignored the activity. He had no interest in these distractions and demonstrated no excitement at all; his attention was firmly focused on his instruments that were directed at the white dwarfs. The whole incident was irritating and their ability to be diverted from their main task disappointing but he'd given up fighting them, if they didn't understand the importance of the data then it was up to him, as usual. He had over the years learned not to depend on others, they usually let you down. He had always relied on himself and used others to relieve the work load.

Sol Webster scanned the structure, fascinated by what he saw. His interest extended well beyond professional interest and into the excitement of exploring the unknown. He felt like a kid who had discovered pirate treasure in his back yard. "This is incredible!" he remarked unable to stand still, the star's significance fading into obscurity in the shadow this discovery.

"They'd be other supernovas," Sol thought as his excitement grew.

Mike watched nervously. This was his first venture into space and although he'd dreamt of exploring the stars as a kid and discussed the possibilities of life existing on other planets he'd never expected to reach one of those stars, let alone, be the first to encounter a new species. He was not sure if he was ready for this step.

Foster, as an experienced trouble shooter, was weighing up the possible risks. He moved around the console and stared at the mysterious castle, crossing his arms as he waited for a report. "It's deserted. No life forms, no energy output. It's probably been out here abandoned for centuries." announced Sol, disappointed.

"And nothing to explain how that thing got out here. Why didn't we detect it before?" asked Mike worried he'd failed in his job of monitoring the system.

Foster unfolded his arms. "Anyone like to comment on what it is?" asked Foster, staring at the dark, lifeless structure on screen.

Sol stepped away from his scanner and joined Foster staring at it in wonder. "It's what it appears to be. A stone castle in space, with no life support and no evidence of any technology beyond that necessary to build a medieval castle. Scanners show no evidence of any advanced culture, no advanced metal alloys or substances detected."

"So how did it get here?" queried Foster, waiting for other conjectures.

"Then your assumptions are obviously wrong," grunted Neuman without looking up from his own studies but proving he was at least listening. Sol found himself irritated by this man's on going attempt to prove his superiority and gave him a disapproving scowl before he decided to challenge him but was cut off by Neuman.

Browne leaned back in his chair casually, refusing to be ruffled, comfortable in the knowledge that he was always right. "Are you seriously proposing that it is not from this system? It would take millennia for that chunk of rock to travel here from anywhere else."

"What are you suggesting? That it survived the break up of some planet forming this asteroid belt. Isn't it equally fantastic to believe it was just flung out into space? Any planet breaking up would be unlikely to leave a structure like this completely intact and even if there was a one in a billion chance it would have had some sign of such an event."

"Assumption!" scoffed Neuman indignantly. "You had best work with facts and not emotion and guesswork. We have no evidence this structure is native to this system, nor do we have the reverse. It's not logical that it should come from outside therefore it must have come from somewhere within. You just have not found where."

"You're a fine one to talk about assumptions and fact. How about your estimate of the supernova? No one could predict that, given the instability that star is exhibiting. You are just posturing but you don't fool me you arrogant over rated theorist. It's time you joined the real world instead of hiding behind an overrated fading reputation," retorted Sol angrily.

Foster listened patiently to the two adversaries then decided to interrupt before it got out of hand, cutting off Browne's response. "When you two have finished arguing, I suggest we go take a closer look."

Sol swung around, a big grin on his face, excited at the idea of exploring the unknown, sweeping away his anger. "I'm with you," he said, eagerly.

Neuman was horrified going pale at the thought. "You're not planning to land are you? What about our studies? I will not tolerate further delays!"

Foster was beaten to a reply by Sol who was taking pleasure in making Neuman squirm. "Of course we are and I recommend in the middle of the castle. There's a courtyard there." replied Sol eagerly seeking Foster's approval.

"Why there in particular?"

"No reason. It just seems a good place to start," replied Sol, reminding Foster of a kid waiting for a treat from his father.

"Alright. Centre it is."

"Really?" Sol was surprised by the agreement.

"Yes, but we're not going to land. Mike and I will use the transit corridor while you gentlemen cover our backs and of course, continue your studies. I wouldn't want to be accused of keeping you from your scientific duties." Foster locked in the co-ordinates and stepped into the next room. Sol looked disappointed. He'd been looking forward to exploring the unknown castle himself but realised he was not trained for such a trip. Once they had verified it was safe, he could take a quick trip down. There was plenty to see and not enough time, this way he could select the best areas to visit.

Mike joined Foster on the platform after putting on Survival Suits Type A and taking weapons. "Voice Control, activate transcorr." The familiar swirling corridor opened up behind

them and the two men stepped through, ceasing to exist for a few seconds while their bodies were in transit to the surface via the wormhole, clad in their silver space suits to protect them from the vacuum of the airless castle.

"We're down, Sol. I'll keep an open channel so that you can keep a record of our progress." reported Foster before directing his attention to the study of his instruments. Mike paid no attention; he was looking at the enormous courtyard that stretched out before them for about a kilometre, to a broad row of steps leading into the main building. His gaze climbed up the side of the building which lacked the glass simplicity of tall buildings in the 20th. This building was tapered with what looked like large balconies at various levels surrounded by castle walls complete with gun turrets and stone masonry.

"Mike. Would you make an atmosphere check to verify my readings," asked Foster, his tone putting Mike on the alert that something could be wrong.

Mike pulled out his scanner and conducted a reading. "We have full atmosphere out there," he reported "How can that be? Our earlier readings said there was no life support."

"That's what it read up there, but down here it's different. Sol, you getting this?" queried Foster.

"Yes, confirming earlier readings from up here. No atmosphere. You had best check what else is different?" suggested Sol, cutting off Foster's next question.

He placed his scanner on longer range. "This courtyard has a force dome which we must have come straight through. I'm also picking up life forms and energy output indicating high levels of technological equipment in use."

"Feels like we were lured down by false readings," commented Mike.

"You could be right but I don't want to leave until we've learned more. Sol, check your lock on us just in case," ordered Foster.

Sol returned after a moments delay. "I think your decision has been made for you. We have no lock. Scanners indicate no life forms to lock onto including yourselves. You're on your own."

"Thanks, Sol. Send a report back to the Alliance just in case. We're going exploring," replied Foster as he took off his helmet.

"What are you doing!" screamed Mike alarmed by the reckless act. He watched him sniff the air, waited for him to collapse from lack of oxygen but none of that happened. "Isn't that a risky way of testing out the equipment?"

"Maybe but now we know we have air. I suggest we get out of these things, they will only slow us down and we may need to move quickly," he instructed as he dispensed with the uncomfortable headgear and gloves, strapping them clumsily to his belt. He was concerned about the situation changing again, creating a need to retain their protective suit. Mike hesitated then decided Foster was right.

While Foster waited for Mike to complete the stowing of his gear, he acknowledged a call from the ship. "Landing party, this is Sol. All comms out of the system are being blocked. I can't raise the Alliance."

"Okay. Sit tight. If you haven't heard from us when it's time to leave the system or if the ship is in danger get out of here and inform the Alliance. We are expendable. Is that clear, Sol."

"Yes, it is. But I will only do it if I have to and I'll bring back help," replied Sol, ignoring

Neuman who considered the whole thing a bit melodramatic.

"I don't like being expendable," remarked Mike, once Foster had cut the commlink. "I sort of think I'm important, to me if not to anyone else."

"Don't worry. I'm not expecting to right myself off that easily either. Time to find out who is running this show and get a key to the door." Foster walked off towards the main building.

Mike glanced up at the sky and noted how sharply focused the stars appeared in the cloudless sky. Somewhere up there was their ship and he realised for the first time, he didn't have to stare at the sky and wonder if there was anything up there. He returned his gaze to the surface, knowing he had to stay alert surveyed the buildings surrounding the huge courtyard in which they stood. He sought out any movement but saw none. Everything seemed as lifeless as the original readings had indicated and the masonry seemed to reflect it was a structure from the past even down to the stone paving and cobblestones that formed the surface of the courtyard.

It was the size of the buildings that confirmed the existence of a more advanced technology. The main structure was more than half a mile but less than a kilometre away. Lights shone in several of the windows, yet from space no lights had been visible. They moved cautiously across the courtyard, watching their instruments, yet knowing they had every reason to suspect their reliability given their failure to detect the dome and other life signs that now drew them to that enormous castle that would have left any medieval lord gaping in wonder.

In the distance, Mike thought he could make out what looked like stables, but then, it could have been his imagination. He could not imagine why an advanced civilisation would need stables, unless it truly did originate from a medieval culture mirroring our own. Then again they may run horses for sport assuming these aliens had a horse like creature.

Drawing closer to the building it appeared to grow taller. There was no movement at the windows, no maidens calling from the balconies, no guards on the battlements. It was as if they had gone home and left the lights on.

He looked back the way they'd come and wondered at the size of the courtyard. He tried to imagine its use. It was far too big for a meeting place and paths would have been far more economical for providing access to and from the numerous buildings that occupied its borders.

"Foster! Why all this space?" queried Mike, breaking the silence that had left them both deep in thought.

"Perhaps landing area for space craft, if this is a colony of some sort, visitors would have required somewhere to land. Judging by the size of it, this was a busy port," replied Foster, unemotionally. His concentration on the forty story castle they were approaching.

On reaching the official looking structure, they climbed the stone steps that resembled those of a cathedral and approached a large metal gate that had been left open. Mike had half expected a draw bridge but as there was no mote this was the next logical alternative. He glanced up to check no one was on the battlements about to pour boiling oil upon them but could see nothing. He noticed Foster scanning the wall and realised he should be verifying what he saw with an instrument check. He usually found it difficult to rely on instruments in preference to his own senses but in this environment perhaps he was better off relying on what he knew instead of a scanner that gave conflicting information.

Mike scanned for life forms then looked around him again as Foster reported his findings. "There is no one inside on the ground floor. Everyone seems to be on the higher levels?"

"If I'm reading this correctly there are less than twenty life forms on this whole piece of flying real estate," commented Mike, puzzled at the small number.

Foster simply nodded and drew his weapon. "Assuming we're not just reading what they want us to see. I only hope they're friendly." As Foster moved towards the gate, Mike realised that meant they were outnumbered ten to one if they were hostile. He drew his weapon and followed. Within the castle walls they found the base of the structure. The entrance lay at the top of a narrow set of stone steps to their left, offering no railing and leading to a doorway that offered no evidence of lighting within.

In front of them was a stone wall that rose into the black, star filled void above them with no windows for the first seven stories. To their right was a narrow path that seemed to encircle the building, presumably providing access to various points on the battlements which towered three stories above them. Mike examined the path in both directions, as it continued under the stone steps that led to the first level, but was unable to locate any points of access. The wall appeared solid leading him to speculate if the battlements might be decorative or a reminder of days gone by.

He was about to seek Foster's opinion when he noticed he was gone. For a moment he felt a slight panic, alone on an alien asteroid facing some unknown life form he was not prepared to face. Then he saw Foster mounting the steps towards the door. Quickly he joined him, feeling a little foolish but also wishing he had access to Foster's thoughts. The man kept so much to himself; he was hard to communicate with, yet he felt a strong friendship had developed in the short period they had known each other. It was because of Foster he was here. The Alliance had wanted to put him on the scrap heap of 28th century society given he was a 20th century born and bred 'primitive' who had no skills to cope with that century despite his assistance in the Tymamid hunt. Foster had pointed out that the skills developed as a special government agent could be equally useful on a mission like this one and his recent escape back to his home time had shown he was quite capable of looking after himself. This was his chance to prove it.

Foster peered into the darkness, a faint light drifted into the room from somewhere beyond providing a view of the interior which was bare. No floor coverings, light fittings or furniture existed; simply bare stone walls not even a flaming torch or an oil lamp. He walked inside. Mike took a final glance behind them at the battlement now only two stories above them and the deserted cobblestone path that separated the structure from the outer wall. He heard a slight noise then noticed the huge metal gate had shut.

Mike considered it was the first positive recognition of their presence. He wished he knew if that was a good thing as he couldn't help but feel they were being led like rats through a maze. He tapped Foster on the shoulder and drew his attention to the gate. "Get the impression we're the mice being lured in with cheese?"

Beyond the entrance room lay a series of corridors that were equally bleak in appearance. Foster took the one that had the better lighting and set off; allowing Foster to lead left Mike time to observe. The place lacked all the features one would expect in any self respecting Hollywood movie. There was no dripping water to break the silence, no rattling chains or distant howls. There was not a sound to be heard nor movement made, it was an eerie absence of sound. Even their shoes on the stone made no noise but this was due to their manufacture and not some supernatural influence.

Mike checked his watch. If Neuman had been correct, they had eight hours and 37 minutes from the time they located the Fortress that was 21.30 hours that evening. If Sol was right and they had a maximum of 10.7 hours.

An hour later they had only acquired new questions, not any answers while their scanners only provided vague images of the life forms above and refused to provide a clear floor plan of the structure.

After several hours of wandering through endless, empty corridors, unsure if they had managed to reach a higher level and unable to navigate their way back, Foster peered through a gap in the wall and saw an enormous, stone amphitheatre. As they moved around the outside, seeking an entrance, they found that every fifty feet the masonry gave way to a six inch, wide slit from floor to ceiling separating that slab from the next. The walls were curved to conform to the circular shape of the amphitheatre.

The interior was poorly lit but further around the circuit, Mike could see an entrance. He also felt that he could see something else on the floor of the amphitheatre stage. He drew Foster's attention to the shadowy form that stood out given the theatre was as stark in decor as everything else in this building.

"It's just a shadow. I doubt there's anything there," replied Foster, dismissing the matter and becoming irritable at the fact that he could not get inside. He walked off leaving Mike to take one more look to confirm its location. He moved on to the next gap and checked it again. He kept this up for the next six wall sections before they came to the entrance. A large, plain, metal door, offering no decoration or artistic pleasure, lay open allowing additional light into the room, though Mike was still trying to determine where any light was emanating from, as there were no windows or sky lights in sight. They found themselves in the top of a large seating auditorium where the steps doubled for seating and stretched down in front of them to a large central area which may have once held court for royalty. It now stood stark and empty devoid of all its trappings, if it ever had any, and was now simply a stone shell.

Mike sought out the shadow he'd been watching and caught sight of something lying on the ground at the foot of the steps that looked human. He strained his eyes in the dim lighting but could not be sure given the shadows that fell across the stage area. It was human in shape but could just as easily have been a store dummy or a shadow that sparked his imagination creating the form he sort to make contact with.

Foster ignored Mike as he made his way down the steps towards the shadowy form. As he got closer he became more convinced it was human and quickened his pace towards the prone form. Then his impression changed, as the shadow solidified, it seemed more like a store dummy than a real person. It took on a silvery glimmer in the half light but the face had no defined features, a pair of slits marked where its eyes should have been and another oval slit, giving it a startled look, provided a point of reference for its mouth. It lay on its side one arm under its body and down by its side, the other holding its chest as if in pain. Mike drew closer before kneeling down beside it, then realised what it was. It was not a store dummy or some stage prop, it was a robot. He pulled out his scanner and got no reading which he hoped meant it was deactivated. "Foster!" he called nervously. "Get over here! Quick!"

Foster had been devoting his attentions to searching for some kind of record. This was proving very difficult given the size of the amphitheatre. The stage itself was as big as some

theatres and he had found no evidence of any changing rooms or offices. "Couldn't these people build anything small?" he cursed to himself. When he heard Mike's cry, he was tempted to ignore it but something in his tone made him react. He saw Mike on the stage kneeling beside something he could not make out. "What is it?" he called back, irritably while noting the acoustics.

"It's a robot!" yelled Mike, nervously.

Distracted by the lack of any echo and the clarity of the sound being carried, Foster didn't listen to what Mike had said. He looked up at the ceiling to check the architecture then the word struck him. "Robot!" He jerked his head around suddenly to verify what his mind told him then started bolting down the stairs. He covered the hundred metre distance in only a few seconds and joined Mike kneeling beside the inactive robot.

Mike waited patiently as Foster scanned the robot before examining the metallic body. He attempted to move its fingers but they were rigid then tried to locate a panel or access into its system. "Is it dangerous?" asked Mike eventually.

"Not at the moment. If it were reactivated we might have a different story. Help me roll it onto its back." Together they moved the robot so that Foster could gain better access to the robot's chest. There he found the breast plate, it slid aside when pressure was applied revealing the machine's inner workings.

"Can you fix it?" asked Mike, after Foster had completed his preliminary examination.

"I have absolutely no idea, how it works. This technology is totally different to ours," he replied, then pulled out his communicator. "Landing party to Denton - You reading me up there?"

"Yes, Captain. We're still here. What have you found?" queried Sol, hiding his excitement.

"Very little," replied Foster, staring down at the robot. "We still have made no contact with anyone down here, but we have located a robot. I'm going to transmit the data from my scanner. Can you get the computer to analyse it and see if we can reactive it?"

Neuman looked up from his study of the star. "You're not going to activate it, are you? It may be hostile. It could be capable of anything. Destroy it!"

Sol looked down at his colleague. "Stop worrying Brownie. We're here for answers, if we don't ask someone we are not going to get them."

"I'd rather remain ignorant. And don't call me Brownie!" he shouted, indignantly.

Foster intervened. "Okay you two stop arguing! Whatever happens you're safe up there so give me the results."

"Working on it," replied Sol, as he viewed the computers results. "It appears that he's operational. Just run out of power, needs a power pack of some kind in the palm of his hand about the size of a four centimetre disk."

Foster held up the palm and saw the space where the disk should have been. Mike looked at it, then at the ground and reached for something. "You mean like this?" He held up a gold coloured disk.

Foster took it and scanned it. "No power," he announced disappointed, then had an idea. "Sol. Can these things be recharged?"

Sol searched the database on screen. "Unknown. It appears the mechanism is similar to those produced by the Laotians but is more advanced than previously recorded. The models on record can be recharged by modifying the frequency of your disrupter. It may work here or it could burn out the battery."

"What have we got to lose?" asked Foster rhetorically. "Feed the frequency variation through direct, Sol."

"Coming through now, Captain."

While waiting for the data to come through Foster had an idea. "Sol. You still unable to get a transcorr fix on us?"

"Checking." Sol moved to the command panel. "No, according to this I'm talking to empty space."

"Try something, link the transcorr to the commslink and see if you can use that to home in on our signal." Sol considered Foster's suggestion then tried linking the two systems. A faint signal appeared with a rough floor plan.

"Linking now, got a reading, attempting to enhance, only f..." began Sol.

"Sol? Sol? Come in 'Denton'! Do you read me, 'Denton'!" called Foster. "They cut us off. That means they're monitoring our activities."

Mike shook his head. "I don't get it. Why the game? They must know we have only five hours, according to Neumann, to get out of here. They'll never make it on this asteroid."

"And neither will we, if we can't get back to the ship," reminded Foster, providing a sombre note. "I think we have only one course of action," he continued starting to recharge the disk with his disrupter.

"No! Wait!" urged Mike nervously. "Don't you get the feeling that we're being drawn into taking certain actions as if we were being tested?" Foster looked at him incredulously.

Mike pressed on regardless. "Hear me out. When we landed in the courtyard, where are we most likely to go? The biggest building around, the one with lights and life signs, we enter and the gate shuts. We follow the corridors that are best lit. They lead us here. That robot has been planted here for us to find."

Foster's scepticism faded as he considered the situation. There was already evidence that contact had been made with the inhabitants of the Fortress and that they were monitoring their movements. If Mike was right, then they were probably being tested prior to contact to determine the degree of threat being offered by them. "In that case I see no alternative but to attempt to reactivate the robot if we are to move on to the next stage. Hopefully our reward is to make direct contact."

"And what is our punishment if we fail?"

"Only one way to find out." Foster aimed the disrupter at the disk which lay on the stone floor and fired. Instead of the usual blue or red beam there was only a low hum. The disk started to glow and Foster stopped. "I hope that does it." They hesitated as Foster reprogrammed his weapon to normal then placed it on the floor nearby. Carefully, he grabbed the robot's metallic hand and inserted the disk. Picking up his weapon they both stepped back.

Nothing happened at first then a faint blue light appeared within the eye slit. Foster and Mike tensed unsure of the reaction to come. Slowly the head turned as it took in its environment. The soft blue light eventually focused on them and the robot abruptly sat up giving them a start. The humans and the robot stared at each other then out of nowhere a searing pain cut into their skulls and burnt at their minds. As quickly as it began it ceased.

"I am sorry for any discomfort, but I had to enter your minds to determine a communication link. My name is Izu-Olio. What can I do to assist you?" said the robot in a

soothing voice that lacked sexual differentiation but seemed more female than male. It remained in its sitting position waiting for the humans to recover from its intrusion into their minds.

For a moment none of them spoke, Foster was not sure whether to put away his weapon or leave it trained on the robot. He decided on the latter. Mike stepped forward "No! Stay where you are!" warned Foster but was ignored; Mike put away his weapon and squatted down beside the mechanical man.

The first thing he noticed was the expression had changed. Its mouth actually moved when he spoke and the startled expression had been replaced by one of expectation. He was waiting for a command. "What is this place? Who are you? How did you get here?" asked Mike excitedly not giving the robot time to reply before he asked the next question.

"Which question would you like answered first? If you have no preference I will answer in order given," replied the robot, still sitting stiffly on the floor with his metallic legs stretched out in front of him like an exercise instructor.

"We have no preference," replied Mike, remaining wary.

The robot remained seated and spoke in an expressionless tone. Mike was fascinated at how the robot's mouth moved, as if the metal was as pliable as flesh. "This was a Battle Fortress for the Jenoa Empire. Once it roamed distant sectors of this galaxy conquering worlds and enslaving their people. Nothing could stand in its way and those who knew of its existence trembled in fear. It was populated with a fierce warrior race which lived for the conquest. Without war they had no purpose. But the empire grew too big and the Battle Fortresses that patrolled it and expanded its boundaries became too far apart to hold the Empire together and gradually it splintered into smaller empires ruled by the Lords who piloted the Fortresses. This Fortress was not so lucky, its people died and now is deserted, except for me and the defence systems. We parked the Fortress in this system when our masters died awaiting further instructions. That is until my power pack ran out."

Foster started to relax a little but kept his weapon trained on the robot as he considered the implications of what the robot had said. "Do you mean this thing, this whole asteroid, can travel through space?"

"Yes, master." replied Izu-Olio.

"Then you might be interested to learn that this star is about to engulf your Fortress. Do you know how to control it or at least shut down the dome so we can return to our ship?" pressed Foster, his weapon beginning to go slack in his hand as he considered taking the Fortress back to Alliance space.

Izu-Olio ignored the weapon and simply stared at Foster as he replied. "The dome cannot be shut down or the atmosphere will escape. We can allow a ship to enter. And yes, I can control this Fortress. Where would you like to go?" he replied, answering questions without stopping for breath and running his answers together.

"I'll tell you that when you take us to your control centre," replied Foster, remembering his weapon and correcting its aim.

"Before we go anywhere ..." began Mike, stopping Foster in his tracks, and feeling a little distrustful of this very helpful robot. "We detected life forms above us, but you say this Fortress is abandoned?"

The robot did not reply for a moment and sat there perfectly still. "What you are detecting

is a false scanner image to cover the location of the defence computer."

Mike watched Izu-Olio suspiciously but got no reaction from it. "What did you just do?"

"I scanned the area above for possible life signs to verify my reply. I am fully equipped with sensory equipment, capable of detecting a wide spectrum of frequencies and extensive scanner facilities, master," replied Izu-Olio.

"Well I guess that puts to rest your theory of us being rats in a maze. Have you finished asking questions?" queried Foster, impatiently. "I want to get out of here before that star incinerates us."

"I suppose you're right," replied Mike, ignoring his grumpiness. "Mind if I just call you, Olio?"

"No, master it is my name," it replied.

"Now that we have that settled. Do you need a hand Olio or can you get up by yourself?" queried Foster as he put away his weapon and stepped forward to assist.

"I'm fine, master," it replied leaping effortlessly to its feet and giving them both a start.

"Then lead on, Olio. Take us to your defence computer," instructed Foster in a more jovial manner. Mike followed in the rear as Olio led them up the stairs to the distant exit.

"You sure get your exercise when you come to the theatre in this place," commented Mike, looking at the entrance which seemed miles away.

"You wanted to see the stars. What did you expect? Silver service?" replied Foster, hiding his own feelings of exhaustion.

Mike took another step and sighed deeply, with a degree of exaggeration. "Any kind of service would be refreshing. Say one of those carrier chairs we saw in Egypt drawn by loyal slaves that would be nice at this moment."

Foster smiled without looking back. "Wishful thinking, my friend, I estimate we have a long walk ahead of us."

Mike suspected he was correct. When they reached the foyer Olio led them a hundred yards down a passage to a recess in the wall. He stepped inside and waited. Foster and Mike hesitated. "What are we stopping for?" asked Foster.

"If you would please step inside, I will demonstrate." replied Olio, standing in the corner like a lift attendant. They stepped inside and Olio pressed a panel on the wall. The scene around them faded and then reappeared but the corridor outside was different. The passage led away in front of them curving up and around to the right whereas before it had been part of a junction of corridors. "It's an EMT, Energy Matter Transfer Booth. We are now on the thirty fourth level." replied Olio and proceeded up the ramp. Foster and Mike hesitated then cautiously followed, some sixth sense making them draw their weapons as they rounded the corner.

Olio waited and observed as his new companions noted they were outside. The black starry night sky was above them. They proceeded up the ramp and joined Olio then together emerged onto a large courtyard, obviously positioned on one of those flat areas that gave the building a jagged look.

At first they looked like statues, silhouettes in a background that was a stark contrast to the dead, haunted feel to the rest of the Fortress. The courtyard was decorated with flowers, neatly planted in cement bins and street lighting, reminding Mike of a 20th century shopping mall, except there were no shops. It was totally out of context with the medieval appearance of everything so

far. Then one moved and Mike noticed in the distance that the courtyard was filled with people of many races wandering aimlessly, or just sitting with expressionless faces, taking no notice of the newcomers.

"Where are we, Olio? Who are these people?" asked Mike waving his weapon around. The robot made no response and seemed to have switched himself off. Mike peered into his eyes and got no response, the blue lights having faded.

"Olio!" came a cry and one of the animated humanoids ran over to join them. He quickly examined the robot then at the two newcomers. "What did they do to him?"

"I don't really care. He led us here, tricked us. Who are you?" asked Foster examining the man carefully for any indication of his race. He appeared human in every respect, a man of about fifty, in 20th century terms, of Anglo Saxon descent. He seemed excited, anxious and lacked the drained zombie appearance of the others.

"My name is Hanvel. Hanvel Dit and this is my robot. They must have reprogrammed him," replied the man, obviously concerned as he removed Olio's breast plate and made adjustments. "There! That should do it," he declared finally and replaced the plate. "Olio! Activate Set up One!"

The robot responded rebooting its system from a primary source untouched by whoever controlled the Fortress. "Master Hanvel, it is good to see you again. It would appear I was not successful in my escape attempt?"

"It would seem so. You led these people back here to be trapped with us," replied Hanvel regretfully.

The robot examined Mike and Foster as if for the first time. "I am sorry, masters for this betrayal. I assure you it is not in my programming to perform such treachery and seek to undo the harm, if I may?"

Mike was the first to drop his armed stance and lower his weapon. "I doubt it," he said, annoyed by the fact they had been misled and unsure if this was not another trick. "The damage is done but tell me this, Olio. How much of what you told us before was true?"

"My memory of the incident has been wiped along with the false programming, upon my reactivation. I am unaware of what I have told you," the robot replied. Mike felt he heard a slight regret in the tone but dismissed it.

"Gentlemen, if you are thinking of escape, forget it. It's impossible. We have tried and once you have gone for interrogation you will have no desire to escape. You shall become peaceful, mindless inmates of Jentac Vaslomin Fargon. Warlord of Jenos, Commander of this Battle Fortress which is most likely about to enter your space and conquer your world as it has every other planet that has had the misfortune of crossing the path of a Battle Fortress. Your world is doomed and you are destined to remain prisoners here for the rest of your life."
