

Alliance & Empire

Part 1: The Forming

Introduction

The near future. Mankind has colonised much of the known galaxy, with the rest being part of vast alien civilisations. An inter-stellar republic has been formed between the human and alien superpowers for mutual protection and advancement.

Recently the republic fell into recession due to a major crash in the open market. Money became almost worthless and many died from poverty-related diseases. As things looked as if they could get no worse a little-known politician took control. He created jobs, reduced inflation and made the republic a better place to live in. This man was called Albert Encat.

Once things were running smoothly Encat decided changes in the way people lived were required if his people were to survive. Encat slaughtered all minority citizens and segregated those who remained. He re-introduced the death sentence and killed anyone who appeared to be against him. Most were against him but many were too frightened of what could happen to them to do anything about him.

Chapter One.

At first there were only a few of them, the resistance. Spread out over vast distances across the known galaxy. All they knew of each other was what Encat permitted to be shown on The System's news site. Communication between the different resistance forces was impossible with Encat monitoring all transmissions. Each band of rebels had to work on their own.

The largest band of rebels, 2000 people led by Admiral Norman Mach and four others, hacked their way into The System's main computer network on Titan and downloaded the core program. Modifying it to suit their own needs they were able to create a new system which was capable of operating independently of the old System. They gave it artificial intelligence and called it Walter. It was put in charge of monitoring the area surrounding the rebel safe house; in Old London, on Earth.

Chapter Two.

Chloë walked down an almost deserted Old London street. As usual it was plastered with Imperial propaganda and military troops marched around, keeping law and order in their normal manner: shoot first, ask questions if suspect isn't killed. On a busy day the streets were filled with ambulances as the trigger-happy troops broke up protest rallies by groups of teenagers with nothing to do. As she turned a corner Chloë noticed a lone soldier empty a laser battery into the chest of a middle-aged man. Confused as to the reasoning behind this incident Chloë looked around and soon found the reason. The man had defaced the Emperor's insignia: a huge, dark eye - all seeing, all knowing. The insignia was designed to make fear run through anyone who saw it. In Chloë's case it worked. She turned and hurried away. As she neared the safe house she heard the trademark call of an Imperial guardsman:

'Imperial citizen, where is your identification?'

Chloë stopped and turned to face the soldier who she had seen empty his weapon into a civilian. She stepped back as she noticed the small patches of blood on the soldier's dark green uniform. From behind his mask the soldier spoke again, in a deep, commanding voice:

'Your identification, citizen.'

'You just harass people for pleasure, don't you,' said Chloë as she reached into the pocket of her jacket for her identification disk.

'Just give me your disk and we can both be on our way,' said the soldier, sternly.

On finding her disk she presented it to the soldier, who loaded it into his Reader.

'Name,' he said

'Chloë Grenfyld.'

'Full name.'

'Chloë Christine Grenfyld.'

'Date of birth.'

'13th March 2387.'

The soldier then took a fingerprint of Chloë

'You may go now, citizen.'

'Thank you, kind sir,' said Chloë, sarcastically.

The soldier continued his patrol and soon found someone else to harass as Chloë continued to the safe house. When she arrived at the run-down building the security system took her fingerprints and retina scan again before allowing her to enter. She had only just regained clear sight in her eyes when she descended the stairs to the cellar, command area of the largest organised rebellion in the Empire.

Before she reached the door she could hear the voice of Admiral Mach. The Admiral had an unmistakeable voice which commanded attention and respect from all that heard it:

'We need a starship. It's unsafe to remain in one place for too long. Eventually we will be found and executed,' he said.

'I'm sure we can arrange something with one of the smugglers down at the docks,' said Jim. Jim was the oldest of the command team and also the one with the most experience when it came to interrogation by the Imperial guards. When he went out he was always stopped by the guards and made to show his identification. It didn't seem to matter how many people were about, he'd be the one who was questioned.

'Good,' said Norman. 'Try to arrange a meeting somewhere.'

'If we can get some Transports then we could capture a capital ship,' said Boris. Boris was known to like the action found in a capture operation.

'I think we should keep our heads down, so-to-speak, for the moment,' said Chloë. Everyone turned to look at her as she spoke. It became obvious the others hadn't been taking much notice of the security systems or they would have noticed her arrival.

'We don't want the Empire to find out about us too soon,' she said.

'Correct,' agreed Norman. 'We need to remain secret for as long as possible so we can be prepared for when the Empire does find out about us.'

Chapter Three.

Norman and Jim entered the 'Old Jester Inn' at the Old London space-port. Here was where they had arranged to meet the smuggler Zed Cartaal. Zed wasn't that well known a smuggler so he was able to get around without being in much danger of being recognised. This made him a perfect candidate for the task at hand. After a short wait, Zed entered the bar. Jim casually signalled Zed, who made his way over to their table and sat down.

'You're late,' said Jim. 'I hope you didn't run into any trouble.'

'Nah. But my ship could do with a bit of a clean up. I couldn't find the ignition when I set off,' said Zed, laughing. Norman smiled, politely while Jim looked around at the others in the bar. They were a fine collection of washed-out space traders and burly convoy pilots washing their troubles away with large quantities of ale. Jim knew how they felt. He had been a convoy pilot in his youth and knew how the Empire treated non-military pilots. He noticed Norman was speaking and returned his attention to the conversation.

'Can we get down to business,' said Norman. 'We shouldn't stay too long. We could attract attention.'

'There's no worry about attracting attention, but I know what you mean. We can talk on my ship,' said Zed.

The group stood up and headed for Zed's ship, the 'Double Whisky', where they got down to business. As Zed closed the door Norman began.

'We need some starfighters and maybe a couple of capital ships. Can you get us any?'

'I can't get you any capital ships, but starfighters are easy. You just walk into a construction with your freighter and providing you have the access code you can fly away with as many as two or three groups a week - but it will cost you. I'm not the type of person who works for nothing,' said Zed.

'Name your price,' said Norman.

'ten thousand per group. Cash only,' said Zed.

'How about it, Jim. You do the accounts,' said Norman.

'We can afford five groups. Maybe six if we don't go looking for anyone who can get us a capital ship for the next three weeks,' said Jim.

'Well that's all right. We'll need to lay low for a while after this anyway. Okay, six fleets it is. How soon can you get them to us?' said Norman.

'Four weeks. Five at the most. That okay?' said Zed.

'That will be fine,' said Norman.

Leaving the smuggler, Norman and Jim headed back to their ship. Zed contacted a friend and got the latest security code for the Alpha Centauri construction yard. He stayed a while at the space station, so as to not attract any more attention than he expected.

'That wasn't too hard. His prices seem reasonable too. Considering the fact that a group of starfighters would cost at least seventeen thousand for old groups and he says he gets them from a construction yard so they must be fairly new,' said Norman.

'Yeah,' said Jim. 'Are we going back to the safe house now? It's just I thought you said we didn't want to hang around too long.'

'Home is is. There should be a transporter due around now.'

'Sir! Intelligence has found the existence of another computer network and it seems to contain updated versions of our own files,' said a lieutenant.

'Excellent work, lieutenant, the Emperor will be pleased. Find the location of its core program,' said Olrik.

'Yes, sir!'

Norman and Jim entered the rebel's safe house. Maxiis ran out of the control room to meet them.

'Norman!', said Maxiis. 'There's some bad news. The Emperor has put a price on our heads.'

'Whose heads exactly?', said Norman.

'Yours, mine, and Chloë's. Walter told me about it not long ago,' said Maxiis.

'Walter thinks it could be because of a hacker he scared off yesterday,' said Chloë. 'He thinks it was one of Encat's spies..'

Norman's eyes widened as he said: 'But if they have known about us since yesterday there may have been someone watching our deal with Jim's smuggler friend. We could be in big trouble.'

Chapter Four.

'My lord,' said an Admiral, in a rather repressed manner. 'We have found the existence of a group of Rebel traitors. We fear they are trying to destroy your glorious Empire. We do not know the location of their safe house at the moment but we have someone tracking their network signal,' said an Admiral.

The Admiral handed a disc to the Emperor, which he loaded into his computer. After a few seconds a report came up on the screen. The Admiral could see the reflection of the screen in Encat's hypnotic, black eyes.

'Norman Mach. Now there's someone I haven't seen for a while,' said the Emperor. 'He was a Admiral in the military only a few years ago. We may have a spot of bother with him. These other two should not be any harm to us. Have our spies found anything of interest yet?'

'Only what is in those files, my Lord'

'Notify me of everything they find - even if it seems insignificant. You may go now.'

The admiral left the room. Encat turned again to the computer and studied the files more carefully. He read the additional notes on Norman and was curious about the meeting he had recently been spotted at.

'Why would an ex-Admiral of the military be mixing with the scum found in ports?' thought the Emperor. 'Attention to this subject is required.'

Four and a half weeks had passed since the meeting at the Corpus space-port when Zed Cartaal brought two freighters into orbit near the rebel safe house.

'You did ask for six fleets didn't you?', said Zed

'That is correct,' said Norman. 'Six fleets at ten thousand each. That makes sixty thousand we owe you. If you would just step this way please.'

Norman showed Zed into a large room with wood-lined walls and a huge screen at one end. Zed guessed the room was used for meetings of some sort or some other type of official business. Norman motioned Zed over to a table holding three large, grey briefcases.

'Here's your money. I hope you can carry it,' said Norman.

'You don't mind if I check it first, do you?', said Zed.

'Not at all. Check all that you like. You should find that it is all there.'

Norman turned towards the screen and turned it on. The navy-blue glow of the System threw the room into semi-darkness as Norman consulted the security systems around the safe house. Zed counted the money in the cases, allowing the thick wads of paper to slip slowly through his fingers as he went. He found it was all there and called for the unloading of the ships to begin.

'Hey,' said Boris. 'These are top-of-the-range ships. They're not even in full use yet!'

'Well, you would be the one to know,' said Chloë. 'You're obsessed with these things aren't you.'

'I'm not obsessed. I just like them - there's nothing wrong with that.'

'What are they called?', said Maxiis.

'They don't have a name as such, what with them being so new, but the designers called them 'Death Warriors',' said Boris.

'They have a strange shape. Not the standard floating box look. These are more like big yellow croissants,' said Chloë.

'They're streamlined. They can move better in an atmosphere this way. Giving the pilot better control while flying and fighting,' said Boris.

'That may come in handy,' said Norman.

A red light flashed on the arm of the Emperor's chair. He pressed a button and a figure appeared on his VDU.

'Sir! Our construction yard at Alpha Centauri has reported the disappearance of six Storm Fighter squadrons,' said the Admiral.

'Have security on full alert and see if you can trace the missing fighters,' said the Emperor.

'Yes, sir! Also, I have found the existence of several probes in the Sol system. I have informed Intelligence about it.'

'Excellent work, Admiral. You will see me in my throne room tomorrow at 1400 hours.'

'Yes, sir.'

The Emperor pressed another button on the arm of his chair and the picture on the VDU dissolved into the emblem of the Empire. The Emperor called up Intelligence and collected all the information on new the probes.

ImpSys://Protected Sector:[PassCode-***20541-98243/6.9#]/Intelligence_Military/Probes.Rpt

The Imperial System.

Intelligence Section.

Unidentified probes found in the Sol star system:

Admiral James Orak has found 9 probes in the core system of the Empire. The probes do not conform to traditional or Imperial designs and are not compatible with the Imperial computer network.

From analysis of the probes' casings it is obvious that they have been in place for a short time only and Imperial researchers are attempting to trace the destination of the probes' signals.

The following day, at 14:00 precisely, Admiral James Orak entered the Emperor's personal throne room, which had been arranged into an awards room especially. Only a handful of people were present. They had been picked out from the Empire's most loyal subjects. The Emperor spoke up.

'We are gathered here today to announce a promotion in rank to one of the most loyal of all the military.'

The Emperor signalled to one of the two cloaked figures standing either side of him. The figure moved towards the Admiral and presented a Grand-Admiral's uniform to him. The Emperor signalled to the other figure as the first figure returned to his post. The second figure presented the Admiral with two small, leather bound, boxes. The Admiral recognised these as medals cases. The Emperor spoke again.

'Congratulations, Grand-Admiral Orak, on your achievement. You may proceed to docking bay one, where a transporter is ready to take you to your new command.'

The Emperor then left the room, along with the two cloaked figures. When they had gone the spectators filed out. Grand-Admiral Orak, knowing the traditions, left the room last

Chapter Five.

'Norman, the probes in the system have been destroyed. The Empire is definitely on to us,' said Maxiis.

'Were you able to find out whether they know where our base is?', said Norman.

'No, but I don't think they know.'

'It doesn't matter anyway. We, hopefully, won't be here much longer. I've arranged for two of us to meet the head of the Sirius-B construction yard. They wish to align themselves with us.'

'You mean we will have our own construction yard?', said Boris.

'Sort of. The Empire will still own and run the construction yard but we will have full use of its facilities,' said Norman. 'This way we will be able to find out about these new ships the Empire is supposed to be building.'

'What new ships?', said Maxiis, in a puzzled voice.

'Exactly. From what I've heard there is only to be one of them made at the moment but it has more fire-power than that of the combined Imperial fleet,' said Norman.

'That's bad,' said Chloë. 'If they know about us then they're bound to test it out on us - if it exists'

'Do you know where it is being built?', said Boris.

'There are a few ideas but the most common one is the Polaris system,' said Norman.

'Maxiis, we should leave now if we are going to catch our transport. Get your coat.'

The face of a tired looking Imperial Commander appeared on the Emperor's VDU. The image on the screen reflected in the Emperor's deep, black eyes as he turned in his huge, leather throne to face the screen.

'Have you finished building my new toy yet, Commander?' asked the Emperor. The tone of the Emperor's voice sent a shiver down the back on the commander and he found it hard to keep his fear of the Emperor from his voice.

'No, my lord. We are having some difficulty with the construction of it's main engine.'

'What difficulty is that then, Commander? I hope you will not have to re-design it. It would never be ready on schedule if you did.'

'No, my Lord. It is just that it won't work. It refuses to burn the fuel we give it.'

'That is because it doesn't run on your normal fuel. Have it drained out and cleaned up then try running it with the fuel I sent to you.'

'Yes, my lord.'

The Emperor shook his head in pity at the incompetence of his servants as he turned off his computer and left the throne room. He was going to personally oversee the construction of this new weapon.

'Now, as you are all probably aware, we wish to join the Planetary Alliance but we must still build ships for the Empire so as not to attract attention to ourselves. This may cause some problems,' said the Chairman.

'I'm there will be no problems as long as we are not here when the Empire is. Also, we will be able to have a look at the weapons you will be constructing for the Empire,' said Norman.

'Well, as long as your sure about that. The Empire has a habit of turning up whenever it feels like it.'

'I'm sure it does. You don't have any information on the Empire's new weapon do you?'

'They did ask us to build it for them but when they told us the size of it we had to decline. It was too big for our yard. The biggest thing we can build here is a space station.'

'Do you remember the size?', said Maxiis.

'Yes, I think so anyway. I think they said it was 700 by 500.'

'is that in metres,' said Norman.

'Yes,' the Chairman said. 'It's rather big, isn't it?'

'Looks like we could be in big trouble,' said Maxiis, looking at Norman in a rather troubled manner.

'What do you mean?' said the Chairman, who also sounded a bit worried.

'The Empire probably knows about our activities over the past few months. We don't think they know where our base is but we can't be sure. You couldn't build us a command ship, could you?'

'Probably, but there's no point. The emperor had us build a dreadnought a few months back but then decided that he didn't need it. He told us to get rid of it. We were going to but then we heard about you lot and forgot about it. You might as well have it.'

'Fine. Do you have a price for it?'

'The Emperor already paid for it.'

'Even better.'

A bell sounded to indicate dinner was ready in the board room. The Chairman invited Norman and Maxiis to join him there and then showed them to their seats.

After dinner, the Chairman showed Norman and Maxiis to the Dreadnought. Setting the ship into orbit around Mars and using transports borrowed from the newly-aligned construction yard, all the equipment and possessions from the safe house on Earth were moved on-board. When everything was set up, Walter was restarted and set about planning the best course of action to take next.

Chapter Six.

system://information.centre/military/ships.capital/dreadnought

The Planetary Alliance.
Information Sector.

Information: Dreadnoughts.

The Dreadnought is the largest Capital Ship in the Imperial fleet.

Statistics: 20 metres wide
 70 metres long
 16 floors
 200 laser cannons
 Capable of carrying up to class 8 shield generators

'My lord, Intelligence has recorded an increase in transportation of goods from Earth to Mars in the Sol system,' said the General.

'Yes, I know. I have sent someone to look into it,' said the Emperor. 'Is my new toy completed yet?'

'The Command Centre will be completed today, my lord.'

'Excellent. Do the shields and weapons work as planned?'

'Yes, my lord. We are now wiring-up the main computer.'

'Excellent. You may now return to duty.'

The Emperor made his way to a shuttle which took him to his throne room where he waited for his transport to arrive. He passed the time by studying the information that had been obtained on the known Rebels.

ImpSys://Protected Sector:[PassCode-***20541-98243/6.9#]/Intelligence/rebels.Earth/safehouse.rpt

The Imperial System

Intelligence Section

Rebel Main Base:

The rebel base has been found by a spy on Earth. The base is not well hidden but lightly armoured. It is protected by six squadrons of Storm Fighters which have been identified as the six squadrons stolen from the Alpha Centauri construction yard. They bear a non-Imperial emblem consisting of 3 planets: Earth, Altair Prime and the Centaurian homeworld.

This was not the type of news the Emperor liked. He suspected that the increase in goods transportation between Earth and Mars had been caused by the Rebels moving base - but to Mars? It wasn't feasible. Mars was one of the most highly protected planets in the Empire. There was a knock at the door.

'Enter!', said the Emperor.

A tall, cloaked, figure entered.

'Ah, Olrik. I see you have returned safely from your mission,' said the Emperor.

'My lord. I have bad news,' said Olrik, kneeling before the Emperor. The Emperor signalled him to stand. The Emperor looked into the blank, hypnotised face of his servant. Seeing no indication that Olrik intended to deceive his master The Emperor allowed him to continue with his report. 'The rebels have indeed been shipping goods from Earth but they have not been shipping them to Mars.'

'Then where are they taking them?'

'They appear to have a Dreadnought orbiting Mars.'

'So, they have a capital ship and six fleets of the latest starfighters. Norman has done well. But we shall destroy them anyway. It's a shame really, Norman was an excellent Admiral. He would have been a great asset to the military.'

There was another knock at the door. Olrik reached for his gun and turned to face the door.

'Put that away! There is no need for it here,' said the Emperor. He turned to the door. 'Enter!'

A figure wearing a General's uniform entered the room.

'What is it, General?' said the Emperor

'My lord, your Command Centre is ready to launch and your transport is waiting outside.'

'Excellent', said the Emperor. Standing and turning to Olrik he said. 'Come, my friend. Let us depart.'

'The starship 'Freedom' is ready to launch,' said Chloë. Turning to face Norman; who was relaxing in the command chair on the Bridge of the Dreadnought.

'Oh, good', said Norman. Pressing some buttons on the arm of his chair. A humming sound filled the ship as the light speed drive got up to full speed. The ship turned out of orbit and entered hyperspace in an enormous flash of light.

A bleeping came from Chloë's computer. She pressed a button and Maxiis' voice came out of the Bridge speakers.

'I just thought I'd ask about where we are going,' said Maxiis.

'What about it?' said Chloë.

'Where is it?'

'I don't actually know.' She turned and asked Norman.

'Polaris construction yard,' he replied. 'Are the shield systems operational?'

'There's an engineering team working on them. They should be ready soon,' said Chloë. Turning back to her computer. 'Maxiis, we are going to the Polaris construction yard.'

'Okay,' he replied.

There was another bleep as the communicator turned itself off.

'I think I'll go to my quarters. It's getting late,' Chloë said.

'Okay,' said Norman. 'I think I'll retire too.'

Norman pressed the communicator button.

'Jim? Are you there?', he said.

A dull voice came back over the speakers: 'I'm here,' it said. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing. It's your shift though.'

'All right, I'm coming.'

'Good,' said Norman. 'I'll meet you on the Bridge.'

The light indicating their approach on the construction yard had been flashing for some time before the countdown appeared on the Bridge's VDU. Jim called for Norman to return to the Bridge: 'Norman. We are about to jump out of light speed - and it's your shift.'

'I'm coming,' said Norman. 'I've just got to get dressed.' Norman arrived ten minutes later, combing his shoulder-length hair. He thought his hairstyle made him look commanding yet friendly. Everyone else didn't really notice it.

The Emperor, Olrik, and the General all entered the Bridge of the Command Centre. All Bridge personnel instantly stopped what they were doing and stood to attention. The Emperor walked over to his large, leather, command chair and sat down. Olrik stoop by his side.

'You may carry on,' said the Emperor. 'I declare the Command Centre Armageddon open to business!'

The mighty ship started its engines and flew out of the construction yard just before the Dreadnought arrived.

'Anything to report?', said Norman.

'Nope. But a scan picked up a vapour trail caused by an extremely large ship entering light speed along a course that could take it to Sol or the nearby systems. I think the ship we are looking for is not a fleet of starfighters and I am certain it is looking for us,' said Jim.

'I already knew it wasn't a group of starfighters. The Chairman of our construction yard told us. He didn't know what type of ship it was but it was bigger than this one. About 700 kilometres by 500 meters - or something like that. I must have forgotten to tell you all about it. Never mind. It can't be helped now,' said Norman. 'Anyway, can we follow that vapour trail you picked up?'

'Probably,' said Jim. He turned to Maxiis who was fiddling with the ship's controls. 'Maxiis, can you follow that ship's vapour trail.'

'I've already got the co-ordinates,' said Maxiis. 'Prepare to jump to light speed.'

'Full speed ahead, Mr. Tarq,' said Norman.

The Dreadnought entered light speed for the second time in as many days.

Chapter Seven.

'My lord,' said Olrik. 'The ship has moved out of light speed but there is no sign of the Rebels.'

'Then we shall wait. They will come soon enough,' said the Emperor.

'Yes, my Lord.'

Olrik left the Emperor's throne room and headed to the bridge. When he arrived he spoke to the people on duty there.

'We are to wait here until the rebels arrive. These orders are from the Emperor himself.'

Olrik sat down in the command chair, by the Emperor's personal chair. Moments later there was a warning beep.

'Sir!', said a young officer 'A Dreadnought has just entered the area seven kilometres away.'

'Put it on the screen,' said Olrik.

The screen, covering the entire front wall of the Bridge, changed from the Imperial logo to a picture showing a Dreadnought carrying the Alliance logo. The Dreadnought sent out a pink beam directly at the Command Centre.

'They are attempting to scan us, sir,' the officer reported.

'Shields up and await further orders,' commanded Olrik.

Olrik pressed some buttons and the Emperor spoke up.

'Yes?', he said.

'My lord, the rebels have arrived. I am requesting further orders,' said Olrik.

'Wait until I get there. Then I shall talk with them. Lets see just how many rebels there are.'

There was a beep and Olrik turned off the communications link. A while later the Emperor arrived and sat down in his command chair.

'Hail that ship, officer,' the Emperor said.

'Channel open, Sir,' said the Communications Officer.

The main screen at the front of the Bridge morphed into a picture of the Bridge on the Dreadnought. Norman got up from his command chair and walked towards the screen. He spoke up.

'Emperor,' he said, giving a very low bow of dis-respect. 'I thought we would find you here. You were probably trying to find us.'

'Admiral Norman,' said the Emperor. 'It is a long time since we last met. I must ask you a question: What is this all about?'

'We are a band of people who are intent on the destruction of your foul Empire. We intend to restore the ways of the Old Republic.'

'Foul? The Empire? The Empire is good. Have you not seen what the Empire has done for this galaxy? It has improved health and education whilst producing employment for its people.'

'That is just a front to keep the populace happy. You kill all that oppose you. You have banned all religions except one and execute all those who follow other religions. You execute all those who criticise you and use the media for propoganda. The System used to be free for all to use until the Empire came. Now it is only available to select members of the Empire and all who hack in are executed. The only reason you've lowered unemployment is because you've killed so many people!'

'You do realise that by saying these things you have signed your death warrant. You know it is illegal to act

against the Empire. And you seem to know a lot of other things too.' Turning to the Weapons Officer the Emperor said 'You may fire at will.'

'Shields up,' said Norman to Maxiis.

Maxiis pressed a few buttons and a blue sphere appeared around the Freedom. The sphere increased in intensity and then became transparent. Norman signalled to the weapons controllers to activate their weapons. Maxiis turned to ship so that it was facing the Command Centre.

'We're ready if you are,' said Norman.

'Excellent. This will give my people some well needed experience. You do realise that you can't win don't you.'

'We shall see,' said Norman. 'If you kill us there are others like us and their numbers continue to grow. This will go on until there is nothing left of your precious Empire. You see it doesn't matter if we die or not. Your Empire is doomed to fall.'

The Weapons Officer aboard the Command Centre fired the Command Centre's laser cannons. The space lit up in a bright red light around the Armageddon as it fired upon the Freedom. The sky turned a brighter red as the Freedom fired back. Chloë ended the transmission between the Freedom and the Armageddon. Five minutes later there was a loud wail and the Freedom rocked, forcefully.

'Norman!', said Jim. 'Our shields are failing. We've got to get out of here!'

'How long before we can go to light speed?'

'30 seconds,' said Maxiis. 'Can we hold out that long?'

'We'll give it a try,' said Norman. 'Try an evasive manoeuvre until the light drive comes online.' Turning to the weapons officer he said 'Fire all weapons.'

The Freedom appeared to explode in a series of patterned lights as it circled the Command Centre, firing all its weapons as it went. The transparent shield sphere around the Command Centre turned blue where the Freedom's weapons hit it. Explosions rocked the Freedom as the Command Centre fired back. Then the Freedom was propelled forward at immense speed as it entered hyperspace.

Chapter Eight.

All the lights were out, Boris was underneath a control system trying to restore power to the ship. The power had gone a few minutes after they had initiated the light drive. They had been thrown out of hyperspace into the middle of nowhere.

It took a while but, eventually, Boris got the power back on the lights flickered and then they came on.

'How much damage?', said Maxiis.

'Shield systems are down. Engines are dead. Lasers are out. Walter's offline. Everything else is okay. Strange really. That thing could have done a lot more damage. The Emperor must have put a few extra touches into this baby,' said Norman.

There was a sudden explosion as the control system Boris had been fiddling with blew up. All the lights went off again.

'Boris, you try and get the shields back up. Maxiis, you and get the lasers back up. Chloë, you and get Walter resurrected. And I'll help the engineers get the engines fixed,' said Norman.

Chloë was the first to get finished. Walter was back on line in just half an hour. She had the power back on five minutes afterwards. Boris was the next to finish, although he couldn't turn the shields on straight away as Maxiis was outside fixing the laser turrets which had been damaged in the battle. After Maxiis came back inside, Boris turned on the shields.

'Walter, where are we?', said Boris.

'We're still in the western spiral arm of the Galaxy,' said the disembodied voice of the computer system. 'The light drive must have been damaged before we jumped to hyperspace because we were supposed to arrive at the Sirius-B construction yard.'

There was a loud wail from the scanner desk. Maxiis looked at the desk.

'There's a distortion in area A,3,' said Maxiis.

'What's it caused by?', said Boris.

'I don't know - Walter, what's it caused by,' said Maxiis.

'I can't really tell from this distance. We should get a closer look.'

'We can't get any closer,' said Maxiis. 'The engines are dead.'

There was a sodden jolt as the ship started moving. ten minutes later Norman returned to the Bridge. His black Alliance uniform had been turned almost completely brown with oil and other substances which had been leaking from the engines.

'The engines are working again,' he said.

'Excellent!' exclaimed Walter. 'Now we can go and see what that disturbance is.'

'What disturbance?', said Norman.

'The scanners picked up a disturbance in area A,3,' said Maxiis, pointing to the scanner screen. 'Walter says we should go and have a look at it.'

'Fine. Lets go and have a look. I'm going to get changed.'

'Where did they go?', said the Emperor, to Olik.

'I don't know, my Lord,' said Olik.

'Then find out! I want them found and destroyed. This rebellion must be stopped.'

'Yes, my Lord.'

Olik walked over to a computer and pushed the officer sitting there out of the way. Olik sat down and dismissed the officer then he started typing something. When he was finished he did not look pleased. By now the Emperor had returned to his throne room. Olik walked back to his command chair and turned on his communicator. The Emperor spoke up.

'Yes?', he said.

'My lord,' said Olik. 'There is no trace of the rebels. They must have flown apart when they entered light speed'

'No, my friend, they did not. Their ship is a vastly modified dreadnought that I had built according to my own designs. It is impossible for that ship to fly apart under any circumstances.'

'But sir, there is no other explanation. They have not arrived at their set destination.'

'Then their engines must have been damaged in the fight. Wherever they are they have no power so you will have plenty of time to find them. Check every sector along their flight path. They must be found!'

There was a beep from Olik's communicator as the Emperor ended the transmission. Olik turned to the Bridge personnel.

'Send all interceptors to check out all the sectors on that Dreadnought's flight path. The Emperor wants them found. When they are found have the co-ordinates sent back to here - along with the fighters.'

'Norman!' said Maxiis. 'Get up here quick! We're being pulled into a strange whirlpool type thing.'

'I'm on my way,' said Norman. He turned off the communicator and ran to the Bridge.

'Walter, have you any idea what it is yet?'

'I have no idea.'

'Oh dear,' said Maxiis.

Norman arrived, looked at the main screen, and said three words: 'Everyone, abandon ship.'

'What about Walter?', said Maxiis.

'No, Norman's right. Everyone should abandon ship while you still can. I'll be all right. I'll turn myself off just before the ship goes into the hole. That way I won't feel anything.'

'Are you sure?', said Jim.

'Yes,' said Walter. 'Now go - before your fighters can't get away either.'

Walter sounded the alarm for emergency ship evacuation and soon the fighter bays and escape pods were full of people.

Chapter Nine.

They all knew nothing could have been done to stop it. The pull on the ship had been too strong. If they had waited for him then they would all have suffered the same fate. There was no going back. He was certainly dead.

Chapter Ten.

They all ran to the turbo lift. Except Norman that is. He had somehow been separated from the others. The front of the ship was starting to melt. Norman ran to the lift just as it started down. Just before he had been turned off, Walter had started the lift thinking everyone was in it. Norman ran to the stairs. He almost made reached the docking bay when he was caught by the immense heat of the melting ship and fell unconscious.

'We've got to wait for Norman!' said Maxiis.

'We can't. Look,' said Chloë, pointing at the melting walls. 'He can't still be alive. Not now. We've got to go.'

They ran to their hips, engaged the engines and flew out of the ship. They were just in time to see the molten remains of the craft being sucked into the hole in space.

Maxiis was moaning.

'There wasn't anything we could have done, Maxiis,' said Chloë. 'The lift started and that was that. Walter must have thought everyone was in otherwise he wouldn't have started it.'

'But we should have been able to stop the lift and take it back up. Then we would all still be alive,' said Maxiis.

'But we couldn't. Look, we've all lost someone before. We just have to go on with life. We still have to defeat the Empire. That's our main priority.'

'But where are we going to live? We need a base.'

'We'll go back to earth. We can live in our old base until the construction yard can build us a new command ship. We even have the prototype of Walter on Earth. Our System is still here.'

'Yeah, but I still think there was a way to get Norman out with us.'

They entered the co-ordinated for Sirius-B construction yard and entered light speed, in silence.

Chapter Eleven.

The molten remains of the Freedom trickled out of the space hole and regained its original shape as it cooled. Three hours after the Freedom had left the space hole, Norman regained consciousness. He found that the ship was in total darkness and everyone had gone. He called for Walter then remembered that he had turned himself off. He got up and felt his way to his sleeping quarters where he fumbled around for a torch. He noticed that there was no sound. He had expected this as the engines were almost certainly tuned off. Norman eventually found a torch, turned it on and headed for the Bridge. After restarting Walter's core program the rest of the ship's systems came back online.

'Walter, where are we?' said Norman.

'You were supposed to have left with the others. I was sure you were on that lift.'

'Yeah. I arrived at the lift just in time to see it going down. I didn't make it down the stairs.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. You could have been killed you know. Anyway, we seem to be orbiting Earth - only it's not in the right area.'

'Why not?'

'We appear to have gone backwards in time. Judging by the landmass structure of the planet and the content of its atmosphere I would say we've arrived at around 615 AD.'

'Hey, isn't that the time of King Arthur, Camelot and things like that? Lets go and visit him.'

'I don't think that is wise. We have already changed history by being here. I don't think we should go changing it any more than is necessary.'

'Yeah, but if we go down there and visit him then we will change history so that we will be able to go down there and visit him when we arrive back here in the first place. If you know what I mean.'

'I know what you mean. Okay, your fighter is still in the docking bay. I'll have it ready for you when you get down there.'

'Thanks. Are there any other people left on board?'

'No. Everyone else must have made it to the ships.'

The mighty ship turned to face the planet. Norman's starfighter, dwarfed by the size of the capital ship, left the Freedom and headed for a small city in the south of England.

'Sir, one of our squadrons report sighting a ship which matches the description of the rebel ship. They say it entered a hole in space,' said the Deck Officer. 'Sir! Another report is coming in! The squadron reports a fleet of transporters have left the rebel ship. They are being escorted by six fleets of starfighters.'

'Enter the co-ordinated into the navigation computer and get us there as quickly as possible,' commanded the Emperor. 'Those ships must be destroyed.'

'Yes, sir!'

The Command Centre was engulfed in a green light as its light speed drive propelled it into hyperspace.

Chapter Twelve.

Norman hooked his 'phone to his gun belt, made sure his gun was fully powered and opened up the plexiglass roof of his ship. When he emerged from the ship he found a crowd of people staring at him. In front of them was a tall, old man dressed in black. The man stepped forward and greeted Norman.

'Welcome, stranger, I am Merlin. Advisor to the people and ruler of the kingdom of Camelot. And you are?'

'I am Norman. Commander of the Planetary Alliance.'

The crowd gasped in astonishment at Norman's height. The old Wizard smiled and turned to them. He spoke up.

'Just as I foresaw. The man from the future has arrived to lead us in our time of need. Hail Norman, Commander of the Planetary Alliance.'

The crowd cheered and the old wizard smiled. He turned to Norman.

'Come, friend, I have much to say to you but we must speak in private,' he said.

The wizard led Norman to the building in the centre of the town and into a grand chamber full of statues and paintings. There he turned once again to Norman.

'I have summoned you here because we need your help. We need a ruler for our kingdom and you have been chosen,' he said.

'Wait a minute,' said Norman. 'You didn't summon me here. I was accidentally sucked through a hole space and only arrived here by pure chance.'

'No. ', said Merlin. 'I summoned you here. I created that hole in space. We need you to become our King. Otherwise we will face destruction when other kingdoms hear about the death of our last King.'

'If I agree how long will I have to stay?'

'Until an heir can be found. It will take about two years - three at the most. Then you will be sent back to your own time. Only a few weeks later so that it will look like you did indeed get sucked through a hole in space but somehow managed to escape.'

'Then I accept.'

'You will not regret it. I assure you. Now, you must be taught the ways of Sorcery if we are to be successful.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, firstly, you will have to be strong enough to pull a sword out of a stone. It has been placed in the stone by non other than myself and only the strongest will be able to remove it. We must make sure that the strongest of all is yourself.'

'And using Sorcery isn't counted as cheating.'

'Heavens no! You can use any means possible. It shows initiative, you see. Now, enough with this chatter. Lets get down to business.'

The old wizard rolled up his sleeves and began to lecture Norman on the ways of Sorcery.

Chapter Thirteen.

'Sir, our scouts have just returned. They say there is no trace of the rebel fighters,' said Olrik.

'Send out all our special forces. The rebels must be found!' bellowed the Emperor.

'At once, sir,' said Olrik.

'Very good,' said Merlin. 'You are stronger than I expected. You will go far.'

'It's still hard,' said Norman. 'I'm having trouble holding it.'

'It will become easier with practice,' said Merlin. 'You may put it down now - slowly. Remember, don't think of the statue's weight.'

Norman slowly lowered the statue to the floor. He had surprised himself. He didn't think he would be able to lift a 2 foot high solid gold statue plus its 5 foot high marble base in the same hand. He wiped the sweat from his head with the sleeve of his robe.

'That is enough for today,' said Merlin. 'You have proved yourself strong enough to free the sword from the stone. Tomorrow we shall start on telekinesis.'

Norman looked quite surprised. He turned to the old wizard.

'Is that hard?', he said.

'No. Well, not that hard anyway. You will probably find it easier than what you have just been doing. Now you should get some sleep. It will be a long day tomorrow.'

'About this sword,' said Norman. 'It doesn't happen to be called Excalibur, does it?'

'Heavens no!' said Merlin. 'The lady of the lake has that. This one is just a plain old sword.'

Merlin was just about to leave the room when he turned to face Norman again.

'How do you know about Excalibur anyway?'

'King Arthur and yourself are widely known in my time. But only as a legend.'

'This King Arthur who you speak of, who is he?'

'He is the one that the lady of the lake gives Excalibur to...,' Norman's voice trailed off.

'I can't say I've ever heard of a King Arthur before. Maybe he will be the heir we are looking for.'

Merlin turned and left the room. Norman returned to his fighter to get some rest.

Chapter Fourteen.

Two months after Norman arrived at Camelot, he had been fully trained as a wizard and was ready to take his place as ruler of Camelot.

'The big day has finally arrived', said Merlin. 'Are you ready?'

'I am,' said Norman.

'Good. Let us depart.'

Norman pulled a long black robe on top of his leather armour and followed Merlin as he headed for the market square. Merlin had recently placed a boulder there and magically inserted a sword into it. This would be where the competition for the strongest of all would take place.

They arrived at the market square and Norman noticed that only four other contenders had arrived. The four were big, muscular men. They were preparing themselves by lifting rocks with people sitting on them or helping in the demolition of a building which had recently been caught in a fire.

'They have no chance,' said Merlin. 'This time I have placed the sword right through the stone.'

'Oh, good,' thought Norman.

'You needn't worry, my friend. You will be able to free it with ease.'

Norman then remembered his lessons in telepathy. His thoughts were not private in the company of Merlin. Merlin walked over to the stage which had been erected in the centre of the square. He spoke to the crowd of onlookers.

'Friends!' he said. 'We are here today to remember the death of our king and to celebrate the ascension of a new king. When, that is, he has been found. Now let the competition begin!'

Norman was to be the last contender. The four before him tried their best and two even got the sword to move slightly but they did not succeed in freeing it. After each contender had tried, Merlin re-set the sword in its original position. Now it was Norman's turn to try. He walked up to the sword, took a deep breath, gripped the hilt of the sword and pulled with all his might.

At first the sword did not move but Norman persisted and, remembering his first lesson: Weight is in the mind, he was able to reduce the stone's weight so the sword slid out freely. The crowd cheered. Norman smiled and Merlin spoke up.

'Our new king! Norman of Camelot. May he have a long life and protect us from our enemies.'

Chapter Fifteen.

'Message coming in from Beta Centauri,' said Chloë.

'Put it on screen,' said Maxiis.

The full-wall VDU flickered to life and the image of a tall woman appeared. The woman leaned forward in her chair and her face came into the light. From her light grey skin, the ridges around her nose and the deep red colour of her eyes Maxiis recognised she was Centaurian.

The woman spoke in Centaurian. Maxiis replied to her in the same language. (The conversation has been translated)

'This is the Beta Centauri Popular Front. Our forces wish to join with the Planetary Alliance,' she said.

'This is the Planetary Alliance', said Maxiis. He was unable to hide the surprise in his voice as he continued. 'We accept your offer. How many of you are there?'

'Two thousand, seven hundred, and forty-five in total. We wish to join as soon as possible but we also need to avoid any Imperial entanglements.'

'Yes, we know all about Imperial entanglements. We lost our command ship at our last meeting.'

'We heard about that. The Emperor covered that one up nicely in the press - but we have ways to get past that sort of thing. On the news he had called you smugglers and that the great Imperial Army had taught you a lesson for breaking the law.'

'Yes, we saw that bulletin. What is your location?'

'BC/3-269,551'

'We shall meet you there in two days.'

'See you then.'

The screen went black and Chloë turned it off.

'What did she say?' said Chloë, who didn't speak Centaurian.

'The Beta Centauri Popular Front wishes to join the Planetary Alliance,' said Maxiis. '2745 people are members of the Front. Our cause is growing in strength.'

Maxiis turned to Jim.

'Jim, would you accompany me to our rendezvous point with the Centaurians?'

'I'd be glad to,' Jim replied.

'My friend, we are under attack,' said Merlin.

'Then let's fight back,' said Norman.

Norman got us and the two wizards ran out into the street where there were many corpses lying all around. Merlin held his sword aloft and shouted for the citizens to join him in fending off the attackers.

There were many cries of 'We are already fighting them, you old fool' and other such comments as the two wizards joined the melee.

'Keep your mind focused on the attackers,' shouted Merlin through the throng. 'They can't help thinking about stabbing you when they creep up behind.'

'I'll try to remember that,' replied Norman in an equally loud voice.

The crowd was a huge mass of people attacking, defending and dying left, right and centre. Norman was finding it somewhat difficult to distinguish between citizens and invaders. Merlin was having no trouble with this at all - he just seemed to be setting everyone alight who came near him.

A large man reeking of sweat lunged at Norman, his sword aloft. Norman ducked out of the way and brought Excalibur clean through the man's neck. Wiping the blood from his face Norman turned to face another attacker. The man was thinner than his last opponent and somewhat more manoeuvrable. The assailant thrust his sword at Norman, who parried and lunged back, cutting the man's arm. The man congratulated Norman on his swordsmanship and lunged forward again, leaving his entire left side open to attack. Seeing the opportunity, Norman ducked under the man's oncoming sword and plunged Excalibur deep into his enemy's exposed chest.

Wave after wave of invaders stormed the city. Norman and Merlin, with a band of citizens still able to fight, cut through the enemy and made their way to the city's main gate. Norman led the citizens forward as Merlin set about dealing with the war machines the enemy had broken through the wall with.

The streets of the city were covered in the blood of the dead and the dying. Norman pushed forward with his rapidly diminishing band of defenders. The area of the city nearest the gate was a flaming mass of buildings and bodies. The enemy forces were becoming fewer and fewer as the band slowly moved closer to the city gates. In the few hours that had seemed like days it took for Norman's group of defenders to reach the gates, Merlin had managed to burn the war machines to ashes. The last embers burned quietly as the surviving members of Norman's small group pushed the remains of the huge city gates closed.

Wiping the blood and sweat from his forehead, Norman said 'I think we'd better get this place cleaned up.'

Chapter Sixteen

'Come in, my friend,' he said.

Merlin entered the room. He looked pleased but yet sad at the same time.

'The enemy has been defeated. Thank you for helping us. You should go back now.'

'You don't want me to go, but there is another task which I must complete.'

'Yes. Come, I will send you back.'

Norman picked up his phone and gun then followed Merlin out into the still devastated city. Merlin led him through the streets and back to his fighter. Norman noted the streets in the southern side of the city weren't as badly damaged as those to the North. Norman decided the enemy must not have got as strong a foothold in this area. When they arrived at Norman's fighter he gave Excalibur back to Merlin, said goodbye and prepared to take off. A crowd had gathered and Norman wished them all good luck for the future as the top of his ship closed. There was a hiss of air as the cabin pressurised and a familiar voice spoke up.

'Time to go?', said Walter.

'Yes, Walter. Merlin is going to send us back.'

'Hurry back then, you don't want to miss your flight - the next one's not for quite some time.'

Merlin produced a hole in space as Norman's ship docked with the Freedom. Norman ran to the Bridge.

When he got there he steered the ship into the hole and re-entered the 23rd century.

Chapter Seventeen.

'Get ready to disengage the light speed engines, Jim.'

'I'm ready.'

'One, two, three - Now!'

The fighters cut their engines and entered the Centauri system.

'Fly to co-ordinates BC/3-269,551', said Maxiis.

'Full speed ahead!', said Jim.

'Maxiis - a Dreadnought has just entered the area. It bears the Imperial emblem.'

'This is Imperial Dreadnought Warrior. Cut your engines and prepare to be brought under a tractor beam.'

A Time hole appeared behind the two Republic fighters. The Dreadnought Freedom emerged and assumed a position where it could cover the two fighters.

'This is Dreadnought Freedom. What's going on here then?'

'Dreadnought Freedom lower your shields and prepare to be boarded.'

'I think you can guess what my answer to that is,' replied Norman.

An officer turned to the Admiral controlling the Dreadnought Warrior.

'Sir, that Dreadnought was almost blown to pieces when the Armageddon attacked it. It can't have its full complement of fire-power or shields left.'

The Admiral spoke to the Freedom again.

'Dreadnought Freedom this is your last chance. Lower your shields or we will open fire.'

Norman turned to Walter's main screen.

'Ready weapons and defensive systems,' he said.

He spoke to the Warrior again.

'Take your best shot.'

He spoke to the fighters.

'You two, fly to the hanger bay. Its going to get rough out there.'

The sky turned bright green as the Warrior fired on the Freedom. The Freedom moved in front of the two fighters so they wouldn't be hit. When they were safely in the hanger bay Norman turned the ship around so that it faced the Warrior and opened fire. The sky changed to a mix of red and green light. The Warrior wasn't able to withstand the modified weapons systems of its Emperor-designed foe. The ship's shields buckled under the intense bombardment of the Freedom's weapons. The Warrior accelerated towards the Freedom, firing as it went. The Freedom turned to meet its adversary and fired again. The Warrior's hull integrity collapsed and the ship exploded.

Maxiis and Jim arrived on the bridge. Norman turned to face them as Walter lowered the shields.

'Where are you to going?' said Norman.

'We're going to a meeting with the Beta Centauri Popular Front,' said Maxiis. 'They want to join the Planetary

Alliance.'

'Sounds good. I think I'll come too.'

'Okay. The co-ordinates are BC/3-269,551'

'You get all that Walter?'

'Yes. Fasten you safety belts, were going in.'

Two days later the Planetary Alliance was larger by 2745 people.

Chapter Eighteen.

ImpSys://Protected Sector:[PassCode-***20541-98243/6.9#]/Research/Fighter.New

The Imperial System.

Research Department.

Report: New Starfighter.

The prototype version of the 'Iron Fist' starfighter has just been tested. It greatly out performs the Storm Fighter in every field.

Statistics:

Speed: 5 Sector Areas per minute (maximum speed)

Gun Turrets: 6

Missile Silos: 2

Guns fully recharged in: 1 minute.

Maximum quantity of missiles able to be carried at one time: 14.

The Emperor was pleased with this report. He pressed a button and Admiral Traahil, the Admiral in charge of research, appeared on screen. She looked up from her work as the Emperor began to speak.

'I have just read your report and am most pleased with your work,' said the Emperor.

'Thank you, my Lord,' said Traahil.

'When will the first full squadron of the Iron Fist fighter be ready?'

'My Lord, we have seven full squadrons on their way to your ship as we speak. They should be there within the hour.'

'Very good. You may begin research on your next assignment immediately. I am sending instructions now.'

The Emperor tapped in the code for his personal communication link and the details for the the new super weapon were transferred to the research department. The Emperor then pressed another button and the VDU screen changed to display the Imperial Emblem.

The Emperor smiled. 'Soon the "Planetary Alliance" will be no more,' he thought.

To Be Continued.....

Appendix One

Dictionary of terms

The System

An inter-stellar version of the internet. The System is much faster than the internet and is the major form of information gathering and entertainment in the known galaxy. Every computer is connected to it and it is virtually unknown for a computer to be operated without a system connection.

Reader

A hand-held computer used to read the information stored on an identification disk. It shows the user all the data stored on the disk in an easy-to-read format and has been known to allow for the alteration of data stored on the disk.

Identification Disk

A small computer disk the size of a normal playing card. It contains information on the name, address and date of birth of the holder. Imperial disks also contain a retina scan and thumb print of the holder.

Starfighter Group

A small group of fighters under the control of one fighter pilot. The Imperial fleets used 20-25 ships in each group, controlled by another fighter outside the group. The Alliance preferred to use groups of 15-20 fighters and posted the pilot with the most experience as head of each group. Both sides had group control stations on their capital ships.