The Invictus lurched suddenly sending half the crew spilling form the large bed the shared.  
  
John recovered quickly.  
  
“Faye, what the fuck is going on?” he yelled out pulling himself off the floor and helping Alyssa to her feet.  
  
“I don’t know John!” the cute purple girl wailed. “There was nothing on the scanners and then suddenly we dropped out of warp!”  
  
“Dana, get down to engineering, this must be a systems failure.” John said, helping the redhead to her feet.  
  
“I’ll go with her!” Rachel yelled, sprinting after her lover.  
  
“Combat bridge now!” John ordered as he finished helping Tashana to her feet. Alyssa was already opening the secret passage and diving down, the rest of the crew followed and they took their positions quickly and efficiently.  
  
“Commander, get me a scan of local space just to be sure,” John ordered.

Nodding, the Latina activated the scanners for an active sweep. “John, the scanners are down,” she said, frowning with frustration as she tapped away at her console.  
  
“Not good, weapons hot, let’s assume this is bad. Any news from Dana?”  
  
“She’s not found anything yet,” Alyssa replied grimly.  
  
“All weapon systems unresponsive,” Calara said tersely as she turned to look at him for an answer.  
  
“Shit! Okay, do we have external cameras?” John asked.  
  
Irillith pressed a few buttons and the screens flicked to life. Local space was cold and empty as usual, with one exception.  A large grey ship hung motionless before them. Its sheer size seemed to defy belief. It was a perfect light grey rectangle, no lights showed form the behemoth as it hung over them. The face closest them was divided into three equal portions. A bridge rose from the featureless surface of each division for a short distance for no obvious reason, and above that was a smaller rectangle that could possibly be a window of some kind, but they too were completely black.  
  
“What the hell is that?” Irillith asked.  
  
“Shields?” John asked, Calara shook her head.  
  
“Anything from Dana?” John asked again  
  
“Nothing, they can’t find anything wrong; it’s just not responding.” Alyssa said.  
  
“We have nothing: no engines, no shields, no nav, no weapons, and the coffee machine isn’t working either!”  Calara said, panic rising in her voice.  
  
“Were fucked,” Tashana said.  
  
“Not by a long way yet,” John replied resolutely. “They must be planning to capture us, well not on my fucking watch!” Pulling the rifle from its housing beside him he checked the ammo counter and began the normal checks before combat.  
  
“Oh crap this one is down, check rifles girls!” John shouted in frustration. The girls grabbed for their rifles, finding them all similarly malfunctioning.  
  
“Right, the old-fashioned way then.” John said, reaching for his sword, expecting it to release smoothly from the catches. He grunted as the sword was held firmly in place. Even engaging his super strength, he couldn’t move it an inch - it was like the sword was even more locked in place.  
  
“John, are we fucked?” Calara asked nervously.  
  
“No. I can still fight,” He said, his jaw set in a firm line.  
  
“Incoming hail,” Alyssa warned them.

John nodded and the main screen flicked to the comm channel. A blank grey face filled the screen, it was hard to call it a face, there were no features of any kind, no eyes, nose or mouth, it reminded John of a man’s upper thigh. But there was no doubt that they were being observed by the creature.  
  
“JOHN BLAKE,” a voice said.  
  
“Er yes, who is this?”  
  
“ALYSSA MARANT,” again the voice said from somewhere.  
  
Alyssa looked up at the screen confused.  
  
“CALARA FERNADEZ,” the voice intoned. Calara nodded once.  
  
“IRILLITH AND TASHANA VALADEN.”  
  
The twins nodded and glanced worriedly at each other.  
  
The face seemed to look round the bridge but it was hard to tell exactly.  
  
“RACHEL VOSS? DANA?” it asked in a tone that brooked no argument.  
  
“They are here one the ship too,” John confirmed, his jaw clenched tight. “Now who the fuck are you and what do you want?”  
  
The face on the screen regarded him impassively for a long moment.  
  
“STAND BY TO BE BOARDED AND HAVE YOUR ACCOUNTS AND TAX FILES READY FOR INSPECTION. ENSURE YOU HAVE YOUR DEPRECIATING ASSETS LISTED CORRECTLY,” the voice demanded, the screen reverting to the external view of the huge ship ahead of them.  
  
“We’re fucked,” John said in a low voice.  
  
On screen the lowermost section opened and a figure walked out onto the lip.  
  
“Zoom in if you can,” John barked. The screen zoomed in and showed another blank faced humanoid standing exposed to the hard vacuum of space, it adjusted a round hat and checked what seemed to be a brief case before turning to regard the Invictus only a couple of kilometres away.  Suddenly the figure leapt off the lip and out onto space, somehow remaining upright, it began gliding serenely towards them.  
  
“John, what the hell is it?” Alyissa asked, as Dana and Rachel joined them on the combat bridge. John sat for a moment rubbing his eyes with his fingers.  
  
“It’s the tax office,” he replied simply, looking up slowly at the crew. “We’re fucked.”  
  
“No! There must be something we can do!” Rachel said fervently.  
  
“What are we up against exactly?” Calara asked, cracking her knuckles.  
  
“When the Terran federation began, taxation was a huge problem, so the tax office began genetically enhancing their auditors. Eventually they began construction their own ships, I am guessing that is one of them. They were dispatched to gather tax for the federation over two thousand years ago, and they’ve been at it ever since,” John explained softly.  
  
“That’s not possible! That level of genetic manipulation is just not possible,” Rachel said as they watched the unprotected auditor drift towards them.  
  
“Only thing guaranteed is death and taxes,” John said with a resigned shrug.  
  
Suddenly there was a knocking sounding through the ship.  
  
“We’d better go see what he wants,” John said, rising from his seat with obvious effort.  
  
With leaden feet, the crew made their way to the airlock. John pressed the button and they watched as the outer door opened and the auditor stepped in. His grey suit seemed perfectly normal, his black brogues seemed similarly normal too. His blank face regarded the crew through the window as the door closed behind him and pressurised to air lock.  
  
“Any last words?” John asked with gallows humour as the light turned green and the inner door swung open.  
  
The auditor stepped into the Invictus and looked around unimpressed.  
  
“JOHN BLAKE YOU ARE FIRST,” The auditor said. “THIS WAY IS IT?” he said, strolling off towards the grav tube.  
  
Dana skipped along beside the auditor. Her smile set to kill.  
  
“Hi I’m Dana, can I get you anything, tea? Coffee? Water?” she asked hopefully.  
  
The auditor stopped dead and turned to face her slowly. Dana’s smile faded slowly as she regarded the smooth expanse of grey flesh that made up the auditor’s face before he turned and resumed his walk to the grav tube.  
  
“Worth a try,” Dana grumbled as she joined them in the long walk to the grav tube.  
  
Silently the followed the Auditor to the bridge and into the briefing room. The auditor sat down at the head of the table and waited for the rest of them to take a seat. He turned and opened the top draw of the filing cabinet beside him and withdrew a thick manila file. Alyssa looked over at the filing cabinet, she could not remember seeing it before. Suddenly she dashed out of the briefing room. A few seconds she burst back in.  
  
“Their ship is gone!” She exclaimed. Looking again at the strangely familiar filing cabinet.  
  
“NO. IT IS RIGHT HERE,” The Auditor said nodding to the filing cabinet. He retrieved a large manual calculator that seemed much larger than should be able to fit in the brief case.  
  
“How is that possible?” Dana asked with a gasp.  
  
“WE ARE MASTER OF MATHEMATICS, TIME AND SPACE ARE IRRELEVANT TO US,” The auditor said.  
  
“But it was outside and huge!” Sakura protested.  
  
“WE HAVE A LOT OF FILES,” The Auditor said. Silently he regarded the files for a few moments, all the crew had the distinct impression of eyebrows being raised.  
  
“DO YOU HAVE A LIST OF YOUR DEPRECIATING ASSETS AND THE RELEVANT DEPRECIATION SCHEDULE?” The Auditor said looking at John blankly.  
  
“Err well here is the thing..” John began.  
  
“Wait!” Sakura yelled out suddenly. The Auditor regarded her coldly.  
  
“According to Terran federation taxation statute 174 (reviewed 2467) we're allowed to have our tax agent present!” she said, sitting back and smiling at the Auditor.  
  
“THAT IS TRUE, BUT, AS YOU WELL KNOW, UNDER SUB SECTION 38749 OF THE SAME REGULATION, WHEN THE TAX VICTIM, ER I MEAN, TAX SUBJECT HAS BEEN ABSENT FROM ANY PERMANENT RESIDENTANCY FOR MORE THAN 100 DAYS AN IMPROMPTU AUDIT MAY BE CARRIED OUT, SHOULD THE TAX SUBJECT HAVE FAILED TO REGISTER FOR EXEMPTION,” the Auditor replied in a smug tone before returning to his file.  
  
Sakura sat there tracing lazy patterns on the table with her finger as the Auditor rebuffed her argument. “Very true, but, as you too, well know, when the tax subject had been actively engaged by the military he, or indeed, she is allowed to have a tax lawyer and or agent present too. Is this not so?”

The Auditor sat there his face twitching as he considered her argument. “YOU ARE CORRECT, IS YOUR AGENT OR LAWYER PRESENT?” he asked.  
  
“No, we don’t carry a lawyer or tax agent as part of the crew.” she replied.  
  
“WHAT KIND OF ABSURDITY IS THIS? WHO GOES INTO DEEP SPACE WITHOUT A LAWYER OR TAX AGENT, I HAVE NEVER HEARD ANYTHING SO DANGEROUS AND IRRESPONSIBLE.”  
  
“I agree, but should to care to fix a time and place with us now I shall ensure our tax agent and lawyer are both present. I believe 30 days is allowed?”  
  
“FINE, NEW EDEN, ON THE FIFTEENTH OF NEXT MONTH. NINE AM, 2036 REPULSE ROAD, MEETING ROOM 101.”  
  
“That’s prefect see you then,” Sakura said, beaming the Auditor her most devastating smile.  
  
“YOU HAVE 29 DAYS USE THEM WISELY AND DO NOT BE LATE, WE ARE COMING FOR YOU ALL,” the Auditor declared as he faded from view along with the filing cabinet.  
  
The crew dashed back to the bridge to watch in fascination as the filing cabinet faded back into view, once again resuming its huge size. Slowly it moved away from the Inviticus and vanished silently from view. The crew checked their stations noticing all the systems coming on line again.  
  
“What do we do now John, do we run?” Alyssa asked  
  
“No, we get to new Eden ASAP and find the best lawyers and tax agents we can, and pay them whatever they want!” John replied quickly.  
  
“Course laid in John,” Alyssa said after a moment.  
  
“Make it so,” John replied.

Swathed in tachyon particles the Invictus leapt forward towards the biggest battle it would ever be involved in.