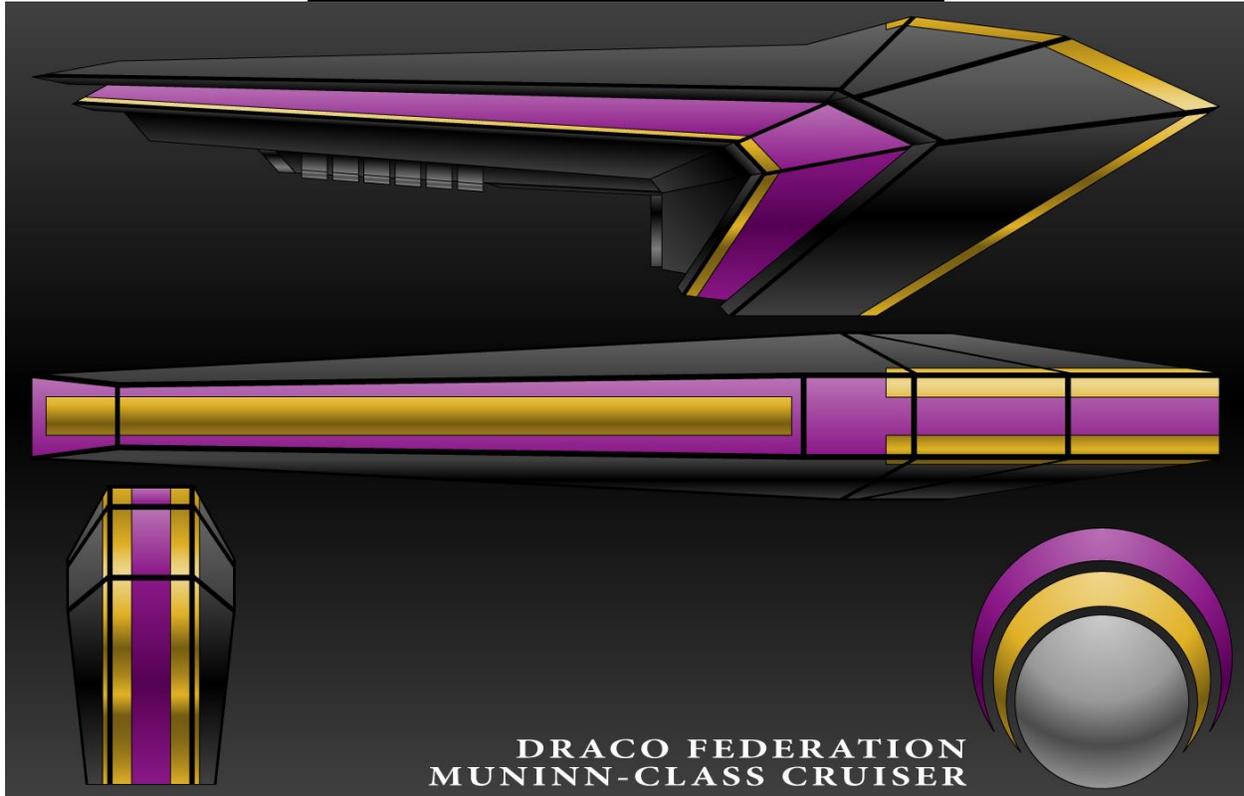


***Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga  
Episode VI: The Nations of Blood and Darkness***



**PART 4**

*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Cavalier, Planet SW-61-4 High Orbit  
SW-61 System, Southwestern Region, 59 Light-Years from NIR Border  
9:15am, September 26, 5434 A.D.*

“This cannot be real...”

Luke could not believe what he was seeing. Based on the transmissions they had been tracking for the past few days, Luke was expecting two small fleets consisting of small vessels as he assumed that the Tenebris, much less the Draco family, would not have grown in population numbers over the course of the past six hundred and fifty years. There should not be anywhere near the numbers needed to crew enough ships for a large-scale fleet.

Instead, Luke bore witness to dozens of ships from two factions where most of the ships were bigger than a Republic cruiser!

Luke looked closely at the two fleets that were exchanging fire. The fleet to starboard was nothing like what Luke had expected. The ships in that fleet were highly angular in shape, almost like a hook in their shape with barely any right angles. Their main color was black or very dark gray, but various areas were accented with purple and gold accents. There were three distinct classes of vessels whose roles were easy to guess based on their activity. The smallest could easily be a cruiser, the middle size looked to be their battleship, and the largest which had launch bays in the front would be a carrier. Both the battleship and the carrier appeared to be the same length as a *Paladin*-class battleship. Fighter craft had come out of the carriers' bays and

were exchanging fire with larger fighter craft from the fleet to port. The fighters from the fleet on the right were smaller and their movements would not be possible if they were manned. The stress from such flying would cause a normal Human to blackout from the gravitational force of those turns. Most likely they were drones that were designed for fighter and bomber combat. What surprised Luke the most about the ships on the right was the lack of visible weapons on the hull. Instead, it appeared that some particles were being “vented” from black strips on the edges of the hull and being directed to a focal point just a short distance from the hull of the ship. Once enough energy was gathered, it then directs that energy as a beam towards the intended target. It was the most advance weapons system Luke had ever seen.

Fighter craft had not been in use since the formation of the Republic after Luna transitioned into the star cluster. Because of the small number of people who were transported to this star cluster over three thousand years ago, the thought of people in small craft that are not usually well protected in certain scenarios was deemed unnecessary once the Republic was formed. It appeared as though the Tenebris deemed their use necessary for reasons only known to them at this time.

The ships to port, however, were just as surprising for Luke but for completely different reasons. Unlike the large fleet to starboard, the ships to port were fewer in number, totaling only four ships. However, their size was what surprised Luke the most. The ships were massive at almost four kilometers in length! It was long with four struts in the midsection pointing in four equilateral directions with large weapon pods supported by a ring that connected them all. The forward section of the ship was taller than wider and had launch bays with runways lining the top and bottom sections with two each and on the sides with four on each side. The back section of the ship consisted of massive canisters of some sort and the engine array. The colors of the ships were black with red and silver accents. The ships were bristling with a multitude of weapons all over the hull including several gun turrets, both four-barrel and larger eight-barrel cannons firing what appeared to be particle beams. The particle beams from the ships on the left were firing red-colored beams while the ships on the right fired yellow colored beams, allowing a distinction on who was firing. The ships on the left also had numerous vertical missile launchers as well as torpedo tubes based on what was also being fired. It was unclear if the ships to port had more weapons than what could visibly be seen, but all Luke could hope for is that there isn't any more weapons that what it was currently firing.

Apparently, the battle here had been raging on for a while as wreckage started to litter the surrounding space. Most of the wreckage was based on the ships to starboard which came as no surprise considering the size and difference in firepower. There only existed the wreckage of two ships to port which only goes to show how tough the larger vessels were. On the other hand, the wreckage that Luke could see may only be those that had not entered the atmosphere after gravity had taken a hold of them. Some of the debris from the starboard fleet was caught in the planet's gravity, forcing them to enter the atmosphere where most of it was burning up. Luke had noticed that the ships on the right were targeting and destroying wreckage large enough that it would cause damage to the cities below. Considering their actions appear to protect the planet from devastating debris, it was starting to become clear who the aggressor was and who was defending this planet. However, the rest of the debris that had not been caught in the planet's gravity had caught Luke's attention.

Before he would go any further with his thoughts, he needed to check a few things.

“Communications,” he said, “which fleet is the Tenebris Dominion, and which one is the Draco Federation?”

“According to the transmissions,” the communications officer said, “the ships to port belong to the Dominion. The starboard fleet has been identified as the Federation.”

“So, that means that this might be a Federation world, though this is based on the fact that the Federation fleet is destroying the debris that is falling to the planet below.”

“Well,” Yuki said, “there is, without a shadow of a doubt, the fact that the Tenebris are alive and well. The only thing we need to find out is why the Draco family is fighting the rest of the Tenebris, and how the political and military structures are of both nations before figuring out what needs to be done concerning them. However, considering the size and capabilities of the fleets we are seeing in front of us right now, I’m concerned about their military capabilities being on par if not superior to the Republic’s.”

“I had the same thoughts as well,” Luke said. “This is especially true for the ships to port considering their size, though the technological marvel I am seeing with the ships to starboard cannot be overlooked. However, that would all depend on the size of their nations compared to the size of their fleets.”

“So, how do we go about finding the information that we need? I’m concerned that if we try to infiltrate their computer systems remotely, they would be able to detect, trace, and discover our location. Even worse, they may be able to back-hack into our own systems.”

“True, if we were trying to hack the ships that were still active.”

“What do you mean ‘still active’? Wait a moment, you’re not considering trying to hack the computers of the ships that have been destroyed, are you?”

“Those wrecks are our best bet to access their systems and get some of the information we need without detection or possible back-hacking.”

“But those wrecks have no power and we don’t know the condition of their main computers. There is also the fact that they could be pulled in by the planet’s gravity at any moment.”

“That is a risk we will have to take. We will need to send two infiltration and data extraction teams. What we need to recover from those wrecks are two things: their navigation data and historical records. We need to be fast to deploy those teams as well. If those wrecks do start to get pulled down by the planet’s gravity, those teams will need to vacate them before the Federation forces target those wrecks to destroy them.”

“This is going to be risky. Do you think the SAGATs we have on board will be up to the task we are about to give them?”

“They have been bored for a while between training sessions. This may give them some much needed excitement after all of this time. Besides, the Colonel has been looking for some action involving the Tenebris ever since he volunteered his entire team for this mission.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*SAGAT Briefing Room, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Cavalier, Planet SW-61-4 High Orbit  
SW-61 System, Southwestern Region, 59 Light-Years from NIR Border  
9:22am, September 26, 5434 A.D.*

“Listen up, SAGATs!”

Colonel Blair had wanted to say those words for a long while. While he and his team volunteered for this mission to find the Tenebris cult, the past several months have been nothing but “boring” for most of that time. There have been missions where they were required to go down to an unknown planet for samples that the scanners could not get from orbit for the sake of

research. Other than those missions, there really wasn't any action for the SAGATs short of their daily training to keep them in shape.

When he was first told about the overall mission, he was very weary of the fact that it was a mission that the RCIA was in charge of after his previous dealings with the RCIA, namely Agent Tora. However, when he had heard that there were two stealth vessels and that Tora was being assigned to the *Templar*, Blair found it better to choose to go with the *Cavalier* hoping that the *Cavalier's* crew would not give him problems or have him run into Tora again. Thankfully, the latter held true, though the former needed a little bit of work.

A few days ago, he had been informed that there were transmissions that could involve the Tenebris, but they were not sure if it was or not due to interference and the distance. The closer they had gotten to the transmissions, the more it was confirmed that the Tenebris were the ones that were sending the transmissions. What he did not expect was the fact that the Tenebris Dominion as it was being called was fighting another nation known as the Draco Federation named after the largest and the founding family of the cult among the six that worshiped it. Even he was puzzled for the past day or so when he heard about that development. Now that they had arrived at the source of the transmissions, a battle in orbit between the two fleets, he had been waiting for orders on how to proceed along with the rest of his team.

That was when he was given a rather risky order which he now had to tell the rest of his SAGATs. He turned on the monitor in the room which showed a holographic tactical view of the current battle including wreckage of ships from both sides in real-time. Blair's team was a bit small as there were not a lot of volunteers to begin with. Aside from Lieutenant Colonel Benja, there were only ten other SAGATs that sat in the room. He did not know them by name but rather their call sign. The reason behind this was to allow for deniability on the part of the government. While the public was told that the missions of both stealth frigates was the exploration of the Western and Southwestern Regions, the possibility that the Tenebris cult could be alive and active was not public knowledge and was considered a covert operation. That was the reason the SAGATs, who would normally not be involved in missions of exploration, did not use their real names while on board. This applied to both Blair and Benja as well who also had to adopt call signs. The call sign used by the team was Ghost, making Blair "Ghost One" and Benja "Ghost Two." The rest were numbered based on their tenure in the SAGATs up to "Ghost Fourteen."

Blair took a deep breath as he had to tell these SAGATs the orders he was given.

"We have arrived at the source of the transmissions that were detected a few days ago," he said. "It is confirmed that these massive ships here..."

Blair pointed at the figures of the large ships that were outlined in red on the map.

"...are calling themselves the Tenebris Dominion. They are currently engaged in combat with forces that are called the Draco Federation which are highlighted in purple. As both sides are speaking English, it is believed that the Draco Federation is in fact the Draco family of the Tenebris cult. The reasons as to why they are fighting each other along with the size and capabilities of the two factions are what we are being assigned to determine."

Blair pointed at the wrecks that were between the *Cavalier* and the two fleets.

"These wrecks consist of ships from both sides," Blair continued. "The wrecks are currently drifting with some of them being pulled in by the planet's gravity. As you can see, only two belong to the Dominion while the rest belong to the Federation. I must point out that the Federation is targeting the wrecks that have been caught in the planet's gravity well and destroying those wrecks so that they can more easily burn up upon reentry making sure those impacts on the surface are kept to a minimum. These actions have led us to believe that this

world is occupied by the Federation as the Dominion does not appear to be gunning down the wrecks. Regardless of who occupies this planet, our orders are to board these wrecks and attempt to extract data in relation to navigational charts and as much history as we can get from these ships as we can before they are caught in the planet's gravity well."

Benja raised his hand. Blair knew that he would and already knew the question but figured to let Benja ask it anyway for the sake of the rest of the team.

"Yes, Ghost Two?" Blair asked.

"Considering that there is wreckage from two factions on the battlefield," Benja said, "I'm to assume that we would be splitting into two teams so that we can extract this information from both factions' wrecks at the same time?"

"Correct. We don't know when or how far back this conflict goes or when the Draco family split from the rest of the Tenebris, so we need information from both sides."

Another member of the team, a brown-haired Caucasian male sitting two rows back, raised his hand this time.

"Yes, Ghost Six?" Blair asked.

"What is the procedure if the wreckage a team is on starts to descend from its orbit?" Ghost Six asked.

"If the wreckage starts to get drawn into the planet's gravity well, that team will withdraw from the wreckage despite whether the data has been completely extrapolated or not. We know that the Federation will open fire on that wreckage when it reaches that point. If there is another wreckage that the information can be extracted from whose data core is still intact, they will proceed to that wreckage as well. If no more exists, that team will return to the ship with the data they were able to recover, and we will sort it out from there."

"Which takes priority, then? The navigational charts or their history?"

When Ghost Six asked that question, Blair realized he did not have an immediate answer for him. Blair was told only to get the data, but he was not told which would have priority in such a situation that they might not be able to get it all. Blair had to ask himself that question as to which one was more important. Was the layout and the size of each faction including the location of their capitals more important or was it the history that led both factions to be at war with each other?

"Sir?" Ghost Six asked, trying to snap Blair out of his train of thought.

"Actually," Blair said, "I was not given orders as to which one took priority over the other."

"Then it is more of a judgement call on our part to determine which one takes priority?" Benja asked. "That is rather unusual for them to not pick one for us."

Blair knew that both pieces of information was important. That was most likely the reason why one did not take priority over the other. Blair thought about it for a moment but quickly came to a decision.

"Then I will make decision right now for you all," Blair said. "While the history between the factions is required to get a better understanding of the conflict between them, this is more than one way to get that information even if it can be acquired outside a battlefield. The navigational charts and the layout of the size of each nation including the location of their capitals however is not so easy to acquire. If both factions have already provided a layout of the systems within their territories, it would go a long way towards our own charts and would save us time in finding their capitals. If we are not able to get their history in time, we can go to their capitals and see about accessing their libraries for their historical records."

“Good thinking, Ghost One,” Benja said. “We will prioritize the charts over the history, then. How will the teams be divided?”

“Team One will consist of myself with the odd number Ghosts. We will go to the Federation wreck with the highest orbit and with a functional computer core. Ghost Two will take the even number Ghosts and head for the more recent of the two Dominion wrecks. Remember, this is still a covert operation so keep the chatter to a minimum as much as possible. Our transmissions could be intercepted. Also, the power of those ships may be out. If you must power the core, keep it as low as possible so that the Federation and the Dominion think that they are power fluctuations. If they detect the power level to be much higher, they will either get suspicious and send an investigation team or they will choose to destroy the wreck outright while we are still inside, neither of which I want to happen. They don’t know we are here and I would like for things to be kept that way.”

“What would the *Cavalier* be doing while we are on this mission?” Ghost Six asked.

“From what I have been told, the ship will be monitoring communications for any additional information that they can find. If it detects anything that is a problem, it will send a short laser transmission to the transports that will be dropping us off at the wrecks to inform us to leave. Anything further?”

“One last question, sir. What happens if we encounter any survivors on the wrecks? What are our orders in that scenario?”

“While you all should still proceed with caution on those wrecks, there should not be any survivors. However, if there are any survivors, we cannot have our presence discovered as this is still a covert operation.”

“In other words,” Benja said, “they are to be silenced permanently, right?”

“You all are ordered to do so by any means other than shooting. Discharging a weapon could cause an issue if an investigation team from either faction attempts to board the wreckage out there so I recommend using anything that would look like they were killed in battle. We need to leave no trace of our existence on those wrecks. Now, we are on a time crunch so gear up and prepare for departure.”

All of Blair’s team got up and saluted.

“Yes, sir!” they all yelled.

They lowered their arms and ran out of the room. Benja stayed.

“Something wrong?” Blair asked.

“I’m going to be honest,” Benja said. “I hope we don’t find any survivors on those wrecks. Killing survivors so that we cannot be seen and reported doesn’t feel right with me.”

“Do you think I feel any better about the idea of following such orders? I feel disgusted about it but that is what we volunteered for. We cannot complain about it.”

“Maybe not, but it doesn’t mean I like it.”

“Neither do I, but for right now, we have a mission to complete. I just hope I made the right choice about which piece of data would take priority.”

“You made the right choice considering the circumstances. If we can get all the information without any trouble, it would be even better for us.”

“I can agree to that. We better hurry and get our gear on, though. We only have so long before those wrecks start to get pulled in by gravity and viable options among the wrecks are already small in their numbers.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Cavalier, Planet SW-61-4 High Orbit  
SW-61 System, Southwestern Region, 59 Light-Years from NIR Border  
9:45am, September 26, 5434 A.D.*

“Captain, the transports report that they are ready for launch.”

The communications officer’s report grabbed Luke’s attention away from the continuing battle that was being fought between the Tenebris Dominion and the Draco Federation. He was watching them for two reasons. The first reason was to get a clear understanding as to the offensive and defensive capabilities of both factions to provide in his report. If the Novus Initium Republic has to get involved in this conflict, it would be best to know what the enemy forces are capable of and prepare for them. The second reason was to keep an eye on the current wreckage. The longer the duration of time since the ship was destroyed, the sooner it is drawn in by gravity and is destroyed by Federation forces.

The newer wrecks would be the most ideal and would give the SAGATs the time they needed to extract as much data as possible. Luke pointed out two wrecks in particular.

“Communications,” Luke said, “provide the transports with the coordinates for these two wrecks. They are the most recent ones and should give the SAGATs the most amount of time to extract the information we need.”

“Yes, sir,” the communications officer said.

Luke knew that the moment the transports left the hangar bays located in the back of the *Cavalier*, they would engage their optical cloak and run silent to avoid detection. It was best to give them a destination while they had a chance to still talk to them.

“Transports have received the coordinates, sir,” the communications officer said. “They are ready to depart.”

“Very well,” Luke said. “They are cleared to launch.”

“Aye-aye, sir.”

Luke looked back at the ensuing battle between the two factions. A thought suddenly popped into his mind, one he did not expect for him to be even thinking about. For whatever reason, he began to ponder how many have died in this battle or for that matter the war between these two factions altogether. Why he was suddenly thinking about that was a mystery to Luke. The Tenebris’ ancestors including the Draco family were nothing but murderers who followed and no doubt still were following a sadistic cult religion. However, there were hundreds of Human lives, as far as Luke knew, that were being snuffed out in an instant as each vessel and manned fighter was being destroyed, but for what reason? Was this war due to a discrepancy between the factions when it came to their religion or did it have something to do with the leadership between the families? Either way, they needed that information to help understand why this war was happening in the first place and how the Republic should respond.

“Sir,” the communications officer said, “the transports have left the port side hangar and have engaged their optical cloaks. They will be out of touch for the time being.”

“Understood, continue to monitor communications between the fleets. Let me know if there are...”

“Sir!” Yuki yelled. “I’m detecting a spatial anomaly behind the Dominion fleet!”

“What did you say?”

Luke looked at the main screen as a single spot in space behind the Dominion fleet began to twist and spiral based on the surrounding stars and the planet below. Soon a small “opening” in space, like a portal, appeared and rapidly expanded to a size a bit larger than the width and

height of the Dominion ships' ring and weapon pods. Soon after, another Dominion ship like the others began to come through the portal slowly.

"What is this?" Luke asked out loud. "This is not a jump using Salire Purpura crystals. What am I looking at?"

"The readings I'm getting from that portal are not consistent with the use of crystals at all," Yuki said. "These readings indicate that the portal we are looking at originated from several Light-years away, maybe more. It's almost as if the Dominion has the means to create a rift in space and cross through it over great distances."

"Are you saying that the Dominion has developed the means to theoretically appear anywhere they wanted to in the star cluster?"

"It is possible. They must have developed a new means of transportation, one that is not limited to the use of star gates or crystals. I wonder if they developed such a drive due to a lack of crystals or if they wanted something that wasn't limited to the use of crystals including star gates?"

"Regardless, this means that they may not be unhindered in the range of their vessels when it comes to interstellar transportation. If that is the case, this would give them a tactical advantage in deploying their forces. This would be a serious threat for the Republic if they waged war against our forces."

As the engine section of the new vessel came out of the portal, the portal closed behind it. The ship quickly launched its fighters from all twelve of its bays, suddenly outnumbering the Federation drones that were still engaged against other Dominion fighters.

"Sir," the communications officer said, "I'm getting messages from the Federation fleet for reinforcements. The message appears to be relayed to a star gate near the edge of the system."

"I was wondering if the Federation developed their own unique transportation method," Luke said. "It appears that they have not. They must still be using warp drive and star gates to get around their territory. That means their reinforcements, unless they are in the next system over, may take some time to arrive. Our teams need to hurry in getting that information while the two sides are still fighting."

"Sir, I'm getting transmissions from the planet. They appear to be from Dominion ground forces."

"Dominion forces are already on the planet? I thought this was a Federation world."

"Based on the transmissions I'm getting, it is a Federation world. The Dominion ground forces are calling for an orbital strike against a Federation military installation. Based on the distance I'm getting between their ground forces and the coordinates of the Federation target, they appear to be almost twenty miles away."

"They are twenty miles apart from each other? Even with as much firepower as what I am seeing from the Dominion ships, they sure are being overly cautious being that far away."

"Um, Captain?" the tactical officer said. "The new Dominion vessel is turning its bow towards the planet."

Luke looked at the new Dominion vessel on the view screen. The front of the vessel began to turn left and downward away from the *Cavalier* towards the planet below. As soon as it was pointed at what Luke could only assume was the target coordinates the ground forces provided it on the surface, it came to a halt. The Federation forces soon directed all their particle beams at the new ship. Luke figured that the Federation forces knew something that Luke did not, or they would not be concentrating all of their firepower on that single vessel. The new ship held its position for a while without firing a single weapon. Thankfully that gave time for Luke

to take a closer look at the engines. He wasn't sure what the ship was using as a fuel source for their engines, but they were glowing purple from their exhaust. However, a larger circular looking engine with four thruster exhaust ports had red particles coming out of the thrusters and a circular ring close to the end of it. Luke could only assume that the massive engine was responsible for the particles being generated and used in the particle cannon turrets. It began to glow brightly, but the ship still did not fire any particle cannons.

"What is that ship waiting for?" Luke asked. "Why haven't they fired a single shot? It looks like that particle engine or reactor is feeding the weapons from what I can tell."

"What in the world?" Yuki said. "Sir, I'm getting a powerful energy signature coming from the bow of that ship!"

Luke looked closer at the vessel. Suddenly, the bow section of the vessel began to split apart along the horizontal axis as the top and bottom sections moved apart from each other. From their angle, something began to glow between the sections a bright red. Luke could only think of one reason why the ship had to separate and why it was glowing bright red.

That ship was preparing to fire a heavy particle beam cannon at the surface.

"Great Maker, no," Luke said. "That's why their ground forces are twenty miles away from the target!"

"What do you mean?" the tactical officer said, bewildered.

"Do you want to know why the Republic doesn't use particle beam cannons anymore?" Yuki asked.

"No, I don't," the tactical officer responded, puzzled.

"Then keep watching. You'll see why."

The red light intensified for a few more seconds. At that point, a massive particle beam was fired from that opening nearly the width of the opening that it was fired from. Clouds moved out of the way as the beam made its way towards its target. As soon as it hit the planet surface, a massive dome-shaped explosion arose from the point of impact. A shockwave appeared and pushed any surrounding clouds that were not in the line of fire away. Seconds later, the dome went away, replaced by a mushroom-shaped cloud.

Luke sat in his chair with a stern look on his face at what he witnessed. Yuki did the same, but everyone else on the bridge was in shock.

"THAT is the reason why the Republic has stopped using particle cannons," Yuki said. "The force of the particles accelerated to such speeds impacting on the surface while ionized causes what you are witnessing: a destructive force of kinetic and ionized energy."

"Such weapons were considered dangerous by the Republic Senate during the Expansion Era," Luke said. "This was some time after the weapons were used against the Tenebris colony the day they went into self-imposed exile. It was the first time they were used against a planetary target. Laser weapons were eventually developed that were just as powerful but would not cause the same level of destruction against a planetary target should they be used in that fashion again. Thankfully, that has not been the case with the exception of weapon testing."

"Sir," the communications officer said, "the Dominion ground forces appear to be communicating with the new vessel."

"Let me guess: they are communicating that it was a direct hit."

"Correct, sir."

As soon as the communications officer said that, another particle beam, this time from a Federation cruiser, shot down towards the planet not far from where the Dominion vessel had struck. Luke witnessed the shot and the much smaller explosion at the point of impact.

“Communications,” Luke said, looking at the officer and pointing at the screen, “was that the point of origin of those transmissions from the Dominion ground forces?”

“Yes, sir,” the communications officer said. “I’m not detecting any further transmissions from them.”

“A retaliatory strike for taking out their military base,” the tactical officer said. “That was quite brutal.”

“Are there any further transmissions from the surface from Dominion forces?” Luke asked.

“I’m not detecting any further transmissions from Dominion forces on the surface,” the communications officer said. “Either they have gone silent to avoid being destroyed or there are no more of them on the surface right now.”

“Part of me wonders if that will keep the Dominion from deploying any more ground troops until they have control of the planet’s airspace.”

“You mentioned about looking up the history of these two nations earlier for the SAGATs to retrieve,” Yuki said. “What if this planet has a library about the history of the Federation? Wouldn’t that be easier to get such information from a public source?”

“We have already deployed our only troops to retrieve the information from the wreckage of the vessels. If we are lucky, they will get that information for us. I’m not about to risk them going down to the planet when there is a threat of a possible orbital strike against civilian targets. We don’t know what the Dominion will strike next if they decided to fire that weapon again. Next time, it might be a city.”

“Then why haven’t they done so?”

“What do you mean?”

“We have been receiving transmissions from this battle for the past few days but from what I can determine, there have been no attacks on any civilian center or any of the cities. It appears that the Dominion are only attacking military targets.”

Luke thought about Yuki’s words for a moment as to why the Dominion would only attack military targets. Based on the actions of the Tenebris in general, they should not hesitate to destroy the cities on the planet unless they needed the populous of the planet for some reason.

That reason suddenly sent a cold chill down Luke’s spine as he thought about the original reasons the Tenebris were exiled from Republic space to begin with.

“They need sacrifices for their religion,” Luke said with a somber tone.

Everyone on the bridge looked at Luke. They were all briefed about the Tenebris and what their religion was about but the thought that they would still need some form of sacrifice after so many years left them all with a sense of dread and disgust.

“You cannot be serious,” Yuki said. “After this many years, you think that they could STILL be practicing THAT part of their religion?!”

“It is only speculation,” Luke said. “However, considering their past, it would fit the reasoning as to why they are not targeting major population centers.”

“I’m surprised that no one else noticed that there is something missing in this battle,” the tactical officer said.

“What would that be?” Luke said.

“Has no one noticed the fact that the particle beam hit the planet?”

“I think we all noticed the obvious fact that the beam hit the planet.”

“That is what I am getting at, sir. Where is their planetary shield?”

Luke realized what his tactical officer was getting at. Luke looked back at the two mushroom-shaped clouds on the planet, realizing nothing had impeded those beams.

“Yuki,” Luke said.

“Already on it,” Yuki said. “I’m checking for any residual energy fields in orbit indicative to the use of a planetary shield. Give me a moment.”

“Sir,” the tactical officer said, “that Dominion ship that arrived recently is turning its bow towards the Federation fleet. I’m also detecting warp signatures incoming from the direction of the star gate where the Federation beamed their transmission moments ago.”

“This area of space is about to get more crowded,” Luke said.

“I’ve run my analysis,” Yuki said. “There are no traces of a planetary shield system at all in orbit of this planet.”

Luke looked at Yuki with a puzzled expression.

“You’re telling me they don’t have any planetary shields at all?” Luke asked.

“Unless it has been down for a very long time,” Yuki said. “Otherwise, I would say that they don’t have one on this planet at all.”

“This is an interesting development. These two factions have developed advanced technology based on what their ships can do, but if neither side has ever developed a planetary shield, it means their citizens are unprotected from an orbital attack.”

“That is a dangerous situation in a time of war. We have gotten so used to the idea that our planets are protected by an energy shield that we don’t remember how it was prior to their implementation.”

“Those were only a recent implementation, but I get what you mean. All this needs to be in my next report so hopefully this entire battle is being recorded. We are recording this battle, aren’t we?”

“I’ve been recording this battle since we arrived,” the communications officer said.

“Excellent. Do we have an estimated ETA as to when the transports should be reaching their assigned wreckage?”

“It should be in the next minute or two, sir.”

“Good, though I wonder how the SAGATs are taking what they have witnessed?”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Cockpit, Covert-Ops Stealth Transport Alpha, Planet SW-61-4 High Orbit  
SW-61 System, Southwestern Region, 59 Light-Years from NIR Border  
9:51am, September 26, 5434 A.D.*

“This is completely nuts!”

Blair had seen his fair share of ship-to-ship combat in the past during the First Interstellar War both on the front lines and while aboard the *Templar*, but this battle was nothing like how he expected it to be. The new Dominion warship that entered the system through some portal was already a shock to him as he had never seen such a method of transportation, but the fact that the same vessel fired on the planet below with a massive particle beam cannon was equally surprising. He wasn’t sure what they were firing at or why one of the Federation cruisers targeted another location on the planet nearby, but he was quite sure that the *Cavalier* was recording all of the battle and subsequent communications for them to get a better understanding of the situation. Blair could only hope that he never has to be on a planet where either party is willing to fire such weapons at his location.

However, he and his SAGATs needed to focus on the task at hand. They were approaching the wreckage of the Federation ships that had been destroyed in the battle but had not been drawn in by the planet's gravity. The pilot had to take his time as they approached. With the transport using its optical cloak, they were not protected by wayward debris like they normally would as the shields could not be activated at the same time as the optical cloak. If they hit any of the debris fast enough or if any debris hit them with enough velocity, their hull would be breached and the explosive decompression would vent them into space. Thankfully all of them, even the pilot, were equipped with full-body sealed suits for such occasions; they could survive the decompression and be in space. The suits have their own thick armor, thrusters, and shields for outer space operations so they would be protected if they hit debris. They also possessed a small communications system to talk with each other without being heard by others including in the vacuum of space. They would also be small enough to go undetected within the debris field including bio-scanners due to the materials the suits were made of. The only reason they did not do so in the first place was because they would be spotted approaching the wreckage which was undesirable. Also, the suits only had so much compressed oxygen to work with in space without a dedicated EVA suit which is why the transport will be nearby to pick them back up once their objective is complete, their time has run out due to oxygen levels, or the wrecks were being targeted by the Federation fleet.

Blair was given a potential target to extract information from the databanks of a Federation ship deep in the wreckage. That wreck was the largest of the ships he had seen being used by the Federation: a carrier. While Blair did not know if this was a dedicated carrier or if it was only large enough to really carry the drones they had detected coming out of the active ships, it was clear that somehow this type of ship would also serve as the flagship of a given fleet or flotilla of ships. As the pilot slowly navigated around the other wrecks towards the carrier, Blair took a very close look at the damage that he could spot to make sure that the ship was intact enough to possibly have the information and looking for a point of entry.

From what he could determine, the armor of the ship was very thick and it looked practically seamless. The holes in the ship looked like it was burned through with the Dominion's weapons only showing explosions once those weapons burned through deep enough for implosions to occur. There was a rather large hole in the front of the ship near the launch bays, the only point in the ship not protected by the armor aside from the engines. It was unclear if this point of impact was strong enough to pierce through and hit something inside to cause the ship to no longer be functional, but there were no signs of life externally from the ship. However, since none of the Federation ships appear to have any visible windows on the hull, Blair could only base his assumptions on the fact that none of the blast points showed any signs of an atmospheric containment field being active. It is possible that the ship no longer functioned due to explosive decompression throughout the ship and any failsafe system to prevent that no longer functioning for one reason or another. The only way to know for sure would be to board the ship first. However, there was no way to determine on a ship that size where the computer core was. Thankfully, the transport had the means to determine the layout of a ship without using long-range scanners that would normally be detected by the Federation or the Dominion.

*"I'm going to land the shuttle in the bay if possible,"* the pilot said through Blair's helmet. *"From there I can use the pulse scanner to get a layout of the ship."*

"Understood," Blair said.

The pulse scanner functioned much like seismic sonar and did not need air to travel. Instead, the pulse scanner travelled through solid objects like the hulls of ships. The scans would

be relayed back to the transport and provide a “map” of the ship. Since the pulse was limited to dispersing throughout the hull and bulkheads, it would not be detected by any of the ships nearby allowing Blair’s team to proceed with their mission without detection.

*“Readings are coming back, sir,”* the pilot said.

“Send it to the holding area,” Blair said. “I need to go over it with the rest of the team.”

*“Understood, sir.”*

Blair got up from his seat and headed through the door behind the cockpit to the holding area where the SAGATs were seated in their restraints. They looked his way despite their helmets not showing their faces. Of course, the team could not see his face either through his helmet. Camera feeds could also be transmitted between them, so they saw what Blair saw a moment ago with the orbital assaults. A three-dimensional hologram appeared in the middle of the holding area as a light blue schematic of the wrecked carrier appeared. They looked at the schematic and the layout, though areas of the ship were destroyed making it hard to determine what functions that area was designed to do.

“Here is the layout of the wreckage of this carrier,” Blair said. “It appears that the computer core is located here.”

Blair pointed at a tall cylindrical structure near the midsection of the carrier. The hologram highlighted that structure in a yellow color.

“It is twenty decks up and four hundred meters to stern from our current location,” Blair said. “Scanners are indicating that there is no power to the lifts as I had expected and there is no active gravity control either. This will make going up to the right floor easy once we are able to access one of the elevator shafts.”

*“Which shaft is the best one?”* Ghost Five asked, his voice going through Blair’s helmet. *“The last thing we need is an elevator getting in our way.”*

Blair looked at the shafts that connected the hangar bay to the desired deck. There were three shafts, but two of them were blown open from whatever impacted the hangar bay that wrecked it. While that meant that they could access those tubes, they both had elevators on different decks blocking their way with one five decks up and the other eleven decks up. The third shaft was intact but there was an elevator seventeen decks up.

“All three of them have an elevator in the shaft between us and the desired deck,” Blair said. “Therefore, we will go up the shaft whose elevator is up the highest. We will access the deck from the doors just below the elevator and move over to the middle shaft. By that point, we would bypass the elevator in that shaft and make our way up to the desired deck. We should not have any issues reaching the computer core by that point.”

*“Do the scans show any power to the core or any survivors?”*

“As far as survivors, that has not been determined. Bear in mind that gravity is off so if there were survivors, they would have to be touching the bulkhead when the scans pass. If they are free-floating, we would not be able to detect them. However, the scans also show no air within the ship, so unless someone was in an EVA suit at the time of the decompression, there would be no survivors since no one could breathe. As for the computer core, the scans show that there is no power to the system. We will have to take the portable generator and power it up on our own to get the data that we have been tasked to receive. However, as I mentioned, we need to keep the power level low to avoid detection from the surrounding ships.”

*“Too bad we cannot access the bridge. It would be nice to access the ship’s log to get a better understanding of how the Federation’s crew functions compared to our own.”*

“We don’t have time for such a detour. Now let’s head out before we run out of time.”

Blair turned towards the direction of the pilot still in the cockpit.

“Pilot, we’re heading out,” Blair said.

“*Understood, sir,*” the pilot said. “*I’ll maintain this spot and alert you of any changes.*”

“Roger.”

The door to the cockpit slid closed in front of Blair. Blair turned around and looked at the large door at the opposite side of the transport. An atmospheric force field appeared in front of the large door, followed by the door lowering like a loading ramp. Blair’s team removed their restraints, unhooked their weapons and gear from the walls near them, and lined up near the force field. Blair walked over to his right to grab his rifle, checked the charge of the power cell to make sure it was still charged, and walked in front of the line.

“Activate your optical camo and magnetic boots,” Blair said.

Everyone in the group pressed a button on their left sleeve. They all soon disappeared from sight but Blair’s helmet was able to display them as silhouettes to show their position. They pressed another button and soon Blair heard a few muffled thuds as the team’s magnetic boots activated.

“Move out,” Blair said, waving his hand for them to move.

Blair walked out of the transport first, as running would cause the possible loss of attraction to the deck and headed right with his team behind him as the magnetic boots kept their feet firmly on the deck. Blair took a brief glance at the transport, which only appeared as a silhouette on his helmet’s heads-up display. For him, it was always weird when it looks like they came through a hole in space-time when they come out of the transport.

Blair looked back forward and saw the shaft that they needed to get to across the hangar bay. As they walked towards the shaft, Blair looked around the hangar bay and only saw the drones that were like the ones still flying and attacking the Dominion ships and fighters. Most were wrecked but some were burnt melted hulks indicating that they were hit with a high temperature weapon like the particle beams the Dominion uses. Strangely enough, there were no bodies in the bay. Either they were blown out into space from the decompression or the bay is automated and needs little to no crew in the bay to manage them.

As they reached the shaft, the doors were sealed shut without any power to them. Blair looked over at Ghost Seven who was their “muscle-man” with the equipment needed for such jobs.

“Ghost Seven,” Blair said, “care to do the honors?”

“*One can opener, coming up,*” Ghost Seven said as he reached behind his back.

In order not to put out a lot of energy that could be detected, Ghost Seven had a manual wedge designed to be used to open sliding doors. The tip of the wedge was razor sharp to make sure it could go between doors, though it was covered by a cap to protect both the sharpness of the wedge and the person holding it so that they don’t cut through their space suit by accident. Ghost Seven took the cap off the wedge, placed the tip right at the separation point of the doors, and with all available force shoved the wedge in. The wedge went in a half inch into the door allowing for them to open a little bit. Ghost Seven gave it one more push for the doors to be positioned into notches further up the wedge so that they could be held there. Once the doors were in the wedges, Ghost Seven used the crank positioned at the opposite end of the wedge to manual push the doors open. He managed to push them two inches apart before he felt something in the doors break.

“*The door locks just broke,*” Ghost Seven said as he closed the wedge to remove it. “*Try opening them now.*”

Ghost Three and Five grabbed the right door while Blair and Ghost Nine grabbed the left door. As Ghost Seven had said, the locks that were in place to keep the doors closed when an elevator isn't there were broken as the doors slid open with ease. Ghost Seven put the cap back on the wedge and returned it to his back.

Blair took out his flash light and shined it upward. It was clear. He shined it downward to make sure nothing was below. At the far end of the shaft, all Blair could see was open space. Apparently, one of the hits this carrier took was at the base of the elevators. However, with no gravity, any fear of falling that far down and out of the wrecked vessel quickly dissipated. Blair had never gone aboard a wrecked vessel before. He had to rethink how he and his team were going to move throughout the ship, even though he already knew there was no gravity.

"Alright, team," he said. "Make sure to turn off your magnetic boots when you are about to jump upwards. Since there is no power in the ship, we should not have to worry about any exposed power cables if there are any at all. Remember, we are going as high as we can before we reach the elevator. Also, if any of you fear that it would drop on us, don't be as there is no gravity to bring it down on us. Let's go."

Blair walked up towards the edge of the door and squatted down. He deactivated his magnetic boots and pushed off the floor into the elevator shaft, propelling himself upwards with the flashlight shining ahead of him. The other members of his team followed behind as their flashlights shined behind him. He could see the elevator ahead of him as he got close as well as the last set of doors before it. He counted the number of decks between him and the elevator.

"Activate your thrusters when you are five decks away from the target to slow you down," he said.

Blair was quickly reaching the point where he was five decks away. As soon as he reached that point, Blair pressed a button on his left sleeve, activating the thrusters at the top of his suit to slow him down in periodic bursts. He slowed down to the point that he reached the bottom of the elevator, extending his left arm to come to a slow stop. He shined the light at the doors to the deck they needed for them to change elevator shafts. The rest of the team caught up, grabbing the sides of the shaft to slow their ascent. Ghost Seven looked at the doors as the door mechanisms were visible inside the shaft.

*"I may be able to destroy the mechanisms directly if you want me to use the corrosive gel, sir?"* Ghost Seven asked.

"Do it, but be quick," Blair said.

Ghost Seven reached into his right pouch attached to his belt and withdrew a small bottle with a nozzle at the end. He engaged his magnetic boots and attached himself to the right side of the wall. He squatted down near the mechanism.

*"I will only apply it to the right-side mechanism. I want to use this sparingly in case we encounter more doors or hatches for some reason."*

"Understood," Blair said.

Ghost Seven removed the cap off the nozzle of the bottle and placed the tip near the mechanism. He poured out a green-colored gel that stuck to the metal of the mechanism. He poured it in a rectangular fashion before he stopped squeezing it and put the cap back on. Within seconds, the gel began to eat through the metal plating until the plate was no longer attached, floating away from the plate by a slight decompression from inside. Ghost Seven put the bottle back in his pocket. The gel used was designed to stick and melt metal without the need of an atmosphere but would not affect non-metal containers. Ghost Seven reached into the housing and disabled the lock.

*“Lock is disabled,”* he said.

Ghost Three and Five floated over to the door and activated their magnetic boots with each of them above and below the door at the seam. They pushed the right door open with ease, allowing the team to enter that deck.

“Good work,” Blair said. “Let’s get to the next shaft over. Ghost Three, stay here as a relay in case we need a connect point of communications back to the transport.”

*“Understood, sir,”* Ghost Three said as she remained near the base of the door.

Blair went through the door first and activated his magnetic boots. As he planted himself onto the deck, he used his flashlight to look around the deck. There were panels floating in place and wires suspended in the air, but there were no signs of any corpses that he could see right now. Blair could only assume that another hull breach was on this deck and the bodies were sucked into space. The rest of the team except Ghost Three came out of the shaft and onto the deck as Blair moved right towards the center elevator shaft. By now, they would have bypassed the elevator stuck in that shaft and could continue up.

As Blair made his way to the doors, he noticed that they were not shut. They were open but as to why, he did not know. The remainder of the team followed and noticed the open door as well. Blair looked down into the shaft and noticed something about the elevator below that started to make sense to him. The hatch on the top of the elevator was open and there was no one inside. Blair could only surmise that whoever was stuck in the elevator tried to escape and came out this door. Most likely at the time they opened it, the deck decompressed and the poor victim who tried to escape ended up getting sucked out into space. The power must have gone out too at that time as the door had not closed, most likely due to the lack of power.

“Looks like that is one less obstacle in the way,” Blair said. “Once we head up this shaft, our target deck is four decks up. Use your thrusters only.”

Blair turned off his magnetic boots and used his suits thrusters to move into the shaft slightly. He then used them to move up slowly. The remainder of his team followed. Once he reached the door, he used his thrusters again to stop and shined a flashlight on the door.

“Ghost Seven,” he said, “time to use that gel again.”

*“On it, sir,”* Ghost Seven said as he approached the doors.

Ghost Seven made his way to the right side of the door, planting himself with his magnetic boots next to the mechanism. He took out the bottle again and poured the gel over the plate the same as last time. The plate came off once the gel ate through it, and Ghost Seven reached in to disable the lock on the door.

*“Go ahead and open it,”* he said.

Ghost Five and Nine came up to open the door this time. As they pushed the door open, Blair shined his light through. Blair widened his eyes, though no one could see them.

This time, though, the deck was not empty. There were bodies floating in the hallway as Blair stepped onto the deck. The remainder of his team came through and noticed the bodies.

*“This may explain why the scans didn’t detect them,”* Ghost Five said. *“If they are not touching the walls, floor, or ceiling, they couldn’t be detected.”*

“While I can agree with that assessment,” Blair said, “I have a hard time believing what I am seeing. Look there.”

Blair shined his flashlight down the hall. While there were a lot of Human bodies that cluttered the corridor, they were not the only ones. Blair shined a light on a rather large insectoid that was mostly green with four legs and two arms. It reminded him of an ancient praying mantis but with four-fingered hands, which included thumbs. Further down the hall, he saw another

unknown being, this time something that looked like a large flightless bird but a bit more muscular and with feathered arms and four-fingered claws, though there looked to be two thumbs, one on each side of the hand from the other two fingers. The last unknown alien race he could identify was by far the scariest looking. This last one was larger than the rest and had a muscular yet boney-looking scales. It looked almost like armor. This one physically in form was the closest to “Humanoid” except for the large tail, but at the same time Blair would not want to face such a being in unarmed one-on-one combat.

What surprised him the most was the fact that all of them had the same uniforms on as the Humans Blair could see. All of them looked to have suffered the after effects of a loss of air and decompression of the deck.

“*What in the world?*” Ghost Five said as he looked down the hallway as well. “*This is the crew?*”

“*I was not expecting to see aliens on board.*” Ghost Seven said.

“Neither was I,” Blair said, “but that is not the only surprise. They are all wearing the same style of uniforms.”

“*So?*” Ghost Five said. “*What is the significance of that?*”

“It means that these alien races have been with the Draco Federation for quite a while. It would take a long time for any alien race to be fully integrated into a society that may be different from their own.”

“*A long time? Wait a minute. You don’t mean to say...*”

“I do. The Federation appears to have been the first Human-based society to have discovered aliens long before the Republic ever did.”

“*You don’t think they were enslaved by the Draco family long ago, do you, sir?*” Ghost Nine asked as she shined her light on each one of the dead aliens.

“Until we learn their history, nothing can be certain. I just hope that the Dominion has not found any aliens, either. For now, let’s make our way to the computer core. It is at the end of the corridor. Ghost Nine, you’re our expert in physiology so stay here and take scans of each one as best as you can as well as serve as our relay point in communications.”

“*Yes, sir,*” Ghost Nine said as she got out her medical scanner.

Blair as well as Ghost Five and Seven continued down the corridor towards the main computer room, moving around the dead bodies suspended in weightlessness. After almost two hundred meters, they reached a large door at the end of the corridor that said on the right side “Main Computer.” The fact that it was in English was enough for Blair to believe that the Federation was run by Humans. After seeing the aliens earlier in the corridor, he had his concerns but that does not appear to be the case now. Blair returned his focus back to the mission at hand.

“Ghost Seven,” Blair began to say.

“*I know, sir,*” Ghost Seven said as he pulled out his wedge. “*I got this.*”

Ghost Seven jammed the wedge into the door, but was surprised at the ease at which the door had opened once he did. He removed the wedge and the doors stayed ajar.

“*It doesn’t look like they had enough time to engage the locks on this door when the power went out,*” Ghost Seven said as he returned the wedge to his back. “*We should be able to open them with ease. Ghost Five, care to give me a hand?*”

“*Very well,*” Ghost Five said as he walked up towards the right side of the doors.

Ghost Seven went to the left side of the doors and pulled them apart. Just as Ghost Seven had said, the doors opened with little effort. Once they were open, Blair shined his light inside

the room. The room was massive, but he could see the massive cylinder of glass and metal in the middle of the room standing several decks tall that housed the carrier's computer core.

"Ghost Five," Blair said. "You're up. Remember to keep the power levels low."

"Understood," Ghost Five said as he withdrew a power pack from his back.

Ghost Five went over to the nearest console. He looked it over to find a place to plug in the power supply, but eventually he had to go under the console and remove a panel. He hardwired the power pack into the console, then went back up to the console to check his results. The console started to get power, but the computer core did not.

"Is there a problem?" Blair said.

"The entire core cannot operate without a precise voltage level," Ghost Five said.

"However, sections of the core can be powered. As I am looking over the different sections of the core, I have noticed that the historical records and the navigation charts are stored in different sections, but the power supply will only have enough power to activate one of the sections for a while to get the information. There may not be enough power to get the historical records afterwards. Do you still want me to stick with the navigational data?"

"Yes, if it cannot be helped. Hurry and retrieve the data."

"Understood, sir."

Blair looked at the core. One of the sections a few meters up came to life as Ghost Five powered it up to activate. Blair took the time to look around the computer room as he discovered more bodies floating around. It was starting to make him feel uneasy, like he was some sort of scavenger or grave robber looking to unearth something valuable from the dead. While this was not far from the truth in what they were doing, he could only hope that the fighting that was going on between these two factions would come to an end once the Republic chooses to act on the information they were gathering. Whether that is the case or not, he could not say, but seeing all of these lives before him wasted in a war that Blair could not understand the reasons for felt wrong to him. Of course, war is wrong in general coming out of the First Interstellar War not that long ago, but Blair knew the reasons behind that war, not the one being fought in this system.

"Whoa," Ghost Five suddenly said.

"What is it?" Blair said as he looked back in Ghost Five's direction.

"I've accessed their navigational logs, sir. You need to see this while I download them to portable memory."

Blair walked over to the console that Ghost Five was at while he hooked up the portable memory device. As Blair looked at the screen, he was shocked at what he saw. The Draco Federation took up more than half of the Western Region in size. While this was nowhere near as big as the Republic in size, it was quite larger than Blair had anticipated. He figured it was going to be smaller consider over six hundred years had passed and the size of the Draco family and its descendants would not have given them due cause to expand as far as he was seeing from the map. Whether they were using some form of high fertility to suddenly increase their numbers over the years or cloning instead, he did not know. However, the fact that they are as large as they have become still surprised him. This may even surprise both the RCIA and the Supreme Chancellor when they see this information.

He then began to wonder how large the Dominion was in comparison, but hopefully Benja's team will share their information that they are retrieving as well once they return to the *Cavalier*. What he did notice on the map were areas that were either once Federation worlds or currently contested systems like this one. They all had names on the map, this star system being

called “Miranda.” He would have to notate that with the *Cavalier’s* database when he gets back as well.

However, one name out of all the star systems on the map jumped out at Blair and with good reason. There was one system that was without question the location of the capital. That system was labeled “Draconia.” Blair almost laughed when he saw that name. It was not very original in his mind, but then again, the Tenebris may have done the same thing for their capital as well.

*“I’ve almost got the entire map downloaded, sir. Just need two minutes to complete.”*

“Make it quick. I don’t want to be in here any longer than is necessary. Seeing this many dead bodies floating around gives me the creeps.”

Blair continued looking around for a minute or so while Ghost Five downloaded the data.

“Sir,” Ghost Nine said, *“I have scanned six subjects of the alien races, namely a male and female of each race. I will upload them to the Cavalier’s database once we return.”*

“Good. Hold your position for now. We are almost done with the...”

Before Blair could finish his sentence, he felt a sudden shift under his feet. He looked around and noticed that the bodies in the room had also shifted. However, he knew that the bodies didn’t really shift. It was the ship itself.

“Ghost One!” the transport pilot yelled over Blair’s helmet. *“You need to get back to the transport immediately!”*

“Why?” Blair asked. “What happened?”

*“I got a short laser transmission from the Cavalier. The Federation fleet got some heavy reinforcements just now and they concentrated all of their firepower on one of the Dominion warships destroying it. The explosion sent a large shockwave that has hit all of the wrecks including this one. We have been propelled towards the planet and could be targeted by the Federation forces at any moment! We are out of time! You need to get back here now!”*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Cavalier, Planet SW-61-4 High Orbit  
SW-61 System, Southwestern Region, 59 Light-Years from NIR Border  
10:02am, September 26, 5434 A.D.*

“I thought only the Dominion ships had that drive unit?!”

Luke could not hold in his reaction after what he had just witnessed. Two minutes ago, Yuki, detected three rifts similar to what the Dominion uses behind and above the Federation fleet. At first, Luke had thought the Dominion was sending reinforcements of their own to overpower the Federation forces. However, that was not the case as three massive vessels of Federation design suddenly appeared from the rifts!

They were massive, measuring around three kilometers in length and looked like hooks with “wings” of sorts on the sides that resembled the central hulls found on the smaller Federation vessels. The middle vessel had protrusions similar to the carriers mounted dorsally and ventrally but with three and two of them respectively. A protrusion was found on each of the side hulls as well. The front of the vessel had twenty launch bays in front and numerous drones flew out of them the moment the ship arrived. They suddenly outnumbered the Dominion fighters nearly two-to-one!

The other two vessels that flanked the “supercarrier” were the same size and shape as the “supercarrier,” but their colors were reversed, the launch bays were removed as were the

protrusions, and thick black strips lines that were on the front, sides, above, and below. Luke wondered if the thick strips were similar to the particle emitters found on the rest of the Federation ships. That answer came very quickly when they emitted massive balls of particle energy in the front of both vessels with the same amount of strength and power as the Dominion vessels, striking one of the Dominion warships along with the rest of the Federation fleet that concentrated their firepower. Whatever shields that vessel had disappeared and the beams had skewered completely through the warship causing it to explode into molten slag. The explosion sent a shockwave throughout the battlefield including the wrecks, causing their orbits to decay and get caught in the planet's gravity.

Luke ordered the communications officer to send a short laser transmission to the transports the SAGATs were sent to retrieve the information they needed, though he knew they would not have enough time to get all of the information they wanted. However, the fact that the Federation was using the same drive system as the Dominion and the fact that they had constructed massive vessels that were "supercarriers" and "dreadnoughts" perplexed Luke even further. How long have both factions have such a drive system and how long has this war been going on? An even bigger question is if the Federation has such a drive as well, why are the smaller vessels still using star gates and warp drives to get here?

"I thought the Dominion only had them, too, based on what we were witnessing," Yuki said. "I don't have an answer as to what we are seeing or why the Federation has the same type of drive system. At this point, we will have to wait until both teams return to see if they have any information to explain this, provided they were able to get that information. Otherwise, it may be up to speculation."

"Sir," the communications officer said, "I am receiving a short laser transmission from both SAGAT groups. They are returning to the *Cavalier* right now."

"The moment they get back on board," Luke said, "I want us to return to base in the Ruber System. We need to report our findings to the RCIA."

"You don't want to stick around to see how this battle will conclude?" Yuki asked.

"This battle has been waged for over three days so far and who knows how much longer still it will be fought before it is over. I do not want to stick around to see its conclusion or risk that either fleet may soon start to detect our presence through our cloak if we wait any longer. We need to analyze the data that was recovered and have the higher-ups figure out what to do at that point."

"Understood, sir."

Luke looked back at the battle that was still ensuing between the Federation and the Dominion. The wreckage that began to descend towards the planet was being fired upon by the smaller Federation ships while the larger ones continued to engage the remaining Dominion warships. If the SAGATs had remained on those ships, they would have been casualties that would be hard to explain to their families back home.

"Sir," the communications officer said, "the transports are back on board."

"Alright, then," Luke said. "Helm, bring us about and lay in a course to the Ruber Station. Engage the warp drive."

"Aye-aye, sir," the helmsman said as they turned the bow away from the battle to leave the system.

Luke could only hope he would not have to see such a battle again and that the SAGATs were able to retrieve the information they needed to start making sense of this conflict.

\* \* \* \* \*