

Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode VIII: What Was Left Behind



PART 5

*Office of Admiral Trent, Novus Initium Navy Fleet Headquarters
Planet Luminaire Orbit, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
6:26am, November 21, 5434 A.D. (4 Days Later)*

“Are we really ready for this?”

Trent got up early that morning after having to take some medication to ensure he got enough sleep last night. He was so anxious and nervous about the mission and the unknowns that were awaiting him, he had to take sleeping pills to help him sleep through the night. He knew today was the day that he would be entering the Southern Region, the first Republic ship to do so. Depending on how things go, they may also be the last one as well.

The feeling he had was not like he was not coming back that he based his thought that his ship would be the last Republic vessel to reach the Southern Region. Any mission could be a ship’s last mission. Instead, the reason he felt that way was that there may not be a Republic as he knows it soon. The summit that Supreme Chancellor Drew had organized with the leaders of the other nations took a few days and there were some heated discussions after most of them found out their ancestors left the New Unity Government over matters that observers may consider petty. However, a decision and a vote were made. In the next three days, the known nations of the Novus Initium star cluster along with the Nature Restoration Zone and the Liberigi Mandate will become “states” in a new nation that will be called the United Systems of the

Novus Initium Federation. While the original nations will retain their existing sovereignty and laws, there would be national laws that all “states” must follow.

One of those laws was that each state must have a form of democratic system that allows for the election of each “state’s” leader who will retain the position’s title. This affected the Camino Star Empire the most as Emperor Dicarín would have to campaign for his title in the Empire’s first elections, but Prime Minister Veonis was quick to point out as an example the change his nation went through in becoming a democratic system and the improvements that came with it. By majority vote, Chairman Miya was elected as the new head of the Tenebris State with the NRZ Oversight Committee now under her supervision rather than the other way around. While there was still a great deal of work to be done to restore many of the planets that were devastated by Armani Draco’s war machine, it was good that the Oversight Committee would be determined to continue the work under “better management” as Miya put it. The current leaders will hold their positions for the rest of the terms dictated by the existing laws of their original nations. However, the leaders of the “states” would also form the Federation Council to govern the new nation. The head of the Council will be selected to be the “de facto” leader of the nation and help guide the Council, though this individual has not been selected yet.

Another change to make things easier to distinguish when referring to the other states was the change of names for each one. While it was acceptable to retain the original names of each nation-turned-state in conversation and in reference, each one was renamed using part of the original name. The Novus Initium Republic was by far the hardest to change the name being the oldest of the nations. It could not be called the Human State either since two other states had Humans residing in them as well. It was decided to call it the Republic State to reference it more easily. The other states were far easier: the Camino State, the Lykan State, the Liberigi State, the Vitam State, the Tenebris State, the Draco State, and the Union State. These names would take effect once the Federation Charter was accepted and ratified by all the nations.

The creation of the Federation will bring with it many rights and privileges that was not seen in some of the respective nations. While cloning was illegal in the Republic, the process is being allowed to restart one last time for the Tenebris State, but this last batch of clones will be able to reproduce naturally. The current clones will be allowed to mix the DNA of any two individuals or even a clone and a natural-borne human to produce an offspring. There will be no alteration where the next generation can only thrive on a liquid diet. This levied the population issue when it comes to clones and their continued existence in the star cluster.

The way Trent sees it, the Union looks to be getting the best deal out of all the nations by joining the Federation. The Federation’s creation will see the sharing of civilian technology between the nations in the earliest stages. Among them are the creation of portal drive-equipped star gates to allow Union-built vessels to travel between systems, both within and outside their borders, almost instantly. Not only will this allow them to explore more of the Northwest Region, but it will also allow the population that are currently living in space stations and other artificial dwellings to either move to any newly explored worlds or to other “states.” Some have expressed interest in moving to the Vitam State or the Liberigi State to increase their populations. Others were also looking into moving to the Tenebris State to help with the restoration efforts on planets that are already habitable without any terraforming required.

Military technology will take longer to share due to the manufacturing methods of each of the nations and the existing laws that govern their construction and maintenance. While there were many details that had to be settled, the leaders of each nation already have plans in motion for each “state’s” military. To show solidarity as a nation, every ship will receive a new paintjob to

signify that they belong to the same nation. This was to commence once the Federation Charter is ratified. There have been talks about allowing mixed fleets of ships for use in patrols on the borders of the new states as well as trade and logistic routes. The only issue with such fleets currently is the logistics of maintaining vessels “outside” their normal jurisdiction. An example of this are the missiles of the Vitam State that cannot be manufactured in the Republic State. The introduction of the Portal Drive on select ships that can support them as well as star gates will help alleviate the problem. However, the Portal Drive’s implementation on ships built outside of the Republic, Tenebris, and Draco States would require a massive overhaul and refit to make them work. Another option is using the hundreds of dreadnoughts made by the original Tenebris Dominion that were equipped with the drive. It would only take a few revisions during a refit to improve them and make them usable by all the states. Aside from the improved particle generators and refined Portal Drives made by the Republic, there was talk of reducing some of their overall weaponry, primarily the missile silos found in the vessels’ midsections. They were the primary weakness of the design that was somehow overlooked. They would also get a different name, the Paramount-Class Dreadnoughts. In Trent’s opinion, it was a better name for the vessels. They would also get the new paintjob as well, which has not been revealed yet.

It was obvious that with as long as the summit was, and that fact it is still ongoing, that Trent did not have an opportunity to speak with either Supreme Chancellor Drew or with Grand Admiral Mikey about his “visitor.” He had hoped that he would have gotten the chance to speak with them before going on his mission into the Southern Region about Bilartini and how he was observing the events that were unfolding in the Lumen System. At this point, it no longer mattered since they were deploying today. Trent still had some doubts and reservations about the mission knowing that he is expected.

If there was one thing that filled him with anticipation, however, it was the fact that today he and the rest of the star cluster were going to get answers to questions thousands of years old.

Trent sat at his desk looking over a three-dimensional hologram of the most recent star charts, primarily focusing on any available information on the systems in the Southern Region. There was not much information to go on, unfortunately. The gravitational fields that cut off the Southern Region from the rest of the star cluster fluctuate the visible light spectrum of stars on the other side. Their color and relative distance are only speculative at best, but the planetary configuration around each star if any was unknown despite any advance means of stellar cartography the Republic had. Even the local headquarters located in the star system at the edge of the Central and Southern Regions cannot provide any clearer readings from stars on the other side of the fields despite being that close. The coordinates that Bilartini provided are just a “best guess” as to where to point the Portal Drive towards.

Trent did not know if they were about to jump into a trap or not. While the rest of the fleet knew that there was a mission for them when they got back today, Trent was not going to let the rest of the Seventh Fleet join the *Marshal* on this mission. He had already discussed this with Captain Dani as the fleet was returning to port in his Ready Room three days ago, but he just sent a message to the rest of the fleet about the matter. Jumping the entire fleet would take too long both there and back. It would be faster for them to go through the portals the *Marshal* generates if the battleship were the only one going through them.

There was only one other matter that was going to bother Trent about the mission. As part of the transition for the militaries that would eventually serve as one under the Federation banner, it was decided without consulting Trent that a member of one of the other militaries was going to accompany them on their mission as an observer. Based on the information he received,

it was a flag officer from the Union fleet. He had not gotten the information as to a name or the species to know what they look like, but they were to meet in his office this morning with Dani.

They would be arriving in the next two minutes. However, a door chime rang in his office, indicating that someone was already at his door. Trent took a deep breath as he prepared for his arrivals.

“Come in,” Trent said.

Shortly after Trent had said that, the right door of the double doors to his office opened, and the person Trent saw was Captain Dani. She did not enter his office immediately, though. She looked like she was holding the door open for someone.

“Excuse me, Admiral,” Dani said. “I am here with our guest from the Union.”

Trent figured that would be the reason Dani was holding the door open as she was. Now it was time to see who or what he was dealing with on this mission.

“Let them in,” Trent said.

Dani nodded her head, acknowledging Trent’s order. She looked to her right and gestured the unseen visitor in. The being that came around the door was a well-endowed female wearing the clean-cut black with orange accent uniform of the New Unity Government. She was mostly covered in black fur. The hair on top of her head was long and full volume, going down to her shoulders. It was also a mix of black and white. The fur around her eyes, the sides of her nose, mouth, and cheeks were white including a stripe coming down from her forehead to the top of her nose breaking up the black. Her tail was large and very bushy. It was also black, but it had two prominent white stripes going down the top of it.

Trent had studied the species in the Union over the past few days and knew what she was: A Skunk. What surprised him the most was how beautiful she was. He never thought he would suddenly be attracted to someone of another species outside of Humans. Knowing that Animality has Human DNA in their genetics, it was possible that her Human-based traits was what initially attracted him, only to be amplified by the “exotic” nature of her animal side. If he had seen her in civilian attire, he may have mistaken her for a supermodel like those seen in the fashion industry.

He was aware of two other aspects about her when he saw her. He was fully aware of a Skunk’s natural defense and its potency. If he so much as angers her to an extent, he would see a side of her that he would and yet would not want to see from that angle. Even worse is that the glands on Skunks her size are also proportionately larger, meaning she could hit him with more than her four-legged ancestors did in the past on Earth. It was best not to upset her where she felt the need to use it.

The other aspect, and this one was quite noticeable, was she lacked a ring on her finger. Trent did not study the aspect of marriage in the Union as he would never need to know that information, but now he wished he researched it. Part of him wanted to ask, but he felt that asking such probing questions was not in his best interest when they just met. For that matter, he did not even know if interspecies marriage was allowed in the Union or even in their culture.

As the Skunk approached Trent with Dani coming in and closing the door behind them, Trent stood up from his seat and straightened his coat. Once the Skunk reached his desk, she smiled and stretched out her right hand across Trent’s desk.

“Greetings, Admiral Trent,” she said. “I am Rear Admiral Shibuya, flag officer of the Union Navy’s Fifth Central Fleet.”

Trent was a bit perplexed as he grabbed her right hand with his to complete the handshake she offered.

“Shibuya?” Trent asked. “Is that not a name based on the ancient Japanese language?”

“Yes,” she said as she withdrew her hand from Trent’s after the handshake. “I can understand your confusion since my species never originated from the ancient islands of Japan. When Animality came into being as Hybrids, our ancestors were given the opportunity by Humans to pick the names they wanted. My ancestors chose Japanese names as many English and European names were picked by species who originated from those areas.”

“I understand,” Trent said as he gestured to the right seat in front of his desk. “Please, have a seat, Admiral Shibuya.”

Shibuya looked over at the chair Trent gestured to and sat down close to the edge of the chair to make room for her tail. Trent had not considered that his chairs are designed for Humans only, but that came as no surprise given the circumstances.

Dani came up and sat in the seat to Trent’s left as Trent sat back down in his seat.

“I apologize if the chairs are not conformed to your anatomy,” Trent said. “That may be one of those changes that will occur in the future one the Federation is fully founded.”

“Possibly,” Shibuya said, “but I may retire not long after the Federation is formed.”

Trent was surprised by Shibuya’s sudden statement. Flag officers in a military do not usually retire without either a good reason such as age or they are suddenly burned out from the stress of the position. Shibuya did not look like she had either of those problems affecting her.

“Why do you want to retire?” Trent asked, not realizing his level of vocal tone or that the way he said that expressed a level of interest and concern.

Shibuya looked at Trent with a shocked expression on her face. Either she was not expecting him to ask that question, or his tone and facial expression may have betrayed his sudden interest in her. Trent noticed out of the corner of his eye that Dani was also shocked by the tone in his question.

Trent cleared his throat to act more casual.

“I am sorry,” Trent said. “You do not have to answer that question if it is of a personal nature that you do not wish to discuss.”

Shibuya was quick to settle her nerves after Trent said that. It was possible that his initial question was more of a sudden outburst from her perspective than he realized.

“It is alright,” Shibuya said. “I do not mind answering that question. I come from a long line of military officers who have served in the Union Navy for generations. My parents were no exception as they met at the Naval Academy, got married, and had me along with my two younger sisters. My sisters over time found themselves husbands and had children, but I was more focused on my military career than starting a family. Now I am almost in my forties and seeing my sisters have a happy loving family life is making me want to take the time to focus on starting my own. However, my career and my position make such an endeavor more difficult than I had anticipated. No one wants to approach a Rear Admiral with notions of love and my stern reputation always tends to precede me making it even more difficult.”

“I see,” Trent said. “I am sorry if it was a personal question. Most career military personnel I know that are flag officers generally wait till they reach the rank of Admiral before they retire unless they are forced to do so.”

“May I ask a personal question in exchange for the one you asked?”

“It is only fair for you to do so. Go ahead.”

“Are you married and have children?”

“I was married, but my wife divorced me because of how long I was away on missions in the past couple of years. Normally I am deployed for two weeks and back for a week or two depending on the rotations of the fleets.”

“I read what has happened in the past two years to the star cluster outside the Union. It was a hectic time for you and your nation.”

“It was not a problem initially as my ex-wife was not always alone. My only daughter, Amarria, usually had lunch with her mother during her workdays in the downtown area of the capital city of Luminous. My ex-wife is the anchorwoman at one of the local news stations and my daughter works at the Central Library.”

“That was nice of your daughter to keep her company while you were gone.”

“It was, but when Amarria volunteered her expertise for a covert mission to investigate the Draco Federation when their nation was first discovered, my ex-wife’s loneliness over that extended period of time forced her to file for divorce. She took her things and moved out while I was on a mission at Tenebris Prime. She was tired of the loneliness and I guess she wanted to find someone who was going to be with her far more than me. Amarria is dealing with it the hardest now that she has to see us as separated rather than together.”

“My apologies. Here I am, talking about wanting a family, and your family has fallen apart recently.”

“It is fine. While I only reached my current rank a month ago, I have been reevaluating my priorities since the divorce, including my military career.”

Captain Dani suddenly had a look of shock on her face. Trent was quick to take notice of her expression and knew he had to address it.

“Do not worry, Captain,” Trent said. “It may still be a while before I look into the idea of retiring. I want to wait and see how things develop with the Federation and the Southern Region first. Hopefully, things will settle down to where we will be on rotation again.”

“Do not scare me like that, sir!” Dani said. “It has taken this long for the crew to feel comfortable around you! They do not want to see you leave and get replaced with someone else that might be less friendly than you are!”

Trent laughed.

“I get it,” Trent said. “You and the crew do not want me to leave because you all like me. I understand that completely.”

Shibuya laughed slightly. Trent and Dani looked at her and began to laugh a little. It looked like Shibuya was finally relaxing and dropping her guard around them.

“You two are funny,” Shibuya said. “From what I was briefed, you two have only been working together for a month now. I am impressed that you two get along so well after that short amount of time.”

“I took the lessons I learned while I was in command of the *Renaldo* in the Eleventh Fleet and applied them to the *Marshal* of the Seventh Fleet when I transferred. I prefer to be at some level approachable than not at all.”

Shibuya took a deep breath, as if she were taking in Trent’s words. Trent was quick to realize that this might have been her biggest issue in her career. If she was not approachable to her crew, it may have inadvertently put up a wall of sorts between them and herself. If she did the same involving her personal life, that would explain her current situation.

“I wished I learned such a lesson in my career,” Shibuya said as she looked at Trent with what he could tell was regret on her face. “Maybe that is another good reason for me to retire. I was never approachable to my crew at all. Is your method common among your forces?”

“I have never asked any of my colleagues in the Admiralty how they are with their crew,” Trent said. “However, I can only hope that Rear Admiral Shannon of the *Renaldo* has taken my methods to heart. She was my former commanding officer on the *Renaldo* before I was promoted

and transferred to the *Marshal*. I promoted her to her current rank and position only because the crew and the fleet can trust her than some new stranger who may run the fleet differently than I.”

“The *Renaldo*? Is that not the vessel that brought President Assefa’s ship to this star system? That was your previous vessel?”

“Yes, on all counts. That vessel has made a name for itself under both my command and under Shannon’s. The *Marshal* will be getting there after both the mission at Tenebris Prime and the mission today.”

“Speaking of which, we need to go over the parameters of the mission, though that will not be much considering it is unexplored. I must ask this, though. I heard only the *Marshal* is going on the mission and not the rest of your fleet. Why is your command making such a decision to only send a single ship to the region?”

“They did not issue that order. I issued that order intentionally.”

“You did? Why would you issue such an order?”

Trent looked over at Dani who shared his glance. Trent looked back at Shibuya who was awaiting his answer.

“Because we are expected,” Trent said.

“We are expected?” Shibuya asked. “By whom?”

“What I am about to tell you does not leave this office unless ordered by the Republic Grand Admiral or the Supreme Chancellor at this time, understood?”

“Alright. I understand.”

“Very well. How familiar are you with the Republic’s report and files on the mind-altering radiation technology, or MAR as we have decided to call it?”

“I was given the files that were provided by the Republic to the Union on the MAR, and I read over all the files before I arrived here today. I also know that those responsible for using that technology not only reside in the Southern Region, but that they may also be responsible for the ‘Lost Ten’ occurrence that led to the development of the other nations in the star cluster.”

“Did the report include images of the device seen at Tenebris Prime?”

“It did, and the fact it was able to create a wormhole to escape through on its own. What does this have to do with us being expected?”

“One of those devices appeared suddenly in my home unexpectedly five days ago.”

Shibuya’s eyes widened in shock while her fur was almost on end. Trent was not surprised by her reaction as he expected it as such.

“Are you saying you were hit with the radiation?” Shibuya asked, eagerly awaiting Trent’s answer.

“Thankfully, no,” Trent said. “Scans have shown I was not hit with it, and I ducked behind a chair when I first noticed the device.”

“That is good, but what happened?”

“It may come as a surprise, but I talked with one of those who was responsible for the MAR through that device. That being went by the name of Bilartini.”

“You spoke with them?!”

“Using the device as an intermediary, yes. It was not a long conversation, though, but I did get a couple of details out of my conversation with them.”

“Such as?”

“A set of coordinates to a point in the Southern Region just beyond the gravitational fields, and the knowledge that there is an observational structure or satellite in this system. It may not be the only one in the cluster, either. This was likely how he found out that my fleet was

assigned to the task of jumping to the Southern Region, which led to him contacting me directly. That is why he is expecting us.”

“If this Bilartini is expecting us, the coordinates he provided you does not surprise me. It may also explain why you want the *Marshal* to go on the mission instead of the whole fleet. You want to minimize the number of people at risk if this is a trap we are going to jump in to. However, the thought that there is some form of observation post or satellite in this system, and possibly in other star systems is rather disturbing.”

“I wanted to report this to both the Grand Admiral and the Supreme Chancellor in person as transmissions were being monitored, but they have been busy with the summit this entire time. They have no idea about Bilartini, that we are expected by him, or the observation post that is hidden somewhere in this system.”

“It feels like that was too well timed to simply be a coincidence. Bilartini may have known you would want to report this matter to your superiors personally and waited for the summit to happen, making it more difficult for you to report your meeting with them.”

“Perhaps, but we will not know that until we get to the Southern Region.”

“You still intend to jump to the coordinates Bilartini provided you?”

“We do not have a lot of options. Solid coordinates into the Southern Region are difficult to come by, and those provided by Bilartini are our best bet to possibly jump safely there. I, for one, am eager to get some answers for their actions. I just hope we are ready for those answers.”

“Speaking of which,” Dani said, “we have over fifteen minutes until our scheduled time of departure. I know it will not take as long to get to the docks from here, but all the departure procedures need to be started.”

“Captain Dani,” Shibuya said, “may I have a moment with the Admiral in private?”

Dani looked over at Trent, both sharing a surprised look on their faces. Dani looked back at Shibuya.

“I can begin the procedures once I get to the ship,” Dani said. “Just do not take too long. Dock control is expecting us to depart on time and I would rather not give them the reason that our delayed departure was caused by waiting for two flag officers to board.”

“We will only take no longer than five minutes,” Shibuya said. “We will see you aboard the *Marshal*.”

“Go on, Captain,” Trent said. “We will be along shortly.”

“Understood,” Dani said as she got up from her seat. “I will see the two of you down there shortly.”

Dani turned and headed for the doors, exiting through the door on the right. After she stepped out and the door closed, Shibuya looked over at Trent with a rather devious look on her face as she smirked. Trent did not know whether he needed to worry, be scared, or both.

“I did not want your captain to be present for this topic,” Shibuya said. “The interesting thing about Animality compared to Humanity is some of our senses are heightened, including hearing and identifying certain tones in voices.”

“Something tells me my tone earlier when I asked why you wanted to retire has betrayed my feelings, now did they?” Trent asked, knowing his sudden liking to this Skunk was made apparent in his concerned tone earlier.

“It did, and I must say, I am both very flattered and yet as equally puzzled.”

“While I must say that your response is interesting, I wonder if you could please elaborate your response?”

“Well, I am flattered because, due to my career and family history, no male wants to approach me at all. That is one of the reasons I want to retire, though finding any male Skunk who is my age that is not already married and has children is next to impossible.”

“I take it that interspecies marriages are generally discouraged or illegal in the Union?”

“This may surprise you, but there is no law against such marriages. However, pressures both socially and culturally often cause many species among Animality to avoid crossbreeding. Oddly enough, the politicians like to put it in their own words saying it helps ‘maintain the purebred species as crossbreeding would lead to a species’ eventual extinction.’ While I get where these politicians are coming from, there have been cases of crossbreeding in the past.”

“I am almost afraid to ask based on what you have told me, but what happened to those children who were born from crossbreeding?”

“Sadly, there were a lot of problems. Depending on the species that crossbred, this resulted in health complications where treatment was hard to do because of their biology. Infertility was also a common occurrence, and no one wants a relationship with an infertile partner. They are usually shunned by their peers and isolated from the rest of society. While it is considered illegal in the Union, crossbreed suicides are commonplace and seen by law enforcement as an ‘eventual outcome.’ They rarely do any investigating into their deaths.”

“That is terrible! How can the authorities not investigate the matter? Do they not know that their deaths could also be the result of a murder?”

“It is the same result, whether it is murder or suicide. The authorities only care for those that are purebred, not the result of a ‘forbidden sinful love’ as some religious fanatics have also called it. I would not be surprised if a lot of the murders were the results of hate crimes.”

“I thought the Union was far more tolerant of such things, but this is showing me there is more to Union society than the ‘pretty picture’ we were provided and led to believe.”

“That can be said for a lot of the societies in the star cluster, but that is another bit of discussion for another time. What I want to know and the reason I was puzzled was why you seem to have an interest in me? I know you are recently divorced, but surely there are those females among your species that you may have an interest in, are there not?”

“I am sure there are, but if there is one thing my divorce has taught me, not everyone is willing to tolerate the military lifestyle of those they are married to unless they are both currently or have been in the military. I am in a similar position as you despite having been married and having a child. Finding another woman my age close to my rank who is also single is next to impossible.”

“And yet, even though I am a Skunk, you have an interest in me. Why?”

“Part of it is knowing that Animality has Human DNA in their genetics, which technically makes you part Human. That being said, and I hope you do not take this the wrong way, but being part Animal brings a level of ‘exoticness’ I never thought I would see myself very attracted to in such a way.”

“Ex...ex...exoticness?!”

Shibuya stood up from her chair, but she was not angry at Trent’s words. She seemed more embarrassed and shocked, unsure how to respond to Trent’s words. Her hands were at her cheeks, her breathing was rapid, and all her hair short of those on the top of her head was on end. It was obvious she had a hard time finding her next words while processing what was just said.

Trent was beginning to think no one has ever told her that she was “exotic.” Despite this, Trent knew they needed to leave soon to get to the *Marshal* and the last thing he needed was for Shibuya to faint.

Trent stood up from his seat while Shibuya was still shocked and embarrassed.

“Shibuya,” Trent said, “listen to me, okay? I need you to take deep slow breaths, alright?”

“O...Okay,” Shibuya stuttered.

Shibuya slowed down her breathing, taking deep long breaths, and tried to regain her composure. After several seconds, her fur began to settle down and she began to calm herself. Once she was able to compose herself and calm down, she looked over at Trent, but she was not upset with him at all from what he could tell.

“You sure know how to ruffle a girl’s fur, Trent,” Shibuya said. “I have never been called ‘exotic’ before by anyone. I know we need to get to the *Marshal*, but you and I will need to have a serious talk about these odd interests of yours later, preferably over dinner.”

Trent raised his right eyebrow after hearing Shibuya talk about dinner.

“Are you wrangling me into a date?” Trent asked with a slight grin on his face.

Shibuya came around the right side of Trent’s desk to within a few feet of him with a devilish look on her face.

“It is either that,” she said seductively, “or I find you later and spray you heavily for turning down a date with a female ‘exotic’ Skunk.”

“Then it is a date,” Trent said, “provided we are not walking into a trap first when we jump to the Southern Region.”

Shibuya laughed, nearly in tears as she turned around and began heading for the doors.

“I will say this to you now, Admiral,” Shibuya said, “if Bilartini is leading us into a trap, that will be an acceptable reason for calling off our date. That is provided, of course, we are still alive for me to make that decision.”

“Before we leave, I have a question for you,” Trent said.

Shibuya stopped less than a meter from the door and turned slightly to look at Trent. She was still smiling after her last comment.

“Are you wondering why I am agreeing to going on a date with you?” Shibuya asked.

“After what you told me about crossbreeding, it does bring up a valid question as to why you want to date a Human.”

Shibuya chuckled a little.

“Crossbreeding between two different species of Animality as I said has complications. The only reason we are even able to do so is the one common denominator we all have: We have Human DNA in our genetics. However, what happens when a member of Animality crossbreeds with a pureblood Human? It is almost like a blood transfusion when someone with a specific blood type is injected with the blood of a universal donor. What I am curious of is what happens if a child is born from this?”

Shibuya chuckled a little more.

“That, and after what you said to me a moment ago, I am also starting to find you a bit attractive. You do have a way with words after all.”

Trent felt like he was going to blush, but he quickly shook it off.

“Alright,” Trent said as he came around his desk towards the direction of the doors. “Like you said, we will table this discussion for another time. We better get going.”

Shibuya took a deep breath, and a serious expression soon came over her face.

“I agree, Admiral,” she said. “Let us be professional for now and find this Bilartini that is waiting for us in the Southern Region. We cannot keep our mysterious host waiting.”

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*Bridge, R.N.S. Marshal, Paladin II-Class Battleship (refit), Headquarters Airspace
Planet Luminaire Orbit, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
7:09am, November 21, 5434 A.D.*

“Attention all hands, we will be jumping in five minutes.”

Captain Dani’s command to the rest of the ship was as loud and direct as ever. Trent was beginning to wonder if she knew what he and Shibuya were discussing in his office after she left, but since they both arrived on the bridge with serious expressions on their faces, it would have been hard for her to get a feeling as to what happened after she was gone. It was better to leave it that way for now to avoid rumors starting just before a mission, and Trent’s possible relationship with Shibuya has not even been finalized yet.

Shibuya had to sit in an observation seat found in the back of the bridge near the elevator as there were no other spare seats available. Trent almost laughed when she saw the *Marshal* when they reached the docks. She had not gotten a feel on the sheer size of one of the Republic battleships and could not resist saying how big it was. Trent would have broken face had the guards at the docking ramp not been around. She pointed out that the Union’s Danbira-Class Battlecruisers, the same class of ship that the Union President was on four days ago, were the largest Union vessels in existence. They never had a reason both in a logistical and military sense to make anything larger than those. After she said that, it made sense to Trent why the size of a Republic Paladin-Class Battleship, especially after the drive section refit, would appear quite large. They are not the largest vessels in existence in the star cluster, but they are up there in size. Shibuya continued to be impressed with the size of the vessel once they were on board, even though they took the elevator to reach the bridge. She must have gotten a sense of distance with how long it took to go from near the docking port to the bridge, which she also marveled at when they arrived. Apparently, the Union ships’ bridges were not as large either. It appeared she was quite surprised with how spacious the vessel was. It made Trent wonder where she grew up or if she had been so used to smaller spaces that large rooms like the bridge were a thing of wonder for her. That may be one of the questions he asks her either later or on their eventual date.

The departure from the dock was standard routine, though it was obvious from Shibuya’s reaction to the size of the bays in headquarters that nothing like that existed in the Union either. Trent was quick to realize a few things based on Shibuya’s reactions. The Union is smaller because their star systems are further spread out than the rest of the cluster. This meant fewer resources to build such ships and structures like the Republic. He also remembered reading that more than twenty percent of their population lived in artificial habitats. Depending on the living conditions inside those habitats, this may result in her fascination in more spacious surroundings. If she were reacting in this manner to being on stations and ships in the Republic, it made him question how she would be on Luminaire itself. Has she ever been to a planet before? If she had not, the wide-open spaces and the open sky would be overwhelming to her.

Looks like Trent would have another question to ask her later.

Once the *Marshal* exited the station, it proceeded to move away from the station and the planet, pointing in the direction of the Southern Region. Trent knew that the order for the rest of the Seventh Fleet to remain behind was going to get the attention of the rest of the Admiralty and the Grand Admiral soon, but hopefully they won’t be informed of this change until after the *Marshal* has jumped to the Southern Region.

“Captain or Admiral?” Diana said from the Helm station. “Do we have coordinates for me to put into the Portal Drive system so that I can begin the startup sequence?”

Trent cleared his throat.

“Of course,” Trent said. “Input the following coordinates.”

Trent got his phone out of his pocket and put it up to his ear after playing the recording he took during Bilartini’s “visit.” As it played, he repeated the coordinates he was given.

“S-Zero-Three-Five-Six, Seven-Zero-Zero-Two, Three-Two-Zero-Five,” Trent said.

Diana inputted the coordinates into her system but was soon baffled after they were inputted. The system gave her an alert tone.

“Sir?” Diana said. “I know you mentioned that going into the Southern Region was our next mission, but these coordinates take us deeper into the Southern Region than just on the edge on the other side of the gravitational fields.”

“I know,” Trent said. “I figured those coordinates would raise some questions. I will make this brief, but I was provided those coordinates through a device, and intermediary, from those responsible for the MAR. Our arrival is expected by them.”

Everyone on the bridge except for Dani and Shibuya looked towards Trent with shocked looks on their faces.

“I know it is a shock,” Dani said, “but the ones who are responsible for the MAR have been able to observe us from a hidden observational structure in this system and possibly others. They knew Trent agreed to this assignment and decided to extend an invitation. Trent has already been scanned and he does not have the MAR. Whoever this is, they apparently want to meet us. Therefore, we are going alone and not with the entire fleet. If this is a trap, it will only be us that will be at risk rather than the entire fleet. Set the ship to Condition Yellow and be ready to use the Portal Drive. Display the countdown on the main screen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the bridge officers said in unison as they returned to their stations.

The timer soon appeared on the main screen with just over two minutes remaining before the Portal Drive’s activation. Dani turned towards Trent.

“Do you think the Grand Admiral will notice the rest of the Seventh Fleet is still docked by the time we use the Portal Drive?” Dani asked.

“I hope he does not,” Trent said. “I do not wish to explain this decision to him if I can avoid it. It would take longer to explain to him than we have time for. Besides, I believe he is still busy with the summit and will not have time to notice us going solo on this mission.”

Trent continued to look at the countdown timer as it reached a minute and thirty seconds remaining. He was starting to get nervous. This was not only the *Marshal’s* first time using the Portal Drive since the refit, but the first time they were jumping to an area of space that no Human, or Animal for that matter, had ever been to before since both groups arrived in the star cluster over three thousand years ago. It was more than that, though. Those who have been responsible in masterminding the conflicts that have occurred between the known nations of the star cluster resided in the Southern Region.

Now, these same culprits are expecting them. This made Trent feel more uneasy than he has ever felt before, and he did not like that feeling about the unknown they were going into.

“Thirty seconds remaining until Portal Drive activation,” Diana said.

At thirty seconds remaining, the power buildup in the reactors and capacitors would start being directed into the Portal Drive. Unless under an extreme emergency, this cannot be stopped and is considered the “point of no return” according to the specifications Trent looked over. While he doubted that either Mikey or Drew would contact him within that small window, there was not much they could do at this point. The buildup could easily be detected and any craft in the area would avoid the vessel unless they were assigned to go with him.

“Activating the Portal Drive,” Diana said.

This was the moment Trent had been waiting for these past few days. As the portal began to open in front of them, they could see stars on the other side, but not as dense. This was like when he was still on the *Renaldo* and they reached Tranquillus before they met the Lykans and the Vitams. The local star on the other side, a blue star, was visible from a distance.

“We are about to be the first Humans, and Animal, to enter the Southern Region,” Trent said. “Let us hope that we come back to tell the tale. Diana, take us in.”

“Aye-aye, Admiral,” Diana said.

The *Marshal* proceeded forward into the portal. As it went through, more of the space that surrounded the star system at their destination began to fill the main screen. Within a minute, the *Marshal* went through the portal and was now in the Southern Region. The portal soon closed right behind the vessel.

“Diana,” Trent said, “can you confirm our position?”

“I am verifying stellar patterns to confirm our location,” Diana said. “However, with the way the gravitational fields are, confirming stellar patterns in this region would be...wait a moment. What is this?”

“What is it?” Trent asked.

“The gravitational fields! They are not visible from our position on this side of them!”

“What was that? That cannot be possible! Show me!”

The main screen changed views from the front of the vessel to the back. The rest of the star cluster could be seen clearly. There were no signs of the gravitational fields at all.

“Is it possible that they only allowed for those who reside in the Southern Region to look out but not allow others to look in clearly?” Trent asked.

“According to the reports,” Dani said, “the fields that separate the Central and Northwest Regions are not like that at all. How is that possible here?”

“There is only one being now who can answer that,” Trent said as he stood up and looked at the communications station. “Sierra, I want you to open a channel on all available frequencies. I only need to say one word to get our ‘host’s’ attention.”

“Yes, sir,” Sierra said.

Dani turned to Trent.

“You think they will show up?” Dani asked.

“I do not know,” Trent said, “but let us be prepared in case they do not. Diana, recharge the Portal Drive with the return coordinates back to Lumen.”

“Yes, sir,” Diana said.

“Admiral?” Sierra said. “The lines are now open.”

Trent looked over at Sierra and nodded to confirm what she has said. He looked at the screen and took a deep breath. Time to see if their “host” was listening.

“Bilartini,” Trent said.

Trent took another deep breath and began looking around on the view screen. He was expecting to see something appear suddenly on the screen or something flying towards them. After several seconds, there was nothing.

Trent looked back at Sierra and gestured with his right hand, acting like he was cutting off his head, to cut the transmission. Sierra nodded and turned off the broadcast.

“Do you think he heard you?” Dani asked.

“He should have,” Trent said. “He said when I arrive to only call out his name. I assumed he would either contact us or jump nearby.”

“Did he specify a frequency to use?” Shibuya asked as she stood up and approached Trent’s seat.

Trent looked over at Shibuya.

“He did not,” Trent said. “Considering he is capable of listening in on all our known communications, I figured it did not matter to him what frequency we used.”

“How long do you think we should wait for him to respond?” Dani asked.

As Trent turned to face Dani and answer her question, a sound came from the Ready Room. Trent recognized the sound as the same sound that was made when the device first appeared in his house several days ago. Everyone else looked in the direction of the Ready Room, wondering what that noise was.

Without saying anything, Trent walked over to the small arms locker on the left wall not far from the Ready Room doors. He put in his passcode and opened the locker, pulling out two pistols. He checked their power level before tossing one to Dani and the other to Shibuya. He grabbed one more for himself before closing the locker.

As the three of them approached the Ready Room doors, Trent used hand signals to the bridge officers telling them to secure their stations. The officers nodded, acknowledging his orders, and locking their stations.

When they reached the doors, Dani took up position on the right side of the door while Shibuya took the left side. Trent looked at the two of them, nodding at them to make sure they were ready to enter. When they both nodded that they were ready, Trent reached for the Ready Room door control panel with his right hand and pressed the button to open it. As soon as the doors opened, Trent rushed in with his weapon pointed ahead of him. Dani came in right behind him with Shibuya taking position in the doorway.

Trent quickly noticed the intruder to his left by the minifridge looking towards the appliance. He was surprised by what he saw: a male Human being or at least something that looked like one. There were features or characteristics that made the intruder less likely to be an actual Human. His skin was bleach-white, lighter than any albino Human in existence according to what he remembered in the history books. His crewcut style hair matched the color of his skin. It looked like he was wearing a single-piece jumpsuit that was white with blue accents, but it looked so tight and form-fitting that it may be part of his skin.

The intruder took notice of Trent, Dani, and Shibuya’s presence and turned his head to look at them with its gold-colored pupils. He smiled and turned his whole body to face them. While the being looked male, Trent was glad to see that it did not have all the male features in the tight jumpsuit. What Trent did not understand is how the security system has not gone off and contained this being? Was it not able to detect him for some reason?

“Greetings, Admiral Trent,” he said. “It is finally good to meet you. I am Bilartini.”

When the being said its name, Trent lowered his weapon slowly while still in shock by what he was seeing. He gestured for Dani and Shibuya to lower their weapons as well. Trent looked over this being that calls itself Bilartini, still trying to figure out what this being was that he was looking at.

“How can I be certain you are Bilartini?” Trent asked. “The device that appeared at my residence was used as a translator since I heard another language it was translating from.”

“You never announced your name just now,” Bilartini said. “That alone should identify that I knew who you were and when you were coming. As for the language you heard during our initial conversation, that was the language of my creators. It took a few days for me to be able to speak to you in your native language and create this body to meet you in person.”

“You use terms like ‘creators’ and ‘create.’ Are you some form of artificial lifeform?”

“I am. My creators made me over thirty of your...years ago. I still find myself struggling with your language as it is rather...cumbersome?”

“Depending on the level of difficulty you are having with our language, that word may be the correct one to use. What about your creators? Are we able to speak with them directly?”

“That will be rather difficult and no longer possible. As of a few of your weeks ago, they have become extinct.”

“Extinct? This was not done by you, was it?”

“It was not by my doing. I was created to maintain my creators’ knowledge during their fight with an enemy that set their sights on destroying my creators in the name of their God.”

Trent suddenly had a shocked look on his face as he remembered his conversation with Grand Admiral Mikey over the motives for the MAR’s use in relation to religion. It appears that Trent’s hunch on their motive may have been correct.

“So,” Trent said, “it is some form of religious war as I had assumed.”

“You made the assumption that it was a religion-based conflict involving my creators,” Bilartini said. “You are partially in error on that assumption. My creators were defending their home from a faction, a theocratic society, that worships an unnamed God. This faction is a different species than my creators. My...”

Bilartini stopped talking and began looking around with a nervous expression on his face, twitching as he did so. He suddenly stopped, looking towards the direction of the ship’s bow.

“They are approaching,” Bilartini said. “I detect three of their vessels. They are responding faster than I had calculated.”

“What are you talking about?” Trent asked.

“I can answer any other questions you may have once we are safe from harm. I knew that if you transmitted my name on an open channel that you would garner the attention of my creators’ exterminators. I calculated that your vessel would be able to use its Portal Drive to exit the area before they arrived. It appears that calculation was in error as they were closer to respond than I had determined.”

“Admiral,” Dani said, “it sounds like we are about to have company and soon.”

“Agreed,” Trent said, not looking towards Dani. “Have Tactical check long-range sensors to get an ETA when they are arriving. Let me know how much time we have left on the Portal Drive and if warping to another location in the system will buy us some time.”

“Yes, sir,” Dani said as she headed back onto the bridge, passing by Shibuya through the open door.

“So, Bilartini. I must ask, but what are we dealing with? If this enemy is here in the Southern Region, why were they so interested in exterminating your creators which they have succeeded in carrying out? It has to involve more than the will or worship of a deity.”

“This faction that sought out and destroyed my creators did not originate in this region of the star cluster,” Bilartini said. “My creators were an old ancient race, and they were the ones who manufactured and distributed the crystals your nation and the other factions have been using to move from star system to star system.”

“They were the ones responsible for the Salire Purpura crystals? If that is the case, then why was Luna, the moon of our ancient home planet of Earth, seeded with them?”

“My creators knew that their race was dying out due to a deterioration in their genetics. They had experimented on themselves to enhance their biology and their lifespans to search for immortality. In the process, their hubris resulted in an increased mortality rate due to genetic

degradation and cellular collapse. They became increasingly infertile, and any efforts to procreate artificially resulted in the rate of genetic degradation increasing exponentially. There were more than several billion of their species when your moon came to this star cluster. Only a few thousand remained when the theocratic nation sought their extinction. My creators were looking for a race to succeed them and take care of this star cluster. They created it as a refuge, but it became their grave instead.”

“They created the star cluster?!”

“Admiral!” Dani said from the bridge. “Come quickly!”

Trent looked in the direction of the doorway. He took a quick glance at Bilartini before heading out onto the bridge.

“Keep an eye on him, please,” Trent said to Shibuya as he passed her.

Shibuya nodded in agreement as she looked back at Bilartini through the door. Trent headed back to his seat as he noticed Dani was conversing with Khara at the Tactical station.

“What is the situation, Captain?” Trent asked.

Dani looked over at Trent as he sat down.

“I have checked with both Science and Tactical, sir,” Dani said, avoiding names for now with their “guest” in earshot of what is happening on the bridge. “We have three targets inbound at incredibly high speed. They appear to be traveling at a rate of one Light-year every six minutes or so.”

Trent was dumbfounded.

“That is faster than our warp drive!” Trent said. “What is their ETA?”

“Depending on where their point of arrival will be, I would say in less than two minutes.”

“How long until the portal drive is at full charge?”

“We are looking at under three minutes until it is ready.”

“This is not good. They will arrive before we can leave. Can we warp to a different location to buy us more time to charge the Portal Drive?”

“If we use the warp drive, we will be using some of the power that is charging the Portal Drive, resulting in an increase in its recharge time.”

“Can we divert power from non-essential systems to decrease the recharge time?”

“We can, but it won’t affect much.”

Trent thought about it a way to decrease the Portal Drive’s recharge time. One thought came to mind, but it would be risky.

“Are the weapons online and charged?” Trent asked.

“They are,” Dani answered, “and diverting their power can reduce the recharge time to match the time they would arrive, but we would not be able to counterattack if they fire on us.”

“Right now, the point is not to fight, but to run. Divert power from the weapons and non-essential systems immediately. Helm, bring us about and prepare to use the portal drive the moment it is ready to activate.”

“Yes, sir!” Dani and Diana said in response to Trent’s orders.

Trent got up from his seat to head back to the Ready Room. As he looked at the Portal Drive’s timer, it suddenly decreased down to a minute and a half, only two seconds longer than the ETA of the unknown vessels. He needed to make sure there were no other surprises in store for them. Shibuya noticed Trent coming back and moved out of the way for him to step into the Ready Room. As Trent reentered, he noticed Bilartini was looking around the room and studying the different objects and trinkets Trent had around the room.

“I have one question that is rather important in this situation,” Trent said.

“You may ask,” Bilartini said without looking in Trent’s direction.

“Does this faction that exterminated your creators pose any ill-will or malice towards anyone else that is in the star cluster?”

“I will make this brief with the short amount of time we have until they arrive. This faction is under the belief that my creators are the ‘wardens’ of the star cluster. That means they view your factions as nothing more than ‘convicts’ in a jail of my creators’ design.”

“Why in the world would they view all of us in that manner?”

“Because to them, you are being punished by their God for the sin of pride by Humanity and to an extent Animality.”

“But they do not know us. What gives them this strange notion that we are being punished for sinning against their deity?”

“Because they do know you, more than you realize.”

Bilartini looked at Trent with those gold eyes of his in a stare that would send chills down a person’s spine.

“They are what was left behind,” Bilartini said.

Trent was not sure what Bilartini meant by his words, but Trent knew that time was running out and he needed to get back to the bridge. Trent headed out the door again after Shibuya allowed him to pass once more. She kept an eye on him, but Trent could tell that she was just as puzzled by Bilartini’s words as Trent was.

As Trent entered the bridge, he saw on the screen that the *Marshal* was turned around facing back towards the center of the star cluster. The countdown timer for the inbound ships had ten seconds remaining while the Portal Drive had twelve. Trent headed back to his seat. He noticed Dani was already in her chair staring at the timers.

“Captain,” Trent said as he passed her seat heading to his, “set us to Condition Red and raise the shields.”

“Aye-aye, Admiral,” Dani said without looking at Trent, pressing the intercom button for the entire ship on her chair. “All hands, this is the Captain. Condition Red, I repeat, Condition Red. Raise shields and prepare for incoming fire.”

As the lights on the bridge changed from yellow to red and the alarm klaxon began to ring out, Dani turned to face Trent as he sat in his seat.

“In this condition,” she said, “we will not be able to use shield boosters, our auxiliary shield, or our armor repairer system since they will be offline.”

“Then let us hope that these incoming vessels do not fire so quickly or heavily,” Trent said. “We are about to find out either way. Bring up the aft view on the top half of the screen.”

Dani turned back around as the timer for the incoming ships’ ETA hit zero. The top half of the main screen switched to the rear view of the vessel. Three circular disks of light appeared with fluctuations in the middle. They were more than a hundred kilometers away which was in the *Marshal*’s favor so far. The disks themselves seemed rather large, which made Trent wonder what was trying to intercept them. Soon, three prongs appeared to be stabbing through the circles of light, two above and one below. They were a slightly darker shade of gold than what the *Marshal* had on it. As they watched, the prongs grew larger. The top two were suddenly shown to be connected by a round base that suddenly appeared.

Not too long after, something black and enveloped in a red field between the visible sections appeared. It was some sort of energy mass, but there were beams of energy coming from the upper section and lower prong that were holding it in place. They also noticed a third beam behind the mass. A central section soon appeared behind the mass with support pylons

connecting the top section and the bottom prong to it. The top section had segmented “wings” on the side and two more prongs poking out from the back. There were red pulses coming from the back of the top and central sections, indicating where the engines were located. They could see what appeared to be turrets attached to their hulls, but they were not pointing at the *Marshal* yet.

Once the ships were through the disks of light, the circles compressed behind them until they disappeared.

“Sir,” Diana said. “The Portal Drive is ready.”

“Tactical and Science,” Trent said, “get as many scans as you can take of those ships as we are leaving this system. I want to know what we are dealing with later on.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” Khara and Glenn said from their respective stations.

“Helm, get us out of here before they close the distance.”

“Yes, sir,” Diana said. “Activating Portal Drive now.”

Trent looked at the front view to see the portal suddenly appearing in front of the *Marshal*. He was right in leaving the rest of the Seventh Fleet behind. If they had not done so, their departure would take longer, and those three ships would be on them quickly. As the *Marshal* proceeded towards the portal, Trent looked at the rear view. The three ships turned their bows towards the *Marshal* and were trying to catch up to the vessel. What surprised Trent was that the turrets that were attached to their hulls suddenly came off! The plates they were attached to pulsed red and a red beam of energy connected the turrets to their ships. Trent had never seen turrets held in place by energy beams before. Trent began to think that the black masses that are in the middle of the ships may be some form of singularity each ship had. If this faction is advanced enough to use free-roaming turrets and singularities as their power cores, it was not a faction Trent wanted to face without more information or a tactical plan.

The newcomers quickly began to fire at the *Marshal* as red beams were fired from their turrets. Despite hitting the shields, the ship began to jolt as the blasts were quite powerful.

“Shields are down to eighty-nine percent,” Khara said. “I can confirm those are particle beam cannons, but their output rating puts them at the strength of a battleship’s guns!”

“Either their power cores have a higher output than I expected,” Trent said, “or these are their battleships.”

“They are not,” Bilartini said from the Ready Room, loud enough for the bridge officers to hear. “Those are their cruisers.”

“Those are cruisers?!” Dani yelled. “That is an insane amount of firepower for cruisers!”

“They are larger than cruisers we know,” Trent said. “We will focus on that fact later. Helm, how much longer until we are completely through?”

“Twenty seconds,” Diana said. “The ship is seventy-five percent through.”

“Sir,” Khara said, “the enemy vessels’ shots are going through the portal. They might hit civilian traffic on the other side.”

“Communications!” Trent yelled.

“I am on it,” Sierra said. “Attention, Lumen Air Traffic Control! Divert all civilian traffic from our exit vector! Enemy fire is coming through our portal! I repeat, enemy fire is coming through the portal! Clear the area of civilian traffic immediately!”

“How close are we from completing the transition?” Trent asked.

“Ninety-five percent,” Diana said. “I am closing the portal in five seconds.”

“Tactical, how far are the enemy ships?”

“Fifty kilometers and closing,” Khara said. “Those cruisers are not fast given their size. I have the scans of their tactical capabilities.”

“I have the readouts of their cores and weapons,” Glenn said.

“The portal is closing now, sir,” Diana said.

Trent looked at the rear view of the *Marshal* and saw that the portal was closing rapidly behind them, but that did not stop the enemy cruisers from firing until the portal completely collapsed. Once it was closed, Trent breathed a sigh of relieve.

“Tactical,” Trent said in a calmer manner, “what is our current shield strength?”

“The shields held,” Khara said, “but they are at thirty-two percent after fifty-seven shots.”

Trent sighed.

“Captain,” he said, “cancel Condition Red. Helm, proceed to headquarters and prepare to dock. Communications, if we get any messages as to what in the world fired on us from headquarters, inform them that I will be giving my report shortly. Also, tell Lumen Air Traffic Control to resume normal traffic. Do we know if any civilians were hit from the shots?”

“None that I can tell,” Sierra said. “I am detecting communications from civilians with a lot of confusion as to what happened, though.”

“No surprise, there. Science, fill me in, will you? Were we seeing what appeared to be singularities as those vessels’ power source?”

“I can confirm that they were indeed singularities that were powering those vessels’ weapons, engines both sublight and faster-than-light, and their shields. What else they power is hard to determine but they were harvesting the particles from those cores for multiple purposes.”

“And the beams that connected their turrets to their hulls?”

“A combination of an energy transfer beam and a tractor beam. I theorize that without a mechanical attachment, the turrets can change directions more rapidly than our own.”

“That means they can track vessels smaller than them with the firepower of a battleship. That is some nasty piece of work. Tactical, take the scans of what you have on the ships that we encountered and coordinate with Science to get a complete technical profile of those vessels. I want to make sure we are prepared to face those ships if they come out of the Southern Region.”

“That begs the question, Admiral,” Dani said as she turned to face Trent. “Is it possible they can leave that region with the gravitational fields still in place?”

“Hold it there!” Shibuya said as she suddenly pointed her weapon inside the Ready Room, presumably at Bilartini.

“May I enter your command room, Admiral?” Bilartini asked from the Ready Room.

“Let him pass, Shibuya,” Trent said. “I think he has something to say in relation to the Captain’s question.”

Shibuya looked at Trent and reluctantly nodded. She set her weapon down and stepped away from the door. Bilartini walked past her and looked around the bridge. The bridge crew were stunned to see him considering how he looked. He saw Trent and Dani in their chairs, and only took a couple of steps towards them before stopping.

“The gravitational fields were created by my creators,” Bilartini said. “They wanted to isolate themselves while you all developed into societies that would eventually succeed them as caretakers of the star cluster. However, those fields can be deactivated if all their generators are found. The fields that separate your Republic from the Union was linked to that system as well. It will go down too if the main gravitational fields are deactivated. The star system we were just in has one of the two remaining field generators.”

“That means that once both of those are found, whoever attacked us will be able to enter the rest of the star cluster,” Trent said. “What I do not understand is who those ships belonged to and why they consider the residents of the star cluster as ‘convicts’ on the name of their deity?”

“Um, sir?” Khara asked.

“Yes, Tactical?” Trent asked.

“Did our friend here at any point mentioned who these people were that were attacking us or that killed his creators?”

Trent looked at Khara with a puzzled look on his face before looking at Bilartini. Bilartini stood there with little to no expression on his face.

“No,” Trent said. “He did not. Why?”

“There may be a reason he has not told us specifically yet,” Khara said. “I looked at some of the data from those ships and I found an ‘identified friend-or-foe’ signal coming from them.”

Trent looked back at Khara, now more puzzled than before.

“An IFF signal?” Trent asked. “Were you able to decipher it?”

“That is the odd thing, Admiral,” Khara said. “I did not have to. It was all in English.”

Trent stood up from his seat in shock before turning back to Bilartini.

“Tactical,” Trent said with his eyes locked on Bilartini, “what did those IFF signals tell you as to who those ships belonged to?”

“They were identified as Rome-Class Cruisers belonging to the Holy Amnon Imperial Navy, Seventh Detachment Fleet.”

“The Holy Amnon Imperial Navy? Rome-Class Cruisers? Bilartini, you said earlier that the faction consisted of ‘those that were left behind.’ As it is obvious to everyone here that what we just encountered were ships built by a nation consisting of Humans or has some Human influence, I want to know what you mean exactly by that term you used? Who are they?”

“My creators were hoping you would not find out who those vessels belonged to, but they also knew that it would be inevitable once they were encountered. You wanted to know why your people in the cluster were dealing with conflict involving religion, slavery, and a ruling elite. This faction was created out of those traits with the intent of subjugating those that were punished by their God for their sins of pride and greed. My creators kept watch over those that your ancestors left behind when Humanity and Animality came to the star cluster. They brought about the collapse of the nation you call the New Unity Government in your home galaxy, later expanding and enslaving in the name of their God. They managed to find their way to the star cluster because of my creators’ mistake of continuously observing them. They are called the Holy Amnon Empire, and in the name of their God, they intend to enslave the ‘sinners’ that call this star cluster their home.”

Trent was suddenly in shock that he had to sit down. Things got far more complicated than he or anyone else could possibly imagine.

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