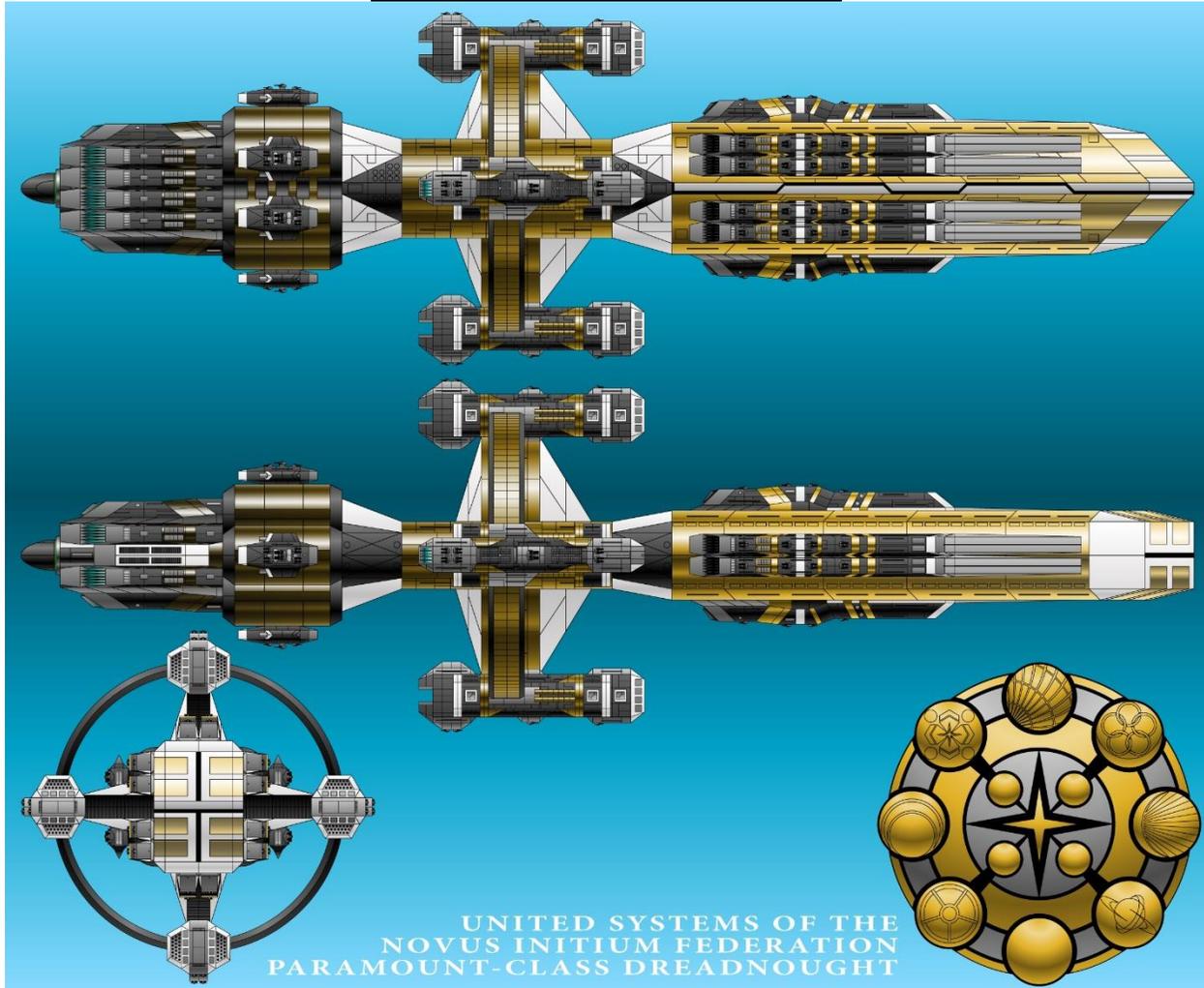


Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode VIII: What Was Left Behind



PART 9

Bridge, N.I.F.S. Troy, Paramount-Class Dreadnought
Planet S-009-13, S-009 System, Southern Region
10:22am, November 26, 5434 A.D. (5 Days Later)

“We need to take down that shield today, people!”

Trent’s anger and aggravation continued to mount over the past couple of days as he stared at the same unwavering planetary shield multiple times now. Trent may have recovered from his physical injuries a few days ago, but the mental scars of what the mechanical being that called itself Bilartini did to Trent and to their mission would not heal anytime soon. Bilartini managed to somehow get the coordinates out to his creators as to the position of the planetary shield generators and their reactors when Trent’s Seventh Fleet under false information were setting them up to protect the last of the gravitational field generators. Bilartini’s creators managed to open a wormhole under one of each of the devices after their plan was exposed to buy them more time for a still unseen plan. With no means to recover them, the Seventh Fleet

returned to Lumen to deliver the news. Many analysts had believed that it would take Bilartini's creators a few days to understand and reverse-engineer the technology.

They were able to do it in less than a day and quickly made many of them to deploy on this same planet. The shield has been up for four days with no signs of losing strength.

There have been some pieces of good news over the past few days. Nathan of the Amnon Empire on behalf of his Pope Empress was pleased to announce that there would be no hostilities between his Empire and the soon-to-be Federation. The Imperial fleet that arrived in Lumen, under Nathan's recommendation, scanned but could not detect the observational post that Trent had stated Bilartini told him about. Either Bilartini was lying, or it was removed as it no longer serving a purpose. Nathan did propose a joint operation to deactivate the last field generator before the Bilartini race managed to secure it and buy themselves some time. Trent's ship and fleet however were slated to begin the changes to the paintjobs as Trent's superiors believed Trent would take time to recover. Trent on the other hand was quite adamant in redeploying to bring the field generator down. Grand Admiral Mikey decided, as he believed Trent wanted to fulfill an obligation to make up for his failure and as some form of revenge, to have his ship's crew along with crewmen from other ships in his fleet take command of the N.I.F.S. *Troy*, the first Paramount-Class Dreadnought with the new Federation color scheme. Along with the Imperial fleet under the command of Admiral Negrete and the Eleventh Fleet after Rear Admiral Shannon volunteered, the *Troy* and the two fleets used portals to return to the S-009 System.

Finding a planetary shield system active and working after being away for one day was a shock. The fact that the equipment was made with non-Human/Animal technology was a clear indication that the Bilartini race were fast learners. While Portal Drive-equipped transport ships were sent to resupply the task force after they commenced and maintained the siege on the shield, it was increasingly apparent that the shield was not going down and may in fact be stronger than Republic planetary shields. The Bilartini shields were also powered by the geothermal energy of the planet, meaning they were using a renewable energy source that provided nearly unlimited power to the shields.

While Trent was committed to bringing the shields down, every weapon at their disposal including the *Troy's* heavy particle beam cannon was barely making a dent in the shields. The lack of progress and the past events were making Trent angry and upset that he was failing his mission once again. Trent wished that Shibuya was here to help him cope with the situation, but she returned to the Union to deal with other matters that required her attention. She made it clear that she would return, and that gave Trent something to look forward to after the mission.

Trent tried to stay motivated, fueled by hatred, but reasoning started to leak through that their siege was going nowhere. Trent reclined in his seat trying to think of other ways to bring the shield down.

"Sir," Khara said from the Tactical station, "our particle supply and missile payload are running low again. We need to stop firing again and recharge the particle tanks for ten minutes."

Trent groaned. He lost count after five of how many times they had to stop firing after nearly depleting the particle tanks on the dreadnought. The ship can produce the particles needed for the weapons at a fast pace, but they have been firing their weapons continuously for the past few days that the particle generator could not keep up.

"Proceed," Trent said.

As he witnessed the *Troy's* weapons ceasing their fire, he began to wonder how the Eleventh Fleet and Negrete's Imperial fleet were holding up. So far, neither have contacted him about any problems, but neither fleet have had to fire their weapons consistently for so long.

He needed to step away to clear his head.

“I will be in the Ready Room,” Trent said as he got up.

“May I join you?” Captain Dani said as she got up from her seat as well. “I wish to speak with you on a matter.”

Trent sighed for a moment as he looked at Dani. This was not the first time Dani wished to speak to Trent on “matters.” Usually, it was about the operation itself and ideas she had to bring the shield down. She had suggested on a couple of occasions to use electromagnetic pulse weaponry against the shields but those proved ineffective. She had also suggested the use of the Portal Drive to circumvent the shield and get underneath it. While this method was both tested and worked on Republic-built shields when testing scenarios of invasions done this way, the Portal Drive could not lock on to coordinates under the shield. The Bilartini had more than enough time to research countermeasures to the Portal Drive thanks to its development and use by the former Dominion they influenced, and this shield represented those countermeasures.

“Very well,” Trent said, sounding less than enthusiastic about another idea as he wanted some time alone.

Trent walked over to the Ready Room doors and opened them. While the Ready Room was designed differently and was less friendly in aesthetics than Republic vessels, Trent never took the time to decorate it as he knew the assignment to the *Troy* was a temporary one until the mission was over. Of course, he thought the mission would be over by now, but the planetary shield saw to the operation’s delay and extension.

Trent walked to the seat behind the desk as Dani sat in the only seat in front of the desk, the Ready Room doors closing behind them. Trent, already feeling tired from how the mission was going, looked at Dani with an annoyed expression on his face.

“Alright, Captain,” Trent said, “what idea do you have this time?”

“Not really an idea on how to take down the shield,” Dani said. “Just my opinion on how this operation is going.”

“I already know. It is going nowhere fast.”

“Exactly. We have been firing on this shield for at least four days straight with no signs of progress. The crew is getting tired and there has been a drop in morale since the second day.”

“What are you suggesting then, Captain?”

“We need to deem this operation a failure, sir.”

“You want us to pack up and leave, giving the Bilartini time to finalize their plans?”

“Sir, they had five days to do that already. When I heard about the operation details for when we were deploying the shield generators to this planet, I heard that it was to remain in operation for a week before the suggestion of a backup system was to be implemented. I also heard that before said backup was suggested, the android we knew as Bilartini seemed fine with a week-long active shield. While the shield that is deployed is not ours, the fact remains that the Bilartini race had plenty of time to work on their plans. Even if we could bring the field down now, we do not know if they have finished their preparations or not. Not knowing what their plans are is also an issue since we have no idea what to prepare for.”

Trent sighed a little as Dani’s words started to sink in. He knew she was right and that was what annoyed him right now. The Bilartini race had about five days to prepare whatever their plan was and there were no signs that the task force was going to stop those preparations.

“You are right,” Trent said. “This operation is a failure and we are getting nowhere with the planetary shield they made. I just feel highly aggravated after what that Bilartini android did while on the *Marshal*.”

“You mean you are upset and enraged because of what he did,” Dani said. “I get it. We all are upset, but I know it upsets you more because it was both mental and physical. The physical part you have recovered from, but I know his actions played with your head.”

“Worse than that. I have been having nightmares the past few days staring into those red glowing eyes of his like I was looking at some sort of demon. Waking up from those has not been great on my mental state of mind.”

“I figured it would not. I am no psychiatrist, but one would say that your experience may affect your judgement on future missions that relate to such an individual.”

“That would be enough for them to pull me off the mission, and with how things are going, they would be within their right to do so.”

“Let me ask. When was the last time you have spoken with Shibuya?”

“I spoke with her last just before the start of this mission. Once we were on this side of the gravitational fields, we have not been able to communicate aside from the reports given to the transports on a regular basis. She said she went back to the Union for the time being to take care of some business there. She did not say what it was or if it was related to the military.”

“I see. Part of me wonders if you should speak with her about what you experienced. Like the rest of the bridge crew, she was there when that android went haywire. For that matter, she did save your life.”

Trent chuckled a little bit. It was the first time he did so in days.

“Now that is something I have not seen in a while,” Dani said. “You have not laughed or showed any signs of joy in days.”

Trent cleared his throat.

“Considering the current circumstances,” Trent said, “I would not be at all surprised why I have not in a while.”

Trent took a deep breath.

“Alright,” he said. “We will leave this system, but I suggest we go to the Murus System where the regional headquarters are located, close to the Southern Region. This way we can monitor the field should the Bilartini decide to finally bring it down. I will submit a report to the main headquarters once we arrive.”

“Are we taking the Imperial forces as well?” Dani asked. “Once we are on the other side of the gravitational field, they will not be able to report to their military headquarters or their other forces in the region.”

“Valid point. I will inform Admiral Negrete about the end of the operation and she can contact her forces. We can provide instant transportation to where she needs to go prior to our trip to Murus.”

“Do you want Sierra to contact them or will you be contacting them from here?”

“I will contact them from my terminal. Inform the crew that we are ending the operation at this time and that we will be preparing to depart.”

“Yes, sir,” Dani said as she got up from the seat, heading for the exit.

She stopped halfway to the door and turned slightly towards Trent.

“Sir,” she said, “can I make a suggestion?”

“Go ahead,” Trent said.

“When we get back, call Shibuya if you can. I think it would do you good to talk to her and take some time to cope with what happened. I would even suggest seeing a counselor or psychiatrist if they can help with your nightmares.”

“I will look into those, but only after we find out what the Bilartini are up to, alright?”

“That is all I ask is for you to think about it, sir. I will speak with the crew about the operation and the departure. I will see you on the bridge.”

Dani turned and exited the Ready Room. After the doors closed, Trent took a deep breath. He knows she means well and at this point, she may be right that he needs to talk to someone and take some time away from things due to his current mental state. There will be time after they find out what the Bilartini were planning, though. Right now, he must make a conference call.

Trent turned to the terminal on the desk and sent out a request to speak with Negrete and Shannon. He wondered how they were going to take the news about the operation being a failure and that they would be returning to their designated rendezvous points.

Once the terminal established a connection, they appeared on the screen side-by-side with each other. Shannon looked to be in the Ready Room on the *Renaldo*, but he was not sure where Negrete was on her screen. She looked like she was sitting down at a desk facing towards the terminal directly in front of her instead of to the side like Trent and Shannon.

“Admiral Trent,” Negrete said. “*Has there been a development in the operation that you have noticed from your end?*”

“Unfortunately, no,” Trent said. “We have been throwing everything at it and there are no signs that the shield is losing strength. Whatever it is that the Bilartini did to their planetary shield generators based on what they stole from us, it is far more powerful and resilient than our own. After consideration of any possible alternatives after four days of constant bombardment, I am ready to call this operation a failure.”

“*He has a point, Admiral,*” Shannon said. “*I would say that it would take a massive fleet with a great deal of firepower to bring this shield down. However, whatever the Bilartini needed to accomplish in their grand scheme of things, they have had five days to do so. If we want to get to the bottom of their plans, it may be best for us to wait and see what develops. We will know once we detect the gravitational field going down.*”

“*I hate to say it, but I have to concur with this decision as well,*” Negrete said. “*Nothing we are doing is having an effect and my crew is getting tired sitting here shooting at a shield we cannot bring down. I need to report to my superiors about our progress here. What do you all tend to do from here?*”

“The *Troy* and the Eleventh Fleet are going to go to the Murus System. It is the location of our local headquarters close to the Southern Region. The headquarters there have been monitoring the field for any changes after the second-to-last field generator went offline. We will check with them to see if there are any further changes.”

“*If you can, I would like for the Troy to remain for a moment,*” Negrete said. “*If my superiors decide they want me to return to the Milky Way, I may ask for a fast means to get to the interstellar gate in Access.*”

“*I can give Murus headquarters the report on your behalf, Admiral Trent,*” Shannon said. “*I doubt it will be any different from mine.*”

“Probably not, but while there are a couple of things I need to attend to, I will wait and see if Admiral Negrete needs a quick jump to Access. That reminds me, though. Has there been any word on the field that surrounds the Bilartini’s home system?”

“*None so far from the Imperial fleet stationed there,*” Negrete said. “*That actually is a problem. We were under the impression that the field generators that surround the region were also protecting their home system. It appears that is not the case. They will likely remain on alert there for any changes, but if the field there is not linked to the ones that surround the region, it means our efforts were wasted in the process.*”

“I have a feeling that the fighting that was supposed to be between us was designed more as distraction to buy them time. I can only assume that we were supposed to be fighting each other the moment their plans were ready, but it was obvious that your operation to shut down the field generators proceeded ahead of schedule for them, forcing them to rethink their strategy and wanting to use our shield generators to secure this location to buy them the time they needed. They never took into consideration Nathan’s secret trip through our portal when we first fled your forces, and the subsequent talks that followed.”

“Yet, we still do not know why and that is concerning. I will contact my superiors from here on the situation and let you know if I need to quickly go elsewhere or if I return with you to your space.”

“Very well. I await your response.”

Negrete nodded in acknowledgement of Trent’s words before she disappeared on the screen. Shannon’s image filled the entire screen now.

“I guess I will be taking the Eleventh Fleet to Murus without the Troy,” Shannon said.

“Looks that way,” Trent said.

“By the way, I forgot to ask, but how are you holding up?”

“What do you mean?”

“Sir, you and I have worked together for a long time. I heard about what happened five days ago and your expression is an easy giveaway that you are troubled. So, what is it?”

Trent sighed.

“I guess there is no keeping secrets with you,” Trent said. “While I may have healed from my physical injuries, my mental ones have not. I forced us to remain here to bring this shield down for days to thwart the Bilartini’s plans out of rage and revenge for what they did. Captain Dani finally had words with me on the matter and I began to see the validity of those words. That is why I am labeling this operation as a failure and for us to return for the time being.”

“I would have told you sooner had we still been on the same ship,” Shannon said. *“Still, better late than never, I suppose. I also heard about your romantic involvement with a Skunk from the New Unity Government.”*

“Word gets around fast, and now I am concerned about Shibuya’s return to the Union.”

“So, that is her name. Frankly, I am surprised that you have such an interest in a member of Animality but considering that word has spread just as fast of their Human traits and DNA, I can see the possible allure in each other.”

“That is something else I hope would not spread, but I will not go into details about that now. Please proceed to Murus as soon as you can. We will see you there in a little while.”

“Understood, Admiral. I will see you there.”

The transmission ended and Trent reclined in his chair. Trent was not sure what to think now that word had spread about his and Shibuya’s involvement with each other. Still, he could only hope that Shibuya was not in trouble with her superiors for what occurred during that time. Maybe Captain Dani was right. Maybe he should contact her when he gets back.

Trent activated an external view of the surrounding space on his terminal and pulled up the Eleventh Fleet. By now they had stopped firing on the shield and were moving away from the planet towards the direction of Murus, preparing to use the *Renaldo’s* Portal Drive to get there. The Murus System where the local fleet headquarters was located has been a quiet assignment for anyone stationed there for centuries. Because of the system being right on the edge with the Southern Region, there is not a great deal of activity in the area other than to study and monitor the gravitational fields. Now it is becoming a frontline post for when the field does go down and

the Bilartini reveal their plans to the rest of the star cluster. The nations that will be part of the Federation have sent ships to the Murus System to become part of the defense fleet in that system. The plan was originally to defend against Imperial vessels but since this was no longer the case, it was best for the ships to defend against anything the Bilartini may throw at them. However, against an enemy that can appear anywhere, this may not be strategically the best move to make. However, if the Bilartini android was correct that their race had no ships to speak of, the question becomes whether they needed the time to build a fleet. If that were the case, it would make sense strategically that the upcoming Federation and the Imperial forces would fight each other first, then the Bilartini would engage the weakened forces.

However, that train of thought did not feel right with Trent for a few reasons. The Bilartini had not been spotted by Imperial forces outside of their home system. For that matter, no one knows what the Bilartini look like. If the Bilartini were wanting to build a fleet, there would be far fewer of their kind if they were confined to their home system versus the rest of the star cluster. There was also the matter that since they were holed up in their home system, the question of resources would also be a matter of great importance. They would only be able to use the resources of a single star system to build a fleet, which may or may not be very prudent to construct a fleet fast. It just did not feel right that their plans involve a fleet unless they are far more technologically advanced than anyone else in the cluster or in the Empire's part of the Milky Way. Although, seeing what the Bilartini managed to accomplish after reverse-engineering the planetary shield generators, it may not be as far-fetched as he would believe.

Still, if their plans were not to build a fleet, then their plans were more than unknown. At that point, it would be anyone's guess as to what the Bilartini's plans were.

His terminal beeped, indicating an incoming transmission. Trent looked to see that the transmission was coming from Admiral Negrete. Trent was curious to see what her superiors told her to do as he answered the transmission. Her image soon appeared on the screen.

"Admiral Negrete," Trent said. "What did your superiors say?"

"*They have asked me to return to the Milky Way, namely to Amnon to provide my report,*" Negrete said. "*Looks like I will need instant transport to Access after all. Can you please oblige my fleet with this request?*"

"Of course. Please give me a few minutes to get back to the bridge and inform the crew. Please have your communications officer transmit the coordinates for the location of the gate in Access to my ship so that we can input them into our Portal Drive. We will signal you when we are ready to open the portal."

"*Understood. We will forward you the coordinates shortly. Tel Aviv, out.*"

The transmission disconnected as Trent took a deep breath. Looks like he will get a chance to see this intergalactic gate that the Empire managed to construct to reach the star cluster. He got up from his seat and headed for the exit from his Ready Room. Before he reached the doors, he heard a familiar sound of something hitting the floor, like it just came through a wormhole like the device that appeared in his house almost two weeks ago. This time, it was accompanied by the sound of a security field being activated. Trent turned around and saw a dark hooded figure contained within the field. Trent could not make out the face under the hood.

"I see you have improved your detection capabilities," the figure said in a familiar voice.

"And I thought you were dead when I shot you through the head," Trent said. "Unless, of course, you are another different model of android than the one I destroyed."

"Once we returned to this region, I linked with a remote system in the event I was destroyed. I remember our last encounter, Admiral, but as you can see, your effort was in vain."

“I will admit that you or your creators pulled a fast one in stealing one of our shield generators and reactors, but I never expected them to reverse-engineer them so quickly.”

“From what we can see, you are giving up trying to bring it down. A wise move, though not soon enough to waste all that time and energy in the attempt.”

“Are you here to mock me and my kind, or do you have some actual business here?”

“Straight to the point, I see. Very well. I came here to tell you two things, Admiral Trent.”

“And they are?”

“The first is that you are too late to stop my creators’ plans. Our preparations are already completed, and we are ready to proceed.”

“So, you are here to gloat after all.”

“I am not gloating. I am merely stating a fact.”

“Phrase or take it how you will. I do not suppose you are going to tell me what these plans are to indulge my curiosity, are you?”

“My creators are quite aware that if our plans are revealed, your nations including the Amnon Empire would attempt to stop us. They will not risk the success of their plan and the future of their race to satisfy the curious whims of your mind.”

“Well, you cannot blame me for trying. What is the second thing you wanted to say?”

“This may fill you with the emotion you call joy, but after this encounter, you will not see me or my creators before the remainder of your day is over.”

“I would take joy in that, but the possible ramifications of such a statement and the scenarios involved causes me to feel anything but joy, especially when they come from you.”

“I see that our last encounter has left you with bitterness and rage. I can also see why you would feel that way given the circumstances of our last meeting.”

“I would ask then what you mean that we will not see you or your creators again before the day is through, but that would relate to your plans.”

The Ready Room doors opened as Captain Dani came in.

“Sir,” Dani said as she rushed in, seeing the cloaked figure in the forcefield. “I can see you already know. I was alerted that we had an intruder on board. So, who is our intruder?”

“The Bilartini android again,” Trent said. “His consciousness was linked remotely when we came back to the Southern Region with him five days ago, allowing his mind to survive. He says that his creators’ preparations for their plan are complete and that we will no longer see them before the day is over.”

“Well, that sounds rather ominous from the sounds of it. What are their plans?”

“He will not tell me. His creators will not allow him to speak anything about them as they believe we will stop their plans. He is correct on that part.”

“There is also a grave error on your part as well,” the android said.

“Care to enlighten us?” Trent asked.

“Let us say that you underestimate our abilities. We are not as helpless as you and the Empire make us out to be.”

“Meaning what?”

“You will find out shortly. Farewell, Admiral. We will not meet again.”

A wormhole soon appeared below the android within the field, sucking him in quickly and disappearing. Trent and Dani were dumbstruck by his escape from the field.

“How was he able to generate a wormhole within that field?!” Dani asked.

“I do not know,” Trent said, “but as they are capable of establishing wormholes in a gravity well in the heart of a building like on Tenebris Prime, this act was just as possible.”

“Are they really able to do more than we have been led to believe?”

“I do not know, but now I am concerned what they have in mind. Let us get Admiral Negrete’s fleet to Access quickly. Something tells me that their plans are starting today.”

Trent and Dani walked out of the Ready Room and onto the bridge, walking to their respective seats.

“Sierra,” Trent said, “have we received the coordinates to the intergalactic gate in Access from the Imperial vessels?”

“Yes, sir. I have already transferred them to Diana to prepare the Portal Drive.”

“Diana, how long until the drive is ready?”

“Charging will be complete in three minutes,” Diana said.

“Sierra, tell the Imperial fleet we will be jumping in three minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” Sierra said.

Dani turned to Trent, and looked like she wanted to say something, but Trent raised his left hand, indicating that unless it was important to wait until they are at their destination. Dani nodded in acknowledgement of Trent’s gesture. If she was going to ask about what the android said in the Ready Room, it was not much, but it was enough to cause Trent to be concerned.

Trent looked at the countdown timer as it appeared on the screen once there were two minutes left before the Portal Drive activated. Trent could see that the Seventh Fleet was no longer orbiting the planet as they already left a moment ago. Whatever that android’s creators have planned, something told Trent that the Southern Region would soon be no longer safe for anyone within the region outside the Bilartini.

As the countdown reached zero, Diana at the Helm pressed a few buttons and activated the Portal Drive. The portal soon appeared in front of the *Troy*, and the Imperial fleet moved itself to enter the portal starting with the cruisers. After a few minutes, the *Tel Aviv* entered the portal, and the *Troy* soon followed through. Once the dreadnought was on the other side of the portal and it closed behind them, Trent saw a sight he did not think he would see again.

He was staring at the starless void in front of them. There were galaxies millions if not billions of Light-years away, but they were small and very distant.

He heard Captain Dani gasping fearfully. Trent had forgotten that he was the only person on board the *Troy* who had ever seen anything similar during the final assault on the Royal Lykan Kingdom’s capital.

“Take a good look, everyone,” Trent said as the bridge crew stared at the screen. “I have seen such a view once before at the end of the First Interstellar War. There are no immediate stars past this point. We are on the edge of the abyss, and the only thing out there are galaxies that are too distant for us to reach without a proper set of coordinates.”

“The Lykan capital has a similar view at night for about half a year, right?” Captain Dani said. “How could they get used to such an emptiness?”

“They had about two thousand years to get used to it. To them, it is a natural thing to see a lack of stars for half their year.”

“Sir,” Khara said, “I have the intergalactic gate and the local Imperial space station to starboard.”

“Understood,” Trent said, realizing they need to focus on the task. “Helm, bring us about so that we can see them.”

The ship began to turn to its right as the distant galaxies moved to the left on the screen. The *Troy*’s size made turns far slower than the *Marshal*’s, a fact that the crew on board are still getting used to. Soon, two objects appeared on the right side of the screen, followed by an

Imperial fleet moving away from them. The fleet was Admiral Negrete's as it began to fly towards the closer of the two objects. It was a circular structure with linear struts that reminded Trent of the Imperial fleet's designs. It was obvious that there were certain aesthetics the Empire strived to maintain for the sake of a uniformed look. The large station beyond it had four massive sections and struts arranged vertically but similar in shape and outline to some of the sections of their ships, connected at the station's midsection horizontally by a thick ring. In the middle was a singularity that powered the station.

"Sir," Sierra said, "we are getting a communication from Admiral Negrete."

"Put her through," Trent said.

A small screen appeared in front of the main screen with Admiral Negrete on it. This time, she looked to be on the bridge of her vessel.

"Admiral Trent," she said, "I must apologize but this is as close as you can get for the time being. Pope Empress Linda the First has ordered that no ship other than Amnon Empire ships are allowed back in the Milky Way for now. Therefore, you cannot approach the gate or the station. Please do not take this as a threat."

"I understand," Trent said. "We have not worked out the intergalactic travel and the ramifications that may occur yet. I know that it must be left up to the politicians, though. We must wait for ten minutes to recharge our Portal Drive, but we will hold our position here for now. I wish you safe journeys on your return."

"Thank you. Stay safe. Hopefully, we will see each other again soon."

The transmission was disconnected. Trent looked to see that the interstellar gate began to open the existing wormhole large enough to let Negrete's fleet enter one at a time. There were some similarities to the Republic star gates in terms of operations, but it was clear there were differences as well. Trent was not going to focus on the details since this gate is crossing galaxies rather than star systems.

After the cruisers entered the gate, leaving only the battleships and the *Tel Aviv* to enter, Trent looked over at the Helm.

"Diana," Trent said, "bring us around towards the direction of the Murus System and recharge the Portal Drive."

"Yes, sir," Diana said as she pressed a few buttons.

The *Troy's* bow began to turn slowly back towards the star cluster. While the entire cluster began to come into view, Trent noticed that they were not in the Access System proper in terms of being within that solar system. Instead, they were on the outside the edge of the system within five hundred kilometers inside of the gravitational field which was severely weakened in this part of the region.

Once the *Troy* was facing in the direction they were to go, a countdown timer appeared on the screen with just over nine minutes remaining. Trent leaned back in his chair as everyone waited for the drive to recharge. At eight minutes remaining, the vessel's proximity alarm began to go off as the klaxon filled the entire ship.

Trent sat up, puzzled by what is going on.

"Report!" Trent yelled.

"Sir," Glenn said, "I am detecting a wormhole close to the intergalactic star gate. Its properties match that of those created by the crystals. It is large and the aperture is facing away from the rest of the star cluster."

"Show me."

"Yes, sir."

The main screen changed view back towards the gate and the station. Only Negrete's dreadnought remained at the gate, but it stopped. Above both the gate and the vessel was a wormhole whose open end was facing away from the star cluster. The wormhole was massive but whatever would fly out of it would be parallel to the gate and the *Tel Aviv*, meaning nothing coming out would collide with either the gate or the ship.

After a moment, ships matching those of the Imperial forces started to tumble out of the wormhole. Either the vessels had lost power, or they were sucked into a wormhole unexpectedly that they have yet to regain control of their vessels. Considering their singularity cores were active and intact, Trent was leaning more towards the latter. The question was where these ships were coming from?

"Sir," Sierra said, "the *Tel Aviv* is hailing us."

"I hope Negrete can provide answers as to what this fleet is, but I think I may already know," Trent said. "Put her through."

A small screen appeared again in front of the main screen with Admiral Negrete in the frame. This time, her expression was one of worry or disbelief.

"Admiral Trent," she said. *"Are you seeing this?"*

"I am," Trent said. "Where are those ships coming from?"

"This is the fleet that was stationed to monitor the Bilartini's home system! I am getting reports that a massive wormhole appeared in front of them and approached them as they tried to evade it drawing them in!"

"Wait, did you say that the wormhole 'approached' them? Are you saying it moved as it drew them in?"

"That is what several of the commanding officers of those ships are saying."

"But that is not possible. The wormholes we generate are always fixed. They have never moved once they are formed."

"I think the Bilartini are showing us that they are capable of more than we know, especially since they created the crystals."

"The question now is why they brought the fleet here? I doubt it is because they simply no longer want to be watched by your forces."

"That could be the reason, but without them telling us, we will not know the reason for them doing this all of a sudden."

Trent looked at the main screen as more ships continued to be thrown out of the wormhole. Most of the ships have regained control and moved out of the way to prevent any collisions with their other ships. Trent noticed there were a lot of ships coming out of the wormhole for it to be just a single fleet to monitor the Bilartini home system. Negrete on the small screen looked like she was noticing their large numbers, too.

"Wait a minute," she said. *"These vessels coming out of that wormhole are not part of that same fleet. Those are ships that were sent out to patrol this region for any sign of the Bilartini in other systems!"*

"Exiting through the same wormhole?" Trent asked. "There is no way that should be able to happen, but as you said, we are dealing with the creators of these crystals."

"Even stranger is the fact some of these ships are reporting that they were using their Fold Drives when a wormhole suddenly appeared and they flew right into it, knocking their drive offline. They are saying it happened so suddenly that they had no time to react."

After the final cruiser came out of the wormhole, the wormhole closed quickly. Trent looked over the nearly one hundred Imperial vessels before looking back at Negrete.

“To the best of your knowledge,” Trent said, “are these all of the ships that the Empire sent to explore this region?”

Negrete looked over the screen on her end.

“I can confirm that this is all of them,” Negrete said. *“I am still trying to understand what is going on here.”*

Trent wondered if this was the best time to mention about his sudden visit by the android. He figured that this action the Bilartini has taken is in relation to what is going on, but before he could bring up his “visitor,” another alarm sounded.

“Now what?” Trent asked. “Report!”

“Sir,” Glenn said, “the gravitational field! It is gone!”

“Gone? How? I thought it took a day to shut down!”

“Do you think that android I was told about lied about how it takes a full day to shut down the field?”

“It took your forces that long because they may not have had a full understanding of the technology used to maintain the field. The Bilartini, however, know how to shut it down even faster than a day, it seems. The fact that we were not over the planet with the last field generator anymore to witness the shutdown feels like a slap in the face since the operation was a failure.”

“Well, with the field down, you should be able to contact your forces and see if any ship can reach the Bilartini home system to investigate.”

“A valid point. Communications...”

Before Trent continued, another alarm went off. This time, it was a proximity alarm. A similar alarm went off on the screen that Negrete was on.

“Now what is it?” Trent asked. “Report, quickly!”

“Sir?” Khara said. “I am detecting a structure off our starboard approximately one thousand kilometers away.”

“Put it on the screen.”

The screen changed views again to a structure like an outpost. It was a simple design as it was a bronze colored arch. The arch was vertical in orientation with the curve pointing away from the cluster. It looked like it had a flat surface at the tips, but it also had a cylinder attached at the apex of the arch. The cylinder itself was curved.

“Sir,” Sierra said, “we have received a text message from Rear Admiral Shannon from the Murus System.”

“What does it say?” Trent asked, concerned about what the message contained.

“She says that long-range sensors have detected multiple structures that have appeared around the Southern Region. A picture of the structures matches the one we are seeing on the main screen.”

“I was hoping that was not the case. The question now is what these structures were designed to do around the Southern Region.”

“Could they be another form of protective barrier to protect the Southern Region in place of the gravitational field?” Dani asked.

“Wait a moment,” Negrete said on the small screen. *“I am getting an emergency transmission through the wormhole.”*

Trent looked at the small screen as Negrete looked to her right to review the message she was receiving. The timing of an emergency message from the Milky Way when these structures suddenly appear was beginning to concern Trent. Negrete’s face soon filled with dread as she turned back to look at Trent.

“I do not know how,” Negrete said, “but those same structures have begun to appear around Empire space and neighboring systems that are being explored by our forces.”

Trent began to think about what this development could mean. Why would the Bilartini be interested in surrounding Imperial space in the Milky Way Galaxy? Trent looked at the structure on the screen and looked over its design with its arches. Trent soon began to envision in his mind about a field around both locations using these structures like a bubble. Why bubble both the Southern Region and Imperial space?

Trent soon remembered that android’s words a little while ago, stating that it would be the last time Trent would see him again. Were the Bilartini leaving? Trent also remembered a small bit of the history the Bilartini android said about his creators’ origins. They were able to transport a small portion of their home galaxy to become this star cluster to get away from their enemies. Were they repeating their efforts from back then, leaving the star cluster with only the Southern Region? If so, where are they heading and why would they encircle the Amnon Empire in the Milky Way Galaxy as well.

Trent soon realized what they were doing and was in utter shock at the scale of what was happening if this was true.

“Great Maker, no,” Trent said as he stood up in disbelief. “They cannot be seriously doing what I think they are doing.”

“What is it, Admiral?” Negrete asked.

Before Trent could answer, the structure fired off beams of purple light from the tips of the arch and from the curved cylinder. The beams began to curve in those directions with one of them passing in front of the *Troy*, the Imperial fleets, and their structure. The beams continued to stretch in their respective directions.

As it activated, the intergalactic gate’s wormhole soon closed completely.

“What in the world?!” Negrete said. *“The gate is down!”*

“Sierra,” Trent said. “Try to get a hold of the Murus System headquarters!”

“I cannot, sir!” Sierra said after a few seconds of struggling. “I no longer have a direct line of communications!”

“Diana, are we able to jump to the coordinates that we came from?”

“I will go ahead and put in the...what?”

Trent knew what she was going to say, but he wanted to hear it from Diana to confirm his suspicions as to what was happening.

“What is the problem?” Trent asked.

“The coordinates are coming back as invalid,” Diana said. “The Portal Drive is giving me an error say the destination coordinates are not accessible to activate a portal.”

“I figured as such and I know why.”

Everyone on the bridge and even Negrete on her screen looked at Trent waiting for an explanation from him.

“The reason we cannot jump, reach the Murus headquarters, and why the intergalactic gate had shut down are all due to the same reason,” Trent said. “The space that we know as the Southern Region is in a state of transition. The Bilartini are leaving and they are taking the entire Southern Region with them.”

Everyone on the bridge was wide-eyed in disbelief when Trent said that. Negrete was more puzzled than confused.

“They are taking an entire region with them?” Negrete asked. *“If that is the case, then why is there a similar field around Imperial space?”*

“There is only one explanation for that and it is one you are not going to like, but it is also why the intergalactic gate shut down like it did. The Bilartini are not just leaving, but they want to reside in the Milky Way Galaxy. It appears they want to be in a galactic community again. However, adding more star systems to a galaxy will affect the gravitational pull of said galaxy. Instead, they are going to replace it instead.”

“*Replace it?*” Negrete asked.

Everyone wondered what Trent meant, but they soon began to realize what the Bilartini was replacing, or rather “who” they were replacing.

“*You cannot be serious,*” Negrete said in disbelief. “*Are you telling me that they are about to transition the ENTIRE Empire and the neighboring systems here while they replace that part of the galaxy with the Southern Region?!*”

“Exactly,” Trent said. “They must have found a way to continually monitor Empire space without detection and calculated the space they were going to take with any that had Imperial influence or was being explored. They are going to trap the entirety of the Human and Hybrid or Animal races in this star cluster. That was why Bilartini was surprised by our plan about invading the Milky Way and getting its coordinates. It would give us a means to return even after they made the transition. They do not want that to happen.”

“*We need to stop them! We need to take out those structures!*”

As Negrete said that, a shield soon appeared around the structure like the planetary shields that were stolen by the Bilartini and were reverse-engineered. Negrete’s expression soon changed to that of dread as the thought of destroying the structure was no longer an option.

“I guess that option is off the table,” Trent said. “Glenn, how long until the beams converge with each other?”

“Based on the fact those beams are moving faster than light through subspace,” Glenn said as he did his calculations, “we have seven minutes until they converged both above and below the region.”

“*We only have seven minutes?*” Negrete asked. “*Is there anything we can do at all to stop this from happening?*”

“I do not think there is at all. When that android said there would be nothing we can do to stop their plans once they were completed, I would never have assumed something like this was what they had planned.”

“How long do you think they had planned something like this?” Dani asked.

“I do not know, but I can easily guess that once Luna managed to arrive here, they put this plan into motion to swap the stars here with those in the Milky Way. If they had the chance, they would have considered taking almost the entire star cluster minus the system we were in if enough systems in the Milky Way were available. They had a lot of time to develop the means to swap the systems instead of jumping an entire section of a galaxy on its own. However, once our societies began to expand to other systems, the Bilartini would limit the systems they wanted to swap to only this region, and made long-term preparations to keep us busy while they make the swap. There was no intention of giving us their technological advancements including the production of the Salire Purpura crystals.”

Everyone looked back at the screen as the beams of light from the structures began to converge on the screen. The beams of light may be Light-years away, but because they were going through some form of subspace, their visible light was reaching the ships faster than normal. They sat there, waiting for the inevitable to occur. As they waited, Trent thought about the plan to return Luna back to Sol. If all of Empire space was going to take the place of the

Southern Region once the transition was complete, it would make the process that much easier, but he would never have imagined that he would see the Earth again like this. Of course, he knew the citizens of the Empire were not going to be happy when they arrive here, but that was something the politicians were going to have to work out on their own.

Trent was soon imagining the Bilartini android laughing at the foolishness of Humanity and Animality, along with their helplessness in the face of the current situation. The odd part is that the Bilartini themselves have never been seen by either the nations of the star cluster or the Empire. Trent cannot envision the faces of those responsible except for the android, and that android was made to look Human. Was that done more out of twisted irony that the only face of those who they could blame looks like that of a Human? It was a twisted and sick sense of humor on the Bilartini's part.

As the beams finally converged above and below the Southern Region, a gravitational field emerged between the beams. It was the same type of field that once enveloped the region, only this time, there was no way for anyone to get through it. Afterwards, Trent noticed across the cluster several purple beams numbering in the thousands if not millions from almost every star system including the Republic. The field was distorting their light, but they were heading for the apex above the region.

"What is that?" Dani asked.

"It is the Salire Purpura crystals," Trent said. "I figured it would take a lot of their energy to do what they are trying to accomplish."

"But if they are getting the energy from existing Salire Purpura crystals across the cluster, does that include those in our star gates as well?"

Trent soon felt the sudden dread of Dani's words. If the Bilartini are using the crystals in existing constructs such as the star gates, they were about to isolate every star system that has relied on them to go between systems! Supreme Chancellor Drew was already looking at the idea of constructing Portal Drive-equipped gates for the Union, but it looks like that will have to shift to converting existing constructs to use those drives. Any Portal Drive-equipped ship is going to be busy for a while with the civilian traffic until that transition could be done.

"I hate to say it," Trent said, "but there is a good chance that the star gates are going offline because of this. We will deal with that crisis when we return."

"Understood, sir," Dani said with her voice full of concern and worry.

Trent did not blame her for being worried. This is going to be a major issue for the nations and the future Federation for a while alongside the Empire's arrival. As the last of the energy from the crystals converged at the top of the beams above the Southern Region, a massive wormhole began to appear at the apex and grow larger as it started to move downward across the beams of the barrier. The beams the enveloped the region looked to be expanding the wormhole as it enveloped the region. Trent could see within the wormhole on the other side and saw more stars that he had ever seen in his life, along with converged beams like the barrier's apex.

However, his attention soon returned when he realized how close the barrier was to the ship. While it did not look like they were going to be drawn into the wormhole, the event horizon of the aperture was large enough to hit the *Troy* and the Imperial fleet along with the structures. A wormhole with as much power as Trent was seeing could rip their ships apart regardless of how tough they were built.

"Negrete!" Trent said. "Move everyone away from the barrier now including the station! We are within the event horizon's field where we will get hit!"

"I am already on it!" Negrete said. "*The station can move, but the gate cannot!*"

“The gate is useless now! If there is anyone on it, tell them to evacuate immediately! They only have minutes before the event horizon hits!”

“The gate is unmanned, but I get the point. We are moving out the area.”

“Diana!”

“Already on it, sir,” Diana said. “Bringing us about to move away from the barrier.”

“Use the emergency thrusters and engines. Get us turned around and away quickly.”

“Aye-aye, sir.”

“Khara, provide us with a rear view as we move away. I want to monitor the situation.”

“Understood,” Khara said.

As the ship began to turn to port, Trent could see the Imperial ships once in view forming up and moving away from the barrier. The station ignited some of its thrusters on the midsection ring, slowly moving it away. As the *Troy* was seventy-five percent into its turn, the rear view appeared on the screen, first showing the structure they had spotted before the rest of the barrier and the Southern Region came into view. They were soon pulling away from the barrier as fast as the ship could travel, but the dreadnought was not meant for speed due to its mass. Even with the emergency engines going, it was still slower than most ships.

“Forty-five seconds until we clear the event horizon’s range,” Diana said.

“There is only forty-seven seconds until the event horizon hits,” Glenn said.

“It is going to be close,” Trent said.

As the edge of the wormhole came closer to their position, Trent had hoped he could see above the wormhole to see if the transition of the stars between the Southern Region and those from the Milky Way happening at the same time. The wormhole’s edge however made viewing above the wormhole difficult. The only object left behind was the inactive intergalactic gate, and it was about to hit the event horizon as the *Troy* managed to clear the edge of the wormhole. The bridge crew watched as the wormhole’s edge came down on the gate, breaking it apart like a house in a hurricane. It was soon gone as the wormhole’s edge continued downward. By that time, they could see a new set of star systems were taking the place of the Southern Region as the opposite side of the wormhole was ejecting them. Trent could see the same multitude of stars within the opposite side of the wormhole, and he knew that these stars were being switched out in the same galaxy.

He could see a similar barrier within the wormhole like the one when the wormhole was above them. It was also like the one that surrounded the Southern Region. However, that barrier stayed on the opposite side while the wormhole came down on the former Milky Way star systems. Trent knew what was happening at that point. The barrier that surrounded the systems in the Milky Way served as a field enhancer for the transition of the systems from the star cluster. Once the wormhole formed on the outside of the barrier over the Southern Region, it connected and formed one inside the barrier in the Milky Way. The barrier in the Milky Way not only prevented anyone from the Empire from escaping, the space within the field would be completely replaced with the Southern Region. Once the transition was complete, the barriers would sync up and deactivate, introducing the former Southern Region to the Milky Way Galaxy. This would also prevent any of their technology from being used to reverse the process by anyone in the star cluster. In other words, once this was done, Humanity and Animality would be trapped in the star cluster with no way to return to the Milky Way.

While anyone in the star cluster would not have any feelings on the loss of returning to the Milky Way, Trent knew that the Amnon Empire citizens would not be the same. He was not sure how they would feel, but it was going to take them a long time to adjust to their new home

in the star cluster. How long that would take and how it would affect their relations with the future Federation remains to be seen, but Trent could only hope that this would not result in hostility for what has happened.

The wormhole soon began to shrink as it continued downward towards the bottom of the barrier on the opposite side. Trent took a long look into the “exit” side of the wormhole, knowing that the stars he was seeing inside that belonged to the Milky Way were going to be the first and last time he would see so many stars from another galaxy. Part of him wondered if anyone that was among the Imperial worlds and their ships were staring at the wormhole beneath them. If they were, they would be taking one final look at the stars of their home galaxy before they were gone forever, replaced by the glow of distant galaxies and an endless void. Thinking about it began to fill Trent with a great sense of loss, and he suddenly began to realize how his ancestors must have felt when Luna arrived in the star cluster over three thousand years ago.

The wormhole reached the bottom of the barrier and began to shrink quickly. Within seconds, it was closed, and the means to reach or return to the Milky Way was gone forever. Trent was suddenly filled with rage. That android was right that Trent was never going to see him or his creators ever again, but Trent never expected this to be what that android meant. The only remnants of Humanity and Animality in the known universe was suddenly and forcefully evicted from their home galaxy, and the new “landlords” just removed the door back in.

Trent took a deep breath as he looked at the screen with Negrete on it. She was in complete shock and she had tears on her face. He figured that everyone in the Imperial fleet just felt their loss and did not know how to cope with such things.

“Negrete,” Trent said, to get her attention.

Negrete looked at Trent but did not know how to respond after what happened.

“Listen to me, please,” Trent continued. “I know that none of us expected this to happen today or ever for that matter.”

“That is the understatement of a lifetime,” Negrete said, her voice shaking. *“Do you realize fully what has happened here?”*

“I do and so did my ancestors. Believe me, they felt the same way you did. They were confused, bewildered, and lost knowing that there was no way for them to go back home to the Milky Way. However, they persevered, they thrived, and they survived. Everyone who was born in this star cluster call it home, not the Milky Way. There may not be any way to get back to that galaxy but there are two things you and the Empire need to consider.”

“And those are?”

“One is that you still have a home to return to. Are all of these star systems I am seeing belong to the Amnon Empire?”

“Let me check...I am getting Imperial transponders from most of those star systems and those I am getting appear to be all the claimed Imperial systems. The rest are star systems that have been catalogued as undergoing exploration.”

“Does that include Sol?”

“Let me see for a moment. Yes, I am reading Sol among them.”

“See? All of your homes are present and accounted for.”

“What was the second thing that you were going to mention about?”

“Unlike my ancestors when they first arrived here, you and your Empire are not alone in this star cluster. You have a whole community here that has lived in the cluster for more than three thousand years. We can help you all cope with what happened and learn to live in the Novus Initium star cluster.”

Negrete tried to smile as best as she could.

"I know you are right," she said. "We are not alone, and that may be what we need right now. Thank you for that."

"Now, I need to return to my Republic. If I am right, we just lost our standard means of travel between systems among civilian logistics and transports including communications. We need to see what we can do to get those back online. Will you all be okay from here?"

"The forces here can return on their own power, though the installation will need to find a new home, but we will work that out. You head back and help your people and your community. Hopefully, we will see each other again soon."

"I hope so, too. Until we meet again."

Negrete nodded in agreement before the transmission and the screen disappeared. Trent leaned back in his seat. He knew the Bilartini are gone, possibly celebrating their deceit and selfishness by tricking a race that was native to the Milky Way into letting their guard down. They also appear to have taken away a staple of transportation more than half of the nations that make up the new Federation use. The Federation was going to have a rough start for a while, but if there was one thing that Humans and Animals can do, it was overcoming their hardships and coming out stronger. Trent could only hope that this would be one of those times as well.

"Sierra," Trent said, "send a message to the Eleventh Fleet in Murus. Let them know what happened just now and inform them we will be returning to Lumen."

"Yes, sir," Sierra said.

"Diana," Trent said. "Are we able to activate a portal to Lumen now?"

"Yes, sir," Diana said. "Coordinates are locked in and we are ready to use the Portal Drive on your command."

"Let us head home, then. Activate the Portal Drive."

"Aye-aye, sir."

As the portal began to form in the front of the ship, Trent realized the one thing he was not looking forward to doing when they return to Lumen: delivering a report like this.

* * * * *

*Office of the Supreme Chancellor, Republic Parliament Building, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
1:32pm, November 26, 5434 A.D.*

"This has to be the worst possible outcome imaginable."

Drew's thoughts spoken aloud came as no surprise to Trent. Providing him with a report as to what happened with the Southern Region and its swap with the systems of the Amnon Empire from the Milky Way would make for a great piece of fiction if it were only that. However, accepting the truth of the matter was far harder, especially considering the disappearance of every known Salire Purpura crystal in the star cluster. Crystals from every planet, moon, station, ship, and star gate were gone, even those stored in stasis chambers. Transmissions from every planet that relied on the star gates for interstellar communications were offline, but military channels that used a separate system were still active. Drew had ordered every vessel with a Portal Drive to jump to different systems to inform the public what was going on. Thankfully, Portal Drives designed for star gates were already in mass production, and the first units were being installed on gates from Lumen to neighboring systems. Any production facility that can produce parts for the drives were put to work to accelerate their

production. It is believed that once other star systems were connected again, production would increase further and deliver more of the drives. Once a quarter of the Republic is reconnected through the gates, the remaining systems will be reconnected at an accelerated rate due to an increase in production with other locations in as little as three weeks on the short end or over a month at the long end.

Drew sent selected ships consisting of Paladins, Paramounts, and Enforcers that he could contact to go to the capitals of the other nations that will make up the Federation. The future Tenebris and Draco States would be able to help with Portal Drive production as well, though the Draco State who also used crystals in their star gates will have a lot of work to do as well to get themselves up and running again. There were also the gates used by the Lykans, the Mandate, and the State that must be made operational again as well. The future Federation was going to practically crawl into its early days due to the setbacks the crystals' disappearance had caused. Drew has yet to decide if he wants to extend an invitation to the Pope Empress yet in the state everyone was in. However, he knew that the Amnon Empire has their own problems to contend with after their transition into the star cluster and would need time to address those.

Grand Admiral Mikey was on a holographic screen from headquarters in orbit. It was double-sided so he could see both Drew and Trent as the latter made his report. He shook his head in disbelief.

"The Bilartini got us all in ways I never thought were remotely possible," Mikey said. *"The ability to move an entire unwilling fleet is one thing, but to do that to an entire section of space is unimaginable."*

"That was why we could not see their plans until it was too late," Trent said. "Because of that android's actions on the *Marshal*, I was quick to assume that the story of how the Bilartini came here or formed the star cluster was just as false as the rest of his lies. The ability to move entire solar systems was not some far-fetched piece of fiction after all."

"Even if we had known this was their plan," Drew said, "it was not like we could stop it. From what I can gather, the Bilartini intentionally allowed their observation posts to become detectable to Imperial sensors and purposely kept that one wormhole from fully closing to lead them here. They wanted the Empire to remain distracted long enough for their space transition devices to get in place. They trapped the Empire within their domain, keeping them contained while preventing us from entering the Southern Region. They made sure no Human or Animal was left in the Southern Region or in the Milky Way once this was completed so that no one would be able to reverse the process while in the Milky Way. That was why they needed time to make the necessary preparations and calculations."

"The worst part is we never saw their faces," Trent said. "We do not even know if the name 'Bilartini' are what they were really called. All we had to go on was their android and they shared the same face as a Human's. I think they had some twisted sense of humor in that if there was a face to put the blame on, it was ourselves. What sickens me more is that they were right."

"What do you mean?"

"We were foolish enough to rely on the crystals that were provided to establish an interstellar nation that we never looked into any alternatives. We were also foolish to believe that android's story at face value without checking the facts first. If we had allowed the Empire to shut down that last field generator, we would be able to investigate their home system and attempt to bring that field down or circumnavigate it using a portal."

"It probably would have ended up the same way," Mikey said. *"You said in your report that the Imperial fleet was displaced by the Bilartini prior to the swap in star systems. They*

could have easily done that to our forces as well. However, they knew how much of the crystals they needed and probably used the bare minimum to displace the Imperial fleet.”

“The fact is now we need to recuperate from this disaster,” Drew said. “There are some good things out of this, though, depending on how you look at it. First, the entire star cluster is completely ours now. The threat of the MAR is no longer going to be present since I doubt the Bilartini are going to risk coming back here only for us to find a way back to the Milky Way. Second, the ancestral home planet of Earth is also here, and we can find a way to return Luna to its original orbit more readily once we settle matters with both our situation and with the Empire. Lastly, it is not the end for all of us at all being out here on our own. There are still systems in at least four regions that have not been explored yet, so we still have room to grow if needed.”

“Speaking of regions, are we going to call the star systems from the Milky Way the new Southern Region?”

Drew laughed.

“Possibly, but we will have to see,” Drew said. “It may be that we will have to forgo calling them that and renaming all of the regions, but that is a matter for the Federation Council to consider once we are able to reconvene after the current crisis has been dealt with.”

“I know it is too early to tell,” Trent asked, “but do we know if the gravitational field that separates Union space from Republic space is gone?”

“Sensors prior to the swap show that it is,” Mikey said. “You want to check up on Shibuya, do you not?”

“I do but I know our long-range civilian communications are down for the moment.”

Drew leaned forward.

“You really are in love with her, are you not?” Drew asked.

Trent started to blush, but he tried to fight it.

“I am,” Trent said. “I know we have only known each other for a short while, but I would like to see about pursuing this relationship.”

“Far be it for me to say ‘no’ to that. We are going to be busy for a while, and your ship along with the fleet should be ready soon. You will have to take the *Troy* there to retrieve them, but we need all the help you can give us to get everything back to normal. If there is a personal message you want us to give to her when we send a ship to inform the Union of what has happened, I want you to have it ready for us to give to her within the hour. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, go write your message and come back when it is finished. The *Troy* will be ready to deploy by then.”

“Yes, sir,” Trent said as he saluted.

As Trent turned to exit the office, he felt better than before since he will be able to communicate with Shibuya. While his previous marriage had eventually failed over time, he wanted to make this one work. He wanted someone by his side again to support him and he would be there to support her, too. There was no telling what the future was going to hold. He knew that there were difficult times ahead restoring the nations’ star gate networks to their former selves, but if there was someone by his side who he could equally support, they would be able to get through this crisis together.

They would no longer be alone.

* * * * *