

*Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga*  
*Episode VII: The Tiger and the Dragon*



**PART 8**

*Inner Sanctuary of His Majesty Pope Armani, Central Tower, Capital City of Plena Tenebris  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
5:49pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“This can’t be happening!”

Armani was beginning to panic as his computer console suddenly shut down in front of him. The console served as his only contact to the outside world until today, first with the jamming and now with a complete shutdown of his system. He attempted to reactivate the console’s systems, but every attempt required a passcode which he never established before. Whoever it was that did this to his system knew their way around it and made it where Armani no longer had control or access.

This unfortunately meant two things to Armani. The first was that he could no longer remotely command his forces or attempt to get more ships to fight for him both locally and remotely. The second is that it also meant that someone was here in the Central Tower and found one of the few consoles that are connected to his system outside his Inner Sanctuary.

He was soon quick to realize that if his Inner Sanctuary has been compromised, he needed to leave now before whoever accessed his system finds him in his bedroom chamber. He bent down to the side of the altar where he stowed away the sacred artifact. As he went to grab it, he could hear the elevator across the hallway from his bedroom door moving, going down to the floor below. As soundproof as his Inner Sanctuary was, it was odd for him to hear the elevator move when he wasn’t inside it for the first time in more than six hundred years. It also meant that the infiltrators were inside and that his escape routes are limited. Leaving using the central podium lift would be unwise due to the drop and lack of grips along the edge of the platform. His

only other means of escape would be to transfer his consciousness to another clone body but that presented him with two problems.

When he transfers to a new body, he is a bit disoriented until he gets his bearing which takes him a couple of minutes. He would also need time to get dressed since the clones were all naked, though clones have long since been grown without any genitalia. His other problem is that his mind remained cloudy and “unclean” until he prayed in front of the sacred artifact. Once he received clarity again, he was back to his old self. If he could not reach the artifact after jumping, he feared that the red god would be angry with Armani’s deviancy and no longer speak with him to guide his actions for the Dominion.

However, Armani began to wonder why this was all happening. Did he anger or upset the red god in some way or was this the red god’s way to test Armani’s faith? Whichever it was, Armani needed to find a way to avoid capture and quickly as he heard the elevator starting to move again, this time proceeding upward. The central podium route, while unwise, was his only means of escape now, despite the drop he would have to deal with.

Armani grabbed the artifact and turned to exit his bedroom. As he opened the door, the elevator came to a stop on his floor. Armani exited his bedroom quickly to his left, heading down and around the hallway, heading to the podium lift. As he ran around the hallway, he could hear the elevator doors open. He didn’t look behind him to see who it was, but he also didn’t want to know if he was visible heading to the podium lift. He saw the lift ahead of him as he continued around the circular walkway. The podium was not closed off by any doors. He would be able to quickly step in and use his staff that was resting inside to activate the lift, thus avoiding capture.

As he stepped in, he reached for his staff with his right hand and gripped it to remove it from its holder. However, the staff would not be released from its holder. Armani could not understand why it would not release. He set the artifact down on the platform and tried to use both hands to pull the staff from the holder. He struggled to get it removed but to no avail, not realizing his grunting and straining noises were rather audible.

After a moment, he let go of the staff, taking deep breaths from the efforts. He knew that, somehow, they were able to lockdown this exit, which meant they knew the layout of the Inner Sanctuary and all entry and exit points. He was trapped and there was no other way out for him other than to kill himself and awaken in a new clone body, but he would be leaving the artifact behind.

For a moment, he saw no one coming down either side of the hallway. He began to wonder if they were coming at all to capture him. The infiltrators must have known the layout of the Inner Sanctuary and would know that he would come this way, so why haven’t they come for him yet? Curiosity began to get the better of Armani and he began to step out of the podium lift.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, he felt something hit him in the face hard like someone just punched him. As he fell backwards onto the podium lift, he let go of the artifact. Both he and the artifact fell to the floor as Armani tried to come back to his senses as to what hit him. Covering his now bloody nose with his left hand while propping himself up with his right, he strained to look at what hit him, but he couldn’t see anything. The only thing in front of him was the empty hallway and nothing more.

*“That was less than what you deserve, you monster,”* a female voice said out of nowhere through what sounded like a speaker.

Armani looked frantically for the source of the voice but couldn’t find it. He was quick to realize two things. He remembered that the first infiltrators to the Central Database one week ago

were using some form of optical cloak and that voice he heard was very familiar. It took him a moment for him to know who it was and who hit him.

“Well, well, well,” Armani said. “So, the little rebellious Miya Tigris has come home, and she brought heretics and sinners to help her. You escaped the divine punishment of our red god, and now you have sunk so low that you resorted to getting help from not only the infidels of my son’s bastard descendants, but from those that hunted and persecuted our ancestors in the Republic. Our red god will never forgive you for this treachery, Miya.”

Suddenly, a distortion the size and shape of a woman appeared before Armani. Within a couple of seconds, the distortion phased into someone in a black suit of armor wearing a helmet with a black non-transparent visor. The woman pressed a button on the left side of the helmet with her left hand. The visor went up, and Miya’s face was visible to Armani.

As Armani stared at Miya suddenly appearing before him, he noticed four more figures in black suits of armor suddenly appearing, two on each side of Miya. Three out of four of them were masculine in their physique, so Armani knew that these were not the prior Chiefs that helped Miya escape. These four, unlike Miya, were armed. Armani knew that there was no way for him to win if he had to fight them in hand-to-hand combat.

One of the men on Miya’s far right took out a device that looked like some sort of scanner. He pointed it at the artifact that Armani had dropped. Armani, believing that any form of scanning on this holy relic was sacrilegious at best, reached for the artifact. The other three people aside from Miya and the person scanning pointed their weapons at Armani. He stopped just short of reaching the artifact once he saw the end of their weapon barrels pointing right at him. He reached back to not give them a reason to fire their weapons right now.

After a moment, the one doing the scanning looked towards the man to his left and to Miya’s right who was still pointing his weapon at Armani. Miya also looked at the person who was scanning. She suddenly had a puzzled expression on her face before looking down at the artifact. She then looked up at Armani.

*“So, this device is the source of your madness,”* Miya said through the helmet speakers.

Armani was puzzled by Miya’s words before he became upset.

“You would dare call a gift from the red god such a derogatory term?!” Armani yelled. “This gift from the red god has given me clarity and guidance of my Dominion for over six hundred years! Who are you to question the red god’s wisdom?!”

*“It isn’t any form of divine wisdom that is guiding your actions, Armani,”* Miya said.

*“You are being manipulated by a form of radiation designed to alter your mental processes to follow some sort of ‘programming.’ You’re being used by someone else!”*

“Such insolence! What proof do you have that this is not the will of the red god?! You don’t have a shred of evidence that proves otherwise that the red god has been guiding me and my Dominion for over six hundred years!”

The man between Miya and the operative that scanned the artifact reached up to the left side of his helmet with his left hand, much like Miya did to reveal her face. He pressed a button and revealed his face.

*“I am Colonel Blair of the Novus Initium Republic,”* he said. *“The radiation this device is emitting matches two separate cases we have come across in the past year.”*

Armani looked at Blair with a puzzled expression on his face.

“What are you talking about? Are you saying the red god has graced his presence on two other people?”

*“I wouldn’t call it ‘graced,’ and it was more than just two people. The first case we have on record is the ruling body of an alien nation called the United Vitam State. All five of the councilors that lead the nation were found to have a unique type of radiation engineered and programmed to alter the mind to initiate tasks to benefit another party who we still do not know anything about. They were hospitalized when common sense tried to override the programming, resulting in a massive migraine and near seizure.”*

Armani thought back for a moment and remembered that he had such an event earlier in the day when he began to have his doubts. He was under the impression that his thoughts were betraying the red god, but was it possible that was not the case?

*“Not too long after,” Blair continued, “we had our assumptions that a similar scenario had occurred more than four hundred years ago involving a king from another alien nation known at the time as the Royal Lykan Kingdom. This king altered the interpretation of the words of one of their revered saints to subjugate other races into slaves rather than bring them to their religion peacefully. His remains were studied recently and the radiation even after all this time was still present on the skull. The radiation signature in both cases matches the one coming from this device in your possession.”*

Armani looked at the artifact, puzzled by what this colonel was saying. Was what this person saying true?

*“Unlike the councilors and that king, you have the ability to jump to a fresh clone body,” Blair continued. “I have two questions for you. First, when you jump to a fresh clone, do you immediately subject yourself to this device’s radiation?”*

Armani looked at Blair directly into his eyes.

“Yes, I do,” Armani said. “I do so every time to receive the red god’s blessing. Otherwise, my thoughts and feelings become unfocused.”

*“So, there has not been a time you’ve jumped without coming back to the device even once. Let me ask you the second question then. I’ve been told you jump to a fresh clone every twenty years. A clone body should last far longer than that depending on the cultivation. Why do you feel the need to jump after using a clone body for twenty years?”*

“By the time the body reaches twenty years of use, I can feel like my mind is not the same, and according to scans I had done during my early years of jumping clones, it showed my brain was experiencing deterioration. This remained consistent after the body is in use for twenty years with each clone.”

*“You never researched why your brain was deteriorating?”*

“I was quick to assume it had to do with the clone’s development and the amount of information that is transferred when I jump to a fresh clone.”

*“Ghost Seven, scan Armani’s head for the radiation.”*

The person who scanned the artifact nodded an acknowledgement of Blair’s order before pointing the scanning device at Armani’s head. After a moment of scanning, the one who Blair referred to as “Ghost Seven” reviewed his findings before looking at Blair. Armani can only assume that they were talking to each other using private lines unless their visors were up.

Blair looked back at Armani.

*“There is confirmation that the same radiation from this device is embedded in your brain,” Blair said. “It’s also confirmed that this radiation is the cause of the deterioration.”*

“That’s the cause of my mental health problems?” Armani asked.

He looked at the artifact with a shocked expression on his face. Was he the victim of manipulation all this time by a third-party? Was someone using him and the leaders of those other nations for some twisted purpose?

Armani suddenly had a sharp headache, more painful than he ever had before. He closed his eyes and held his head in agony, screaming for it to stop. Blair pointed his weapon at Armani.

*“Does your mind instantly transfer if your body dies suddenly?”* Blair asked.

Armani struggled to answer Blair as the headache was getting worse. After what felt like an eternity, Armani was able to squeeze an answer out.

“Yes!” he said.

Suddenly, Armani felt a sharp burning sensation in his chest. He opened his eyes to see what happened, but just as light seeped into his eyes, everything was quickly going dark. The smell of burnt flesh filled his nose for a moment before that sense and others started to fade. He suddenly felt as if his consciousness was pulled away from his body, the agonizing pain he was experiencing in his head also went away. All he knew was the familiar darkness, the void he felt every time his body died, and his mind was being transferred.

Within seconds, he began to feel heavy and some of his senses started to return. He began to breathe again, coughing for a moment to clear the fluid out of his new lungs. He slowly opened his eyes as a light blinded him that was shining through the canopy of the capsule his new body was inside.

His mind was still fuzzy. This was not new to him as he experienced this feeling every time he awoke in a new body. His first instinct was to go and pray to the artifact for clarity of mind once again. He soon remembered however that the reason his mind was degrading after twenty years was due to the artifact subjecting him to radiation every time according to Colonel Blair. Once he heard this and had his doubts, the worst headache he had ever experienced had struck his mind. He believed Blair shot him after telling Blair that his mind would be transferred to a fresh clone body once he died. The headache was completely gone, and he felt relieved for the first time in his life. Someone was manipulating him and his desires for the past six centuries. He no longer needed the artifact for clarity. His sudden need for revenge against those that did this to him gave him newfound clarity. Someone was going to pay for using him like this.

He heard a hiss as the pressure inside the capsule was being released. As soon as the top of the capsule lifted, he saw other people in black armored suits much like Blair. For reasons he could not explain, Armani was feeling at peace.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Central Podium Access Hallway, Inner Sanctuary, Central Tower, Capital City of Plena Tenebris Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
5:57pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“Ghost Two, is Armani there with you?”

Blair kept his rifle aimed at the remains of Armani. After Armani confirmed that his mind would be transferred to a new clone upon his death, Blair fired his laser rifle right at Armani’s chest. Armani immediately collapsed, with a large burnt hole in his chest. For Blair, it was good that their helmets were using an air filtration system, or he and his team would have smelled the charred remains of Armani’s burnt flesh.

A few seconds after Blair fired the shot, he decided to check in with Ghost Two to see if Armani’s consciousness had successfully transferred.

*"This is Ghost Two,"* Benja said over Blair's helmet speakers. *"One of his clones awoke just a moment ago. He seems oddly calm even though we are here."*

"I'll go through the details later," Blair said. "Have him get dressed and prepare him for transport. We have the device that subjected him to the mind-altering radiation. We will join up at the main entrance to the Inner Sanctuary in ten minutes. Also, dispose of the remaining clones of Armani. He won't be using another one again after today."

*"Understood, sir."*

Blair looked over at Ghost Seven.

"Secure that device, Ghost Seven. We need to analyze it and see if we can determine where it comes from."

*"Yes, sir,"* Ghost Seven said as he got a bag out from one of his packs.

The bag was designed to contain any radiation an item or object was putting out so that the person carrying the device was not subjected to it themselves. Blair should have asked Armani before shooting him how the device worked so they know how to activate it or rather avoid activating it.

As Ghost Seven approached the device, a red glow started to emanate from the device. Fearing it was going to release the mind-altering radiation, Ghost Seven quickly tossed the open end of the bag over the device. As soon as the bag was over the device, Blair heard an audible thump sound coming from under the bag. The bulge of the device under the bag became flat.

Blair began to wonder what that sound was after the bag flattened.

*"Ghost Seven, check under the bag. Carefully."*

Ghost Seven approached the bag slowly and grabbed the side of the bag closest to him. Once he got a good grip, he quickly yanked it away.

Nothing was under the bag at all.

*"Where is it?!"* Blair yelled.

Ghost Seven looked over the bag, but there was nothing inside. He took his scanner out and went over the bag. His scanner gave indications that it had detected something. When Ghost Seven looked over the readings, he was taken back but what was detected. He then took the scanner to the floor where the device was last placed. After a moment, he looked at the readings before looking over at Blair.

*"I'm not sure how this is possible,"* Ghost Seven said, *"but I'm detecting graviton and tachyon particles in both the bag and on the floor."*

"Graviton and tachyon particles?" Blair asked. "Wait a moment. Those particles are found when wormholes are formed using the Salire Purpura crystals!"

*"Yes, sir. Somehow, that device was able to create a small wormhole for itself under the bag and disappeared by jumping."*

Blair looked at the spot where the device was before it vanished. He would never have believed such a small device could generate a wormhole on its own.

"Someone didn't want us to have it, to prove that Armani was being manipulated. Ghost Seven, did you save the scans of the device before it disappeared?"

*"Yes, sir, along with the scans of the particles. Our recordings should also show the device before it disappeared as well."*

"At least the evidence is documented. Analysts will have to go over that data to determine who build it and where it came from once we return to the Republic."

*"Ghost One, this is Ghost Six,"* the British male voice said through Blair's speakers. *"We found an object of interest in the storage room."*

Blair was beginning to wonder of the device only did a short-range jump into the storage room to avoid being taken. He could only hope that was the case.

“Report, Ghost Six. What did you find?”

*“There is a stasis tube in here with what appears to be the body of Armani Draco.”*

“Another clone of Armani is in the storage room?”

*“This isn’t a clone, sir. This body is dead, being preserved possibly to use as the original genetic material for Armani’s clones. This is his original body.”*

“How is that possible? I thought his mind was transferred to data storage and preserved for the trip over six hundred years ago, not his dead body.”

*“The only people who could answer that question are dead aside from Armani. You may have to ask him, provided he even knows for himself. In the meantime, what do we do with the body? We don’t know if the stasis tube is mobile or not?”*

“The body is already deceased, and we already know the laws about cloning. I’ve already ordered Ghost Two to dispose of the remaining clones of Armani. The clone Armani is in now will be his last one. Deactivate the unit and dispose of the original body.”

*“Understood, sir.”*

“What about the former Chiefs? Was that what they were looking for?”

*“I’m not sure. They were looking through a few things, but while I was speaking with you, they disappeared from my sight.”*

“They’re gone?! Why didn’t you say so in the first place?!”

*“My apologies, sir. I focused on our conversation that I wasn’t paying attention to where they went.”*

Blair took a deep breath.

“It’s fine. There is only so many places they can go in here. The only exit is through the main entrance and I haven’t received a report yet from the team guarding it.”

*“I think I know where they went,”* Miya said, still staring at Armani’s body.

Blair looked over at Miya. The tone she used to say that did not sit well with Blair, especially when she was still looking at Armani’s dead body.

“Where would they go?” Blair asked.

*“I may have only punched the man responsible for the death of my Tribe and my grandmother, but what do you think the four of them will do when he only has one clone left?”*

“Oh, no. Ghost Two, come in.”

“Yes, Ghost One?” Benja said.

“Be on the lookout for the former Chiefs. They disappeared from Ghost Six when he wasn’t looking and Miya believes they may be heading your way to take out Armani.”

*“Can Ghost Eight track them? The Inner Sanctuary has sensors in almost every room except the storage room where they disappeared from.”*

“Valid point. Let me get her on the line. Ghost Eight, respond, please.”

*“Ghost Eight here,”* she said. *“What’s the situation?”*

“We have Armani in custody, but I need you to locate the former Chiefs. They got away from Ghost Six and I think they are heading for Ghost Two’s team.”

*“I’ve been tracking everyone in the Inner Sanctuary and the Chiefs are not heading that way. They appear to be in the study.”*

“In the study?”

Blair looked at Miya with a puzzled look on his face. Miya looked back at him.

*"If you are about to ask why they are there, I do not know," Miya said. "I figured that they would be heading for Armani's location. Let me check in with them and see what they are doing."*

*"There is no need," Tonya's voice said over the speakers. "When you opened the channel up, we heard the conversation you were having. After we heard that Armani was in custody and what happened to the artifact, we headed over to the study. We were curious why he would have a study and what its contents consist of."*

"Okay," Blair said. "So, what have you found?"

*"It seems about over ninety-five percent of it contains his own personal logs for the past six centuries. There are no logs prior to the exodus to Tenebris Prime. The rest contain his research notes on his life's work which led to the use of blood as nourishment with supplements added. There does appear to be other projects he was working on, but we haven't reviewed those records yet."*

"I see. We will have another team go over and review those records and research. They will be needed for Armani's trial. For now, please return to the main entrance to the Inner Sanctuary. We will be departing soon."

*"Understood, but what about our daughters who are the current Chiefs?"*

"It may be best not to see them right now. If they see you in your current attire, they will have issues with you all if they don't already for your actions. We will see about returning you all once the current crisis is averted."

*"Understood. We may not like it, but you make a valid point. We will meet you all back at the main entrance."*

"Ghost Eight, with the communications from the Central Tower down completely, do we know if the jamming has been lifted by the *Templar*?"

*"They haven't lifted the jamming yet,"* Ghost Eight said. *"They may be waiting for us to confirm that we have Armani in custody."*

"Proceed to send a transmission to the *Templar* confirming his arrest. Inform them to use the shutdown codes on the Dominion ships in orbit and throughout the remaining Dominion fleet. Only shutdown weapons, defenses, and propulsion except thrusters. I would rather see them alive and able to communicate if needed then completely in the dark for the time being or be caught in a gravity well."

*"Understood, sir. I'll contact them right away."*

"Listen up, Ghost Team. We will rendezvous at the main entrance to the Inner Sanctuary. Once Ghost Two's team has Armani dressed and detained, they will meet up with us there. We will then proceed to the transport pickup location and head back up to the *Templar*."

*"Sir,"* Ghost Eight said, *"I shut down everything including power to the doors to the towers. How are we going to get to the rendezvous with the transport? Do you want me to power up the doors?"*

"Only in the Aspergillus Tower, Ghost Eight. We will go back the same way we came. We cannot risk powering the entire Central Complex and having others who still support Armani coming to his aid. Once we rendezvous with the entire team, you will activate the doors in the Aspergillus Tower to make our extraction."

*"Understood, sir."*

"Alright. See you all shortly."

Blair looked at his HUD. It did show he was communicating to the entire team. He rolled his eyes and turned it to receive long-range transmissions but broadcast short-range.

“I must be getting tired to make that mistake,” Blair said. “Ghost Seven, is there any way for us to track where that device jumped to?”

“Sorry, Ghost One,” Ghost Seven said. *“My scanners were not designed to track or trace objects that can jump like that. There was no way for us to know that something that small could even make a jump this deep inside a building on a planet.”*

“Understood. There’s not much more we can do now. Let’s proceed to the rendezvous and await the others.”

As most of Blair’s team turned and head down the closest hallway to lead back to the elevator, Blair turned to notice Miya still standing by Armani’s corpse of his previous clone. He stopped and turned towards her.

“Is something the matter, Miya?” Blair asked.

*“I’m still angry for what he did to my grandmother,”* Miya said without turning around. *“Even though the clone in front of me that was responsible is dead, the mind and consciousness behind that action is still alive. This doesn’t feel like justice to me.”*

“Armani’s actions, whether influenced by that device or not, will be determined in the courts of either or both the Federation and the Republic. The fact is that someone or something was manipulating him all these years. Part of me wonders if your grandmother knew that was the case and he was manipulated into killing her before she dug too far into the truth?”

Miya raised her head, as if to ponder the thought. After a moment, she turned and looked at Blair. With both of their visors still up, they looked into each other’s eyes.

*“Armani was genuinely upset with the knowledge we possessed,”* Miya said. *“If he was manipulated to the point of killing both my mother and grandmother, then justice won’t be served until those responsible are brought to justice.”*

“You know,” Blair said, “you and the others speak about mothers, grandmothers, and daughters, but not once have I heard the words ‘fathers, grandfathers, and sons.’ Where are they in all of this?”

Miya turned back towards the corpse.

*“It was by Armani’s decree that the part of the family that is to lead would only have suitors or mates so that we may bear offspring. A male is cloned specifically for breeding with us, enhanced in all areas and I do mean ALL of them.”*

Blair tried to imagine that in his head, but quickly realized that he would start to feel inadequate if he pondered it for too long.

*“These males would go into forced abstinence until presented to those they would mate with once those women hit the time, they are most likely to be impregnated. The males would only produce the ‘X’ chromosome so that we would only have females once they mate with us. The only males in our family that are not clones are usually in managerial and supervising roles in other aspects of society.”*

“What about those that you all are mate with?” Blair asked. “What happens to them?”

*“Since those males are taught nothing more than to mate with us along with their basic instincts, they are taken to spend the rest of their days as part of the blood farms.”*

Miya’s last statement shocked Blair.

“Wait, are you telling me that not only do you never know who your father was, but these males are raised to ‘mate’ with you once to impregnate you and that’s it? They nor your mother and those that precede her never do it again?”

*“That’s correct. There can only be one heir to the title of Chief. If the impregnation by some odd reason does not work, artificial insemination is performed. Once the child is born, the*

*ovaries are removed for good measure and used to provide a fresh batch of clones in the future using their DNA. Should the child die before producing their own heir, another branch of the family will begin the lineage of Chief instead.*”

Blair did not know what to say about this atrocity at first, but one question finally came to mind that needed to be answered.

“Why would Armani only want women as the Chiefs of the Tribes? Would he feel threatened if the Chiefs were all men?”

*“I don’t have an answer to that. Bear in mind that we were raised for more than six centuries in this culture. We never gave it much thought as it seemed to be the norm for us. Is your Republic any different? Your Supreme Chancellor is male and in a position of power.”*

“Then you need to look into our history more. There have been women who have served as Supreme Chancellors. We elect Supreme Chancellors based on merit, actions, and history. We do not discriminate on sex, skin tone, or religion. Discrimination based on those is an outdated and destructive state of mind. Those resulted in wars before our ancestors, including your own, found themselves in this star cluster. We have tried hard to prevent such things from breaking up the Republic and it was also the reason for the Charter.”

Miya looked back at Blair, her expression was that of surprise.

*“Females have been in a position of power and authority over an entire nation in the Republic? We were only given authority over our own Tribe.”*

“Remember, Armani twisted you all to suit his needs based on the manipulation he went through. There are far more freedoms in the Republic than there are in the Dominion. I can tell you more, but we need to go now. We must rendezvous with the rest of the team. Remember, the Armani you will see next won’t be under any form of manipulation now. He may be more benign than before.”

*“That remains to be seen. Let’s go.”*

Miya turned towards Blair’s direction and proceeded to walk past him down the hall towards the elevator. Blair turned and followed her, pondering what must be going through her mind right now. He could only hope that she won’t do anything foolish now or later.

However, Blair began to feel some relief knowing that everything involving the threat of the Dominion was coming to an end. Blair wondered what the current remaining Chiefs were going to do about these events, but considering all systems were down in the Central Complex, there isn’t much they could do if they wanted to.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Bridge, R.N.S. Marshal, Paladin-Class Battleship, Flagship of the Republic Seventh Fleet  
Planet Tenebris Prime Orbit, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
6:04pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“It’s finally over.”

Trent reclined in his command chair as he looked at the main screen. He was notified by Captain Tora of the *Templar* that her agents stopped Armani’s transmissions and apprehended him. He was also told that the *Templar* had the means to disable the Dominion forces in the system and everywhere they are located, shutting down all but life support and thrusters so that they don’t fall towards any planet they are orbiting or near. As soon as the *Templar* dropped the jamming field it was putting out, it sent the shutdown protocol for the Dominion dreadnoughts’ computers. Once received, the weapons on the dreadnoughts stopped firing, their shields were

down, and their main engines were offline. When that occurred, Trent sent out the order for his fleet along with the Federation fleet to cease their attack. While Trent was glad that the fighting has stopped, he knew they needed to remain vigilant and on alert in case someone among the dreadnoughts was able to override the shutdown. He was worried about the damage the enemy fleets sent to Lumen and Sanctus could have done during this time, but hopefully they will be able to establish contact with headquarters soon.

*"It is, Admiral,"* Tora said, her image on the right side of the main screen. *"The last communication from Ghost Team stated they have Armani in custody after they forced him into a fresh clone."*

To the left of the screen that Tora was on was Admiral Tyler, the Federation flag officer on board the Dreadnought *Heaven's Arrow*, the vessel that jumped the *Templar* and the Republic Seventh Fleet to Tenebris Prime. The expression on his face was a puzzled one.

*"I have to ask,"* Tyler said. *"Were you right about there being a device that was somehow controlling or manipulating Armani to perform his heinous acts?"*

Tora looked slightly to her right, obviously looking at Tyler's screen on her side of the transmission.

*"Ghost One was able to confirm the existence of the device,"* she said.

Trent was now puzzled.

*"What do you mean by that?"* he asked. *"I figured you would say that he was able to secure the device so that it can be studied."*

Tora looked back at Trent.

*"That...got complicated,"* Tora said.

*"What do you mean it got complicated? Did he secure the device or not?"*

Tora took a deep breath.

*"While Ghost One was able to get video footage and some scans of the device, it managed to...elude him."*

Trent was becoming more puzzled by Tora's words than he would like.

*"You're making it sound like the device had a will of its own and somehow managed to escape him."*

*"You would be correct on that, Admiral. The device looked like it was about to give off a radiation burst in front of Ghost One and his team before they could secure it. To prevent getting exposed to the radiation, another member of his team tossed a radiation confinement bag over the device. Just as the bag began to settle over the device, they heard a sound that was something other than a radiation burst. The bag was suddenly flat and the device somehow disappeared. This may be a shock to both of you, but residual readings indicate that the device managed to jump away via a wormhole much like what the Salire Purpura crystals produce."*

Both Trent and Tyler were in shock.

*"How can an item that small manage to produce a wormhole deep in a structure and in a gravity well?"* Tyler asked.

*"Considering we have never tested the use of the crystals in an atmosphere or gravity well, it may be possible,"* Trent said.

*"No, it isn't. The Federation tested this some time ago. Because of the need of gravitons to form the wormhole, doing so in a gravity well hinders their use. The wormhole that we tried to generate fluctuated and was deemed unsafe to use."*

*"Then let me ask this: how was Luna able to jump then?"*

Tora and Tyler looked puzzled by Trent's sudden decision to bring up the ancient Earth's moon that brought their ancestors to the star cluster.

*"What do you mean?"* Tyler finally asked.

"The crystals were activated in a gravity well across the entire moon once an electrical charge was provided. A wormhole soon generated just outside of the atmosphere and pulled the entire moon through. If a gravity well prevents the crystals from forming a stable wormhole, what happened on Luna should not have been possible."

Tyler and Tora looked to be pondering Trent's words for a moment.

"Regardless," Trent continued, "we now have proof that there is indeed a third-party manipulating select parties into conflict, and whoever it was does not want us to know who it was or where they are. Considering the Dominion and Federation's explored areas, it is doubtful that whoever it was is residing in regions where a major power currently resides, whether the region is explored in part or in full. That leaves only two areas where those responsible currently would reside: the sparsely populated Northwest Region or the impenetrable Southern Region."

*"You think those responsible for the mind controlling radiation is in one of those regions?"* Tora asked.

"They haven't been explored by any of the known nations that currently exist, so the possibility does exist. While I feel an expedition is needed for both areas, I will leave that up to command to decide once this current mission is over. How soon will Ghost Team return?"

*"They are making their way out of the towers right now, though with Armani in custody, they will easily be spotted since they cannot cloak him. However, with power offline in the capital, it will be difficult for anyone to reach them. The team is only powering doors and exits for their escape route. Once they are outside the towers, their transport will pick them up."*

*"Do you believe the Chiefs that remain loyal to Armani will take advantage of the situation and try to usurp power for themselves?"* Tyler asked.

"Possibly, but that won't go very far now that we are in control of their computers and power supply. Their arrests may soon follow as collaborators, but again, we will leave that up to the politicians to decide."

*"Once Armani is aboard the Templar,"* Tora said, *"we will establish contact with our respective governments and agencies. I know that the two of you want to know what has become of the assault on our nations by Dominion dreadnoughts, but we need to be patient a bit longer."*

"Very well. In the meantime, I suggest we scan the planet for any possible surface-to-air weapons that could be brought online somehow. I would prefer that neither we nor any future expeditions to this world get a nasty surprise that was overlooked."

*"I concur,"* Tyler said. *"This will also give us a chance to understand the layout of both their civilian and military layout along with any possible destruction to their ecosystem. We can already see what they did to their moon based on what our readings and from what we can see from here. Look for yourself if you haven't already."*

Trent pressed a couple of buttons on his chair. In the heat of battle, he wasn't focused entirely on the planet's moon, only the locations of enemy ships in the system. The moon appeared near the top of the main viewscreen, and Trent was in shock. The moon was strip mined to such an extent that the moon was heavily deformed with multiple deep crevasses visible to the naked eye. It was this level of environmental devastation that the Republic was trying to avoid. Obviously, the Dominion did not share that same sense of environmental conservation and protection. The moon paid that price and possibly other worlds and moons in the region.

Trent looked back at Tyler.

“Very well,” Trent said. “I suggest deploying both of our fleets around the planet to conduct scans of the surface. We will get a comprehensive image of the planet in the shortest amount of time that way.”

*“Understood,”* Tyler said.

As Tyler’s image disappeared from the main viewscreen, Trent looked over at Tora.

“From what we were told in the reports,” Trent said, “we can already assume that the current Chiefs are still in the Central Complex, save for two. We already know where Tigris Chief Miya is, but I’m willing to assume that Ebony would not be in the Central Complex after Armani gave the order for the Aspergillus to be killed.”

*“You think that she fled from the capital somewhere?”* Tora asked.

“Yes. I doubt she would remain in the capital. Her skin tone alone is enough to identify which tribe she belongs to. Depending on her mode of transportation, if any, there is only so far she could go in a few hours since the Aspergillus clones were executed.”

*“A valid point. However, unless we have something specific to look for in terms of DNA, we can’t guarantee that we will find her unless she is someplace that is unusual.”*

“I understand, but she needs to be found due to her position and title.”

*“Very well. I will have the city and the surrounding areas scanned to see if we can find her. I’ll let you know when Armani is on board so that we may contact the Supreme Chancellor and RCLIA headquarters, provided they were not hit in the attack at Lumen. Tora, out.”*

Tora’s image soon disappeared off the viewscreen as Trent reclined a little bit into his seat. Captain Dani in front of him turned her chair partially to the right to look his way.

“I have to ask, Admiral,” Dani said, “but why is it important to find Ebony? If almost all her Tribe is gone, she isn’t much of a chief in that regards.”

“Maybe so,” Trent said as he looked at Dani. “However, with Armani out of the picture, this leaves the current Chiefs without a unified leader that they answer to, not to mention that they are the next in line when it comes to authority in the Dominion. I’m concerned about them attempting to take power for themselves which may result in a civil war. Of course, that’s only if they could do so without computers or without any form of combat training for that matter.”

“I understand, sir. Are we looking at sending down a team of SAGAT’s down to the planet to apprehend the Chiefs in the compound as well as an occupational force until the Senate decides what to do with the planet?”

“Yes, though we will only occupy the capital for the time being. The Dominion lacks any ground troops to defend against an occupation, but I would rather not take a chance in case they surprise us.”

“Understood, sir. Do you want me to send the order or do you want to do the honors?”

“I’ll send out the order,” Trent said as he pressed the button on his chair, activating fleet communications. “This is fleet command. All ships are to deploy around the planet and begin performing a detailed scan of the surface alongside the Federation ships. I want all SAGAT’s aboard the *Marshal* and all cruisers prepared to deploy to the planet below for temporary occupation. The Central Compound will be occupied by the *Marshal*’s SAGAT’s while all remaining SAGAT’s patrol the capital city. I don’t expect armed resistance due to there being no active ground forces remaining on the planet but be prepared otherwise. Deployment will be in twenty minutes. That is all.”

Trent deactivated the fleet communications and reclined in his chair. Dani looked at Trent with a puzzled expression on her face.

“You know they are going to ask how ‘temporary’ this occupation is going to be, right?” Dani asked.

“I know,” Trent said. “I don’t have an answer for them, unfortunately. That will depend on the Senate and Command just the same. Let the Major in charge of our detachment of the SAGAT’s know that his team needs to arrest the three Chiefs we know of in the Central Compound for being collaborators along with Armani.”

“You know the former Chiefs may complain about us arresting their daughters, right?”

“I know, but the fact is they went along with Armani’s madness. Miya and Ebony, from what I heard about her, are the exceptions, but that decision is...”

“I know. The Senate’s. Very well, sir. I will let them know.”

“Thank you,” Trent said as he got up. “I’ll be in my Ready Room. You have the bridge, Captain. Alert me if a problem arrives. Otherwise, forward transmissions from Tora, Admiral Tyler, or the Supreme Chancellor to my terminal.”

“Yes, sir.”

Trent walked over to the left side of the bridge to the door to his Ready Room, pressing the button for access on the right side of the door frame. Once the doors opened, Trent walked in, the doors closing immediately behind him. Trent let out a heavy sigh, trying to relieve a lot of the stress he had built up during this operation. He was glad that he didn’t lose any ships or anyone on board those ships, but he was really hoping things would not have come down to open conflict like they did. However, he knew that Armani forced their hand under the circumstances, both with his actions against two of the Tribes under his Dominion and his sudden unprovoked attack against the Republic. Armani would have to answer for both of those actions, among other acts he has committed.

Trent went over to the minifridge, grabbed a container of water, and walked around to his chair behind his desk, sitting down in his chair. He closed his eyes and reclined in the chair, though he wished it reclined more. He still worried about Laura and the attack on Lumen, but hopefully he will be able to get an update on the situation there soon. All he could do now was wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Office of the Supreme Chancellor, Republic Parliament Building, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic  
6:11pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“Are those dreadnoughts secured?”

Upon receiving a call from Grand Admiral Mikey, Drew was immediately concerned about whether the Dominion dreadnoughts were under Republic control or if something had caused them to become active again. Drew was eager to hear Mikey’s report.

*“I can say for certain that they are secure, sir,”* Mikey said with a small smile on his face. *“As we have determined, there is no one alive on any of the ships. We are working on finding someplace to properly secure them, but there are a few things we found of interest on board these vessels that we were not expecting.”*

“Such as what?” Drew asked.

*“According to our technicians, the operating systems on board the dreadnoughts are based on a version the Republic used over six hundred years ago. There are minor changes to the coding, but the base code is the same. Because of that, it made seizing the dreadnoughts that*

*much easier. I'll save you the technical details, but there were so many holes in that version that our guys were able to transmit a command that allowed us instant access and control of the dreadnoughts' computers."*

"Are you able to update their systems to a more recent version of our operating systems to prevent someone in the Dominion from remote controlling them?"

*"We have already changed the command codes to the vessels including the base system and applied the patches to those aforementioned 'holes.' No one in the Dominion will be able to control these vessels, at least here in the Republic. I'm not sure about those that are located on the border worlds of the Federation."*

"Hopefully, our team has managed to apprehend Armani by this point to alleviate that potential problem. I haven't heard anything from them yet, however. You said earlier that there was something else that surprised you?"

*"Yes. One of our medical officers who was investigating the dead bodies noted something of interest among the clones that were on board. Bear in mind that these people are still unaware of the whole story as to what is going on with Armani, his Dominion, or the Federation for that matter. However, they found one thing in common with all of the clones."*

"Aside from the obvious same genetic code between those of each 'Tribe?' What is it?"

*"Despite having definitive gender traits, they have no genitalia. They are not able to reproduce naturally."*

Drew had a look of one who was dumbfounded. Why was there no mention of this in any reports they were provided?

"This may explain why there is little to no diversity between the clones," Drew said.

"They are cloned only to fulfill their roles and nothing more."

*"It doesn't end there, sir. Their stomachs and digestive tracts are also not like a normal Human's. Their digestive tracts were designed to only ingest one source of nutrition. You and I both know what that is."*

Drew brought up his right hand to his forehead, rubbing it for a moment before bringing his arm back down. He sighed.

"So, the clones cannot reproduce, and they can only ingest blood. As ingesting blood and cloning are both illegal in the Republic, not to mention the fact that the Federation does not nor will not follow the ways of the Dominion, there can only be one course of action concerning the fate of the clones."

*"I know, sir. I know that the Federation wanted to allow the clones into their nation, but even President Shea could not have foreseen this fact unless her troops took the opportunity to study the Dominion clones."*

"I will contact President Shea and talk to hear about this development. Please send me the bio readings that were taken along with the technical data concerning patching and changing the command codes for the dreadnoughts. I'm going to pass both of those along to her so that she can be brought up to speed concerning this matter."

*"Understood, sir. What are you going to tell our forces at Tenebris Prime?"*

"It's better you don't know for now. Please send me those files right away."

*"Understood, sir."*

Drew leaned back in his chair as Mikey looked like he was pressing some buttons on his end of the transmission. After a minute or so, Drew's terminal threw up a notification stating he had received the files from Mikey.

*"Transmission of files complete,"* Mikey said as he looked at Drew again.

“Thank you, Grand Admiral,” Drew said. “Keep me posted of any developments that arise concerning the dreadnoughts.”

“Yes, sir. Mikey, out.”

Mikey’s image disappeared from Drew’s terminal. Drew closed his eyes and leaned back. Today may have been eventful, but he was soon asking himself many questions that made him feel uneasy about this situation.

One of those questions was the fact of how easy it was to defeat the Dominion forces. Drew wasn’t going to start saying that it was easy from the start as the Dominion’s dreadnoughts possessed overwhelming firepower, but the fact that their computer operating systems were heavily outdated was a shock. The Dominion had been around for more than six hundred years, and yet in that time they never came up with a different version of their operating systems or created a new one for that matter. Granted, Armani was a scientist and not a computer technician or a developer, but there should have been those among the Lupus Tribe who would have been able to update or create a new system. Was there no need for such things or did the Lupus only know how to work with the existing code and OS? There may have been a level of stagnation among the Dominion society when it came to software development compared to hardware development. Drew as well as Mikey, Aja, and even President Shea were so afraid of the Dominion’s military might due to their numbers and ships that none of them ever thought to consider a means of attack outside of direct military tactics. If Armani was serving someone or at least was being manipulated by them, why did the one who was manipulating not try to propose updating the Dominion’s computer systems?

Drew soon began to wonder why the Draco Federation never took this method of attack into consideration in their war with the Dominion. Either the Federation lacked the technical expertise to hack into the Dominion’s systems or the Federation’s operating systems were just as outdated where they couldn’t risk such an attack without it affecting their own systems. Unlike the Dominion, however, the Federation could draw on expertise from the alien races that reside in their nation to enhance or create a completely new operating system for their forces.

Drew’s biggest concern at this point was why the outdated operating system was never brought up during the briefing after the two factions were first found? When Ghost Team, or at least half of them according to the debriefing after first contact, were aboard the Dominion dreadnought accessing the ship’s navigation systems, they should have known almost immediately about the outdated system they were hacking into. If they had known about it then, the team that was sent to Tenebris Prime on board the *Cavalier* would have been able to shut down the Dominion forces before they ever launched an assault on the Republic or renewed their fight against the Federation.

Something did not sit well with Drew over how this “oversight” was handled. Ghost Team has never been this sloppy on a covert operation before, not including Blair and Amarria’s discovery at the Federation’s capital. At least that exposure could not be helped since they were trying to hide in plain sight but still looked out of place. Drew began to wonder if the actions of Ghost Team were recorded because he was curious as to know why they missed this.

Before he could follow up with Head Agent Aja concerning that matter, he needed to contact President Shea and let her know how to shut down the Dominion forces that assaulted her border worlds. As he gathered the files that he was just provided into a single file ready for transmission to President Shea, he was still concerned about that “oversight.”

No matter the reason for the oversight, Ghost Team will need to be investigated.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Troop Bay, Covert Dropship, Capital City of Plena Tenebris Airspace  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
6:16pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“We are proceeding back to the *Templar* with the target.”

Blair looked around at the rest of Ghost Team, no longer cloaked, while they sat in their seats with the harnesses on. He eyed Armani in the middle of the seats across from him with Ghost Five and Seven flanking him. Armani had restraining cuffs on his wrists in front of him. Oddly enough, Armani looked rather calm, as if at peace. Considering this was the first time in more than six hundred years that he wasn't being manipulated, it may be understandable why he was like this.

Once they boarded the dropship in the western courtyard of the Central Complex and secured Armani, Blair contacted the *Templar* to inform them they were on their way back through his helmet. An image of Captain Tora appeared in his visor.

*“Understood, Ghost One,”* Tora said. *“While I am not pleased you were not able to secure the device, the facts of how it disappeared could not have been foreseen. What about Miya and the rest of her entourage?”*

“They are returning with us,” Blair said. “We figured it was best that they don't remain behind as they could be viewed as traitors by others, especially the current Chiefs of the three remaining Tribes. That reminds me, have we heard anything about Chief Ebony?”

*“Admiral Trent and Tyler's fleets are being deployed to conduct scans of the planet right now to find anyone who would be out of place, but that could take a while even with these many ships scanning.”*

“While we are on that topic, did we lose any ships?”

*“Thankfully, no. Between the inexperienced officers on board the enemy dreadnoughts and the electronic countermeasures Republic forces deployed, the battle was rather one-sided. However, one thing has started to bother me about this whole operation.”*

Blair wasn't sure he liked where Tora was starting to go with this. He admitted to himself that the operation was far too easy after the initial encounter and briefing of the Dominion, but if Tora is bothered by this aspect, this can't be good.

“You would not be alone in the fact that this operation seemed a bit too easy, Captain, if that is what you are talking about.”

*“The operation being easy is one thing, but the fact is that if we had known that their computer operating systems were this outdated, we would have no need to infiltrate their Central Database to begin with. Is this line secure to where only you and I can talk?”*

Blair looked on his wrist to verify if only she could hear him and vice versa. The display showed it was a private connection and no one else could hear him.

“The line is secure.”

*“I've been thinking about this the whole time while the battle was underway and after I talked with Admiral Trent. It has to do with the report from Ghost Eight about the outdated systems. If we had been informed of the outdated operating systems, we could have shut down the whole Dominion long before they attacked the Republic and the Federation earlier today. While I wasn't present at Miranda when the two factions were first encountered, who was it that led the team to gather the information from the destroyed Dominion vessel in that system?”*

Blair looked slightly to his right at Benja, or rather Ghost Two. Benja sat directly across from Armani with his rifle and this suddenly made Blair feel uncomfortable.

“Ghost Two was leading the team that infiltrated the Dominion dreadnought at Miranda. His team consisted of the even number members of my unit.”

*“Did he or any member of his team submit a report concerning their hacking into the ship’s systems in relation to said system being outdated?”*

“Not to my knowledge or it would have been discussed at the briefing.”

*“Why didn’t Ghost Eight bring this up on this assignment if she knew about the outdated systems, then?”*

Blair knew that Ghost Eight was sitting three seats to his right past Benja. He needed to get to the bottom of this matter.

“I’m going to inquire about this with her on my own. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

*“Very well but be advised that if Ghost Two or any members of that infiltration are responsible for deliberately withholding information that you may be held responsible for their actions as the unit’s leader.”*

“Understood. I’ll contact you again shortly.”

Blair cut the transmission and took a deep breath. If Benja or a member of his team retained vital information that could have prevented open conflict between the Republic and Dominion, they could be held on charges of treason. He could only hope that it was not the case. He put this team together and trusted everyone. He didn’t want to see that come apart because of an oversight or worse sabotaging the mission.

Blair pressed a few buttons on his controls on his right arm to establish a direct private connection with Ghost Eight. He could only hope that Benja didn’t notice Blair’s actions.

“Ghost Eight, this is Ghost One,” Blair said. “Don’t react but this is a private line. I need to talk to you about something important.”

There was a brief pause before he could hear Ghost Eight taking a deep breath.

*“Yes, Ghost One?”* she asked.

“A few weeks ago in the Miranda System, you went with Ghost Two to board and investigate the Dominion dreadnought that was destroyed, correct?”

*“Yes, sir. I was also responsible for hacking into their navigational computer systems.”*

“Then I need to know something right now. Knowing that their computer operating systems were outdated at that time when you hacked into that dreadnought’s systems, why were you completely surprised at the Central Complex and why did you not report this fact during our initial briefing after that mission in Miranda?”

Ghost Eight was suddenly silent. Blair was beginning to wonder what happened during that mission that she wouldn’t answer Blair right away. Unless, by chance, she was ordered not to by someone. There was only one way to know if that was the case.

“Ghost Eight,” Blair said in a serious tone, “I am ordering you to answer the question.”

He could hear Ghost Eight suddenly sighing over his helmet’s speakers.

*“Very well, sir,”* Ghost Eight said. *“As your rank is higher than the one who gave me the gag order, I will tell you what happened. When I first discovered that the operating systems on the dreadnought we were investigating were six hundred years out of date, I mentioned that I can easily initiate a shutdown protocol to remedy the Dominion forces inert, at least for their weapons and defenses either at that time or at a later time once we retrieved the data.”*

“So, you did know about the outdated OS and had the means to shut it down.”

*“Yes, but I was ordered by Ghost Two to not speak of this matter about the OS or the means to shut it down to anyone. That order extended to the rest of the team. Revealing it to anyone among the team or on a report would be a court-martial offense according to him. He*

*also ordered me to act surprised if we should ever come across this scenario again while we were with the rest of the team. Therefore, I acted surprised about finding out the operating systems were outdated while on we were in the Central Tower on Tenebris Prime.*”

“Did Ghost Two give you any reasons for not wanting to tell anyone or report your findings to the rest of us?”

*“No, sir. He did not divulge his reasons.”*

Blair again looked slightly towards Ghost Two. Why did Benja issue that order? What was his intention for keeping valuable and crucial information secret from everyone?

“Did he at any point in time order you not to tell me?” Blair asked.

*“He said not to report it to you at any time, but he did not say anything about being ordered to report it when asked specifically about the mission like you did.”*

“That was a good call. I’m not going to reprimand you or the others on his team for keeping this information as you were ordered not to, but even you should know that this information would have prevented the Dominion from assaulting Lumen and Sanctus. For that matter, we could have disabled the entire Dominion threat without even firing a shot.”

*“I am aware of that, sir. I feel like I am responsible for any actions the Dominion took that could have been prevented had I spoke up about it. I will accept responsibility for following such orders, sir.”*

“I will think about it, but the fact that you spoke up about this matter and why you didn’t say anything will levy that responsibility. I’m going to get to the bottom of this right now.”

Blair pressed a few buttons on his right arm to shut down the private connection he had with Ghost Eight and switched on the external audio systems in his helmet. He looked directly at Benja to his right.

“Ghost Two, you and I need to have a little talk.”

“Oh?” Benja said through his helmet speakers. *“Did you have a nice conversation with Ghost Eight?”*

Blair was suddenly surprised that Benja knew about Blair’s conversation with Ghost Eight. Was the line not as secure as Blair made it?

*“Next time,” Benja said, “cover the display on your right arm. I could see that you were talking with Ghost Eight privately.”*

Blair looked at the display on his right forearm and realized that Benja could see what was on it. While Blair was not happy that he allowed Benja to see who he was talking to, that was not important.

“Very well, Ghost Two,” Blair said. “Since you can already guess what this is about, would you care to explain your actions and orders?”

Miya near the back of the dropship on the opposite side from Blair looked his way, along with the odd numbers of Ghost Team and the former Chiefs. Even Armani looked in Blair’s direction, wondering what is going on.

*“What orders are you talking about?”* Miya asked through her helmet speakers.

Without looking away from Benja, Blair decided to answer Miya’s question.

“When one of our stealth vessels came across the battle in the Miranda System, my team was present there. We split into two teams. My team consisted of the odd numbers and we proceeded towards the wreckage of one of the Federation ships. Ghost Two here led the even numbers and investigated the wreckage of one of the Dominion dreadnoughts.”

“So,” Armani said, “you accessed the ship’s information and found out about capital’s location. Clever and sneaky.”

*“Wait a minute,” Miya said. “When we were in the Central Tower, Ghost Eight stated that the operating systems we were using were over six hundred years out of date. That was how you were able to shut everything down so easily.”*

Armani looked towards Miya when he heard this information.

*“THAT’S how my Inner Sanctuary was compromised?!” Armani yelled.*

*“Not now, Armani!” Miya said. “The point is that you had operatives on one of our ships weeks ago. You all should have known about the operating system we were using at that point in time, so why didn’t you use the shutdown protocol when that was discovered?”*

*“That’s easy,” Benja said. “If we had, I wouldn’t have the opportunity to achieve my goal, which is this!”*

Benja quickly raised his rifle and pointed at Armani, who suddenly looked at Benja with fear in his eyes. Armani had never feared death before because he could transfer to another clone upon his death. Blair knew that would not be the case anymore as he tried to knock the rifle down from Benja’s hands.

Blair was a second too late as Benja pulled the trigger. The rifle’s laser hit the mark right at Armani’s heart, and the only thing in its place was a burnt hole that Blair could see straight through.

*“NO!” Blair yelled as he removed his harness and grabbed the rifle from Benja’s hands.*

Ghost Five and Seven who sat on each side of Armani removed their harnesses to check on their prisoner and quickly saw the life fading from his eyes. There was nothing they could do with a fatal wound such as what he had. Blair looked towards Armani while pointing the rifle Benja used right at Armani’s killer. When Armani’s head slumped forward and was motionless, it was clear their prisoner was dead, and with him no chance to learn about the artifact.

Blair turned back to Benja, no longer caring about callsigns for this mission.

*“Why did you do this, Benja?!” Blair yelled. “Why did you have us go through all of this just to kill this man?!”*

Blair wished he could see Benja’s facial expression, or what his thoughts were for that matter. Was this entire operation orchestrated just so Benja could kill Armani for some reason? Benja didn’t even know about Armani until the operation in Miranda, so why did he do this?

Before Benja could answer, Blair heard a beeping coming from Ghost Seven, and he recognized that sound. Ghost Seven noticed it too and looked down at his radiation scanner on the right side of his belt. It was somehow activated when he got out of his seat and the scanner portion was pointed behind him.

The only person behind Ghost Seven was Benja.

Blair looked at Benja in shock, almost taking a step back.

*“Ghost Seven,” Blair said, “it that scanner detecting what I think it is on Benja?”*

Ghost Seven turned towards Benja, pulling out the radiation scanner, and pointed it towards Benja who continued to sit in his seat without moving. The scanner beeped faster the closer the scanner got to Benja. Ghost Seven turned towards Blair.

*“It’s confirmed, sir,” Ghost Seven said. “It’s the mind manipulation radiation.”*

Without lowering the rifle, Blair moved his left hand to activate his communications link.

*“Pilot, I need you to get me Captain Tora again along with Admiral Trent. We have a problem...”*

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