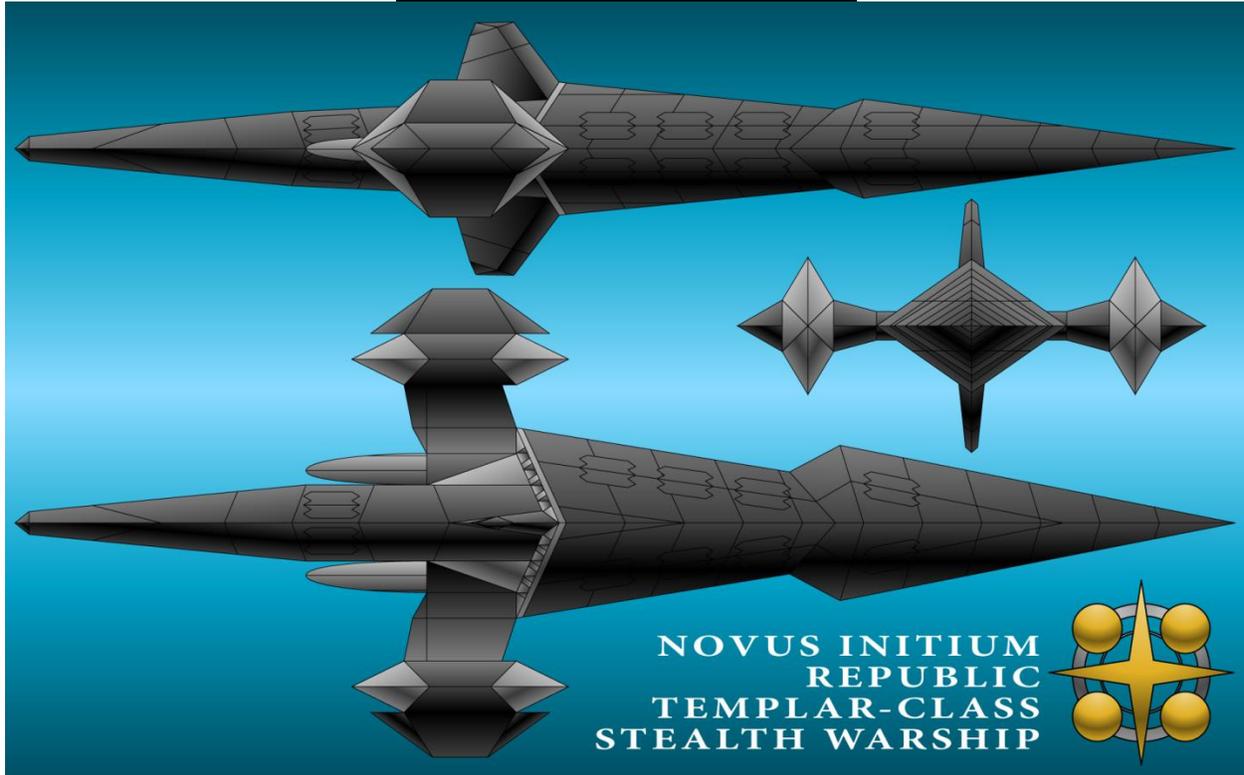


***Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga***  
***Episode III: The Siege of the Light***



**PART 1**

*Office of Advisor Forneido, Lykan Royal Palace, City of High Charity (translated)*  
*Lykana Orbit, Heronia System, Capital of Royal Lykan Kingdom*  
*10:16am, August 28, 5433 A.D.*

“Report on the readiness of Project Beta.”

Three months have passed since the Lykan Research and Development team began their work on Project Beta and those three months have been rather lengthy for Advisor Forneido along with the rest of the Royal Lykan Kingdom. Ever since the Camino Star Empire joined the war with their new allies from the United Vitam State and the Novus Initium Republic, the trio of galactic nations began to push forward into the Eastern Region against the Kingdom’s forces. The Kingdom has been on the defensive against those three nations as the Lykans were finding it harder to properly deploy their forces across the vast number of systems under their control.

Two months ago, there soon arose another rather problematic issue. While the Kingdom was able to construct ships to keep up, the problem was the duration of time it took to “program” the “living cores” the ships were using and keeping them alive. The R and D team quickly came up with a solution: clone the most receptive mind among the slaves that can be easily “programmed” and encase them in life support boxes. This made it easier to maintain a brain versus an entire body and would be less work to implement. Brains could be cloned as quickly as ships being built. Once those started being used on the battlefield, the advances of their enemies soon slowed to a halt but not before losing a substantial amount of star systems. The only good news is that the enemy forces did not seem to have the necessary troops needed for a full

occupation of any of the planets they seized. However, they don't have to if the worlds are populated by slaves who are more than happy to be "liberated" from the Kingdom's rightful authority. Any Lykans who were on those planets were subsequently captured as prisoners-of-war or POW's as the Republic seems to abbreviate the term.

There was also an issue that arose in relation to how quick the enemy forces had advanced into Lykan space during that time. While the initial jump between star systems that were between the nations required the jump crystals to cross, enemy forces soon reached Kingdom star systems where jump gates were located. Whenever the Royal Fleet was forced to retreat through the gates, they made sure that the gate's controls and systems at the opposite end were shut down to where their enemies couldn't use them. However, the most bizarre reports came in not too long after. Somehow, the gates came back online without authorization and soon enemy forces were flowing into Kingdom star systems. The Royal Fleet no longer had the means to shut down the gate again after their codes had been changed by enemy forces. In every system where there was a jump gate, this oddity continued to occur. There were rather vague reports and communications from Lykan jump gate operators that they were infiltrated by what looked like Republic forces and troops. However, communications were soon jammed or terminated and sensors did not detect any wormholes created by jump crystals much less Republic ships. Somehow, though, enemy forces were managing to infiltrate Kingdom space and take control of the jump gates to make them active again and allow their forces to advance. This allowed enemy forces to not use their crystals which Lykan military analysts were hoping would slow the enemy forces down. Whatever the enemy forces were using to reactivate the gates, it could not be detected.

That was not the only odd report Forneido received. After the Kingdom deployed the new "cyber-brain" equipped ships which greatly slowed the advance of enemy forces with larger numbers, several key installations began to go offline or were destroyed one at a time without explanation or any sign of enemy ships that would have attacked them. There were reports that ships and installations were destroyed by railgun fire but once again there were no signs of enemy ships, such as Imperial ships which use railguns, or wormholes being detected opening in those star systems. Analysts were starting to suspect some form of sabotage from slaves that were not subjected to the cyber-implementation, but there has yet to be any evidence that showed they were involved. There was the possibility that a cloaking device was used in these cases. It would explain a number of things and the Royal Intelligence Department was already aware that the Republic and the Empire has such devices. However, a cloaking device would not be able to hide a wormhole opening from a ship jumping into the system. There has yet to be an explanation as to how, if possible, enemy forces were reaching Kingdom-controlled systems without using the jump crystals. The only other explanation available was if there was an alternate form of faster-than-light travel that one of the enemy nations had managed to develop in such a short amount of time. If that was true, it would explain the odd reports and instances that had occurred. However, it would also mean that the Kingdom's enemies have in their possession a means to infiltrate their territory without a readily available means to stop them.

This line of thought did not bode for Forneido or the Kingdom. If their enemies had indeed made a vessel that is invisible and capable of traveling between star systems on its own, the security of the Kingdom would be at stake. He needed to know how Project Beta was going and, for the workers and scientists' sake, how soon it will be completed.

*"Greetings, Advisor Forneido,"* a hologram of a male Lykan said.

The Lykan was dressed in the attire of a scientist, though the full-body hologram itself

was in shades of orange and red as well as semi-transparent so the white color of the clothes could not be determined so readily. The hologram stood on a small disk on Forneido's desk and stood only five to six inches tall. No doubt Forneido appeared the same way on the scientist's end but sitting down.

*"Project Beta will be completed within the next five solar rotations,"* the scientist continued. *"We are supplying the vessels with the 'packages' you want to use. I will say it did take some time to complete the 'package' contents in question."*

"Excuses are not what I ask for, Jyinuuro," Forneido said. "All I expect are results in order to turn the tide of this war. How many ships are being fitted?"

*"Cultivation of the 'package' contents, as I said, took a while so the best we could do is fit up to ten ships with them."*

"Ten is the best you can do?"

*"Ten would be overkill if used against a single target. The potency of the 'package' is enough for only one to be deployed and hit successfully for the desired effect."*

"It isn't the potency that I am concerned with. It is whether or not the target will hit its mark before being intercepted. If none of them hit their target, this project will be terminated and so will you for your failure to meet the demand of the Kingdom."

*"I find that a bit excessive if you consider the fact that the failure would come from our own navy not being able to circumvent enemy lines to deliver the package."*

"That may be. Nevertheless, I had requested for enough to be fitted to three times the number of ships to make the operation go more smoothly and that is where you failed to deliver. If the ships hit their mark without using them all, then you will be congratulated. If they don't, you will be executed. Those are the outcomes and, as you can very well guess, failure is not an option for you or the Kingdom. Do I make my point clear?"

*"I understand, Advisor."*

Forneido pressed a button on the disk, ending the transmission. He reclined in his chair as he now had to figure out how to deal with an invisible enemy.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Templar, Republic Stealth Warship #1  
Planet Vita Orbit, Virani System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region  
9:49am, August 30, 5433 A.D. (Two Days Later)*

"Do we have the targeting coordinates for the strike?"

Vice Admiral Trent sat in the command chair on the bridge looking at the Lykan station that was in orbit of the Vitams' original home planet on the main screen. The project to create a working sustainable warp drive was completed in less than a month. The design and construction of the stealth ship that Trent was employed to help create took less time to build. However, the ship could not be completed until the final working model of the drive unit was completed due to not knowing how the engineering section would be designed without a finalized engine design. Thankfully, the finished drive was able to be fitted without making the ship any larger.

While the *Templar* as it was soon named was supposed to be a stealth ship, its length was the same as a *Paladin*-class Battleship at fifteen hundred meters. While part of what contributed to this size was the sustainable warp drive itself and the capacitors needed to sustain it for prolonged flights, it was also understood that the ship would function independently for extended missions without aid or support. Right now, the *Templar* is known only to the highest levels of government and the military from the Republic and the State. The rest of the population and the

military of those nations as well as the Empire are unaware of the ship's existence. Those ships on the front line only know a Republic covert ops team has managed to get access to enemy gates on the opposite end of those they have captured for their allies to reach the next system. Currently their allies are fighting in several systems but have not made much headway in over a month.

Because of this prolonged stalemate, the RCIA, which the *Templar* reports to, had ordered the ship to investigate and intercept Kingdom communications. The RCIA wanted the *Templar* to find and destroy strategic and logistical centers for the Kingdom's military operations. This would help slow the Kingdom's supplies of ships and equipment to the frontlines in order to allow allied forces to push forward. While the *Templar* has been successful in taking out select key installations and production centers, the Kingdom seems to have backup locations throughout their territory, thus the mission was taking longer to complete. However, the more the *Templar* takes out, the more likely the Kingdom will know that there is an enemy ship in their territory that doesn't use jump crystals to get around their nation.

It was then that it was decided to focus on vital installations, ones that did not have backups that would cripple the Kingdom's war effort. Among those locations would be the worlds that the races from the United Vitam State originally came from. Of the five worlds whose coordinates were supplied by the leaders of the State, all of them had installations in orbit that were taking the populations of the planets and either shipping them as slaves or converting them into the "living cores" for the Kingdom's ships according to State's intel. The *Templar* had already destroyed four of those installations. The one over Vita itself was all that remained.

Before every strike, the *Templar* would deploy stealth drones similar to the one that Agent Tora used when the Republic came in contact with the Kingdom and the State for the first time. The bays located on each side of the ship house dozens of drones but also landing and boarding craft for the teams of SAGATs that were selected for this mission. Optical cloaking has also been miniaturized to work with any SAGAT that is equipped with one, but the technology is relatively new so only a few SAGATs can be equipped with them. This has allowed for infiltration into select research, production, and intelligence facilities to gather needed information on Kingdom assets. It also allowed them to make sure a target did not have innocent slaves on board who were not "cyberized" yet. Once the infiltrators had done their job and evacuated the facility, the drones then covertly scan the facility to find a weak point in its structure.

The *Templar* was equipped with railguns since lasers would be easy to track, not to mention anyone with an eye could see the shot. The railguns were hidden under hull plating when not in use. The ship also possessed a heavy railgun in the bow where the tip of the ship would open to reveal the barrel. This railgun only had so many shots to fire before the ship runs out of ammo. Of the forty rounds the *Templar* had for the heavy railgun, half of them have been used already.

One of those rounds that remained was about to be used against the Kingdom facility in Vita's orbit.

The drones were relaying targeting coordinates back to the *Templar*, and soon a firing solution would be achieved to destroy the facility in one shot. However, the reports from the infiltrators before they left the station were similar to the reports given at the other installations. The infiltrators were expecting to see a lot of slaves being processed and undergoing cyber-implementation to be used on Kingdom ships. However, not a single slave was on board the stations. They were completely manned by Lykans. It was puzzling to see and made Trent begin

to both worry and wonder how the Lykans were supplying their ships with “living cores.”

Trent took a brief look around the bridge at the bridge crew he was given and was still surprised about the people that were selected. The bridge itself was designed the same compared to other Republic ships, though there were now an additional two stations by comparison due to the nature of the ship and the additional roles the vessel has on board. Trent kept it that way to feel more comfortable, though the other two stations were put in once Trent was aware of their necessity.

At the Communications station located on the lower section and to his right was the pop idol known as Sheryl. She was selected to not only communicate with their teams but intercept transmissions from Kingdom forces. She is also tasked with analyzing Kingdom computer systems for cultural references to get a better understanding of their culture. With information about their culture, they will know how to best attack the Kingdom not only logistically but perhaps even morally as well. This information is more readily available on civilian systems as the Lykans have been doing everything they can to wipe away the culture of their slaves and replace it with their own in the name of their deity. So far, Sheryl has found that the Lykans have left their world in as much of its natural state as possible. The only Lykans found on their home planet, of which the location is still hidden for now, are those who are similar to monks and scholars. They have been tasked with maintaining the planet and their “purity” by discarding the distractions of the outside world past the sky and attempt to come closer into relationship with their deity. There are those of similar practice in the Republic of select religions so this is not entirely new to Trent. However, it has been confirmed that the Lykans are the only race in their own system and even more so for their home planet.

It was also discovered that their capital is not located on their home planet but rather on a large orbiting city known as High Charity. It is from there that the King and the heads of the Royal Families govern and rule the Kingdom. Its exact specifications and layout are still unknown as is most of the layout and location of the Lykan home system. There are only artistic pictures of High Charity found in various government-based offices. The purpose or reason why they are found in those offices can only be speculated.

At the Helm station also on the lower section and directly in front of him was a woman by the name of Rei. This woman was selected by the RCIA for her expert piloting skills. She is a well-known interstellar race ship pilot and had won several races and circuits throughout the Republic. She had several sponsors that backed her and her expert skills. However, the war had postponed almost all of those races due to the fact that the star gates were used in most of those races and traffic had to be freed up for military and select civilian craft to travel through. While the *Templar* is definitely far larger than what she is used to piloting, her awareness of the ship’s surroundings as well as her precision maneuvering have made her a valuable asset. However, Trent knew that she signed on for the task so that she could end the war quickly and start racing again. Apparently she and Sheryl know each other from other “circles,” as the term is known.

Because of her skill, her use of the sustainable warp drive and its operation has been a rather smooth experience. No one has ever flown through the gaps between the systems before and her quick responsiveness has allowed the ship to avoid collisions with any celestial objects that resided between the gaps such as meteors and asteroids. Thankfully she logged their locations and trajectory in case they flew through the same way again.

To the left of the Helm station is the Operation station designed to monitor internal ship systems and functions as well as people on board. A woman by the name of Usatame was working that station. While she is young, she was also rather reserved and doesn’t speak unless

she reports or engaging in a conversation. Sheryl, Rei, and the other bridge crew members have tried to get her to open up about herself but she seldom opens up about her personal life. She was recruited by the RCIA from a highly successful shipping company where she had a similar job on a freight ship. Her attention to detail made the ship she was on highly efficient and the RCIA took notice. While she was on board, the ship ran the best Trent had ever seen. Trent just wished she opened up more to everyone.

At the Tactical station just to Trent's right was someone else Trent was not expecting to see and for good reason. Natalie, a popular model from Voluptas and one of Sheryl's friends, was manning that station. She was one of the people who were there during the attempted kidnapping incident that Trent managed to prevent. What surprised him as well as Sheryl was the fact that Natalie was an undercover agent for the RCIA. She was on that craft years ago when the RCIA got wind of a possible kidnapping. Her job was to prevent the kidnapping from happening and take the kidnappers into custody. However, Trent's ship intercepted the craft's SOS and thwarted the attempt before Natalie could reveal herself. She stayed undercover to remain friends with Sheryl and the others as well as keep a close eye on them in the event another kidnapping from fanatical fans were to take place. The RCIA called her back when the *Templar* was under construction due to her training in weapons both handheld and ship-based. Her accuracy with those weapons is uncanny, including accuracy with the heavy railgun. Trent noticed that there were two sides to her: there was her serious focused side when she is behind the controls of the weapons and then there was her energetic very sociable side where she gets along with everyone. Right now, she was the former as the drones fed her targeting coordinates.

Unlike the bridge design of other ships, there were two additional stations located along the back wall on each side of the elevator. The station behind Trent's right side was the Intelligence station. The purpose of this station is receive reports and communications from various sources involving the Royal Lykan Kingdom whether the sources are from allied ships or enemy communications. It also uses a dedicated communications line to hack into Kingdom computer systems and copy their information to analyze for use. Thanks to this information gathering system, Trent and his superiors were getting a better understanding of the structure and locations of Kingdom assets. Despite this, they still do not know the location of the home system of the Lykans and the capital of the Kingdom. However, Lykan communications have been "tight-lipped" about that piece of information and putting a trace in their network would not help either considering the vastness of their communications system. It came as no surprise that Agent Tora was the one assigned to that station but she was made aware that Trent was in command of the ship for this mission and that her information was to be used to point them in the right direction of their next target. She had just finished copying the information in the station's database that the ship was now targeting.

The station behind Trent's left was Drone Control, the station used to coordinate the drones that are used to gather information remotely. Despite the name, it is also used to coordinate the landing and boarding craft used by the SAGATs to get aboard Kingdom assets in order to take control or acquire needed information and equipment. The station is similar to a flight controller's station in that regards. This station was being manned by a rather new and promising recruit by the name of Haley. She had recently graduated from the Academy and showed an affinity for coordinating shuttles, transports, and other small craft. The RCIA scouted her out when the *Templar* was under construction before she was given an assignment to a ship in the Republic fleet. This made it a bit easier in terms of information to falsify where she was stationed so as to not raise any issues with family members. The same had to be done for

everyone on the ship. This was especially true in Haley's case because her big sister is Rear Admiral Kayla in the Tranquillus System. As far as Kayla was concerned, Haley was assigned to Research and Development to test out the possibility of attack drones that were considered top secret and would have her out of touch for a long while. Stories were created for everyone else on board ranging from prolonged vacations to reassignments involving top secret or classified missions. As far as anyone is aware, the stories are holding. Very few people knew the truth about their actual mission, including Trent's wife who has been making sure that no one else knew of their whereabouts.

Right now, the drones' targeting coordinates were being transmitted to Haley who was relaying them to Natalie's station.

"Targeting coordinates are being sent to Tactical," Haley said.

"I have them," Natalie said. "Rei, bring the bow down negative sixteen degrees and to port two degrees. I'll do the small adjustments from here."

"Understood," Rei said as she pointed the ship's bow in the direction Natalie wanted.

The main screen started to pan down and slightly to the left as the center of the station began to fill their view. It soon came to a stop.

"Looks like we are right on target, again," Natalie said. "There are times I wonder why I think I need to make adjustments with her skill."

"That is part of the reason why I was brought on board," Rei said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

"Sheryl," Trent said, "has there been any communications from this station that will point us to the Kingdom's capitol?"

"None that I have been able to detect," Sheryl said. "Just some progress reports concerning the productivity of the Vitams that are on the planet as well as logistical reports. There isn't anything involving the military or their political structure."

"Then this station has outlived its usefulness. Natalie, you may fire when ready."

"Understood," Natalie said. "All hands, prepare for primary weapon fire. Dropping optical cloak and activating ECM. Opening the heavy railgun barrel."

While dropping the cloak was not usually needed to fire the railgun, the cloak is required to drop when the *Templar* needed to deploy any ECM and jamming systems in order to cut off communications from its target. This way, a call for help could not be broadcasted alerting any of the local forces that would have them rush to the scene. By the time any of those forces realize there was no communications from the target, it would already be destroyed, usually leaving no survivors.

The dull hum of the heavy railgun powering up started to become audible throughout the ship as the targeting system locked on to the designated coordinates the drones supplied. Soon the sound of the hum had leveled out and the readout on the screen showed that the target was locked.

"Heavy railgun ready to fire," Natalie said, her finger over the firing button.

Trent took in a deep breath.

"Fire," he said.

As soon as Natalie pressed the firing button for the heavy railgun, a slight shock of the recoil was felt as the solid round was hurled via electromagnetic rails at half the speed of light out of the barrel towards the station. In a split second, the round penetrated the station's armor and super structure all the way through, piercing the station's primary reactor, the *Templar's* primary target. The reactor, suddenly having two massive holes on opposite ends, suddenly

exploded through the ruptures the railgun round had left, the station started coming apart as other power systems started to explode. Atmosphere and bodies started venting into space as the station was becoming nothing more than a massive amount of orbiting debris. What was once an orbital station one minute ago was now nothing more than a massive amount of twisted and burned debris, all in less than a minute.

“Scanning for survivors,” Natalie said.

“Did any communications make it through the ECM?” Trent asked.

“I detected no transmissions from the station that got through our ECM,” Sheryl said. “I am detecting, however, transmissions from other sources trying to reestablish contact.”

“I detect no life signs,” Natalie said. “It looks like there are no survivors. Shall I drop the ECM, Captain?”

“Go ahead. Haley, recall the drones. Helm, set a course for deep space so that we can send our encrypted report on this mission.”

“Yes, sir,” Natalie, Haley, and Rei said in unison.

“Tora,” Trent said as he turned his chair around to face her direction, “any idea where we head from here?”

“At present,” Tora said without turning around from her station, “the only coordinates we have yet to go to is the one we acquired from that deceased imposter clone of you. That is still a rather good distance from here and will take a while to reach. It is also deep in Lykan territory and rather close to the edge of the cluster.”

“Despite how close it is to the edge of the cluster, you still do not believe that it is the location of their capital?”

“Sheryl’s interpretation of their culture from available references appear accurate. Half of their year, they can see practically all of the stars from the cluster at night while the other half they only see distant galaxies. Much of their history and literature suggests that they are the farthest most star in this region of the cluster.”

“I have to ask this, then,” Usatame said as she turned around, “if we at least have those coordinates, why haven’t we tried to find their capital instead of trying to take out their logistical support?”

Almost everyone on the bridge was surprised that Usatame said anything at all considering how reserved she usually was. The only person who wasn’t shocked was Tora.

“Finding their capital would mean nothing without fleet support,” Tora said, still not turning around. “If the fleets cannot move further into Lykan territory, we cannot force the Kingdom to surrender and it would prolong this war.”

“Then what about taking out their capital with one strike? If their king and the rest of their government are killed, the military would not be able to function without someone to lead them, correct?”

“That wouldn’t work,” Sheryl said. “Based on what I’ve interpreted, the Lykans are not going to have their leaders, both government and military, in the same place. If the heads of the government are killed, then the head of their space fleet will take charge who will usually be on the flagship.”

“We would only have one chance to strike,” Tora said. “Regardless of who we take out first, the other will know we are in the system and will raise their defenses making a second strike hard to accomplish in a system that no doubt is heavily defended with lots of ships. We would lose the element of surprise from that point forward.”

“I see,” Usatame said. “I guess I was just being hopeful for a quick end.”

“There is no shame in wishing for such a thing,” Trent said. “Everyone here and serving on the frontlines have the same feelings. However, reality tends to make such wishing very difficult. Believe me, I know all too well. My wife wishes I wasn’t all the way out here right now, but she knows I have reasons to be here. Personal reasons as some of you no doubt heard of on the news a while back.”

“The clone of you the Lykans used to try to get us at war with the Empire,” Rei said. “I remembered seeing that news report and the Chancellor’s statement involving that clone.”

“Until we can make sure that my DNA is removed from their database to prevent them from trying again, I can’t resume my normal duties in the Navy. The same goes for others whose DNA was scanned like Colonel Blair who is also on board. If the location we have left to check out is the location of where the clone was made as well as their database that has our DNA stored, we can take it out and prevent them from using that DNA for their own purposes. Then lives like mine can go back to normal.”

“As normal as living with at least three alien nations now known to the Republic can get,” Tora said.

Everyone looked in Tora’s direction after she made that rather snarky remark. They all knew she had a point but the delivery of her statement could have been better. Trent did a fake cough to draw everyone’s attention away from her and her remark.

“Regardless,” he said, “that was part of the original mission and for now it is time to attempt to fulfill it. Do we have an idea as to how long it would take for us to get there from here?”

“It will take us a few days to get there from here,” Rei said. “It is several Light-years from our position.”

“Understood. Go ahead and take us into deep space. We need to give our report.”

“Yes, sir. Engaging warp drive now.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Office of the Supreme Chancellor, Republic Parliament Building, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic  
11:01am, August 30, 5433 A.D.*

“Thank you for coming.”

Drew had finished reviewing the report from the *Templar* that was sent to the RCIA by coded transmission. Agent Aja brought the report in person to Drew’s office to prevent any interception of information considering that the existence of the *Templar* is still a classified secret to only those privileged to know about it. After reviewing the report, Drew called for the military Joint Chiefs and United Vitam State ambassador Drino who knew of the ship’s existence to meet him in his office to discuss the latest developments. The Camino Star Empire ambassador along with the rest of the Empire are still not aware of the ship’s existence, though they have their suspicions due to the *Templar*’s actions of making the star gates that the Empire was trying to seize suddenly accessible at both ends. Whatever those suspicions are, the Empire has yet to address them with the Republic or the State, most likely due to a lack of evidence.

However, while all three nations have made great strides thanks to the *Templar* in encroaching into the Kingdom’s territory in the first month of their offensive, the Kingdom managed to hold their forces at bay with a sudden increase in the number of ships sent to stop them. The *Templar* was ordered to engage logistical targets within the Kingdom to reduce those numbers, including facilities that would be processing the slaves into living cores. If any of them

could be saved, the *Templar* was ordered to do so. However, the reports concerning those facilities so far have been rather disturbing. Drew hasn't informed the Joint Chiefs or the State ambassador about what was found at the installations orbiting over the five former home planets of the founding races of the State.

Or rather, what the *Templar* did *not* find.

The Joint Chiefs, among them being Grand Admiral Mikey of the Republic Fleet, and Ambassador Drino came through the doors as Drew stood to greet them. By this point everyone was wearing a translation device in their ears so that Drino could understand them as well as the reverse.

"Greeting, Supreme Chancellor," Drino said as he sat in one of the seats in front of Drew while the Joint Chiefs sat on the two sofas behind him. "I'm assuming you called us here for an update on the *Templar*, considering that the head of your intelligence agency is here."

"That is correct," Drew said as he sat back down in his chair. "Trent has given us an update about your five home planets and the Lykan stations that orbit them."

"So I take it they were all destroyed?"

"Correct. We were provided footage of their destruction each time."

"I assume they saved all of our brethren on board each station prior to each station being destroyed, correct?"

"That is where things get a bit odd."

Drino suddenly had a puzzled look on his face.

"What do you mean by that?" Drino asked.

"According to the recon, infiltration, and sensor reports," Aja said, "there was no sign of any other race aside from the Lykans on any of the stations that were destroyed."

"That cannot be right," Drino said. "Those stations served to transport our kind off of the planets and onto ships to become slaves to the Lykans. Even if they are focusing on using them as living computer cores for their ships, there has to be others on board those stations."

Drino stopped himself when a troublesome thought came to his mind.

"Don't tell me those worlds are completely depopulated?" he asked.

"No, they are not," Aja said. "The *Templar* crew thought the same thing and checked each planet but there were still inhabitants on those worlds that make up the races of the State. However, the populations are all less than five hundred thousand each."

"Less than five hundred thousand each? Those worlds should have a couple billion each that were not able to flee the Kingdom! How can there be THAT few remaining?"

"This may be speculation but other than those that were transported off the planet to continue being slaves, there is the chance that the implementation process to become living cores may have had numerous failures along the way. We know they don't have that many ships or we would have been pushed back by such numbers."

"But as you said, that is just mere speculation without any hard facts. The *Templar* didn't find anything about what happened to them?"

"They are still looking over the information they recovered at each of the stations to get any information of what happened to them all but you have to remember that you all have been at war for decades. This could be the result of both the liberation of so many of your kind that more slaves were required to fill the void and the ongoing war you all have had since then. That is a lot of time and data to go through."

"I know but my government and our people need to know what happened to them. They need at least some sort of closure to those who were lost."

“We’ll have the *Templar* forward all of the data to us so that we can have teams go through and investigate the matter. Right now, the *Templar* is looking at heading for their original objective.”

“You’re talking about the star system where that infiltrator’s mind was transmitted after he committed suicide?” Grand Admiral Mikey asked.

“Yes,” Aja said. “They are a few days away from the target with their warp drive. Since we have not identified a suitable target after they destroyed the station that orbited Vita, it is probably best for them to proceed. Also, it puts them very close to the edge of the star cluster. If they can identify the Lykan home system from there, we can use the *Templar* to force the Kingdom to surrender.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Drino said. “There have been rumors that the Kingdom has only battleships in their home system. Lots of battleships. What good would it do for one ship with limited ammo to take on such a force?”

“Ambassador, you are thinking we would be using the *Templar* for conventional warfare. There are other ways to get an enemy to surrender.”

“You have piqued my curiosity. What methods do you have in mind?”

“We were provided details about their culture that was extracted from each location the *Templar* had attacked, and each piece of information provided us with a clearer vision as to why they have not allowed any slaves into their home system.”

“I figured it was out of their sense of purity, to keep their home system free of having ‘unworthy blood’ taint their system of origin.”

“That is the line they have fed everyone but in reality, it is out of fear.”

“Fear? And just where did you get that notion considering the Kingdom war machine that is in play?”

“They are afraid of because of where they are. Their home system is on the edge of the star cluster. If an enemy force were to invade their home system, they would have nowhere else to retreat to. They would be trapped and would either fight to the last Lykan or surrender against an overwhelming force.”

Drino eyes widened as Aja’s words set in. This was making a lot of sense.

“This explains things,” Drino said. “No wonder they didn’t want any of their slaves to know and why they expanded as far as they have. Not only were we their labor force, we were their disposable shield!”

“Exactly,” Aja said. “Right now, the Lykan government is resting in their cradle of power believing that they are safe and protected. With our forces currently in a stalemate with theirs, they no doubt believe this even more so than before. If they continue to hold out against our forces by attrition alone, they will no doubt feel that this is nothing more than a test from their deity and be motivated to start pushing forward against our forces which continue to weaken. We have to show them that they are not invincible, to demoralize them in some way that may result in them panicking.”

“I see what you are getting at, but how do we go about making them panic?”

“I would suggest leaving that to my intelligence department. Once we have the required information, we will formulate a plan.”

“And what information do you still require?”

“That would be the location and layout of Kingdom assets in the Heronia System, the capital of the Royal Lykan Kingdom.”

“The Heronia System? You have a NAME to their capital system?!”

“Yes. There are a few references to their system in several texts among their own databases. It would appear that the name of the system was deliberately removed to prevent slaves and other alien races yet to be enslaved from investigating and researching their exact location. However, while they have a name for the system, the Lykans still keep its exact location secret. It is possible that only ship commanders know the location in the event they need to have their ship return there or just themselves in case they have to report to their superiors directly.”

“And any attempt to capture a Lykan commanding officer has meet with failure as they self-destruct the ship in the event of capture,” Grand Admiral Mikey said. “If we can catch one and interrogate them, we could get that information and you can begin to work on any plans involving their capital.”

“While that would be nice, they would no doubt figure out our intention and make it harder to plan accordingly. We will rely on the *Templar* to continue gathering information. If it can find the Heronia System on its own without alerting the Kingdom of its presence, that will be even better for us all.”

“You do realize,” Drew said, “the Empire will get wind of this operation. Do we know what to do should they find out about it?”

“Oh, them?” Aja said. “They already know.”

Everyone in the room looked at Aja with shocked expressions on their faces

“What do you mean they KNOW?!” Drew said. “How?!”

“I decided to bring them up to date about the operation over a month ago. They figured that we had the means to infiltrate Kingdom systems without detection or the need to use star gates. They are not dumb, Chancellor. They were quick to analyze and determine how it was done when their ships were able use Lykan star gates at both ends.”

“And how is it they did not address my office directly when they wanted to inquire about it?”

“They have studied us through our media for quite a while. They know that if they addressed it that we would deny it if they directed the matter towards you and other government officials. They do know about the RCIA through the media as well and they figured based on our actions that we had some involvement in the matter. To that end, their ambassador contacted me directly with their speculations based on what has occurred and I, knowing that we would eventually tell them, decided to do so about the *Templar*. I also informed them about the fact that the ship and its mission were deemed ‘classified’ and could not be released to the public for fear that word would somehow get to the Lykans and we would lose our tactical advantage.”

“And why is it you did not address this with the rest of us as soon as the ambassador contacted you?”

“Because I wanted to wait until the *Templar* began its primary objective first rather than bother them with the details concerning the destruction of key Kingdom assets.”

“So are we expected to see the Imperial ambassador in our meetings now?” Drino asked.

“Actually,” Aja said as she looked at her watch, “they should be waiting in the lobby right about now. I called them here for this meeting but told them to wait until called.”

“You called Ambassador Orbinai here before this meeting?” Drew asked. “You knew you were going to bring this up with us beforehand?”

“Of course. After all, it is best for all of us to be on the same page as the old saying goes.” Drew gave an audible frustrated sigh.

“Fine,” Drew said as he pressed the intercom button for his secretary. “Is the Imperial ambassador waiting in the lobby?”

"She is, sir. I was going to inform you that she is here but she said that I should wait for you to call out here first."

"Understood. Go ahead and have her come in"

"Yes, Chancellor."

Not too long after the secretary got off the intercom, the doors opened and a female Camino stood in the doorway wearing purple and golden robes that covered up most of her physique aside from her head and her hands. The robes were only a few centimeters off the ground. The headdress she wore was also rather long and flowing behind her head and stopped at the middle of her back. According to what the Republic and the State knew of Imperial attire, this usually represented someone who was affiliated with the Imperial government. The Royal Heirs to the Imperial Throne tend to wear garments that are more extravagant than what the ambassador was wearing. Some of the people in the room were trying to image how much more extravagant those garments could possibly be.

The ambassador, much like most Caminos, also had cybernetic implants which help her to hear and speak in the Human's English language.

"Greetings, Chancellor," she said. "Greetings as well to Ambassador Drino and the Republic's military Joint Chiefs. Thank you, Agent Aja, for inviting me to these hearings."

"Greetings to you, Ambassador Orbinai," Drew said. "I must apologize for keeping you and your government in the dark about this matter. I heard Agent Aja has told you about it, am I correct?"

"About the *Templar*? Yes, she has. My government, though, understands the initial concerns and reasons for the secrecy. They are upset as to how long it took for you and the heads of the State to inform the Empire about this ship."

"We had our reasons, Ambassador. Trust tends to not come very easily, especially in light of the how our initial meeting with both the State and the Kingdom went. On the other hand, your Empire knew about the Republic for a long time but made no effort to contact us about your existence. I would say that the Empire may have trust issues as well considering how your first encounter with the Kingdom went decades ago."

Orbinai nodded her head in agreement.

"You are correct in that assessment," she said. "It would seem that all of us, including the races that make up the State, all have trust issues when it comes to our initial encounter with the Lykans. However, this also gives us a common enemy. Now, Agent Aja has filled me in so far with the operations of the *Templar* including the recent destruction of the Lykan installation over the planet Vita."

"Yes," Drew said, "and now the *Templar* is heading for the system where that infiltrator a couple of months ago transmitted his mind once he committed suicide."

"You're talking about the one who stole one of your destroyers and had it jump into one of our star systems?"

"The same one. They are a few days away using their warp drive to that system. It will also put them close to the edge of the star cluster in that region. It has been brought to our attention that the name of the system the Lykans' home planet is in is called the Heronia System. If the *Templar* can find any information on that system and its location, we can attempt to lay siege their system and force them to surrender."

"What good would that do us if our forces are currently in a stalemate with theirs? We have yet to penetrate their lines despite the actions the *Templar* has taken so far."

"Allow us to fill you in on what we have in mind, Ambassador..."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Main Broadcasting Stage, National Broadcasting System Building, City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic  
11:45am, August 30, 5433 A.D.*

“Fifteen minutes to air!”

Laura sat in one of the chairs just off the stage along with her fellow anchorman Matt as they looked over the news articles they were about ready to cover in their next broadcast. Most of the reports are local with a few that were involving other locations. There were no reports about the war so far other than the fact that they were still being held back by Lykan forces from advancing any further.

However, unlike most people, Laura knew about the *Templar* and its role in the war. Updates about the ship and personal notes from her husband Trent were sent to her whenever they came in. However, because of the nature of the information, they were sent to her by an RCIA agent who contacts her prior to delivery. The message is sent by a physical paper letter, which is rare to use in the age of digital technology and emails. The agent brings with them a small portable ink remover device, a cylindrical device that paper is fed at one end and dissolves the ink on the paper. A clean sheet comes out the other end with no text on it at all. Most of the time, the agent delivers the letter when she is at home but there were occasions when they were delivered to her at work.

Today is one of those days. The agent stated though that they will be coming by her office after the broadcast. It was probably better that way. Laura informed security that she had a guest every time they arrived at her work and the “name” they would be under. Whether that name is the agent’s real name or not, she did not know. She never bothered to ask only because it was probably better not to.

Aside from Trent being on assignment, Laura was also aware that a few other people she knew were on the *Templar* as well. Among those people was the pop idol Sheryl who ended up staying the night a couple of months ago after having dinner. It was on that night that she found out what Trent was being asked to do along with Sheryl. Laura was also not surprised about the fact that Agent Tora was also assigned to the *Templar* as she seemed to get some perverse pleasure in bothering Trent. However, she was under his command for the mission so at least there was some chain-of-command that wouldn’t have them stepping on each other’s toes in that regards. What ended up surprising her most was the fact that one of the other people aboard was Natalie, one of the other celebrity friends who Sheryl knew. The fact that she was an RCIA agent this entire time was a shock to them all when the crew for the *Templar* was finalized.

Aside from the fact that Trent was assigned to the mission, there was another reason why Laura was in the know about the mission and it related to the celebrities. The RCIA had managed to weave a bit of a story involving the absence of both Sheryl and Natalie and they gave Laura the task to announce those fabricated stories and activities to keep the public’s curiosity at bay. Of course, Laura would have to approve the “sources” of the stories being broadcasted so that there were no complications with the journalism process. She has been concerned that the Chief would find out about the sources in question and the stories behind them, but so far the RCIA has been able to verify everything she was reporting in some form or fashion. Either the RCIA has body doubles of those two somehow or some VERY advance and convincing holograms. Thankfully today, the RCIA had nothing for her to report on that topic.

Laura had to admit that during the development of the *Templar*, it was nice for Trent to be

able to come home every day and spend some quality time with her. He had not done that in a rather long time and for her, it was a very comfortable feeling. She hated to see him go once the ship was completed but she realized that things would not be able to go back to normal until the war was over. Thankfully, he is helping to make that happen but for now she had to be patient.

Of course, in light of where all the “action” was taken place, one of her reporters got transferred to the forward command center for the Republic forces who were engaging the Kingdom forces. That reporter is Brenda and she now serves as a war correspondent on the frontlines. Right now, according to her, there is a lull in the fighting as both Republic and Kingdom forces appear to be taking a “breather” to rest and resupply their forces. Recon of the enemy forces have shown that they are not getting as much supplies and ships as they have been thanks to the actions of the *Templar* but it still is not enough for the Lykans to withdraw and regroup. Somehow, the Lykans were still holding their ground meaning they have their logistical support spread out throughout their Kingdom.

Brenda was assigned to one ship on the frontlines whose fleet was deployed once the Republic went on the offensive. Last Laura had heard that ship was the battleship *Grange* under the command of Rear Admiral Nora. From there, Brenda would report the action that was taken place and any new developments. This was very similar to when Christina was sent to Trent’s ship, the *Renaldo*, when the ship along with the fleet it commanded were supposedly doing training exercises in Tranquillus. Of course, the reality is that the fleet was sent to make first contact with the Kingdom and State forces that appeared in the same system. Thanks to Christina, the Republic learned about the aliens without censorship or secrecy, something the RCIA was trying to do but failed to make happen.

“So, what is Trent up to today?” Matt suddenly asked Laura.

Laura looked up from the news articles they were going to report to look at Matt.

“The usual,” she said. “You already know he’s at work with Republic Military Research and Development. Why do you ask?”

“You haven’t said much about him as of late and I was beginning to wonder.”

“He works long hours there and I don’t blame him for it. With everything going on, he has to do something to help end the war faster.”

“Is that really the case?”

Laura was puzzled by that last question.

“What do you mean by that?” Laura asked.

“How about an explanation as to who that man in the suit is that visits your office here every once in a while? You tell security to let him in as he works for Trent but why would he need to send someone when you both live together? What is so important that he could not tell you once he got home?”

Laura had to think of something quick. Matt was becoming far too suspicious of Trent’s activities and if she isn’t fast and careful to respond, he could open up his own version of an investigation.

“Him?” she said. “There are days where he has to spend the night up at work. Because of the nature of what is being developed, he cannot simply call me so he requests someone to act as a courier to deliver me messages on days he has to be there overnight. He has to let me know somehow, right? Otherwise, I’m up all night waiting on him to come home when in reality he doesn’t.”

“Oh. That makes sense I guess. I’m sorry for asking but things were just not making sense to me when I saw that guy one time leaving your office without saying much at all.”

“Don’t worry. Everything is fine so don’t worry if you see that man again, okay?”

“Okay. By the way, have you heard anything from Brenda lately?”

“I haven’t heard anything as of late. There must be a lull in the fighting again.”

“Part of me wished there was some development in the war. How long have our forces been in...what was the name of that system, again?”

“They are in the Poni System. They have been there for almost a month or so since the Kingdom began to fortify their positions to prevent any further advancement into their territory. There are other systems they are fighting in but the Poni system is the most advanced point the Republic has done. Not even the State or the Empire has advanced as far as we have but I think the Kingdom knows that. That may be the reason the Kingdom is concentrating its forces in that system.”

“Do you think Brenda will be alright out there?”

“I would hope so. Besides, she said she wanted to be where the action was.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Ready Room, R.N.S. Grange, Paladin-Class Battleship  
Planet Poni IV, Poni System (Contested), Eastern Region  
12:32pm, August 30, 5433 A.D.*

“Someone looks bored out of her mind.”

Brenda looked up from her meal at the sudden comment directed towards her. Rear Admiral Nora and Captain Dennise had invited Brenda to Nora’s Ready Room on their lunch break to try to socialize with each other. They had been assigned to the frontlines in the Poni System after their forces rotated out with the previous fleet assigned to the frontlines. The *Grange* and its fleet have been in the system for ten days so far and for Brenda, this was the second battleship she has been on since she was assigned as a war correspondent on the frontlines. However, unlike the first battleship, she felt more welcomed here on the *Grange* with its crew by comparison.

Nora and Dennise have been particularly open to her, inviting her to meals in the Ready Room for the past week or so. Much of it had to do with the fact that the three of them share some common history or rather they all came from the same place. While Luminous was the capital city of the Republic, there are other cities located all over Luminare. One of them was known as Paraíso De La Sol, or Paradise of the Sun in the ancient Spanish language, founded by those of Hispanic heritage. The city was located near the equator and thus earned the “sun” part of the name. The city itself after so many years was indeed a paradise with numerous skyscrapers, hotels, amusement and sports centers, and beaches. In order to offset the urban look, lots of foliage was spread throughout the city. Even the standard of living in the suburban areas was exactly like those found in Luminous with houses, apartments, and mansions spread throughout. It was believed that the development and recreational aspects of the city was used when creating similar tourist spots on other planets.

However, there are a select few people within the population of the city that seek more than the paradise they are living in and want to see or do more. Most of those people tend to join the military in order to see other worlds within the Republic which is what Nora and Dennise did. Their personal reasons for doing so differ, however. Brenda on the other hand did not want to seek the military lifestyle and chose to be a field reporter instead volunteering to travel to other systems in order to see what all the Republic had to offer compared to her hometown. However, when she got assigned to *Serenus* for the past several months, it was a rather boring

assignment being on the edge of Republic space.

That is, of course, until the incident with a clone of Vice Admiral Trent made by the Lykans stole a destroyer from the local headquarters there and jumped it into the territory of the Camino Star Empire. Brenda reported the situation as it happened and that was the most excitement she got while stationed there. However, it did cause a little bit of trouble for the real Vice Admiral Trent who is the husband of Anchorwoman Laura. Considering the circumstances, it was not Brenda's fault as Trent's name was announced in the background during her report and even Laura understood that. However, when Brenda requested to report the news on the frontlines of the war, it appeared Laura was all too willing to oblige her request.

The fact that the three of them came from the same city, though, was a surprise when they found out about each other's background. While Paraíso De La Sol is still a very large city, meeting anyone else from that city abroad is considered very rare when compared to the size and the population of the entire Republic. The three of them managed to talk about their own personal histories and how they came to be where they are today in between battles during meals. However, they ended up running out of things to talk about during lunch and Brenda was beginning to show it when Nora called her out on it.

"Sorry about that," Brenda said. "I just had a few things on my mind."

"Like what?" Dennise asked.

"Part of me has wondered about going back home after this assignment."

"You mean back to Paraíso De La Sol?" Nora asked. "Why do you want to go back to that city?"

Brenda leaned back in her chair.

"I set out to see the worlds of the Republic," Brenda said. "That was what I told myself when I left home to become a field reporter after I got out of college. In reality, I left home because I felt confined being there."

"Confined?" Dennise said. "What do you mean by that?"

"My parents had some sort of grand plan for me but at the same time they sheltered me a bit to the point that they didn't allow me to date any boys until after I graduated high school. To make sure that I didn't date any boys, they had me attend an all-girls school."

"Wait," Nora said, "you're not talking about Femenino De Noble, are you?"

"How do you know about that school? Have you heard of it?"

"Dennise and I attended the same school. The fact that the school was trying to teach women how to be prestigious and proper only for women like us to choose a life not aligned to that way of thinking just goes to show that their teachings are very dated."

"I'll say," Dennise said. "I was more than happy to get out of that school. I know they are responsible for a lot of women getting into high-end positions including management, but I guess it is not for everyone."

"Everyone like us," Brenda said. "It also did not help that when I graduated I had no idea how to properly talk to boys. It took a lot to undo that entire strict regimen to break out of the mold I was forced into."

"For us, it was the military," Nora said. "It was quick to break us out of that mold and got us to be more sociable because we had to. Dating boys, though, got rather difficult but it is still doable when we are on shore leave."

"Managed to hook one yet?"

"Not quite. I think that goes for both of us. What about you?"

"Getting there, but my job has kept me away from some of the rather good places I would

go to nab one. I will get one someday.”

“Most likely I would look at getting one after the war,” Dennise said. “If I get one, I want to make sure I am present if I end up raising a family with him.”

“I’m the same way. I want to have a family someday but I need to get a more stable job than this one.”

“Is that why you want to go back to our home town?” Nora asked.

“Yes it is, actually” Brenda said. “I also think it would be nice to find a hot guy on the beach in the sun, look at him seductively, and say ‘That hot guy will be mine.’”

All three of them laughed at that comment. Whether serious or not, it was good to have a nice laugh to break the mood after all of the conflict they have been through. The laughter soon settled down.

“Brenda,” Nora said, “can I ask you a question?”

“What’s up?” Brenda asked. “Is it about our home town?”

“No, not this time around. I was wondering if you heard about some sort of covert ops group that works for the Republic, the State, or the Empire.”

“Why are you asking me if I heard of a covert ops group? I would have figured I would be the one to ask you that sort of question, considering the circumstances.”

“Normally, you would when such groups report directly to the military for that purpose. However, I believe there is a group out there not affiliated with the military. Whether they are affiliated with our government or not, I do not know.”

“Why do you think there is such a group to begin with?”

“I have heard some strange reports prior to being deployed here by other fleets, including those from the State and the Empire.”

Now Brenda was curious and beginning to become inquisitive as her reporter persona started to take over.

“What kind of reports are you talking about?” Brenda asked as she was beginning to take notes.

“As our forces have been making their way into Kingdom territory, an oddity has been occurring every time. I’m not sure if you know how star gates work when it comes to air traffic controllers, but both the sending and receiving gates have to acknowledge the use and connections between the two gates before a wormhole is established to let a ship through.”

“I assume based on the fact that you told me this information that the oddity comes from the star gates and their air traffic controllers.”

“Indeed it does. The oddity is that while we can take control of one gate, the connected gate cannot be accessed while the Lykans are in control of the gate at the opposite end.”

“Yet, somehow, Republic and allied forces have managed to advance despite this fact.”

“That’s the thing. When our forces are finally able to use the gate to get to the next system, we find debris of enemy ships and an abandoned gate with dead Lykans on board. Someone or something managed to take them by surprise and make it where we can advance our forces through enemy territory but no one has taken credit for it. It’s only because the Lykans have managed to reinforce their positions in star systems such as this one that we cannot proceed any further where this could be investigated.”

“So, there is a secret ally who has been helping to advance our forces as long as our forces are able to secure the gate first. Does that sound about right?”

“Exactly. It must be some sort of covert or special ops team that is pulling all of this off and making it possible. What I don’t get is how they are jumping into the next system without

alarming the Kingdom's forces?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"The advancing forces investigated the gates and the wreckage of the ships before moving forward and securing a foothold in each system. Records from those ships and gates indicated that they were attacked by an unknown assailant, one they could not see or detect. There were also no records of any wormholes opening by use of a jump drive anywhere in the system. Whoever attacked them managed to get to that system without the use of a jump drive."

"How would something like that be possible?"

"I'm not sure, but I have my suspicions concerning how it might be possible. Bear in mind that these are only the theories of one person that happens to fit the facts."

"I understand. Go on."

"Allow me to analyze based on what we know so far. Since the enemy forces were attacked by an unseen assailant, this immediately makes me believe that this was done by a ship with an optical or complete cloaking device. This would narrow down the nations with this technology down to two: the Republic and the Empire. Neither the State nor the Kingdom has yet produced such a device."

"Would ECM and ECCM be able to do the same thing without a cloaking device?"

"Possible but the enemy ships made it clear that their attackers could not be 'seen,' not 'detected.' That is why I assume that a cloaking device was used."

"I see. Continue then."

"The other part of the attack that has my attention was the fact that there was no mention of laser fire at all being used. Apparently, the weapons used against the ships were railguns."

"That alone would narrow it down to the Empire. They are the only nation that uses railguns."

"I thought the same thing too but there is a factor that makes me think otherwise."

"What factor is that?"

"That factor is the reports of who boarded the enemy star gates. According to the logs, it was Humans, not Caminos, who boarded the gate and proceeded to take control of it."

"Humans were involved with the capture of the gate?"

"Yes. Therefore, either this was a joint operation between Imperial and Republic covert ops forces, or this is strictly a Republic covert ops force that is pulling all of this off."

"But the Republic doesn't use railguns on their ships."

"Not now, but a long time ago, they did."

"They did? How long ago was this?"

"When our ancestors came to this star cluster three thousand years ago, the ships they had used projectile cannons and missile launchers much like the Kingdom and the State use respectively. After a few hundred years, the Republic did away with those weapons in favor of railguns similar to what the Empire uses because they were cheaper to make rounds for compared to missiles."

"Why am I not surprised they went with the cheaper option?"

"It was the 'cheaper' option for a while. They eventually moved on to particle beam cannons, but eventually the Republic Senate passed the Resource Conservation, Preservation, and Recycling Bill in 4761 A.D. when the Republic start utilizing laser weapons so that rounds were no longer needed on ships. However, that does not mean that the designs of such weapons were abandoned. Most likely they are still archived in the military database. If the Republic government ever commissioned the use of those weapons again, it would not take much to make

them up-to-date with existing technology.”

“I was not aware of that fact.”

“Not many people would remember such details nowadays. However, as you can see, all this is theories that happen to fit the facts.”

“There is still one thing you have not explained in your theories, though.”

“What did I overlook?”

“You mentioned it earlier but do you have a theory as to how a ship managed to get to the system without a jump drive?”

Nora realized that there was indeed a hole in her theories. She came up with theories about the ship, its armaments, and who could be involved, but without an explanation of how the ship managed to reach enemy star systems without being detected, all it led to was towards a dead end for her theories. She sighed when she realized that fact.

“That is the ONE important part that I still cannot explain,” Nora said in defeat. “I still don’t know how it is possible to get to another system without detection and without using a jump drive.”

“Well, SOMEONE is helping us,” Dennise said. “As to how they were helping us, we will have to wait until we are able to secure the next star gate in the system. Otherwise, it does all of us no good.”

“Do you think that the Republic Research and Development managed to come up with an alternative faster-than-light means of travel?” Brenda asked.

“If they did, I wished they shared it with us,” Nora said. “It would make traversing across star systems a whole lot easier.”

“It would also mean they would be a lot less secure,” Dennise said. “While accessing star gates may be a problem right now, they also allow controlled access between the systems outside the use of a jump drive. If every ship in the cluster had such a drive that does not require star gates or crystals, it would have been harder to keep our borders secure.”

Nora and Brenda looked at each other. If such a ship existed, it made sense for only that ship to possess such a drive. Otherwise, every nation’s security would be in jeopardy.

“For now,” Nora said, “I guess we can put the theories on hold. If there is someone out there trying to help us, I hope they are working on the means to make it easier for us to win this war right now. I don’t know how much more of this conflict I can take right now.”

At that moment, the red alert klaxon started to sound throughout the entire ship as the intercom came to live in the Ready Room.

*“Rear Admiral Nora!”* someone said over the intercom. *“Captain Dennise! Report to the bridge immediately! We have enemy ships warping to our position!”*

“So much for lunch,” Nora said. “Brenda, get to your assigned escape pod just in case.”

“Kick some butt!” Brenda said as she got up and ran towards the door, exiting the Ready Room.

“I guess they couldn’t wait until we finished lunch, could they?” Dennise said as her and Nora got up from their seats and headed for the door.

“What can I say?” Nora said. “Their timing has never been perfect for any of us.”

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