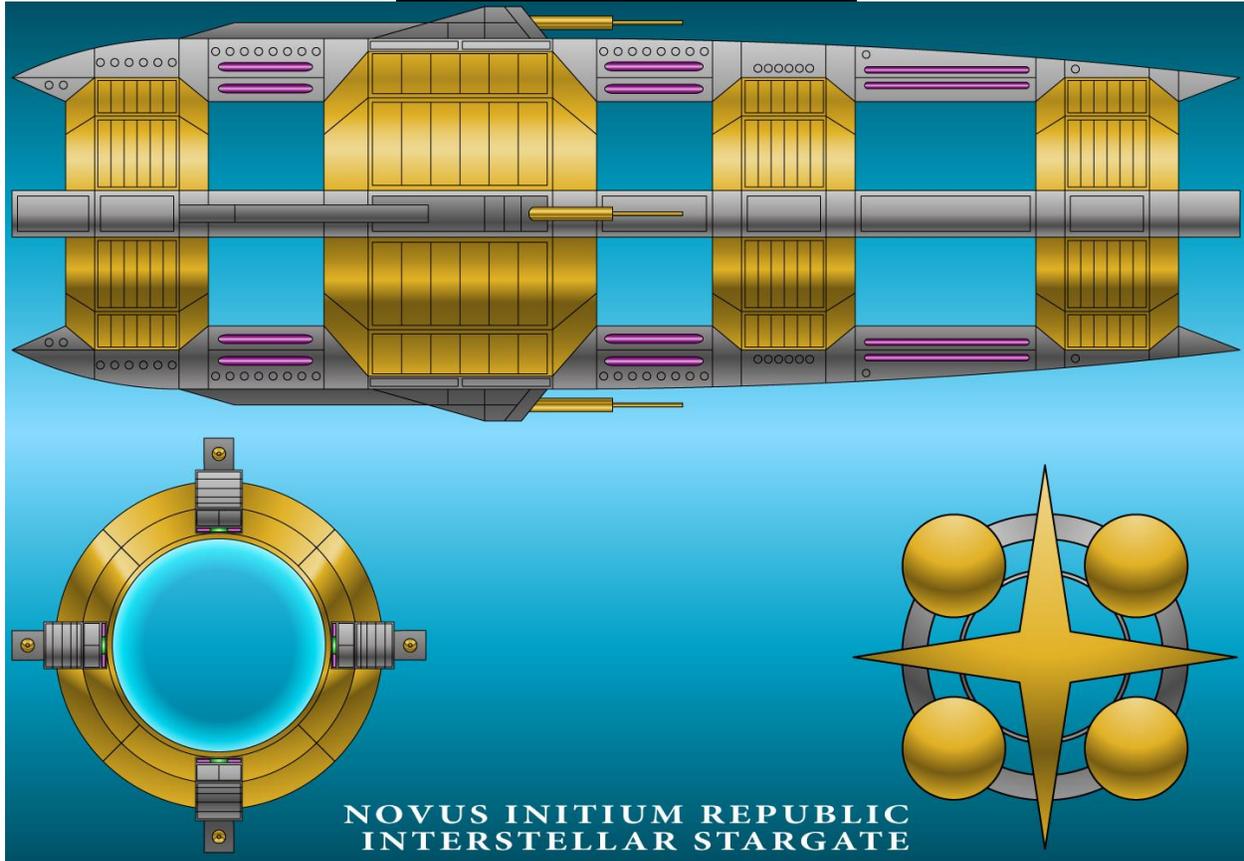


Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode III: The Siege of the Light



PART 4

*War Room, Republic Military Headquarters Station
Planet Luminaire Orbit, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
11:08am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“There hasn’t been any further activity since that last fleet came through?”

Supreme Chancellor Drew and the rest of the Joint Chiefs continued to monitor the invading Lykan fleets that had entered the Lumen System through the enemy star gate just outside the system. The Second Fleet that intercepted the first Lykan invasion fleet had destroyed all of the ships they were tasked to destroy. The First Fleet, located at the enemy star gate, had finished destroying the second invasion force that had entered Lumen. Both Republic fleets left their warp disruption fields active and managed to protect the generators from the enemy fleets’ fire. However, the enemy’s mobile star gate had not shown any further activity since then.

“No, sir,” Grand Admiral Mikey said. “It could be that the enemy is now aware of our tactical abilities in this star system. The fleet has detected transmissions from the enemy ships back through their star gate. It seems they are rethinking their strategy based on those reports.”

“Should we try to take control of their star gate?” Drew asked.

“The First Fleet has already done a scan of the enemy star gate. There are no control centers that are accessible to anybody except possibly maintenance crews. In other words, it

would appear this gate is fully automated and controlled from the opposite gate.”

“Then we can only hope that the *Templar* has managed to infiltrate the enemy star gate’s control center. Otherwise, we could be seeing a larger invasion force soon that would allow those ships with the virus to slip through more easily.”

“There is still the option to destroy the enemy star gate.”

“Not when this same gate will allow us to go deep into enemy territory, possibly near their home system.”

“You’re still hopeful of that possible scenario, I see.”

“Wouldn’t you if it brought about a closer end to the war?”

“Yes, I guess it would, but I’m also trying to be realistic about the situation.”

A beeping sound soon rang out within the War Room. This sound was not an enemy alarm but rather the sound of an incoming communications signal. Mikey looked at the terminal in front of him on the table.

“The First Fleet is contacting us,” Mikey said. “They are getting a low-level communication from the enemy gate. Wait a minute. The message is using a Republic encryption!”

“It must be the *Templar* or one of their infiltration teams,” Drew said. “Put it through.”

“The First Fleet is routing it to us, but it is text only.”

Mikey looked over the message first and started to smile.

“The message is from Colonel Blair,” he said. “His infiltration team has seized the star gate located in Lykan space. However, the Lykans have become aware of the *Templar*’s activities as they have shut down their operations long before they seized the gate. The *Templar* is looking into destroying the remaining ships that contain the virus but this action would expose the *Templar* to the enemy fleets and their battleship stationed next to the star gate. The *Templar* cannot send a communication to HQ due to how close it is to the enemy fleet that could track the message. There is also an infiltration team on Dellino III but there is no word yet on the success of their mission. He are awaiting orders that he will relay back to the *Templar*.”

“So the *Templar*’s activities are becoming increasingly apparent to the enemy,” Drew said. “If they do engage the enemy ships in an effort to destroy the remaining ships carrying the virus, they are going to quickly be overwhelmed by the remaining ships eighty-one to one. We may need to send the First Fleet in.”

“Speaking of which, the First Fleet is asking why there is a Republic communique coming from an enemy star gate.”

Drew only now just realized what had occurred after Mikey said that. By communicating through the enemy star gate, the First Fleet was now aware that there were Republic units deep in Lykan space. While this may have compromised the covert mission the *Templar* was on, Drew quickly realized why they did so.

“Go ahead and inform the First Fleet of the truth,” Drew said.

“You want me to tell them about the *Templar*?” Mikey asked, puzzled. “After all of the work and effort to keep the ship secret, why do you want to tell the First Fleet about it?”

“Because Trent knows that he needs backup and there would be a lot of questions if the First Fleet went through without knowing about that ship. He wants to avoid being attacked by friendly fire, not to mention the members of the military would start asking about how our forces got control of that gate.”

“I see,” Mikey said, realizing the truth in Drew’s words. “I will let them know about the *Templar*. My guess is that we will get a signal from the *Templar* or Colonel Blair as to when to

enter the gate. I'll order the First Fleet to be ready to enter when they get the signal and feed them the information we received from the *Templar* concerning the enemy fleet deployment and the layout of the system. We may have to rush to secure the other gates in the Dellino System to prevent enemy reinforcements from converging on that system. This is still going to be quite the gamble to be taking, sir."

"I know, but right now, securing a foothold that deep in Lykan space is more important than secrets. I want you to inform the Second and Third Fleets as well so that they know where the First Fleet is going. I don't want questions later from them when the First Fleet goes through the enemy star gate."

"Understood, sir, but you know Aja is going to have a fit about this."

"Maybe she will or maybe she won't, but even she would have to concede to the circumstances that we are presented with."

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*Lumen Star Gate Air Traffic Control Room, Currently Under Republic SAGATs' Control
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:09am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

"Whelp, there goes the 'covert' part of this operation."

Colonel Blair had sent the encrypted message through the gate for the Republic First Fleet to receive on the opposite end. His team had confirmed that the enemy fleet was engaging the First Fleet until the last enemy vessel was destroyed from their intercepted their transmissions. Blair sent the message after getting in touch with the *Templar*, via the portable communications system Sanders had also carried, as the stealth ship was positioning itself to take out the remaining enemy ships carrying the viral agent on board. The moment the *Templar* would fire, the enemy fleet will know they are under attack and proceed to engage the vessel. Once the enemy did so, Blair's team will open the gate to receive the First Fleet coming from Lumen.

His team had discovered that the mobile gate was instructed to self-destruct should the Republic try to board or take control of it. They managed to shut down that function so that it won't blow up when the First Fleet uses the gate.

However, the *Templar* had not received word about Benja's mission which was starting to worry him, but those thoughts would have to wait.

"Now that the message is out there," Blair said, "let the *Templar* know that we are ready to proceed in three minutes. We need to give headquarters a chance to explain about the *Templar* to the military."

"Understood, sir," a male member of the team said. "Do you need me to ask about Lieutenant Colonel Benja?"

"Not unless they tell you on their own. I thought we would hear something by now concerning their mission but I am a bit concerned that we haven't."

"It could be that it is taking longer than usually due to some unforeseen circumstances."

"Maybe that is the case. My concern right now is what will happen if that battleship tries to contact us? Sanders, are you sure they cannot access this gate remotely?"

"I have already changed the access codes to those used by the Republic. That also includes the gate that is in the Lumen System."

"My concern is if they tried to board this gate. We can hold our own in here for a while but we won't be able to hold off against a whole battleship-size number of troops. I don't know

why I didn't think about that scenario until now."

"I think it is because we have not been in such a scenario before," Sanders continued. "Before this mission when we gained access to the gates, the ships were taken out first before we attempted to board. This time around, it is the reverse due to the circumstances. All we can do is hope that the Templar begins its attack before the Lykans know that there is a problem."

"You're right, but just in case, have the internal barriers ready to activate at a moment's notice. I want to have some form of defensive barricade up with whatever is available to us. Let's make sure that we can defend this control center should in the event we need to."

"Yes, sir!" the team said in unison.

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*Lykan Research Facility Number Twenty-Two Rooftop, Northern Continent of Fortiudia
Planet Dellino III, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:10am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

"Take out the security guards on the walls."

Benja made sure that his whole team was on the roof after leaving Vistorio in the security room. They found the controls for the self-destruct system for the facility after they had tied up all the security guards they stunned including the guard that escorted the scientist earlier. They told Vistorio to wait seven minutes to set off the bomb to make sure that his team had evacuated the premises.

That was three minutes ago and Benja had just called for the dropship to pick them up. However, the guards on the walls might stop Vistorio from setting off the bomb if there was a time delay so Benja ordered his team to incapacitate them to keep them from doing so. The team quickly fired their tranquilizers at the guards when they were not looking at each other. They were all down within a minute.

Not too long after, Benja felt a push of air behind him as his visor identified the cloaked dropship above them. The drop bay doors opened up from beneath the craft and handles descended for the team to grab. Everyone grabbed a handle and they were quickly pulled into the bay. Once the bay doors closed, the team let go of the handles and deactivated their optical cloaks.

"Did everything go alright?" the pilot said over the intercom.

"I want you to move about a mile east of the facility," Benja said. "We have someone else on the inside that will be destroying the facility."

"Someone else? Who would that be?"

"I'll tell you about it in a moment, but I need you to hurry up and get us out of here before we are caught in the blast."

"Understood. Hang on!"

Benja and his team could feel the craft run and accelerate to their left. Benja only hoped that Vistorio actually goes through with destroying the facility on his own.

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*Lykan Research Facility Number Twenty-Two Security Room, Northern Continent of Fortiudia
Planet Dellino III, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:12am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“They should be away by now.”

Vistorio waited in the security room after Benja’s team had left. He locked all the doors to every room remotely except for those that Benja’s team needed to escape to the rooftop. Every Lykan scientist that was in the facility could not escape from their rooms and only a few of them he could see on the monitors realized the doors still would not open.

After Benja’s team had left, Vistorio quickly managed to route the self-destruct controls to a remote detonator device he had found and programmed. He knew the security room had a secret for such a scenario but did not tell Benja’s team about it. He wanted to disappear in the eyes of the Lykans but still be alive in that regards. He was making final preparations when one of the guards, the one that was in charge, started to wake up.

“What in the...?” the guard said, still groggy. “Where...what? Why am I tied up?”

The guard then noticed Vistorio at the controls.

“You?!” the guard yelled, waking up the other security guards. “How did you do knock us all out and tie us up like this?!”

“I had help,” Vistorio said. “It may be good that you all woke up when you did. I’m about to take my leave. So will you, but in your case, it will be towards the afterlife.”

Vistorio moved over to the far corner of the security room.

“I found two things of interest to me,” Vistorio continued. “The first is the self-destruct system, which is now tied to this remote detonator in my right hand. With one press, this facility will blow up in a flash.”

“You idiot,” the head guard said. “You would die too!”

“That leads me to the second item of interest. This security room is equipped with capsules designed like escape pods to protect those inside from harm from said bomb. Apparently, you guards view yourself more valuable than the scientists that work here.”

The guards soon realized that they were all tied up. None of them could get to the pods that were built into the room and started to panic, including the head guard.

“You can’t do this!” the head guard yelled. “We all have families! We’re still considered civilians!”

Vistorio pressed a button on the device that was in his left hand as a cylindrical pod came up from the floor. He entered the pod and was about to close the pod door before he turned and faced the guards.

“There were families on the colony world I came from,” he said. “There were families on each of those five worlds you all made me create that drug for! There were families your kind turned into living computer cores for your warships that are being destroyed every single day! Do you THINK that I would have sympathy for you and your kind?!”

Vistorio pressed a button within the pod that started to close the door.

“The answer to that question,” Vistorio said, “is NO!”

As soon as the pod door closed, Vistorio pushed the self-destruct button.

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*SAGAT Holding Bay, Republic Stealth Dropship, One Mile East of Lykan Research Facility
Planet Dellino III, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:14am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“Brace for shockwave!”

The pilot’s voice rang out through the holding bay’s speakers as Benja’s team grabbed

for anything they could hold on to. Suddenly, the dropship shook violently from a nearby explosion. After the initial shockwave hit, Benja got on his communicator in his helmet.

“Pilot!” Benja yelled. “Was the explosion from the research facility?”

“Yes, it was,” the pilot answered over the speakers again. “*Would you please tell me who it was that stayed behind to destroy the facility?*”

“It was a Vitam scientist. He was the one responsible for making the virus. This was his means of atonement.”

“*He sacrificed himself by blowing up the facility and all of the scientists in it? It would appear that he was a patriot after all.*”

“I guess so, but we have something else to report to the *Templar* that is not good news. Headquarters is not going to like what else we discovered.”

“*Wait a moment.*”

“What is it?”

“*This cannot be right. I’m getting a distress signal from what appears to be a pod.*”

“What? Did someone escape the facility in the explosion?”

“*Whatever it was, it flew from the site in the explosion and is near our position. Should we check it out?*”

“Affirmative. I don’t want to risk this operation because of a survivor.”

“*Understood. Flying that way now.*”

“How is it that place had escape pods?” Carlos asked. “It’s as if someone planned an escape for select people in the facility.”

“I don’t know,” Benja said, “but if Vistorio’s sacrifice was in vain due to one scientist escaping, I will not be happy.”

“Do we take them alive?”

“Yes, because while I still do not condone the death of civilians, I’m not about to have whatever knowledge this Lykan has fall back into the Kingdom’s hands no matter what it is.”

“*We are over the site,*” the pilot said. “*The pod appears to be intact.*”

“SAGATs,” Benja said, “prepare for drop.”

They all activated their optical camouflage again. The bay doors opened and they had a short drop to the ground. The pod ahead of them was cylindrical in design and was durable enough to knock down several trees creating a clearing for the drop ship. Benja and the rest of his team approached the pod slowly while the drop ship hovered overhead. As they reached the pod, Benja looked it over for a release valve or switch, provided it was not damaged upon impact.

All of a sudden, the hatch hissed open from the release of pressure from the inside. As the hatched opened up, Benja could not believe who was inside the pod! Benja deactivated his optical camouflage.

“*Greetings, Mister Benja,*” Vistorio said through Benja’s helmet translator. “*I guess you were not expecting to see me again.*”

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*Bridge, R.K.S. Gorulia, Thrasher-Class Battleship
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:17am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“What did you say?”

Head Director Jyinuro stood up from his seat. He was just told a recent report involving both the jump gate and the research facility on Dellino III. He thought it was some kind of cruel joke, but he wasn't laughing if what he was told was true.

"We are getting reports that we no longer have control or access to the Lumen Jump Gate, sir," the communications officer said. "Also, one of the stations in orbit over Dellino III has registered an explosion coming from Research Facility Twenty-Two. They are saying that the ENTIRE facility was destroyed."

"This can't be happening," Jyinuro said as he sat back down in his chair in shock. "Did any of the scientists or data survive?"

"No, sir. The facility and the data were a complete loss."

"How am I going to explain this Advisor Forneido? I hate to say it, but his theory of a Republic stealth force is true. While there is nothing that can be done for the facility, I want troops to board the jump gate and seize control of the gate again. If there are Republic troops in that gate, they could override the protocols and bring forces through the gate! The First Fleet of the Republic is already at the other end possibly waiting to come through!"

"Understood, sir. Sending the order for troops to deploy."

Jyinuro was starting to panic. Republic troops just destroyed a valuable research center that not only included their scientists but also the clones, the Human DNA information, the virus cultivation, and even the test drug to enforce the Lykans' rule over their slaves! If they lose the gate and a Republic fleet comes through, they'll be outgunned and outmatched! The only samples of the virus that were left were in the eight remaining ships that were still waiting to go through the jump gate. Those ships had to survive in order to create more of the weapon.

"Communications," Jyinuro said. "Send a command to the ships carrying the virus. We need them to move to a secure location to protect the remaining samples of the virus."

"Understood, sir. Where should I send them?"

"Send them in orbit over Dellino V. We don't need them near Dellino III if there are still any Republic troops in the area. Order the rest of the fleet into defensive positions. If the gate activates before we seize control we need to hold off the Republic fleet as long as possible."

"Yes, sir. Sending the..."

Before the communications officer could finish his sentence, the farthest vessel filled with the virus from the gate exploded, quickly followed by every ship that contained the payload directly in front of it. A high velocity round was seen going straight through each one of the eight vessels one after the other. Within a few seconds, all eight ships were destroyed.

Jyinuro was suddenly in shock at what just transpired. He did not know what just happened, only that the virus was now and suddenly completely gone!

"Sir!" the tactical officer said. "I have a reading behind the ships that were just destroyed! I have a ship of unknown configuration, battleship size!"

"Put it on screen!" Jyinuro said as he got up to approach the screen.

The screen focused on an area of space directly behind the destroyed vessels. It was hard to see but there was a long angular vessel that was dark gray shaped similar to an arrowhead. It had two wings mounted midsection both dorsal and ventral. Two angular pods were mounted on each side of the vessel. The front of the ship was split open, revealing a large barrel, presumably the weapon that was just fired.

Jyinuro's fur was on edge as his hatred started to get a hold of him.

"THERE you are!" he growled under his breath.

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*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Templar, Republic Stealth Warship #1
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:18am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“If they couldn’t see us before, they sure can now!”

Tora had to be the bearer of bad news. The firing of the heavy railgun was successful and the eight ships that contained the virus were destroyed. However, the power needed to fire a solid round through that many was more than what could also be supplied to the cloaking device. The optical cloak was gone and the reactors were struggling to make it active again after firing the railgun. This meant that the enemy ships could see them now. However, the ship’s design and construction materials still made it hard for enemy instruments to lock onto the *Templar* other than with their optics.

“Can we still jam their communications and targeting systems?” Trent asked as he ascertained the situation.

“We still can,” Natalie said. “Shields and railgun turrets are also still online.”

“Good because we are going to need all of them. Jam their communications. Let’s keep that battleship from organizing the remaining ships or calling for reinforcements. ECM’s on any of the ships you can use them on. We need to keep them from bringing all their firepower on us. Raise shields and get the shields boosters active. The moment our shields are up, we will be quite noticeable to the entire enemy fleet. Target the destroyers first with the railguns. They are the most numerous and can cause problems if they get too close.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Sheryl, get in touch with Blair’s team. Tell them to activate the star gate and let our ships come through. We are going to need backup to secure this gate and the star system.”

“Yes, sir,” Sheryl said.

“Sir,” Tora said, “you realize that once a Republic ship enters the system, the Lykans’ early warning detection system will go off and warn the rest of their forces in neighboring systems.”

“That is a risk we will have to take but thankfully we can prevent that from happening. Sheryl, make sure that Blair knows we will need three teams of SAGATs to seize control of the nearby gates from the Republic. If I’m right and the First Fleet is on the other side of that gate, they will have more than enough SAGATs to fulfill the task.”

“Yes, sir,” Sheryl said.

“I hate to sound like a pessimist,” Tora said, “but do you think the ships that would have the SAGATs would reach those connecting star gates in time before such reinforcements arrive?”

“I will be honest,” Trent said. “I don’t know but they need to be. The First Fleet is large and can handle this enemy fleet easily but if the enemy sends a lot of ships into this star system and head our way, that might be a different story.”

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*Lumen Star Gate Air Traffic Control Room, Under Republic SAGATs’ Control
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:20am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“Colonel, the *Templar* is engaging the enemy fleet.”

One of the SAGATs in Colonel Blair’s team had been monitoring the situation involving

the Lykan fleet that was still in position in front of the gate, the battleship located not too far from the gate, and the *Templar*. After the *Templar* fired its heavy railgun at the ships that was carrying the virus, the ship was now visible to the enemy fleet. Blair could only surmise that the power the *Templar* had to use to fire that one round through so many ships took a lot of power that had to be diverted from somewhere. That somewhere was the ship's cloaking system.

After Blair's team secured the control room and set up both barricades and defenses, they turned off their own cloaking devices and could see each other as well as talk without using their communications devices. This made working on the controls of the gate much easier to do.

"They are now jamming the enemy ships' communications and targeting systems," the SAGAT continued. "I can no longer keep track of them with the gate's onboard systems."

"Sir," Sanders said, "I'm getting a transmission from the *Templar*. They are requesting that we open the star gate and send word to the Republic First Fleet to go through."

"Well that is going to set off a lot of alarms in this system," Blair said. "The enemy can quickly call in reinforcements from other star systems the moment our allies come though."

"There is more," Sanders said. "They also want any ships carrying boarding parties of SAGATs to immediately head to every star gate in this star system to seize control. This will help prevent enemy forces from coming into the system."

"Looks like Trent thought the same thing I did. Alright, send a message through the gate and activate it to receive our allies. It's time for these Lykans to wish they never came up with this idea."

"I'm sending the message to headquarters now."

"Activating gate to receive mode," one of the female SAGATs said.

"Sir!" the observation SAGAT yelled. "I've got three boarding craft being deployed from the battleship! They are heading this way!"

"Looks like they know," Blair said. "How long till they get here?"

"In just over a minute."

"Alright, SAGATs! Put everything into automated mode! We'll let the Republic Fleet control it remotely from here. Sanders, keep that link open. We may need backup from SAGAT reinforcements once the Republic Fleet arrives."

"Yes, sir."

"Put the station on lockdown. We need to hold them off here for as long as we can. Those barriers should slow them down for a while."

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*War Room, Republic Military Headquarters Station
Planet Luminaire Orbit, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
11:22am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

"Chancellor!"

Grand Admiral Mikey was almost ecstatic when a transmission came in from the first fleet through his console.

"What is it, Grand Admiral?" Drew asked in anticipation.

"The First Fleet has reported that the gate is now set for our forces to transport to the Dellino System!" Mikey continued. "They have received word from Colonel Blair's team that the *Templar* has destroyed the remaining ships carrying the virus and need reinforcements to take out the remaining enemy fleet in the system. They are also stating that they need ships with

SAGAT boarding parties to be deployed to the remaining gates in the star system upon arrival and one for the gate on their end.”

“Why do they need one for the gate at their end?”

“The enemy battleship in the system has just deployed boarding parties to the seized gate to gain control again.”

“I understand. Inform the First Fleet to proceed through the gate with those instructions. Make sure they send in the destroyers first. Even the *Templar* will have problems with the enemy destroyers if they get too close for their guns to track. We are now commencing a deep invasion of Lykan space. It is time to turn the tide on this little endeavor the Lykans tried to pull.”

“Understood, sir. Sending the order now. Have we heard anything from the State or Imperial ambassadors since this whole thing began?”

“I have not checked with them yet, but with the current state of emergency, it has been rather busy. Let me give them a call and see how things are going with their governments as well as give them an update.”

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*Bridge, R.K.S. Gorulia, Thrasher-Class Battleship
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:24am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“What is the status on our infiltration team?!”

Jyinuro was starting to get rather frustrated. The boarding shuttles that were launched had connected with the star gate near the control center minutes ago but the gate is showing that it is still operational. The enemy stealth ship was deploying some sort of jamming field making communications garbled at best, completely cut off at worse. The enemy ship had also deployed some sort of electronic countermeasures against most of their fleet but not all. However, the enemy stealth ship had already managed to destroy two destroyers in the opening volley while those not affected by the ECM, for which the *Gorulia* was affected, were attempting to destroy the stealth ship. However, being battleship-size, the guns of a few cruisers and a dozen or so destroyers against the enemy’s shield boosting system was beginning to become rather ineffective. The more ships that are destroyed, the more ships the enemy can disrupt their targeting systems.

“I’m trying the best I can to get a response,” the communications officer said. “From what I can determine from the response, it sounds like the infiltration team is delayed due to the station being on lockdown. They are attempting to hack the system but they must be using some sort of program or a professional hacker to keep ahead of our team’s effort.”

“Are you certain we cannot contact anyone outside the system?” Jyinuro asked.

“I’ve tried, Head Director, but I cannot get a signal through. I can’t even get in contact with anyone in this system either. The only reason why I can get a signal to the infiltration team, or at least attempt to as well as receive, is due to our close proximity.”

“Head Director!” the tactical officer said, “I’m getting a reading from the gate! It’s activating! Something is coming through the gate!”

“What?!” Jyinuro yelled. “Not now!”

Jyinuro and the rest of his bridge crew watched as one end of the gate opened a wormhole. Within a couple of seconds, ten Republic Crusader-class destroyers had appeared within the gate. They quickly moved out of the gate, leading Jyinuro to believe more would be

coming through. However, while seven of them started to engage their destroyers, three suddenly veered away and warped in different directions. It did not take long for Jyinuuro to realize where those destroyers were suddenly going.

They were heading for the other three jump gates in the system!

Jyinuuro also noticed the gate was not closing, meaning the Republic was about to send in more ships.

“Forget reclaiming the gate!” Jyinuuro yelled. “Target all cannons on the star gate! I don’t care if we have to use optical targeting! I want that gate destroyed now before we are overwhelmed!”

“But what about the infiltration team?” the tactical officer said.

“If you can get a message out to them to get off that station, then do so, but right now our nation’s security is our top priority!”

“Yes, sir. Targeting the jump gate.”

“Sir,” the helmsman said, “I’m no expert but isn’t the gate heavily armored to withstand the gravitational pull of the wormhole it generates? It would take a fleet to destroy the gate!”

“A valid point. Tactical, target any of the wormhole emitters you can. If we can disable those, the gate won’t be able to sustain the wormhole.”

“Understood, sir. Changing targets to the wormhole emitters.”

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*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Templar, Republic Stealth Warship #1
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:27am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“Sir, the enemy battleship is targeting the star gate!”

Natalie’s sudden outburst shocked everyone on the bridge. Trent looked at the Thrasher battleship next to the star gate as its guns were starting to turn towards the structure. Trent did not know if they were just moving them for other reasons or if it was simple desperation.

“I thought we were jamming their targeting systems?” Trent asked.

“We are,” Natalie said, “but it would appear they may be using optical scanning to target the gate.”

“But the guns on that battleship won’t be enough to destroy the gate on its own by the time the rest of the First Fleet arrives. Check the angle on those guns.”

“Yes, sir. The angle of the enemy guns appears to be pointing at...the wormhole emitters!”

“What was that?! Can they hit those from their position?!”

“They can if they have a clear shot and can rely on optical targeting.”

The wormhole at the other end of the star gate showed some activity and another ten destroyers came through. They started moving out of the gate to engage the enemy fleet.

“Sheryl, tell those recent arrivals to engage the remaining enemy fleet!” Trent said.

“Natalie, we need to engage that battleship and get its attention!”

“Yes, sir!” Sheryl and Natalie said.

“Also, send a message to Blair. Tell him to disengage the star gate and raise the gate’s shields! Have him inform headquarters of the situation!”

“Understood, sir!”

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*Lumen Star Gate Air Traffic Control Room, Under Republic SAGATs' Control
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:29am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“They want us to do what?!”

Colonel Blair along with the rest of the team looked at Sanders while they maintained their defensive positions inside the control room door. Sanders was just as surprised to report the recent communication from the *Templar* concerning the recent change in plans.

Sanders reread the message.

“The *Templar* wants us to close the gate and activate the shields. The enemy battleship is attempting to target this gate’s wormhole emitters. If they succeed, the gate will be disabled and repairs without support could take a long while. They also want us to inform headquarters to stop sending ships until the battleship here is either disabled or destroyed.”

Blair did not know what to think. Right now they still had to deal with the Lykan infiltration team that had boarded the gate and was trying to get to the control room. So far, the barriers had greatly slowed them down and Sanders was running a counter-hacking program at the same time. They needed reinforcements from the Republic to force the infiltrators to either flee or stop their progress at least. Closing the gate and raising the shields would allow the gate to remain unharmed but it would also trap the infiltration team with his team and they would be forced to hold them off.

There had to be an alternate to this plan. Then Blair thought of something.

“I have an idea. You two.”

Blair was point at two of his SAGATs farthest from the door.

“Check the controls and see if the shields on that side of the gate can be raised without causing an issue to the wormhole.”

“Yes, sir!” the two said as they got up and ran to the shield controls.

They quickly looked them over before reporting what they found.

“They DO have directional shielding!” one of them said. “We can direct the shields like a dome in the direction of the battleship and its guns!”

“Will it affect the wormhole?” Blair asked.

“No, sir. It won’t affect the wormhole or any ships entering and exiting the gate.”

“Then do it! Activate those shields!”

“Yes, sir!”

* * * * *

*Bridge, R.K.S. Gorulia, Thrasher-Class Battleship
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:31am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“I’ve got all available guns trained on the emitters.”

The tactical officer took a few minutes to position all of the guns at the star gate’s wormhole emitters. Without the ability to use their targeting systems to immediately focus all available guns on a target, doing so by visual targeting took a lot longer when they must rely on their eyes to determine angle and range.

“Then what are you waiting for?” Head Director Jyinuuro said. “OPEN FIRE!”

The tactical officer fired all available guns at the jump gate’s wormhole emitters.

However, the shots were suddenly intercepted by the gate's shields between the gate and the battleship! Jyinuro was suddenly in shock!

"How is it that the shields are up but the wormhole is still active?!" Jyinuro asked.

"I've got a reading, sir," the tactical officer said. "They've only activated the shields between us and the gate. The rest of the gate is still exposed."

"This is not good. It would take too long for us to reposition for another attack. Order what ships we can to target the wormhole emitters! We cannot let more ships through the gate!"

"I can't, sir!" the communications officer said. "While we have been focusing on the jump gate, six more destroyers were taken out. The enemy stealth vessel has not managed to jam the targeting sensors of all remaining ships, but now I can't get a hold or maintain contact with any of them!"

"Are you saying we have lost control of our fleet?!"

"Sir, it is not my place to question you, but wouldn't it be easier to withdraw from battle and get out of the jamming range of that ship? We need to call reinforcements but we can't do so while that ship is jamming us."

"Sir," the tactical officer said, "we have more contacts coming out of the gate. I'm reading four Republic Guardian-class cruisers that have just entered the system. With our own cruisers unable to target enemy ships and the fact that we would have to resort to optical targeting, we are at a severe disadvantage. We still have those three enemy destroyers that have warped to the other gates, no doubt to try to seize them. If they seize those jump gates, we won't be able to get out of the system."

"What are you talking about?" Jyinuro asked. "This ship is equipped with jump crystals. We can jump out of the system without using the gates."

Everyone on the bridge turned to face Jyinuro with a look of shock on their faces.

"How can you NOT know?" the helmsman said. "Head Advisor Forneido ordered this ship's crystals to be used in the mobile jump gate! We don't have ANY crystals on board."

Jyinuro's eyes went wide when he heard that. He thought the ship could jump to safety at any time should things go bad. For the ship to NOT have that ability was starting to make him panic. He was a researcher, not a strategist! He sat in his seat, not saying a word. Everyone on the bridge realized that they might have lost him in his current state of mind.

"Communications," the tactical officer said, being second-in-command, "get those infiltration troops back on board. This gate is lost."

"Yes, sir," the communications officer said.

"Helm, once those troops are on board, set a course for the Ciscio gate. We need to secure that gate before the Republic tries to seize it. That is our best shot out of here."

"Yes, sir," the helmsman said.

The tactical officer looked back at Jyinuro who was almost catatonic. Either he had lost his mind or his fear of death by either Republic hands or Forneido's was too much for him to bear.

The tactical officer's station suddenly went off as another ship came through the wormhole. This time a Republic Paladin-class battleship came through. The vessel was larger and had far superior defenses than any Thrasher in the Royal Navy. It usually takes a fleet to break through a Paladin's defenses to destroy it, a feat still not yet attained as every time they got close the Paladin generally retreats or Kingdom forces do. There was no way a Thrasher can go one-on-one with a Paladin. They had to get out of this area of space and quickly.

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*Lumen Star Gate Air Traffic Control Room, Under Republic SAGATs' Control
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:33am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“They stopped?”

Blair looked back at Sanders after Sanders made that comment. The rest of the SAGATs looked at each other wondering what he meant.

“What do you mean they stopped?” Blair asked.

“The Lykans have stopped their hacking attempt,” Sanders said. “It would also appear that they have stopped trying to get through the barriers as well.”

“Are they returning to their boarding craft?”

“It looks that way. Considering a Paladin just entered the system through the gate, the enemy knows they cannot go toe-to-toe with a Paladin without a few more battleships or their entire fleet at their control. They must have recalled the infiltration team because of that fact. The enemy battleship may be retreating.”

“Wait, did you say a Paladin?”

“Yes, why?”

“That is unusual for one of those ships to come through before the rest of the First Fleet does.”

“Remember, sir, we did inform headquarters there was a battleship here. My guess is they don’t want to be messing around with destroyers and cruisers trying to take out the enemy Thrasher.”

“That is a valid point. At least their presence caused the infiltration team to withdraw. We can rest a bit easier now without them around but keep the lockdown in effect until the airspace is clear of Lykan forces.”

“Yes, sir.”

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*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Templar, Republic Stealth Warship #1
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:36am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“Well that didn’t take long.”

Trent reclined in his command chair as he saw the Paladin come through the wormhole and began clearing the gate. Normally more Crusaders and Guardians would come through the gate before a Paladin would come through but most likely it was due to the report of an enemy battleship in the facility.

“Sir,” Sheryl said, “we are getting a message from the Paladin. It is Admiral Trista of the R.N.S. *Norris*.”

“Put her through on audio only,” Trent said. “Make sure that voice mask is active. While the *Templar* may be known to the military now, our identities are not.”

“Sir, she requested you by name. It appears that they told the military who was in command as well.”

Trent was shocked by that fact, but he realized that it was probably unavoidable.

“Alright, put her through on visual,” he said.

Sheryl pressed a few buttons and soon a holographic screen appeared two feet from

Trent. There was no need for others to see the rest of the bridge which might still contain sensitive information. A Caucasian woman with long brown hair appeared on the screen and smiled once she saw Trent's face.

"Vice Admiral Trent," she said. *"I wondered what you were doing all of this time."*

"Nice to see you, too, Trista. To what do I owe the pleasure of this transmission?"

"Not to cut the pleasantries short, but we have a Thrasher that we need to take out in a hurry. Thankfully, we have a little surprise for them to keep them from warping away."

"Are you talking about a warp disruption field generator?"

"Yes. We are about to deploy it from our port side since the enemy battleship is on our starboard. Once we deploy it, we need to focus our firepower on that battleship. Together, it should be rather easy."

"Understood. We are tracking their infiltration team's boarding craft and they are aligning themselves to the Cisco gate. They must not have any jump crystals since they are resorting to using a star gate, but one of your destroyers that came through headed there to seize the gate. That battleship may be trying to get through the gate before it is seized and trapped here."

"Understood. Deploying the generator now. Let's get rid of this battleship."

"Roger that. Tactical, aim for the enemy battleship and prepare to light it up."

Natalie nodded in agreement since she could not reveal herself like the rest of the bridge crew.

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*Bridge, R.K.S. Gorulia, Thrasher-Class Battleship
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:38am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

"What in the world is going on?"

The helmsman was starting to become frantic as he was working the controls but was not getting the results he was trying to get.

"What is it?" the tactical officer said.

"The warp drive," the helmsman said. *"It JUST went offline!"*

"What did you say?"

The tactical officer looked at the readings on his display, and then went wide-eyed when he got the results.

"You can't be serious!" the tactical officer finally said. *"That Paladin has deployed a warp disruption field!"*

"Can't you target the generator and shoot it down?!" the helmsman said.

"The generator is on the other side of the Paladin! I don't have a clear shot at all!"

"I can't get the ship to warp speed with that active! How far are we from the edge of the field?"

"We are twelve kilometers from the edge of the field!"

"Are you serious?! Even with afterburners, it will take several minutes to reach the edge and clear it with a ship this size!"

"The boarding craft are now on board. I'm raising the shields and diverting power from weapons. Get to the edge of that field as fast as you can. Our shields should last long enough against that Paladin."

Warning sounds soon rang throughout the bridge. The ship suddenly rocked from fits to

the shield. The only problem was that laser weapons should not be rocking the ship. The tactical officer looked at his screen again.

“Against the Paladin,” he said, “we might be able to last, but against both the Paladin’s lasers and the stealth vessel’s railguns, our shields might not last very long. Helm, hurry and get us to the edge of the field, quick!”

“I’m already getting us there with afterburners at maximum!” the helmsman said. “I guess the Head Director didn’t think this was how this day was going to go, huh?”

The helmsman turned to look in Jyinuuro’s direction, only to see an empty chair.

“Wait, where did he go?” the helmsman asked.

“What?” the tactical officer said as he looked and noticed the vacant chair as well. “He was there a moment ago. Where did he go?”

“You don’t suppose he abandoned the bridge and we just didn’t notice because we were busy trying to save the ship, do you?”

“If that is the case, then where is he now?”

“Does it matter?”

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*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Templar, Republic Stealth Warship #1
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:40am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“What is the enemy shield’s status?”

Trent watched as the enemy battleship, now within the warp disruption field, attempted to flee the area with its afterburners running hot and its shields being fortified. Considering the ship had not fired a single shot at either the *Templar* or the *Norris*, it was a safe assumption that they had diverted power to their shields in order to survive long enough to escape the field and go to warp. However, between the lasers of the *Norris* and the railguns of the *Templar*, the first layer of shields may not last very long.

“Enemy shield strength is down to thirty-three percent,” Natalie said. “Even after diverting power to shields, they still won’t last very long.”

“The problem is that they have a second shield that will activate in just a moment,” Trent said. “After that, all they will have left is the armor which is still rather thick. What is the status of the heavy railgun?”

“Our last shot caused a couple of wires to burn out. Repair teams are already working on it and trying to get the railgun operational. Why do you ask?”

“There is still one weakness to the Thrasher design that I have yet to see them correct.”

“You’re talking about the weak armor plating between the hull and the engines, right?”

“You are exactly right. If we can nail one shot with the main gun right in that spot, we should be able to hit its reactor and destroy the vessel. Have the repair teams given you a time frame as to when those repairs will be complete?”

“It would take the repair teams ten minutes to have the gun repaired.”

“That will be too long. Can we fire the weapon without replacing those circuits?”

“I’ve never asked that but let me check with them real quick.”

“Do so, please. If we can finish this in one shot, it would make this battle wrapped up a lot faster.”

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*Shuttle Bay #2, R.K.S. Gorulia, Thrasher-Class Battleship
Lumen Star Gate Airspace, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:41am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“We are about to lose the first shield!”

Jyinuero walked out of the elevator and into the second shuttle bay as the tactical officer’s voice came on over the speakers to inform the crew of the status of the ship. Jyinuero knew in the back of his mind that even at full afterburner, the ship might not make it out of the warp disruption field by the time both shields were gone and the only thing left is the armor. Whether the bridge crew, who took it upon themselves to usurp his command, realized he was missing was something he no longer cared about. He needed to get off of this ship and a shuttle is a lot faster than the battleship and could clear the field in less time. The Paladin and the stealth vessel would be too focused on destroying the battleship to even take notice of a shuttle launching from the front of the ship.

The shuttle bay crew were bracing themselves for all of the impacts hitting the shields from the railgun fire from the stealth vessel. Some of them had looks of concern on their faces as they no doubt were not expecting to be in this situation today, much less possibly die in it. That is the life of a soldier, one who serves the military. This was not the life of a scientist. He did not have to stay here and die like the rest of the soldiers on this ship.

As he approached one of the shuttles, some of the hangar personnel noticed him and wondered why he was there. One of them approached Jyinuero.

“Sir, why are you here? Shouldn’t you be on the bridge?”

“The bridge crew can perform their duties in command of this ship without me,” Jyinuero said. “I am just a scientist and therefore I need not be here to participate in this battle. Is that shuttle prepped for launch?”

“It is ready for deployment but we haven’t received orders to deploy yet.”

“No need,” Jyinuero said as he pulled out a device from his pocket. “Command override. Open hangar doors to shuttle bay two.”

An atmospheric force field activated in front of the bay doors as alarms went off indicating they were opening. Jyinuero went past the hangar bay crew member that had first approached him and climbed into the shuttle.

“Why are the shuttle bay doors opening in bay two?” the operations officer back on the bridge asked over the speakers. *“Why is there a shuttle launching? Report immediately!”*

Jyinuero started up the shuttle’s engines after closing the shuttle’s canopy. The communication system inside the shuttle soon came to life along with the shuttle.

“Shuttle Alpha-Five-Seven-Nine, you’re not cleared for launch!” the operations officer said.

Jyinuero turned off the communications system. He did not need the permission of a mutinous crew to leave the ship. He lifted off of the bay floor and set his engines to full speed. The shuttle quickly flew out of the bay and into open space. The Thrasher was quickly falling behind as the shuttle was almost four times as fast and he was fast approaching the edge of the field. He turned the shuttle towards Dellino IV as it was the only other civilian populated planet aside from Dellino III. With the large number of civilians on that planet, he could disappear, hopefully from Forneido’s wrath.

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*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Templar, Republic Stealth Warship #1
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:43am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“Did you say a shuttle?”

Trent was surprised to hear the latest report. The Thrasher was still several kilometers from the edge of the warp disruption field but a moment ago, a shuttle launched from the front of the ship. The shuttle was not large enough to hold many people, only a few at best. Why it launched was still up for debate.

“Yes, sir,” Natalie said. “The shuttle is definitely faster than the battleship. Maybe it was sent out to try to warn the Kingdom of our presence here?”

“By now,” Trent said, “the early warning system would have already alerted the Kingdom of the Republic ships in this system. I’m surprised we haven’t seen any ships by this point.”

“Could it be that there is not such a system in place in this star system?”

“Considering how deep we are in their territory, they may not have needed one in place.”

“Sir, the shuttle has cleared the field. It is going to warp.”

“Where is it heading?”

“That’s odd. It is heading to Dellino IV, not to any of the star gates.”

“Isn’t that a civilian occupied world? Why is it heading there?”

“Maybe they have a communications system they could use to contact their command center. It is hard to tell.”

“We’ll worry about that another time. How are the enemy battleship’s shields?”

“They are dropping rapidly. The rest of the Republic fleet has taken care of the rest of enemy ship and have begun to focus fire on the enemy battleship. The enemy battleship is within five kilometers of the field limit.”

“What about the heavy railgun?”

“The repair teams report that it can be fired but it would have to be at fifty percent of normal power levels to avoid severely damaging the gun.”

“Will that be enough to punch through the battleship?”

“I cannot guarantee it will go all the way through but it might be enough to punch through the armor and hit their reactor.”

“It will have to do. Charge up the railgun and prepare to fire the round into the engine block.”

“Yes, sir.”

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*Bridge, R.K.S. Gorulia, Thrasher-Class Battleship
Lumen Star Gate Airspace, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:44am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“How long till we clear the field?”

The tactical officer was almost livid at the situation they were in. Their entire fleet was destroyed and now the entire Republic fleet in the system was raining laser fire on them with the stealth vessel firing its railguns. Their shields were about to go completely out and they would have to rely on their armor. They were within four kilometers of the edge of the field. The ship would have to be completely clear of the field in order to use their warp drive due to the warp

bubble that is always established around any ship, no matter what the nation was that uses that drive.

“It will be another three minutes before we are completely clear of the field,” the helmsman said. “We can activate the warp drive after that.”

“By now,” the tactical officer said, “the Republic may have seized all the gates.”

“So where do we go?”

“For now, head to Dellino III. They will have the orbital facilities we will need to make repairs and make contact with headquarters. We need to report the situation here, including that coward Jyinuro’s desertion of his post. At least we know he was heading for Dellino IV.”

“You think he is trying to seek protection from the governor there?”

“Right now, that is the least of my concerns.”

The tactical officer looked at the shield strength of the ship.

“The shields will be gone in a few seconds. Inform all hands to brace for damage to the armor.”

“Yes, sir,” the communications officer said.

As soon as the shields were gone, the impacts of the stealth ship’s railguns were more violent while the laser weapons started to heat the hull in numerous areas. However, with their shields down and their engines facing the enemy, the engines were starting to get most of the damage from the assault. If the ship can get past the field with only a few operation engines, it would still be enough to use the warp drive.

However, the loss of even one engine would slow the ship down making it take longer to leave the field.

The tactical officer’s console went off again, alert him to a new threat. As he looked to see what the threat was, it was in shock at what the alert was about. The stealth ship was about to use its primary weapon, the same one used to destroy the eight destroyers with the viral payload in one shot. If that shot managed to hit their engine block and pierce the reactor, the ship would be lost.

The tactical officer reclined back as he took a deep breath.

“Helm, all stop. Communications, send a message to the enemy fleet that we surrender.”

The whole bridge crew turned in shock at what the tactical officer said.

“But we are almost...,” the helmsman started to say.

“That stealth vessel is pointing its primary weapon at us and we saw what that did! We won’t make it and I’m not about to die like this! Do what I say.”

The bridge crew was reluctant at first but realized the situation they were in.

“All stop,” the helmsman said.

“Sending the surrender now,” the communications officer said. “I just hope they get the message with all of the jamming.”

“Let the rest of the crew know,” the tactical officer said. “No one is to put up any resistance if we are boarded. This operation is a failure.”

“Yes, sir.”

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*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Templar, Republic Stealth Warship #1
Lumen Star Gate, Dellino System, Royal Lykan Kingdom, Eastern Region
11:46am, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“They are surrendering?”

Trent was not sure if what he initially heard was true or if the message was that garbled. He needed confirmation so he ordered for the jamming to cease. Once the jamming was turned off, the message was loud and clear that the battleship was surrendering.

“I have confirmation, sir,” Sheryl said. “All ships have stopped firing.”

“Should I power down the railgun, sir?” Natalie said. “They have come to a full stop and they don’t have any of their weapons active.”

“Go ahead and power it down for now,” Trent said. “We will leave the boarding to the rest of the fleet since they have the manpower to do so.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Sheryl, inform Colonel Blair to prepare for friendly troops to board and take control of the star gate shortly. Our work here is done. Afterwards, see if you can get in touch with Benja’s team. They have not checked-in in a while.”

“The last part of that order might not be needed,” Natalie said. “Our dropship that was sent to Dellino III just warped out within the field. I bet they were not expecting all of this.”

“I’ve sent the message to Colonel Blair,” Sheryl said. “He confirms the order and is standing by. Lieutenant Colonel Benja is contacting us right now. He says it is urgent.”

“Put him through on the monitor,” Trent said.

Sheryl pressed a few buttons and a holographic screen appeared in front of the main monitor. On the screen was a team of SAGATs in the bay of the vessel with Benja in front. To Trent’s surprise, a male Vitam in what appeared to be in a scientist’s attire was right behind him.

“Lieutenant Colonel Benja,” Trent said. “Was your mission successful?”

“It was, sir,” Benja said. “The facility itself was destroyed by the hands of the Vitam scientist Vistorio who is right behind me. He was the one that was responsible for the virus development that was being deployed against our forces. From the looks of the wreckage, I would say that both the Templar and our forces were successful in stopping them. I am surprised to see that enemy battleship still intact.”

“They had just surrendered to our forces after their shields were gone. They were attempting to flee the warp disruption field which was deployed by the battleship *Norris*, which is why you dropped out of warp the moment you hit the field. A shuttle, however, managed to leave the battleship prior to it surrendering and fled to Dellino IV. We are not sure who was on board the shuttle. Hopefully the crew of the enemy battleship will tell us who it was and why they left. You said in your message that it was ‘urgent.’ The completion of your mission usually does not qualify as such.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t. However, Vistorio here did more than develop the virus that was being used against us. He comes from one of the State colony worlds that ended up being raided by the Kingdom years ago. After he was captured, he did a few projects for them in exchange for his life. One of those projects was developing an addicting and rather toxic drug designed to make the Kingdom’s slaves more subjective to commands. However, a pseudo-antidote was used to suppress the side effects on a daily basis and was deployed as an airborne agent through drones launched from orbital stations. If someone misses a day, the effects are harsh. After three days, they die from paralysis after their nervous systems shut down. He never developed a complete antidote.”

“That’s horrible! Is there a way we can save those worlds?”

“Sir, the five worlds that the State’s races came from are the worlds in question and we took out the stations with the pseudo-antidote. All of those people are now dead because of us.”

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