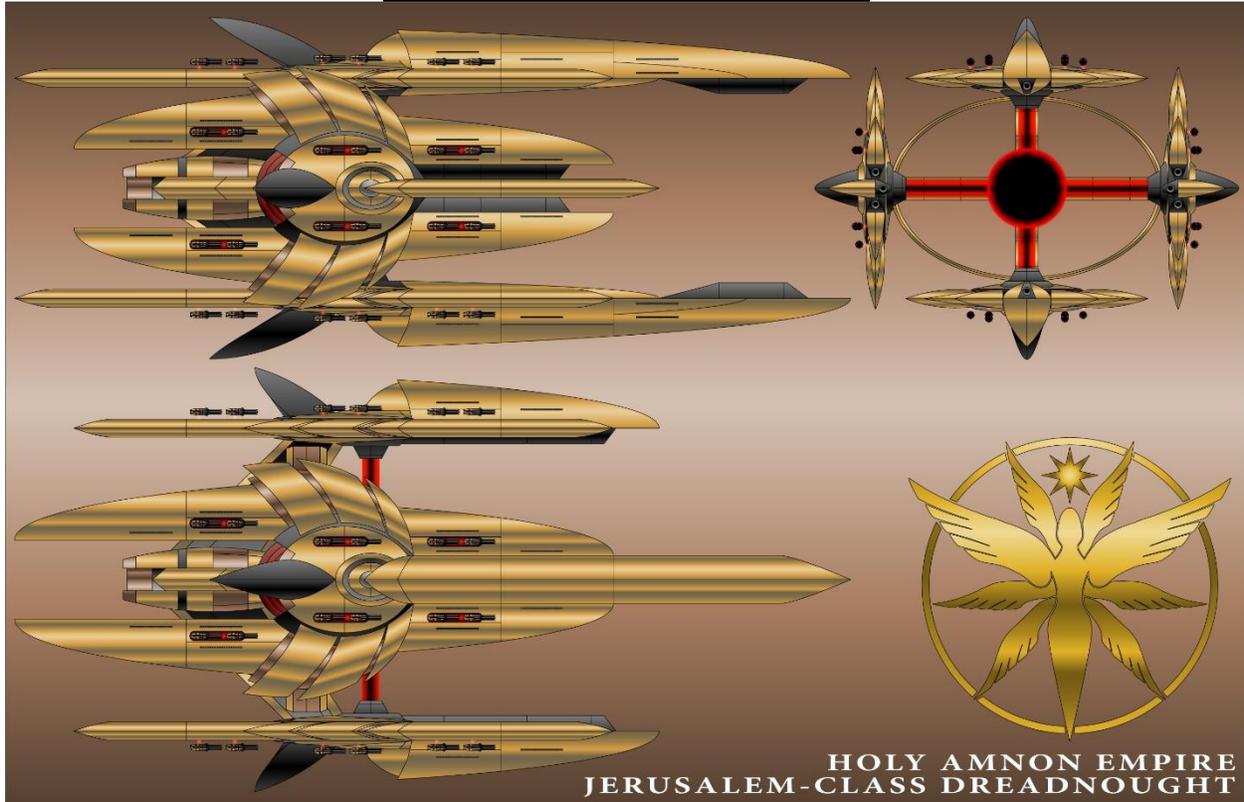


Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode VIII: What Was Left Behind



PART 8

Office of the Supreme Chancellor, Republic Parliament Building, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
3:24pm, November 21, 5434 A.D.

“I want to know how you got here, Nathan.”

Drew was beside himself. After completing the summit meeting that saw the signing of the Federation Charter, establishing a new nation in the star cluster, Drew was approached by this man who arrived after Drew got back to his office. He thought that the man came from High Sanctus or from the Draco Federation based on his religious-looking attire he was wearing. The last thing Drew would have expected was that this man came from the Amnon Empire!

Drew was trying to figure out how someone from the Empire managed to make it to Luminaire when the field was still active around the Southern Region.

“I can only assume you are asking because of the gravitational field that separates what you call the Southern Region from the rest of the star cluster, correct?” Nathan asked.

“That was my thought, yes,” Drew said. “The field has prevented any known nation in the cluster on this side of it from reaching that region for more than three thousand years.”

“And yet, you are able to now with a piece of technology that is not hindered by those fields from what has been observed. Very impressive. However, there are two misconceptions about the gravitational fields in question.”

“Which are?”

“The first is that the field is either weakened or has holes in it in several areas. The more generators that are found and disabled, the weaker the field gets and the more holes that appear.”

“Are you saying you got here through one of those holes?”

“Actually, no. The second misconception about the fields is that if you provide an opening through them, it is easy to get through. Your vessel that was spotted earlier this morning was too busy fleeing that it did not take notice of a shuttle launching from one of the cruisers. That shuttle was mine. I flew through the portal undetected since our shuttles are also stealth craft in nature. They are usually assigned to those of high prestige or position. I landed near your capital without anyone seeing it shortly after reaching this system.”

“Shortly after? You have been here for a while?”

“I have, and I must say that walking through the streets of your capital without anyone stopping and questioning me for my attire was quite surprising. I went to your Central Library to investigate more and to get a crash course in your history as well as your religions. Both topics were quite fascinating.”

“And what did that information tell you at least about the Republic since more recent events might not be found there yet?”

“If you are referring to this star cluster’s version of the New Unity Government, I am aware of them as well as the other nations that exist or existed. To answer your question, I am extremely impressed with the Republic’s history. It was not all pretty, but the lack of internal conflict and this devotion to conserving the environment is impressive. While I have my concerns about the multitude of religions in your nation, the fact that they all coexist on a single planet appropriately called High Sanctus without conflict is equally impressive.”

“I will not say that there have not been some blemishes in our history, though.”

“Yes, I read up on the Tenebris Dominion and the Draco Federation. While the Draco Federation retained the original religion that the cultists based their so-called faith on, the fact that there was a nation like the Tenebris Dominion that worshiped and ingested blood is very sickening. It was good that their leader and their grotesque cult were dealt with.”

“On that I can agree. The question I should be asking now is are you here to give us a warning, an ultimatum, or have a civilized discussion?”

“It was going to depend on what I found out. Once I knew, I was told to speak with the nation’s leadership. I was not expecting other nations, but you all appear to be here for a summit based on the different types of ships I saw in orbit.”

“The summit concluded a little while ago.”

“Pity. I would have liked to talk to you all at once if I could. I do have to ask what the summit was about.”

“It may surprise you, but it was to form a new nation between the existing nations of the star cluster. It is called the United Systems of the Novus Initium Federation. The Charter was signed a little while ago and will be made official in one week.”

“Impressive! I must congratulate you all on such a spectacular achievement!”

“The announcement will be made official in a few hours which was why I was trying to work on my speech.”

“My apologies again for the interruption, but I also have one especially important question that deserves an answer. How did you hear about the Holy Amnon Empire? We know you have not reached the Milky Way Galaxy unlike our presence here in the star cluster.”

“A being by the name Bilartini spoke of your Empire after he was found in the Southern Region by the same ship three of your cruisers attacked and whose portal you snuck through.”

“My sincere apologies for that misunderstanding. The ship called out the same name as the species who resided in the Southern Region. My forces believed that it was either one of their ships or their allies.”

“Yet you risked your own life to find out?”

“After the attack began, we noticed familiar markings on the vessel, particularly the language that was used. We saw the name *Marshal* on the vessel and knew that this could not be one of the Bilartini vessels. That was when I quickly launched in my shuttle and snuck through the portal your vessel had created.”

“So, the question is where do we go from here?”

“A better question is where is this being that goes by that name located right now?”

“He is with another fleet on assignment.”

“Meaning that you have a fleet now in the Southern Region. If that being is with them, he must be needing some help to keep the field from collapsing completely.”

“Considering what your Empire has done, I cannot say I blame him. The last thing we need is for your forces to invade us and ruin everything we have worked for here.”

Nathan had a puzzled expression on his face.

“What kind of story did that being feed and deceive you with?” Nathan asked.

“Are you telling me that you are not responsible for the downfall of the New Unity Government and the enslavement of those that survived a thousand years afterwards?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a minute. Now I know there is a misunderstanding involved and I should not be surprised considering the source. What more did he tell you?”

“Take a seat and I will go over it with you.”

Nathan took a seat in one of the chairs in front of Drew’s desk as Drew explained to him everything about the Empire. He started with the civil war within the New Unity Government, the Amnon faithful’s involvement that ended it, the isolation, the enslavement, the quiz, and how the Amnon viewed the people that call the star cluster home. Nathan did his best not to interrupt or attempt to clear up matters until after Drew had finished.

“That was everything you were told?” Nathan asked.

“It was,” Drew said. “Do you have anything to prove otherwise?”

“This may be shocking for you to hear, but while some of that is true, the circumstances that happened are not what they are.”

“Such as?”

“Tell me, have you encountered some sort of mind-altering radiation?”

“Yes, though we have abbreviated it as MAR. How are you familiar with it?”

“While many records from the fallen New Unity Government were lost, there were some that were retained due to what was discovered. There was a scientist who was researching the crystals that were not on Luna when it disappeared. He was asked to continue more than a century’s worth of experiments. During his testing, he suddenly went mad and took the crystals. The last records indicated he went on a colony ship full of Hybrids and activated them. He was hoping to be able to return Luna back to the Sol System, but they were never heard from again. Well, at least until today when I read up on the New Unity Government that exists here. His last scan just after the disappearance revealed a form of radiation in his mind that was never discovered before. No one knew more about it until not long afterwards when the more radical Hybrids became violent after the colony ship’s disappearance. The same radiation was found on them and later Humans who violently reacted. It was quickly discovered on several worlds except for Amnon. My ancestors kept the violence away while continuously checking for that

radiation to make sure no one else was affected by it. However, no one knew where it came from or why. We believed it was an act of God that we were spared and that we needed to find a way to stop the civil war. What you were told as to how we stopped it was true, but the motives were not the same. It was either we stopped the war by removing the means to wage it such as the loss of technology or let it spread across the galaxy eventually engulfing our world as well.”

Drew was shocked by this information. There would be no way the Amnon Empire would have known about the MAR unless they were either told about it or they experienced it themselves. While the Amnon did perform such an atrocity, the purpose behind it was not as malicious as he had expected if this was the truth.

The question now was whether Bilartini was telling the truth or was Nathan?

“What about the isolation and the enslavement a thousand years later?” Drew asked.

“The isolation was for our own protection,” Nathan said. “We had so little information as to how the MAR as you call it was spreading or affecting people in those systems. We also did not know how effective our measures were which was why we had to continue to advance our technology and combat capabilities. This whole idea of enslavement was never on anyone’s mind when we came out of isolation. The idea was to help those that survived if any with becoming part of a society again. However, what you were told about how they managed to develop up to Medieval or Industrial Age was a lie. They were more tribal than anything, and they were still at war with each other. The MAR was still affecting them even after a thousand years. However, we managed by that point to find a way to remove the MAR from their minds. We did find the devices that were the sources of the MAR, but they disappeared through wormholes somehow before we could either destroy them or secure them. It took years to find them all and try to bring those affected back to normal. Unfortunately, their level of mental development was that of a savage and it would be centuries before their minds and those of their descendants would be developed enough to the same level as yours and mine’s again.”

“Then what about this bit about slavery?”

“I will admit that many were put into servitude to learn manners and etiquette as a start. It was not the best idea or the most positive one, but if they were brought into servitude from the start, it would help their redevelopment that much faster.”

“And the test?”

“Our Pope Emperor Peter the Second had hoped as did many that after a thousand years that their mental development had increased to a point that they may become full citizens of the Empire. Yes, it was a religious-based one, but it was a starting point for them when they were born. The percent that passed was higher than what you were told at eighteen percent of the population, but the Pope Emperor did not make a decree for people to wait another thousand years. Every hundred years, a mass test was done to see if anyone else was developed yet. Those results were lower unfortunately at nine percent, but every century since then the percentage has gone up. Almost a third of those that were enslaved are now full citizens of the Empire. We have not stopped their redevelopment as we still run tests to increase their mental capacities, but they do not have to be enslaved to have these procedures done. We have been looking at cybernetics as an option which we did use from the start when they were first found, but those were not used as enslavement tools in the beginning as you were told. We only use cybernetics now if a child’s development is not progressing as it should.”

“What about calling us ‘convicts?’”

“While we believe you are in a jail, it was not by our God. Luna being seeded with those crystals was no accident. It was deliberate, and the ‘jail’ was of the Bilartini’s creation.”

“Luna being seeded was deliberate?”

“When we were able to discover their observational posts, we discovered that they were where the MAR devices were coming from. One of those was in the Sol System near Earth, but we were able to detect traces of the crystal from that outpost. We also know that their wormholes disappear quickly, yet one did not that led back to this star cluster. The question becomes why? Why was that wormhole slow to fully close? I think the Bilartini wanted us here and to fight each other for reasons we have yet to understand.”

“Are you saying that they are not extinct?”

“Are you serious? We have not found one of their kind at all since we have been here. We have lost some ships using the tactics you have mentioned but we have not killed any of them. My Empire did not even know you were here until today, though we had our hunch when we discovered the barrier. However, we believe we found their home system, but we have not managed to penetrate it as the barrier that surrounds it is the same as the one that encompassed the region. We believe that if we take down the barrier that surrounds the region, it will power down the one that protects their solar system.”

Drew took a deep breath to let all this information sink in.

“I thought everything Bilartini said earlier was a lot to take in,” Drew said. “The only problem I see now is who to believe. Both of you have provided stories, but neither of you have produced hard evidence. In Bilartini’s case, he has provided a supposed motive for your actions which is why the MAR was used to force us to fight against powers that would use religion to subjugate others. I have yet to hear what you believe the Bilartini’s motives are in all of this.”

“Let us look at what it could be. You say that the MAR was used in instances here in the cluster to fight those who used religion as a form of subjugation. By telling the story they did about my Empire in conjunction with their actions, they were grooming you all to fight us. We came here after what they did to our brethren that caused the civil war in our galaxy. Once we took down that barrier and found you all, you would be ready to fight us and push us back to the Milky Way.”

“We had planned to do more than that. We had plans to destroy the gate you all used to get here, present you with an ultimatum to leave us alone, and even return Luna now that we have the means to do so.”

Nathan was shocked by what Drew said.

“I am surprised that you can return Luna,” Nathan said, “but I am equally surprised by the fact you told me your plans so readily. Why?”

“The being that calls himself Bilartini was surprised by our plans to send Luna back. He did not object to it, but it seems he was not expecting us to do so. It seems like the Bilartini as a race wants us to fight each other, but the question is why? If their motive is for us to fight each other, then what is their goal?”

“I wonder about something, though. Did this being tell you their history by chance?”

“They did.”

Drew proceeded to tell Nathan about the Bilartini’s history, the origins of the star cluster from another galaxy, and the genetic attempts to extend their lifespan which had disastrous effects. He also told him how they said the seeding of Luna was by accident, which Nathan scoffed at the notion, and that they needed successors to manage their technology and the star cluster in their place.

“If the Bilartini really are dying,” Nathan said, “why are they making us fight one another? I still have yet to see their motives in this matter.”

“It sounds like we need to get to the bottom of this and ask them ourselves,” Drew said. “Thankfully, we know someone who can answer those questions for us. However, there are two problems we face.”

“What are those?”

“If the Bilartini know that disabling those barriers would bring down their field, why have they not stopped you till now?”

“I valid point. So far, all they have managed to do is destroy some of our ships, but they look like they could do far more damage than what they have done thus far. They are holding back, allowing us to bring down their fields. If we are doing so more quickly than they had anticipated, that might be why they reached out to you all. Unless of course, they wanted you all to speed up in your preparations to fight us.”

“Either of those if not both can be the case. On the other hand, that leads to problem number two. That fleet that the *Marshal* is a part of is currently installing several planetary shield generators on the planet where the last field generator is.”

“Planetary shield generators? You have such technology?”

“Yes, we do. The intent was for this to slow you all down by almost two weeks as the shields the generators produce are quite powerful but would drain the generators over time if the energy is not renewed. This was the measure we were going to use to finalize the Charter, consolidate our forces to engage yours, and prepare to move Luna back to Earth. We also had plans to appear in both Sol to get the necessary calculations for Luna’s return and in Amnon as a show of force to present our ultimatum.”

“That would have also given the Bilartini the time needed for whatever they had planned. I still do not get why they want us to fight each other. Is this survival of the fittest and the winner gets their technology?”

“Maybe, but a race that says that they are not warriors and who lost much of their home territory before bringing the star cluster here I doubt would condone the use of violence based on their principles. No, they want us to fight, but I do not think that is their real goal for us. I think it is about time we got to the bottom of this.”

Drew suddenly remembered what Trent said earlier that there were observational outposts in the star cluster including in this system that Bilartini mentioned. If he were to contact Grand Admiral Mikey, they would know immediately. Drew also remembered what Nathan had said about the Empire’s ability to detect the observational outposts.

“Nathan,” Drew said, “can your shuttle also detect those observational outposts like the rest of your ships?”

“It was more designed for stealth transport, but are you saying you know there is one of those constructs here in the system and you have not done anything about it?”

“We were only made aware of its presence today, but we do not have the means to detect it. If I send any transmissions that could alert the Bilartini that we are stopping the operation, they may bring harm to my forces and possibly yours depending on their agenda.”

“Does that include coded transmissions?”

“So far as we know. They have had more than three thousand years to figure out and understand our communications systems. Wait a moment. There may be a way that they cannot intercept.”

Drew looked at his terminal for a moment to research other communications options at his disposal. He remembered that there was a laser communication system used for short-range transmissions as they were more secure than other transmission methods. The Republic relied on

this system to bypass their own jamming systems during the First Interstellar War and the laser communication system located in the building was both upgraded and tested in repeated intervals in case communications jamming occurred again. Since a laser beam system was a direct line of communication, it cannot be intercepted unless something was between the transmitter and the receiver. It was his best way to contact Grand Admiral Mikey.

Drew activated the system and waited for a connection to the military headquarters station in orbit. Mikey would have just returned there after the summit had concluded. A few seconds later, Mikey appeared on the screen.

“*Chancellor?*” Mikey said as he had a confused expression in his face. “*Why are you using the laser communication system to contact me? That system is generally reserved for emergency use only.*”

“This may be considered as such. I need a ship ready to portal to the Seventh Fleet’s location immediately. I need the *Marshal* to return here without delay.”

“*You only want the Marshal to return? Is something wrong?*”

“I do not have time to explain, but I want Bilartini brought here immediately. Some developments have been brought to my attention that I need him to answer for. Also, make sure that the Seventh Fleet does not activate the planetary shields yet until we have answers.”

“*Sir, if the fleet does not activate those shields or is waiting for word to activate them, the Imperial forces could arrive and engage our forces. With the standing orders to flee to prevent them from knowing our tactical capabilities, we could possibly start to see losses.*”

“Hang on a moment.”

Drew muted the transmission and looked at Nathan.

“Is there anything you can provide us to either keep your forces from attacking or possibly invite them here if needed?” Drew asked.

“Yes, though this may surprise your Grand Admiral if you tell him directly. Let me talk to him and explain the situation as well as give him an important code. It may get their attention and cause them to arrive there, but they will not fire or engage your forces.”

“Very well. At this point, it is our best bet to work this whole problem out.”

* * * * *

*Bridge, R.N.S. Marshal, Paladin II-Class Battleship (refit)
Planet S-009-13, S-009 System, Southern Region
3:39pm, November 21, 5434 A.D.*

“Did you say a Paladin just arrived?”

For several minutes, Trent and Shibuya had a make out session until the moment passed. Both were embarrassed by their sudden actions that it was hard for them to get the words out. They eventually started to talk more about their feelings and their lack of companionship as of late. Trent was able to talk more about his life including his “brainy” daughter, Amarria.

Trent had kept on eye on the time so that he knew when the operation was nearing completion and when he needed to return to the bridge. It was not that he did not enjoy Shibuya’s company, far from it, but he did not want to cause trouble for either of them or have his crew start spreading rumors about them.

With less than ten minutes remaining in the hour that was given to set up the planetary shield generators, Captain Dani’s voice rang out over the intercom in the Ready Room. A portal was opening behind the *Marshal* and the *Grimsson’s* location from the direction of Lumen. Trent

and Shibuya came out of the Ready Room onto the bridge to investigate. As they looked on the screen, they saw a Paladin Battleship coming through a portal. The portal closed right behind the battleship once it was through.

“Sir,” Sierra said, “we are getting a transmission from the R.N.S. *Paladin*.”

“THE *Paladin*?” Trent asked. “That is the Republic flagship!”

“Confirmed, sir. Grand Admiral Mikey wishes to speak with you in private. He is using a laser transmission to communicate with us.”

“Laser communication? Very well. I will take it in the Ready Room. Let me know when the operation is finished.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will go sit down at the observation seats again,” Shibuya said.

“Wait here for now,” Trent said. “This should not take long.”

If Grand Admiral Mikey had come all this way to speak with Trent that it could not wait until they returned, it must have been very important. If it had to do with Bilartini in any way, he would feel better knowing that Shibuya was not close to him. Trent walked into the Ready Room and locked the door. He did not want to risk Bilartini coming in if the conversation was about him. Trent made his way around to his seat behind his desk as his terminal showed an incoming transmission. Trent presses the button to accept the call. Grand Admiral Mikey appeared on the screen and looked like he was in his own Ready Room on the *Paladin*. His expression was that of both worry and seriousness.

“Admiral,” Mikey said, “are you alone?”

“I am, Grand Admiral,” Trent said. “Why have you come here from Lumen?”

“You need to cancel the operation and dismantle the shield generators immediately without Bilartini knowing what is going on.”

“Has something happened?”

“You are not going to believe this, but an agent from the Amnon Empire snuck into Lumen using a stealth shuttle through the portal your ship created this morning when those three Imperial cruisers attacked you.”

“Are you serious?” Trent asked in disbelief.

“I am. The agent took the time to look through our history at the Central Library before meeting with the Supreme Chancellor. According to this agent, Bilartini only provided us with what we consider are ‘half-truths.’”

“Can we trust this Imperial agent’s words? Does he have proof that Bilartini is not giving us the whole story?”

“He gave us a code to use to call the Imperial forces to our current location, but this code specifies that they are not to open fire on us. It is a code that is used to open a dialogue.”

“Are you saying we have the opportunity to speak to them peacefully?”

“Yes. We are to invite them to Lumen to discuss a peaceful resolution to the current situation. As insurance, if our forces do not return in two hours, the Imperial agent has given the Chancellor his blessing to terminate his life.”

“That agent is serious, but what does this have to do with stopping the current operation we are working on?”

“This agent believes that Bilartini’s creators who are still very much alive are planning something but the Empire’s advancements in the Southern Region is faster than they were prepared for. They do not know what they are planning, but it seems like this operation is for more their benefit than ours. That was all I was told since I needed to get here quickly.”

“I see. I will send a private message to both my Captain and Communications officer for them to contact the fleet as well as the Grimsson. I will have them make up a believable excuse, like technical difficulties due to the heat. What should we do with our guest in the meantime?”

“Keep him in the dark for now and for as long as possible. If he gets hostile, detain him as best as you can. I am going to send a signal out through one of your sensor probes to avoid immediate detection. That will bring the Imperial forces to our location.”

“If Bilartini notices the signal or the approaching Imperial vessels, I doubt he will remain docile for long.”

“I understand but do what you must to detain him when the time comes. Avoid destroying him if you can but do so if there is no alternative.”

“Understood. Let me get the word out before it is too late.”

“Very well, Admiral. I wish you luck.”

The transmission ended, and Trent took a deep breath. Today was not how he expected it to go, but with his history, when does it ever? Trent quickly typed up his message to both Dani and Sierra, making sure that the messages will appear small where only they could see it. He kept it simple: “Ordered to stop the operation, retrieve equipment, and need to provide excuse for delayed activation. Bilartini is suspect.” Once he finished the text message, he sent it out and unlocked the Ready Room door. He wished he could send it to Shibuya, but she was not at a station and Bilartini would easily see the message to her from where he was sitting. Now Trent needed to explain the call he received to the rest of the bridge officers, including the guests.

To keep Shibuya out of harm’s way, Trent typed a message on the terminal for her eyes only, explaining what is going on and to wait in the Ready Room for now. Once he finished, he locked the screen, got up from his seat, and walked out of his Ready Room.

“Admiral?” Sierra said as Trent walked onto the bridge. “We have received a report from the operation teams.”

“I take it they are almost done?” Trent asked, playing along.

“No, sir. They are running into difficulties due to the excessive amount of heat.”

“Are you serious? I just told the Grand Admiral we would be done shortly.”

Trent rubbed his forehead and sighed. He did not want to play into it too thick.

“Shibuya,” Trent said, “there is a private message for you as well. Could you let Grand Admiral Mikey know of our update when you get the message?”

“Of course,” Shibuya said. “He did not say what the message was about, did he?”

“It would not be private if he did.”

“Fair enough. I will go check it out.”

Shibuya walked into the Ready Room, the doors closing behind her. Trent walked over to his seat, trying to avoid eye contact with Bilartini.

“I have to ask, Admiral,” Bilartini said. “What did the Grand Admiral of your fleet need to say to warrant his trip to our position?”

Trent sat down in his seat to continue to avoid eye contact.

“He was informing me that the Federation Charter has been signed, making it official,” Trent said. “We were ordered to return to base after the operation is complete for the fleet to begin undergoing the necessary changes.”

“Did the Grand Admiral have to come all this way to deliver that message?”

“He does not leave the Lumen System often. This was his chance to do so and for him to see the Southern Region. I do not blame him for wanting to make the trip if it gets him out of the capital at least once.”

Bilartini remained silent after Trent said that. Trent could not tell from his seat whether Bilartini believed him or not, but for now it was best not to raise any suspicion. After a few minutes, Trent could hear Bilartini getting up from the seat behind him.

“Rear Admiral Shibuya is taking a lot of time to review and respond to a message,” Bilartini said.

Trent could tell he was becoming suspicious, something Trent would not have figured he would feel as a machine. Bilartini was full of surprises, and that was now beginning to worry Trent at this point.

“It depends on the message and how she wants to respond to it,” Trent said. “For all we know, it could be a personal matter that is affecting her. For now, she will come out when she is ready to do so. I did not think you would be impatient for her to return, Bilartini. Is there a reason behind that behavior?”

Bilartini did not respond. Trent stood up and looked at the machine whose facial expression looked like he was bothered. Bilartini’s expression quickly changed to a blank emotionless expression, but Trent knew he had hit a nerve or rather a circuit in this case.

“I have concerns with the delays in your operation, Admiral,” Bilartini said. “It is very inefficient and time-consuming to the point that Imperial vessels may arrive before the operation is completed. Is there a contingency plan if the Imperial forces arrive before it is completed?”

“You were at the meeting as I was, Bilartini. There was no backup plan if this one fails. If the operation fails, then it fails, and we will have to find an alternative in dealing with the situation. This operation is to give us enough time to muster our forces, but I have this strange suspicion that you have an ulterior motive for wanting us to set up the planetary shield system.”

A thought soon came to Trent that he did not consider before. Why are they setting up a planetary shield system to protect an interstellar shield system?

“There is also the matter that your creators can put up a field around an entire region of space, but they could not do the same thing to a single planet,” Trent said. “I did not think about that until just now. Do you have a reason behind that, Bilartini?”

Bilartini remained silent, this time for much longer than before. He did not have an answer so readily like the other times. After Trent asked that question, everyone on the bridge looked towards Bilartini who in turn noticed all the stares. Bilartini’s emotionless face started showing signs of cracking.

At that moment, the alarm klaxon went off.

“Admiral,” Glenn said from the Science station, “one of the sensors probes have detected an Imperial fleet approaching our position.”

Trent knew that they were approaching because of the signal the *Paladin* had sent discretely. It looks like the code worked, at least so far.

“How many?” Trent asked, not taking his eyes off Bilartini.

“I have a reading of twenty-one vessels. Sixteen match the cruisers, but there are four that are larger than the cruisers and the last one is larger still.”

“What is their ETA?”

“At their current speed, they will arrive in ten minutes.”

“Admiral Trent,” Bilartini said, his composure regained, “you must engage the planetary shield now, even if it is not complete. It will still buy you time.”

“That is not an option at this point, Bilartini,” Trent said. “The real order I had received from the Grand Admiral was to cease the operation and recover our shield generators and reactors. It has been long enough that none of them are connected and powered by this point.”

“Your Grand Admiral ordered this?!” Bilartini said.

Bilartini could no longer hold his expressions in check. His face was filled with anger and fear. He was clearly irate and no longer in control of his expressions.

“When we picked you up,” Trent said, “an Imperial agent snuck through our portal in a stealth shuttle, landed on Luminaire, and met with our Supreme Chancellor. This agent told him a different story. After their conversation and a gesture of trust, the agent gave us a code to contact his forces for a peaceful meeting. That is who is on the way right now as the *Paladin* sent the message through one of our sensor probes. We are going to resolve this peacefully. If you have a problem with that, you better address it now.”

“You would make peace with those that enslave their own and butcher another race?!”

“From what I hear, your creators are very much alive. The question is why they needed the additional time instead of us? You also have not answered my previous question as to why your creators cannot make a planetary shield.”

“I think I can answer the latter one for you, Admiral,” Glenn said. “The gravitational field redirects everything including light. If you put that over a planet, it is like covering it with a sun visor. You would cause the planet to get cold till it is like a planetary Ice Age.”

“Our planetary shields by comparison do not work the same way. Light and solar energy still reach the planet, but solid items and energy weapons over a certain power level cannot get through. The Republic is the only nation to develop it, and I can see where another nation who does not own any ships would want to use them for their purposes in defending themselves. You not only wanted to buy time, Bilartini, but you wanted to learn how our shield systems work for your creators to use. Now, however, we have denied you both.”

Bilartini’s eyes started to glow red, and Trent was starting to realize that Bilartini was no longer in the mood to ask questions. Now Bilartini needed to be restrained and fast.

“Computer...” Trent began to say.

Bilartini, however, had other ideas. He managed to rush Trent and grab him by the throat, rushing towards the screen. He pinned Trent against the screen. Trent tried to breath but was having a difficult time doing so as he struggled to get free of Bilartini’s grasp. Trent was lifted off the floor by at least two feet.

“You are going to order your forces to activate the planetary shield now,” Bilartini said. “This is non-negotiable. If you do not, I will snap you neck.”

Trent knew that even if he could get the computer to engage the security field now, Trent would be inside it as well with Bilartini’s hand on his throat. He felt like he was about to pass out from lack of air. Suddenly, he heard what sounded like a laser rifle go off behind Bilartini. At that exact moment, Bilartini’s arm at the shoulder burned clear off. Trent dropped to the floor instantly, coughing as he removed the limp robotic hand from his throat. He saw Bilartini turn around to face is assailant and Trent was shocked to see who it was.

Shibuya was by the weapons locker, holding a laser rifle. She was obviously a fast learner when it came to Republic-built hand weapons.

This was Trent’s chance to contain Bilartini. Despite trying to regain some air, Trent took a deep breath.

“Computer,” Trent said, “contain Bilartini!”

“*Unable to comply,*” the computer said audibly. “*No such person or entity found on board the Marshal.*”

Trent and everyone on the bridge was shocked by the computer’s response while Bilartini laughed slightly and looked at Trent with his glowing red eyes.

“Did it ever occur to you why your computer’s sensors did not alert you my presence in the first place? I can evade your sensors the same way as the observation posts can!”

“How about you back away from him before I blow a hole in that thing you call a head?” Shibuya said as she took aim with the rifle.

“Not likely,” Bilartini said as quickly looked at Shibuya’s laser rifle.

Shibuya pulled the trigger on the weapon, but it would not fire. Shibuya, wondering what was going on, tried pulling the trigger again multiple times, but the weapon still would not fire. She looked at the display on the side and saw the word “lock” active on the device.

“Maybe you never figured out that we had a long time to study you and your systems,” Bilartini said. “I could command this whole ship if I wanted to, but I think it would be better for the Admiral to do so.”

Bilartini looked back at Trent.

“Maybe I should have used the MAR as you call it on you to begin with. It would have been so much easier than trying to convince you all, but we needed you all to fight while we made our final preparations. I guess we will have to make do with controlling you instead!”

Bilartini’s eyes began to glow brighter as Trent realized that Bilartini was equipped with a MAR projector in his head. Trent did not fear it, however. Instead, he laughed slightly.

Bilartini became puzzled as his eyes glowed brighter, preparing to fire the MAR at Trent.

“Why are you laughing?” Bilartini said. “Is this what you call being delusional?”

“No,” Trent said. “This is what I call ‘you did not study enough’?”

Before Bilartini could respond, a forcefield suddenly appeared around him. Bilartini looked around him, trying to understand what just happened.

“What is this?!” he yelled. “Your computer cannot trap me! It is not even supposed to be able to detect me!”

“We began equipping our ships and government structures with MAR detection systems,” Trent said as he got up off the floor. “The moment the MAR is detected, a forcefield surrounds the target until they are analyzed. You may have evaded detection under normal circumstances, but the moment the MAR’s radiation signature overpowered your evasion capabilities, the computer was able to detect it and entrap you.”

“I must say that was very clever of you and your engineers, but ultimately futile. Once the MAR dissipates from my body, your computer will release me. It is only a matter of time, Admiral, but when it does, I will kill you instead of controlling you. My creators will triumph in their plans, and neither you nor the Amnon Empire can stop it.”

Trent walked around the field towards the direction of Shibuya near the weapons locker. She stopped him for a moment to see that he was okay as he tried to pass her by putting her right hand on his right shoulder. Trent stopped and put his left hand over her hand, looked at her with a smile and nodded, indicating he was okay, but he could tell the lack of oxygen affected him.

“How touching,” Bilartini said. “I hope your so-called make out session in the Ready Room was worth it, because that will be the last time you two will ever do that.”

Trent without looking could hear the shock coming from most of the bridge crew, but it filled Trent with more anger than he already had. Bilartini could see inside the Ready Room that whole time which meant he knew about the farce Trent pulled with keeping Shibuya in the Ready Room to protect her. He removed Shibuya’s hand from his shoulder, went over to the locker, and pulled out another laser rifle. He walked up next to Shibuya and took aim at Bilartini.

“Come now,” Bilartini said. “Did you not learn your lesson the first time?”

Bilartini’s eyes glowed towards Trent’s laser rifle, but the laser rifle did not lock.

“What is going on?” Bilartini said in shock. “Why did that not lock?”

“The field prevents any form of electronic communication from leaving the enclosure,” Trent said. “At this point, however, I am done with you and your danger to this crew.”

“What are you going to do? If you drop the field to shoot me for even a split second, I can lock your rifle and kill you instantly.”

“You really did not do much studying about our shield systems, did you?”

“What do you mean?” Bilartini said with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Who said I needed to drop the field to shoot you?”

Bilartini was quick to realize that the field was only one-way. He could not get out, but that did not prevent anything else from getting in.

“Wait,” Bilartini said. “You need me. You want to know my creators’ plans, right? I can tell you what they are if you let me out.”

Trent changed the settings on the rifle to maximum and took aim.

“Your proposal is denied,” Trent said as he pulled the trigger.

The laser pierced the shield on one side, hitting Bilartini in the head, melting it instantly. The laser ricocheted against the field’s interior, striking and piercing Bilartini’s body in multiple areas before the laser lost strength. His mechanical body parts started to fall apart due to all the holes in his structure. What parts of him remained together leaned against the field, no longer moving at all.

“Computer,” Trent said, “can you detect anything inside the field that is made of metal?”

“Confirmed,” the computer voice said. “*Metallic components not consistent with Republic technology are detected within the suppression field.*”

“Do you detect any power sources?”

“Negative.”

“Maintain the field until further notice. Security, report to the bridge with a secure container immediately.”

Trent lowered his rifle and was able to calm down. However, he almost collapsed from the lack of oxygen earlier, but Shibuya grabbed him. Trent dropped the rifle as he was beginning to feel weak, but he was barely conscious.

“Captain!” Trent heard Shibuya yell. “Call a doctor!”

Trent began to phase in and out. The lack of oxygen and possible blood flow from the brain was causing him to black out. Eventually, he succumbed to it and passed out.

* * * * *

Bridge, R.N.S. Paladin, Paladin II-Class Battleship (refit)

Planet S-009-13, S-009 System, Southern Region

3:55pm, November 21, 5434 A.D.

“Is he alright?”

Grand Admiral Mikey sat on the bridge waiting for the Imperial forces to arrive when the *Marshal* contacted his ship a couple of minutes ago. He was given an update as to what just occurred on the bridge of the *Marshal* by Captain Dani. Bilartini was gone and Trent during the attack fell unconscious from lack of oxygen and blood to his head.

“The doctor says he will be fine,” Captain Dani said. “He should be up again in the next day or so if not sooner.”

“That is a relief,” Mikey said. “I never expected Bilartini to be that dangerous, though.”

“Physical strength, speed, computer hacking, and even the MAR was installed in him. He was a nasty piece of work.”

“Was there anything left that we could use to salvage any information?”

“The Admiral shot at Bilartini’s head first. He was not taking any chances if the head remained intact.”

“Understandably. However, now that we know the Bilartini themselves are very much alive and the story we were provided about the Amnon Empire is not completely true, we can proceed with talks with the Empire about co-existence and what to do with the Bilartini race.”

“They should be arriving momentarily from what our scanners can detect.”

“I have to ask something, though, and it is a private matter.”

“One moment then, sir.”

The screen showed that he was put on hold for a moment. Most likely, Dani was taking the remainder of the call in the Ready Room. It was better that way and out of respect, he should do the same. Mikey quickly got up and went to his Ready Room, to his desk, and linked the transmission through his terminal just as Dani came back. He could see she was sitting in the Ready Room, though she looked surprised to see that he did the same.

“What did you want to ask me, sir?” Dani asked.

“I wanted to ask if anyone knew about the possible relationship that Trent was having with Shibuya? I heard you knew about it somewhat.”

“Apparently, the Admiral and Shibuya after the operation began retreated to the Ready Room where they did make out. They kept it secret and discreet from everyone. It was not during the entire time, but Bilartini was able to see inside the Ready Room and during his attack blurted out about their relationship to the entire bridge officers.”

“Oh, no...”

“Because of the attack and the Admiral’s condition, no one wanted to ask about it. I will say that their relationship may have saved Trent. Shibuya heard the commotion and came out of the Ready Room. She saw Trent’s code to access the weapons locker earlier and shot Bilartini in the arm with a laser rifle, releasing Trent. Her quick thinking and response saved his life.”

“It is commendable. However, they went against my orders to wait until after the operation was over to pursue this matter.”

“With all due respect, sir, if they did, he would be dead and probably so would the rest of us on board. This time, them disobeying your orders should not be punished.”

“I will take your comment under advisement. For now, make sure that the Seventh Fleet regroup with the planetary shield equipment as soon as possible to the *Marshal* and *Grimsson*. Now that the Bilartini know we are on to them, they may accelerate their plans, and we still have no idea what that is. At least we know they wanted the planetary shield generators to protect their planets, but for what purpose with the Empire in most of the region I cannot figure out.”

“Understood, sir. We will jump back to Lumen once the rest of the Seventh Fleet rendezvous with our ships.”

“Just one more thing, Captain. I want you to know that I am a sympathetic man. If Trent and Shibuya want to pursue their relationship, I will let them, but they need to still follow orders and discipline during an operation. I hope you understand that when you want to pursue such a relationship as well if you not in one already.”

“I understand, sir. You may want to hurry back to your bridge. The Empire’s ships will be here in a minute and you are the senior officer present to speak to them.”

“Valid point. We will see you back in Lumen soon. *Paladin*, out.”

Mikey cut the transmission before getting out of his seat and heading back towards the bridge. He needed to be ready to greet the Imperial forces when they arrived. Once he got to the bridge, he headed for his chair and sat down. A few seconds later, twenty-one disks of light like the report from the *Marshal* said began to appear in front of the three battleships. Sixteen of the vessels that began to appear from the disks matched the Rome-Class Cruisers that the *Marshal* had encountered. Four of the ships that came through had two sections like the lower sections of the cruisers pop out of the disks above and below each other. Sections like the top of the cruisers appeared on the sides and were rotated ninety degrees. These ships were longer than the cruisers and their IFF signals identified them as Mecca-Class Battleships.

The largest vessel that appeared was massive with its sections spaced further apart. While the cruiser's top sections lined all four sides, the top and bottom sections possessed the cruiser's lower section attached to the front and middle of those sections. An oval-shaped ring connected underneath the sections at the top of each of the four pylons which connect those sections to the center module. While the singularities of the cruisers and battleships were the same size, the singularity on this massive vessel was nearly twice the size! The beams holding it place from the other sections were more prominent than the other vessels, but the designers looked to not want to risk the other sections if they were detachable should a core that size become unstable. This vessel's IFF came back as the Jerusalem-Class Dreadnought and was two kilometers in length.

"Those are some impressive vessels," Mikey said.

"We are being hailed," the Communications officer said.

"Put them through."

A small holographic screen appeared in front of the main screen. A Human woman who looked to be of Hispanic, Latin, or Spanish descent appeared. Her uniform was white with gold accents, clean cut, and rigid. She was wearing decorative shoulder pads that were holding a golden cape in place. She was also wearing a hat that reminded Mikey of the hats worn by wet navies on ancient Earth according to historical files.

The woman was immediately in shock upon seeing Mikey. It was obvious that she was thinking that she was expecting aliens to be on board these vessels. He could understand her surprise to see Humans instead.

"What is going on here?" the woman said. *"We were responding to a code from one of our agents to come here without combat. Why instead am I seeing three large vessels with several smaller ones in orbit over this planet and Humans on board one of them? Explain yourself immediately."*

"I am Grand Admiral Mikey of the Novus Initium Republic Navy. I am a descendant of Humans who came here on the ancient moon of Luna. Your agent by the name of Nathan provided us his code willingly because he has contacted our nation located at the heart of this star cluster. He wishes for the Amnon Empire to establish diplomatic conversations with the Republic and the other nations of the star cluster, including those who descended from the colony ship of beings you call Hybrids."

"Then it is true. You all are in this star cluster. My apologies, but I was not expecting to meet the descendants of those that disappeared here. I am Admiral Negrete of the Imperial Dreadnought Tel Aviv. It is an honor and a privilege to make your acquaintance, Grand Admiral Mikey. I assume you know who we are and why we are here?"

"Our Supreme Chancellor knows more of the details than I do. We do know you are here looking for a race called the Bilartini that resides in this region of the star cluster."

"We know where they are currently holed up now. We were attempting to disable the field generators in the region as they also appear to power the field that surrounds their home system. This system appears to be the last one."

"Yes, but we also know that they were trying to delay this location's deactivation by misleading us into helping them. Their intentions were recently made known to us a moment ago and our forces that orbit the planet are working on removing our equipment at this time. They appear to be interested in our planetary shield generators."

"Planetary shield generators? You have developed such technology?"

"Yes, but we are expected, and your agent has bet his life on our arrival."

"That is not surprising. I know Nathan and he only gambles if he is assured of his victory. I was told there were ships that can open portals that are not hindered by the gravitational field surrounding this region. Are your ships capable of that feat?"

"They are, but some of your vessels are larger than I had expected. We may have to ask for assistance from the battleship *Grimsson* that is here as it is the same size as your vessel. Give me a minute to make the preparations and we will be on our way. Both Nathan and our Supreme Chancellor await you."

"Very well. I await your signal to proceed."

As the screen with Admiral Negrete disappeared, Mikey took a deep breath. So far, the Empire was not hostile as Nathan had promised when the code was provided. Between that and Bilartini's actions on the *Marshal*, it was obvious that the Empire was only aggressive towards the Bilartini race because of their actions. Mikey was still pondering what their plans were and why they needed time to prepare, but hopefully their plans can be stopped before they are able to come into fruition.

"Get me in contact with the *Grimsson*," Mikey said. "I need their help getting the Imperial fleet to Lumen."

"Yes, sir," the Communications officer said.

Within seconds, another screen appeared with Rear Admiral Lewis on it. He looked a little perplexed.

"Grand Admiral Mikey," Lewis said. *"Today just keeps getting weirder, does it not?"*

"It does," Mikey said. "It does not stop there, either, I am afraid. We will be transporting the Imperial vessels directly to Lumen, but I will need your ship's help due to the size of the battleships and the dreadnought."

"Are we sending them to Lumen for a diplomatic mission?"

"We are, though I know a whole fleet arriving is going to look less than inviting. I am not about to argue with the fleet's flag officer on this matter either."

"Understood, but what about the Seventh Fleet? For that matter, what is Admiral Trent's current condition?"

"The *Marshal* will bring the fleet back on its own since we no longer have to concern ourselves with trying to flee. As for the Admiral's condition, he is currently unconscious in Sickbay, but the diagnosis is good that he will be up in a day or two, maybe less."

"Understood. He is a man with some bad luck in such situations, is he not?"

"I cannot argue that point, but he does get the job done when needed. Prepare to use the Portal Drive to return to Lumen with our guests. We must not keep them waiting."

"Understood."

The screen with Lewis disappeared shortly afterwards. Mikey looked over at his Communications officer.

“Inform Admiral Negrete that we are using our Portal Drives,” Mikey said. “They will enter the portals first after we send a message through letting our forces know not to be alarmed or open fire on them.”

“Yes, sir,” the Communications officer said.

“Helm bring us about and activate the Portal Drive to Lumen. Let us bring our guests home with us.”

“Understood, sir,” the Helmsman said as they pressed a few buttons on their station.

As the *Paladin* began to turn around to face towards Lumen and activate its Portal Drive, Mikey took a deep breath. He was concerned about Trent but there are more important matters to attend to.

Besides, Mikey doubted that Trent was going to be alone during his recovery.

* * * * *

Sickbay, R.N.S. Marshal, Paladin II-Class Battleship (refit)
Planet S-009-13, S-009 System, Southern Region
4:01pm, November 21, 5434 A.D.

“Mikey is on his way to Lumen with the Imperial Fleet.”

Captain Dani came down to Sickbay to check up on Trent to see how he was doing. He was in one of the beds in a medical gown with instruments monitoring his condition both attached to him as well as scanning equipment. Trent had a device around his neck to help with the physical trauma it endured when the Bilartini being grabbed his neck. If Bilartini wanted Trent dead from the start, he could have easily snapped his neck. That may be the main reason Trent was still alive at this point. The only reason Trent did not pass out immediately was the rush of adrenaline he had, pushing himself to remain conscious until Bilartini was dealt with.

The report she gave was not meant for Trent, however. It was meant for Shibuya who was sitting down by his right side.

“Thank you, Captain,” Shibuya said, her eyes still on Trent. “You realize you do not have to report to me yet until the Federation officially begins, right?”

“I know,” Dani said, “but I thought I should let you know what is going on.”

“I hope things can get worked out with the Amnon Empire after what just happened on the bridge a moment ago.”

“I am just glad that you were able to think and act quickly to what happened. That saved the Admiral’s life.”

“Part of me wished I shot Bilartini’s head from the start, but I did not have a clear shot with Trent on the other side of him.”

“You still got him to let go of Trent. That is better than the alternative if you did not. Do not be hard on yourself. Bilartini was full of surprises and that was our biggest problem. I wondered why the ship’s security did not entrap him to begin with. At least that got explained but it also meant that we could not get a good scan of him to know what he was capable of. My engineers are going over Bilartini’s remains to see how he was able to evade our scanners. Considering he can jump into a ship undetected, another one could appear inside the ship and disable us easily. We need to be able to detect them the moment they do so.”

“I will be honest. When the laser rifle I had was compromised, I almost considered spraying Bilartini in the eyes to disable them. I am glad I did not do so, or he would not have been able to use the MAR like he was going to do and become detectable.”

“That and Trent would have been hit, too. I hear that the smell is extremely potent.”

“Very potent. It is a sulfur-based liquid that smells like a combination of rotten eggs, garlic, and burning tires.”

“Oh, Great Maker! I am imagining that now and I am already feeling disgusted.”

Shibuya laughed.

“If you think that is bad, you should hear what it does when it hits parts of the body. It causes temporary blindness if it hits the eyes and vomiting when it gets in the mouth.”

Dani looked like she was about to gag just hearing those details.

“That is horrible!” Dani said. “Does that come out of your mouth?”

Shibuya looked at Dani with a shocked expression on her face.

“You do not know how Skunks spray?” Shibuya asked. “We spray from scent glands found in our anuses.”

Dani was now in complete shock.

“You mean,” Dani said, struggling with the words, “to spray, you have to...have you ever sprayed anyone if that is what is required to do so? Is that not very revealing?”

“My pre-Hybrid ancestors were not concerned about revealing their butts and spraying something if they were threatened to the point they need to. Our post-Hybrid selves however are a bit more reserved of revealing ourselves, especially if there was any cleaning afterwards involved if done maliciously.”

“And yet,” Trent said weakly, “you threatened to spray me if I stood you up.”

Dani and Shibuya looked at Trent surprisingly. Trent’s eyes were slowly opening as he was regaining consciousness.

“Trent!” Shibuya said as she stood up.

“Admiral!” Dani said as she went around to Trent’s left side. “How are you feeling?”

“Like someone put me in a choke-hold during a wrestling match and I lost,” Trent said. “However, I feel like I am going to vomit after hearing that description of the smell a Skunk’s spray was being compared to. If you ever spray me, Shibuya, I had better deserve it.”

Shibuya laughed a little bit as tears were coming to her eyes. Trent looked down and noticed the device around his neck. He soon looked around the room to get his bearings.

“I take it I am in Sickbay,” Trent said, his voice rather raspy.

“Yes, sir,” Dani said.

“I remember Bilartini or what was left of him collapsing in the field before I passed out. What happened afterwards and how long have I been out?”

“You have not been out for long, sir. You were only out for ten minutes or so.”

“Ten minutes and I am already in a bed in a medical gown with equipment hooked up? Our medical team were very quick it seems.”

“They wanted to make sure you were stable. They had figured you would not regain consciousness for a day or two. It seems their diagnosis was not accurate.”

“Maybe they meant to say I would not be up for a day or so. It is hard to speak and breath, though.”

“Bilartini put a lot of pressure on your esophagus and that is what the device is rejuvenating at the moment.”

“I see. I blame myself, though.”

“For what?” Shibuya asked.

“I should have been more suspicious of him when he arrived. The fact that the computer did not identify him as an intruder immediately was the first sign something was wrong.”

“I should have identified it as well, sir,” Dani said. “His sudden arrival and the Imperial ships approaching forced us to rush out without asking why he was not immediately detained by the security fields.”

“We also became too trusting of his story, but that was only fueled further when the Imperial cruisers fired on us without warning. We believed his story and did not stop to consider that some things were not making sense.”

“We all were fooled by him,” Shibuya said. “You cannot shoulder the blame squarely on yourself. We all should have asked questions of him.”

“Speaking of which, I think I heard his remains are being examined to find out how he avoided our ship’s detection system, right?”

“Correct, sir,” Dani said. “However, in the state his body is in...”

“I know. I did not leave much of him left to examine. If they find anything at all, it will be a miracle. What about the fleet and the Imperial vessels?”

“You must have regained consciousness after I told Shibuya. They arrived without their weapons armed and we monitored communications between the Imperial vessels and the *Paladin*. We got a look at what are called the Mecca-Class Battleships and the Jerusalem-Class Dreadnought that arrived. We have footage for you to review later.”

“Rome, Mecca, and Jerusalem, huh? Those are the names of the cities of importance to the Amnon Faith based on its origins of the three base religions it consists of. Are they still here in the system?”

“No, they are not. The *Paladin* and the *Grimsson* used their Portal Drives to transport themselves and the Imperial fleet to Lumen. We will be transporting the entire Seventh Fleet once they are finished dismantling the equipment.”

“I see. There is only one last bit of business then that needs to be addressed.”

“What is that, sir?”

“The fact that Bilartini spilled the news about the relationship between me and Shibuya as well as our make out in the Ready Room.”

Shibuya looked away from Trent with a look of shame on her face. Trent felt ashamed that their relationship was brought out in the open the way it did, but not of what they felt for each other.

“About that,” Dani said. “I spoke with Grand Admiral Mikey as he asked about that situation since it was mentioned in my report to him.”

“That is not good to hear,” Trent said. “What did he say?”

“He said that while he has no problem with your relationship and he understood that it was not your fault how it was brought out in the open the way it was, he was upset that you did not follow his orders to avoid pursuing the relationship until after the operation was completed. He did not go into details as to what is to be done for disobeying his orders. However, I did inform him that if your relationship did not advance the way it did, Shibuya would not have shot Bilartini to save you and the bridge crew if she did not feel the way she does towards you now. He said he will take that fact ‘under advisement,’ though I am concerned what he means by that.”

“He knows that it was either follow his orders and I along with the bridge officers would be dead or disobey orders and we would be alive. Whatever punishment he decides will be based on those facts, but my history and experience would play a factor in that decision as well. We will have to wait and see what he decides.”

“I feel like this is my fault,” Shibuya said. “I was the one responsible for kissing you in the Ready Room.”

“Yes, you were,” Trent said jovially, “but I do not regret that at all. Please do not be upset with yourself over the matter.”

Shibuya was nearly in tears again, but with a smile on her face.

“Alright,” she said. “I will not regret it.”

“What about the bridge officers or the crew?” Trent said as he looked back at Dani. “How are they taking the news of our relationship?”

“They are more concerned about your condition right now,” Dani said. “They were shocked by the news of your relationship with Shibuya, but they are not judging you since your feelings for each other are mutual. Right now, only the bridge officers know about your relationship, but it will not take long before the rest of the crew hear about it. Right now, they seem rather supportive of what you two have, especially with how you were after your divorce, sir. They were concerned with how down you were feeling.”

“I was quite depressed, was I? Hopefully, I will be back on my feet in a day or two and address any of their concerns. In the meantime, prepare the fleet to deploy once...”

Before Trent could finish, Dani’s personal communication device went off, indicating she got a call. Dani looked at it and her expression was both serious and curious.

“One moment, sir,” Dani said. “It is from Sierra.”

Dani accepted the call and put it up to her ear as she walked away a short distance, her back to Trent and Shibuya. Trent chuckled a little as he looked at Shibuya.

“I guess a Captain’s work is never done,” he said.

Shibuya chuckled, but they suddenly heard a gasp from Dani.

“Is that confirmed?” Dani asked. “The team witnessed it firsthand?”

Trent began to wonder what was going on as was Shibuya as they looked at Dani. Dani soon turned around with a look of shock and disbelief.

“Understood,” Dani said. “I will be back on the bridge in a moment.”

Dani hung up the call and slowly brought the device down to her side as her expression remained unchanged.

“What happened?” Trent asked.

“One of the teams on the planets witnessed a couple of wormholes opening on the planet, sir,” Dani said, her voice trembling. “They sucked in one of the planetary shield generators and its accompanying reactor they were working on breaking down. Both the generator and the reactor are gone, sir. The wormholes closed immediately afterwards.”

Trent took a deep breath as best as he could.

“Bilartini must have memorized and transmitted their positions if all else failed,” Trent said. “They got what they wanted. The question now is what are they going to use it for? One generator and reactor are not enough to protect a planet.”

“They may try to reverse-engineer it,” Shibuya said. “I would if I needed them later on.”

“A valid point. Captain Dani, as soon as the rest of the fleet have the remaining gear on board, take us back to Lumen. We need to evaluate the situation once we are out of this region.”

“Yes, sir,” Dani said as she saluted before leaving Sickbay.

Trent relaxed in the bed as Shibuya sat back down beside him. The species known as Bilartini needed time to prepare their plans but for what purpose? Why did they need the planetary shield generators? What was he missing to solve this puzzle? What in the star cluster was the Bilartini’s goal?

They needed answers to those questions, and soon before it is too late.

* * * * *