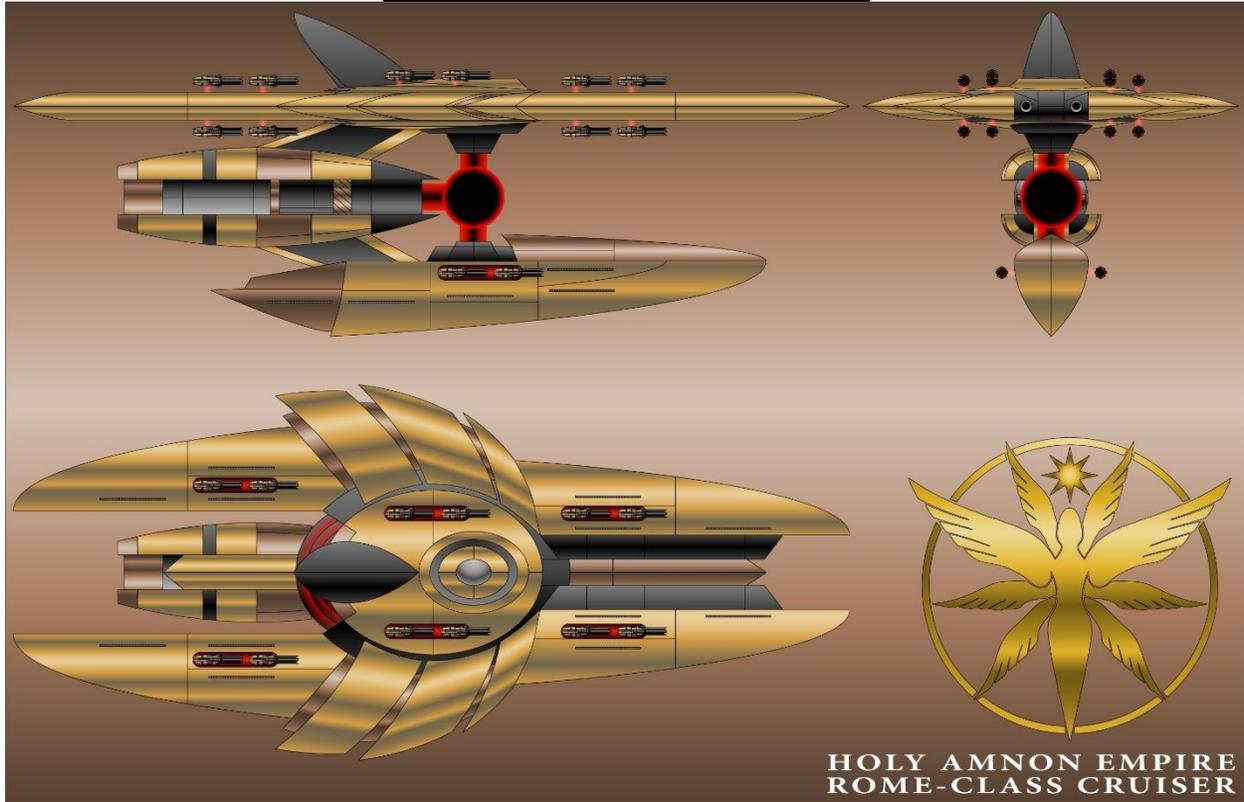


Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode VIII: What Was Left Behind



PART 6

Federation Summit Meeting Room, Republic Parliament Building, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
12:26pm, November 21, 5434 A.D.

“They are called the Holy Amnon Empire?”

Drew had received word during the day’s summit meeting that the *Marshal* ten minutes after jumping to the Southern Region on its own without the rest of the Seventh Fleet was jumping back with something firing at it. The red particle beams that were coming through were quite apparent to the normal onlooker among the civilian traffic. Thankfully, no civilian ships were in the line of fire, but civilians bearing witness to unknown assailants firing upon the *Marshal* was not the best thing for them to see after the surprise Dominion attack. News stations that managed to get footage of the *Marshal* exiting its portal with shots firing at it were already having a field day as to who the attackers were and why they were attacking the battleship. Those same news stations were trying to get in contact with Drew for comment, but with Drew in the summit meeting on its fifth day as they were trying to smooth things out involving the transition from independent nations into a single nation, he was unavailable to comment on anything. Even if he was, he was as much in the dark about what the *Marshal* encountered as everyone else involving who fired at the *Marshal*, much less why the vessel went on the mission on its own without its fleet to support it. He needed answers and he needed them now, which was why he ordered Trent to come to the summit as soon as possible without delay.

What Drew did not expect when Trent arrived a couple of hours later was who he brought with him to the summit meeting. Accompanying Trent was a female Skunk by the name of Rear Admiral Shibuya from the Union who was ordered as an observer for the mission. The other individual that accompanied them was completely unexpected. They were a near solid white Humanoid in both skin and hair tone with blue accents on the body suit. His gold-colored eyes were particularly haunting to Drew as this individual looked around the room at the leaders of the known nations and their security details. Trent had introduced him as Bilartini, an artificial lifeform of those that created both the star cluster, the Salire Purpura crystals, and the MAR. That information alone was shocking to hear, but the fact that Bilartini's creators were now extinct was even more surprising. Bilartini had mentioned that those responsible for exterminating his remaining creators were known as the Holy Amnon Empire, who also fired on the *Marshal*.

That alone raised more questions that needed to be answered.

"That is correct, Supreme Chancellor Drew," Bilartini said. "It may be best for me to explain who they are and how they relate to the events that have occurred to your Republic and the other nations whose leaders have gathered here today. My creators designed me to be a repository or database of their knowledge and history in the event you all would eventually reach the Southern Region. Therefore, any questions you may have after I explain the events that have led us all to this point I will be able to answer."

"Very well," Drew said. "Before you explain about the Holy Amnon Empire, maybe you can give us some insight about the nature of your creators. A brief history will suffice since we know a full history lesson would take much longer than we have in one day. Anything more detailed and elaborate will be directed to our historians to record and store to preserve their knowledge and history."

"I understand. I will cover the more important details first. My creators are known as the Bilartini, which they named me after. They felt that since I am the retainer of their knowledge that I should be named after their race for that purpose."

"Makes sense to me for the purpose you were built for."

"Maybe that was why we were attacked," Trent said. "The Empire knew that name and thought we were calling them specifically when I said it over an open channel."

"That on its own needs to be explained as well," Drew said.

"I will provide it in my report later. Let us allow Bilartini to continue."

"Very well," Bilartini said. "My creators' recorded history began more than two million four hundred and fifty thousand of your years ago. They began on a planet called Gural in the Firon System in the Bornia Galaxy. This galaxy is located...it appears my creators do not have the information on the distance of their native galaxy from the star cluster. However, based on their historical records, there appears to be a reason for this later. They reached the ability to travel to other worlds after they were able to synthetically create crystals forged from gravitons that their star system had in abundance roughly one million one hundred thousand years after their earliest records. Instead of using vessels capable of interstellar flight, they were able to immediately jump from planet to planet in other systems over great distances. They seeded other worlds with the crystals to create transit points for the apertures that you call wormholes."

"An interstellar society that never used ships to travel," Drew said. "Fascinating. It may explain why there are planets here with the crystals, but I am concerned as to why they created this star cluster."

"Over two thousand years after they explored multiple systems, a race that threatened their species arrived in their part of the galaxy. My creators were not fighters or combatants,

instead relying on negotiation and diplomacy to suppress any aggressive tendencies that may develop among their kind. However, this did not work on the Dri-En, the name of the species that invaded, as they were prone to conquest and the stripping of resources. If the Dri-En were to obtain the means of using the crystals to jump vast distances, they would be able to conquer the entire Bornia Galaxy at a far more rapid pace. To prevent that from happening, my creators accomplished two objectives. The first was to use the crystals on any planets the Dri-En occupied and jump those worlds to the outer orbits of distant star systems, freezing those Dri-En before their kind could reach them to rescue them.”

“I take it their second objective was to jump entire systems that were not occupied to form this star cluster?” Drew asked.

“That is correct. This star cluster would be far larger and the area you call the Southern Region would have been at the center of the cluster if all their territory was moved. This should provide you with an estimation how many systems my creators once occupied.”

Drew was almost in shock that the cluster would have been far larger than what it was now. He still pondered how entire systems were moved when only the planets were seeded.

“How were entire star systems moved?” Drew asked. “I thought only the planets were seeded with the crystals?”

“The collective energy of the crystals made that feat possible,” Bilartini said. “My creators were able to jump entire systems with the amount of crystals in each system all at once. It is like devices you call pattern enhancers when used in that method to focus on what is within their field. Giant wormholes the size of star systems appeared and jumped them all to this location. My creators did not care how far they went if they can escape from the Dri-En. However, there were a ‘anomalies’ that occurred in the process.”

“Such as?”

“Several asteroids, a few moons, and two planets were found missing that possessed the crystals that were used. While the moons and planets that went rogue were later found, the asteroids were not during that time. Much time passed before their fate was discovered. The asteroids had impacted on the moon of an inhabited planet on another galaxy, dispersing the crystals all over the planetoid. That moon is the one you called Luna.”

“That was how Luna was seeded with the crystals?” Trent interjected. “I thought you told me your creators were looking for a race to succeed them as caretakers for the cluster. This sounds more like Luna was seeded accidentally than intentionally.”

“While my creators contemplated the idea of recovering the crystals, they decided against it as they knew that they were not going to be around forever. If the indigenous lifeforms were able to utilize the crystals, my creators would judge them to see if they were worthy or not of their knowledge. However, over time, my creators had started to forget about the seeding of Luna as they decided to indulge themselves in other endeavors.”

“Nice to know they forgot about their ‘happy accident,’” Drew said. “What kind of endeavors were more important or garnered their attention to forget about Luna’s seeding?”

“My creators, while naturalists at first when it came to their views on genetics or cybernetics, were suddenly looking at the idea of using genetic manipulation to achieve longer lives to prevent overpopulation now that there were a limited number of systems. Some fanatics among them also viewed this as their chance to achieve deity status through science-induced evolution. While this showed promise among those that first had it done, it began a species-wide rush to begin their forced evolution. Unfortunately, my creators failed to see that excessive genetic manipulation would result in an eventual degradation of their DNA. By the time this

occurred, the damage was irreparable, and a decline began to show as their need for immortality resulted in the completely opposite effect. Infertility rates of newborns increased and any operation that corrected this was met with lethal results. My creators attempted to use cloning and artificial methods to create the next generation while finding ways to correct the issues that occurred. Despite their collective intelligence, they were unsuccessful. While they had lifespans that still far exceeded Humanity and Animality, seeing their race slowly creeping towards extinction filled them with regret and sadness for their hubris.”

“If they were regretting their actions, what prompted them to use the MAR on some of our people?” Drew asked.

“The MAR as you have designated it did not come until much later. When Luna transitioned into the star cluster, many of my creators were scared at first that they were being invaded until they investigated their ancient records and rediscovered what occurred when they came here so long ago. They saw promise in Humanity and a means to pass on their knowledge, but they wanted to wait until you as a species can appreciate their gifts of the crystals. They were curious about your origins as a species and were able to find Luna’s origins. They deployed a surveillance system to monitor your species that remained in your home galaxy and in what you call the Lumen System to study how both groups handle the sudden changes that occurred. The results and continued observations of both groups fielded mixed feelings on how they viewed Humanity. Thanks to Animality, you all know what happened to your ancestors that remained in your home galaxy until Animality’s ancestors arrived in the star cluster as well. That alone was an anomaly that my creators were not expecting as they did not know that some of the crystals from Luna were transported off prior to the moon’s transition to this star cluster.”

“They did bring us up to speed for the few centuries in-between. However, what was it that your creators saw that scared them or at least caused them to become concerned with our species, both Humanity and Animality?”

“They did not become concerned until after Animality arrived in the star cluster. Before their arrival, they saw the struggle both groups of species went through in adjusting to the changes in their environments here and in your home galaxy. The fact that both groups were able to survive Luna’s transition and developed into societies with the goal of surviving showed you all were capable of great things. However, the ones that remained in your home galaxy after Animality arrived in the star cluster took a turn that degraded their society soon afterwards.”

“What happened when Animality came here?” President Assefa asked, growing more concerned with Bilartini’s words as was everyone else in the room.

“What I am about to tell you is based on observations that were taken along with the historical texts my creators were able to intercept when they were accessed remotely between planets. According to this information, when the local law enforcement units arrived at the point the colony vessel that held Animality’s ancestors made its transition to the star cluster, the wormhole that formed in front of the colony vessel had already drawn the colony vessel in. It closed almost immediately. No escape pods from the colony vessel were found in the area, and their fate from the standpoint of the New Unity Government was unknown.”

“That comes as no surprise,” Drew said. “Even after so many centuries, it is not like the New Unity Government in the Milky Way had the means to know what happened to the colony ship any more than what happened to Luna.”

“That is true, but that uncertainty had its consequences once the facts as to how that happened became public knowledge once an investigation was ordered.”

“What happened?”

“The Hybrids of the New Unity Government viewed this action as a terrorist act against Hybrids as Humans were responsible for performing a ‘scientific test’ on millions of Hybrids. While Human elements of the government were quick to point out that this heinous act by a group of Human scientists was neither affiliated with nor endorsed by the government, more radical groups and individuals among the Hybrids did not believe the Humans. They intensified the anger and hatred towards Humans by pointing out that more Hybrids were lost in this act of illegal experimentation against their kind that was done intentionally compared to those Humans who disappeared accidentally on Luna. Escalating the matter further and not wanting to hear any more of what they perceived as ‘lies’ from the Humans involving the events around their lost colony vessel, the more hostile groups of Hybrids resorted to a coordinated attack on several Human-occupied government buildings on multiple worlds. Several Humans who have long since had more oppressive racial tendencies against Hybrids retaliated by bombing residential areas with high concentrations of or were completely occupied by the Hybrids. The New Unity Government had lost complete control of the situation as the attacks by both radical groups resulted in a civil war that lasted over eight months across every planet and system except one. The remaining star system where the civil war did not reach was the home of another growing faction within New Unity Government space that soon became involved and ended the war.”

“I take it that this faction would become the Holy Amnon Empire?”

“That is correct. In the system known as Asahel, formerly the HR Eight-Eight-Three-Two System of the old Human pre-interstellar designation, a large colony world known as Amnon was far from the civil war that erupted and for various reasons. The most prominent of those reasons was that the planet was the home of the largest concentration of religious followers in the New Unity Government, populated by those Humans and Hybrids that followed the Amnon Faith which combines elements of Christian, Judaism, and Muslim religions into their hybrid religion. The core belief of the Amnon Faith is that God had punished Humanity for their pride and the mutilation of worlds and planetoids such as the terraforming of Luna by taking away that moon. This ‘act of God’ forced Humanity to leave their home planet of Earth and struggle with the sin they had committed. They made the civil war that was occurring out to be another punishment by God for mutilating more of his worlds without following his divine Word. Only those on the planet Amnon, who prayed to God for the terraforming and blessing of their new home planet, found themselves spared of the civil war that surrounded them as no ship from either side of the conflict had made their way to their ‘sanctified’ world. The ships that were in orbit were commanded by Amnon faithful as part of their defense fleet.”

“They used Luna’s disappearance as part of their religious fanaticism? I feel dirty at just the thought that our ancestors’ disappearance was used in such a manner.”

“It was more than used in that manner. It drove those that believed in that ideology to commit a crime that would make you far sicker.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just because they were free from the conflict of the civil war, that did not mean that the citizens of Amnon did not have a hand in what was to come. Long believing that Humanity was corrupt, this belief was fueled further by the Hybrids’ creation by Humans, another abomination of their God’s creations. However, the Amnon faithful did not hold the Hybrids themselves responsible of that fact, instead welcoming them into the faith as equals as they would be saved by God’s ‘mercy.’ In the meantime, ‘agents of the Faith’ put themselves into positions to help bring down the New Unity Government in the ‘name of their God’ as His tools with their Pope’s blessing. This included infiltrating government, military, and research departments to plant the

means to disrupt the activities of those departments when the time came to act. Those activities included but were not limited to computer backdoors, sabotage of communications, and remote detonation of reactors on planets, stations, and ships. All of this required the transmission of a simple command that would reduce the 'corrupt' New Unity Government back to your Stone Age regardless if they were Human or Hybrid, isolating them and forced to start rebuilding their societies from scratch. Only the planet Amnon and those faithful to the Faith would be spared this 'holy act' along with their existing information and technology."

"They were going to take down a multi-planetary government through an act of sabotage and reduce them to that level of development?! That would be overkill no matter how you looked at the situation!"

"That was their plan, and no one saw it in time to stop it. The required command was given on midnight of the first of January in the year 2700 A.D. by your calendars. Almost immediately, every reactor self-destructed, causing nuclear fallout on every planet under the control of the New Unity Government including the original colonies that were established on Mars. Every non-Amnon vessel exploded regardless if they were military or civilian. The government was cut off from all communications with every colony world and agency. Hundreds of millions of citizens died in the initial devastation with many more in the following months from nuclear fallout. For all intents and purposes, the New Unity Government you were told about in your home galaxy was no more. Technology was no longer functioning from the electromagnetic pulse blasts of the reactors exploding, along with the deaths of many Humans and Hybrids with advance knowledge that would have helped restore society to their pre-civil war conditions. On those planets that were mostly spared from those effects, they found their computer systems were wiped, resulting in the shutdown of common utilities and amenities. Any debris from the ships and stations that exploded in orbit soon fell from orbit on all the planets they were at, causing an extinction effect like what happened to the creatures your ancestors called 'dinosaurs' on Earth millions of years ago. Any Humans and Hybrids that survived the cataclysm would find themselves few in their numbers, resorting to using their basic primal instincts and survival skills for them to survive their situation. Any knowledge of the New Unity Government, basic schooling, and even the history of your home planet of Earth would only live on in printed media such as books and by word of mouth. The former of these were in noticeably short supply and the latter was extremely limited due to the reliance of technological to teach newer generations of their history."

Everyone in the room was stunned by Bilartini's words. The fact that a faction was able to pull such an act off without being stopped or noticed in advance was unprecedented. Even worse was the fact that this was done in the name of their religion that believed that Luna disappearing was an "act of God." The scope of the events and the amount of death that occurred was something Drew tried to wrap his brain around these events, but he honestly could not.

Bilartini looked around the room, gauging the reactions that everyone was showing.

"Do you need me to pause for a moment while you process what I have told you thus far?" Bilartini asked.

Drew took a deep breath.

"No," he said. "We were seeking answers to many questions, and while you are answering them with your explanation, we have to accept the fact that this is now the history of those that reside in the home galaxy. We may not like what we are hearing, but if we turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to these facts, that ignorance could just as much be our downfall as it was for those in the Milky Way. We need you to continue. If we need to take a break, we will tell you."

“Very well. I will continue. The Amnon, the term used for those faithful who inhabit their planet are now calling themselves regardless if they were Human or Hybrid, felt accomplished in the divine justice they have brought to the ‘unfaithful’ of the New Unity Government. Not wanting to feel pride for their actions, they begged for forgiveness and continued to ask their God for his divine blessing in creating a new government that would adhere to his will for generations to come. It was soon decided by the Amnon that the current head of the Faith, the Pope Kimberly Thomas, would be made Pope Empress Kimberly the First, the first head of the new Amnon Empire and the Amnon Faith. Pope Kimberly accepted the position after deep meditation with God for one week.”

“And thus, another theocratical empire is formed,” Drew said. “I figured that the head of their religion was their leader of their nation. Please continue.”

“As the head of the new Amnon Empire, Pope Empress Kimberly the First began to establish the government based on the combined histories of those nations that were once ruled by faith. One of the first government bodies she created was the Cardinal Council, consisting of those that were nominated as heads of several government ministries, namely the Ministries of Education, Faith, Transportation, Defense, Commerce, and Internal Affairs, among others that would be created when needed. They are also responsible for the creation and enactment of new laws and ordinances that would be approved by the Pope Empress or Emperor. A new Pope Emperor or Empress will be chosen from this council as those who have dedicated their lives in service to the Faith are forbidden from having offspring. The military would be run by the Ministry of Defense who will select the Grand Admiral of the Fleet to follow the will of the Council and the orders of the Pope Empress or Emperor. A Theological Court and Civil Court were also created to handle religious and civil cases, respectively.”

“I have read about such nations in Earth’s past a long time ago, but the level of governmental structure is not what I expected.”

“It is far more religiously governed that my nation is or ever was,” Prime Minister Veonis said. “My ancestors knew that combining the positions of both the leader of the nation and of the faith was too much power for an individual to wield. It looks like the Amnon were able to make it work for them better than I would have imagined.”

“Please tell me you are not admiring the Amnon and their actions, Veonis?” Emperor Dicarini asked.

“Not at all but bear in mind how long ago this occurred. They have lasted far longer as a society than the former Kingdom ever had or even the Tenebris Dominion. They made it work whether we like it or not when you consider that their empire is still around.”

“Let us let Bilartini continue,” Drew said. “There may be more to this Empire that we do not know yet. Please continue, Bilartini.”

“Understood. In case you are wondering how life was like for the average Imperial citizen, many of the rights held by the New Unity Government were retained, but several were deemed destructive and were not implemented. These included the right to free speech, the right to bear arms, and the right to vote. Much of these would be detrimental to the Faith and would result in the ‘chaos’ that enveloped the New Unity Government. Citizens of the Amnon Empire would not be segregated between Humans and Hybrids as they are all viewed as Amnon and as God’s creations. The Council also did not want a repeat of the New Unity Government’s civil war that was caused by their differences. However, to prevent the dilution or mixing of Human and Hybrid DNA, there would be no interracial marriages between them. All marriages would be held in a church or chapel of God. Practices such as divorces, abortions, and same-sex marriages

were illegal and an affront to God and his Word. The punishment for any of these the removal of their rights and their status reduced to that of a slave of the Empire. Their reproductive organs were also removed in a manner that could not be undone.”

“Great Maker!” Drew said. “That is horrible!”

“I feel you on that one, Chancellor,” Assefa said. “I also know that while we do not have such laws involving interspecies marriages because we do not want to be oppressive to our people, I feel a bit similar in their notion of interspecies marriages. Such marriages have resulted in...problems in my nation for the individuals involved and their offspring.”

“We will have to discuss that matter in further detail later,” Drew said. “For now, as sick as it makes me right now, let us let Bilartini continue.”

As Drew said that, he noticed that Trent and Shibuya both had looks of concern on their faces. Trent took a quick look at Shibuya who shared his glance and worry as well. Drew needed to talk to Trent anyway concerning how he knew where to look for Bilartini on their mission, but it looks like something happened between those two that has resulted in an unexpected and unforeseen connection. This type of discussion may require Assefa to hear as well, but there were more pressing matters to listen to right now.

“There is another aspect of Imperial culture that was different compared to the New Unity Government culture,” Bilartini continued. “It is their method of entertainment. With religion being the forefront of the Imperial culture including daily prayer, most forms of entertainment would now come from art and theater depicting scriptural references, though this took them time to develop and create their own. Anything that is televised through monitors and terminals aside from news programs were generally the reading of scriptures from the old books of the Faith’s base religions. They were often told in a way as to not promote revolution or rebellion among the population unless used to reflect on punishment for not following the laws of the Empire. Music is also created through organs, pianos, string instruments, horns, and vocals. Other instruments can be used but only when the music calls for their use.”

“Sounds boring if you ask me,” Drew said.

“I agree,” Assefa said. “I wonder how they agreed to such a cultural lifestyle like that?”

Veonis cleared his throat as did Miya. Drew and Assefa looked at them with puzzled expressions before they realized that both the Lykans and the former Tenebris Dominion had such lifestyles and cultures until recently.

“Speaking from experience,” Miya said, “if a culture was raised in such a manner and not know of any other, such as the culture of the Republic, they do not know of any other way of life and assume it is the norm. The Empire’s citizens are in the same situation in that regards.”

“Fair enough,” Drew said. “My apologies to the present company that dealt with similar circumstances under their late leadership.”

“Mister Bilartini,” Miya said, “could you please continue?”

“Of course,” Bilartini said. “There are those among the citizens that have asked what the Empire would do about those worlds that once were part of the New Unity Government and should they explore or contact those worlds. Pope Empress Kimberly the First decreed that those of sin on those worlds will need time to work off and repent for their transgressions against God and his creations. She set a date of the first of January in the year 4000 A.D., one thousand and three hundred years in the future. The Empire needed time to become stronger for its citizens, culture, government, and technology. Some of the advance technology made by the late New Unity Government was lost, but the rest were still available to them including ships they used to research, create, and advance their technological capabilities. Once the Empire was ready to

come out of their isolation after that many years, they would go forth to the worlds that once belonged to the “sinners” and bring them under the light of God. One edict that Pope Empress Kimberly the First did not bring up in public but only to the Cardinal Council is that when the Empire explores those worlds, any survivors they find are to be enslaved to work off the sins of their forefathers. Those sins would one day be worked off and they will be able to rejoin the proper and faithful society of the Amnon Empire. While it is quite evident that Pope Empress Kimberly the First would never live to see that day, she believed that her decision would be the best course of action to prevent rebellion or a revolt in the future, provided no one gives them the means or the reason to perform such actions.”

Drew began to feel nothing but rage by this point, but he withheld his statement, allowing Bilartini to continue.

“Over the next one thousand and three hundred years, the Empire continued to flourish and grow. New technologies were introduced for the betterment of the Empire as well as for the Empire’s ships and weapons. Among the many advances of the Empire was the creation of a new singularity drive, a system capable of harnessing the power of a micro black hole. While not as powerful as the DAMIWE system the New Unity Government developed many years ago, the singularity drive produced more than enough power and particles to be used in the energy weapons of the Imperial ships. The shields of the vessels were reinforced with the same particles, strengthening them against a multitude of weapons once used by the New Unity Government. Developers created a point defense system for use against missiles and enhanced the armor plating to defend against kinetic weapons such as artillery and railguns. Ground combat equipment saw the development of power armor suits using projectile guns and launchers as well as non-lethal methods. Warp drive development had given way to a new type of faster-than-light drive system: The Fold Drive. Far faster than a conventional Warp Drive, travel between planets in the same star system was near instantaneous while long distance travel is rated at one Light-year every six minutes. The Fold Drive and its speed was deemed necessary once the Empire’s isolation period was over to quickly reach all the former New Unity Government worlds in case any of them had managed to reestablish interstellar flight again.”

“So,” Drew said, “they managed to make technological innovations that far exceed our own, but only to enslave and enforce their laws on their victims. I am trying what I can to hold my anger back, but it is not easy.”

“I am getting images of a nation that is worse than the Dominion in that nature,” President Shea said.

“I agree with you on that point,” Miya said. “However, while we developed new technology in a couple of fields, the use of a singularity as a power source is a drastic leap in technology. The fact it was developed so that the Amnon Empire can remain the superior technological nation despite reducing the New Unity Government to the Stone Age is overkill by any means of measure.”

“I know some of us are feeling a little hot under the collar,” Assefa said, “but we must let Bilartini continue or we will be here all day.”

“Very well,” Drew said. “Continue, Bilartini.”

“I feel like anything further I say right now would upset you more without taking a recess first,” Bilartini said. “Are you sure you want me to continue?”

“We are. Please continue.”

“Very well. The development of the Fold Drive led the Empire to quickly come across another planet that was on the far edge of their habitable zone in the system. While much cooler

than Amnon, it could still be inhabited by citizens of the Empire and would reduce the ballooning population without resorting to exploring outside the star system. While many initially flocked to the planet, there were requests about terraforming the planet to make it more habitable. Unfortunately, the discovery of indigenous life that thrive in the existing environment put a permanent hold on those requests. The Empire was dedicated to the preservation of existing life after its development. Instead, it was recommended that cities be built close to the equator of the planet and resort to underground settlements for future expansion of the population. This along with laws passed on the number of children a couple could have greatly reduced the population growth until the isolation period was over.”

“An ecofriendly dictatorship,” Drew said, rubbing his forehead. “I never thought I would see that. Continue.”

“On the last day of December, 3999 A.D. on the eve of the end of the Amnon Empire’s isolation, Pope Empress Teresa the Fourth was informed of the edict set forth by Pope Empress Kimberly the First about what to do if worlds once populated by the sinners of the past were found to still be alive and active. She ordered her fleet numbering over seven hundred ships that were being sent to those worlds that anyone found were to be enslaved in the name of their God to work off the sins of their forefathers. None of the ships’ commanding officers or the crew questioned this order as everyone in the fleet has been taught at an early age what happened to those that defiled God’s creations outside of their home system. At midnight on the first of January, 4000 A.D., the fleet was deployed to multiple star systems that belonged to the former New Unity Government with a single edict: to explore, to survey, and to enslave.”

“And thus, they began the Empire’s ‘holy’ conquest,” Drew said. “They sound more like the conquistadors of ancient Spain. What about the planets they were sent to conquer? What state were those planets in?”

“While one thousand and three hundred years had passed since the devastation of the New Unity Government, the population growth of the survivors of those worlds had been slow due to the number of areas that were devastated by the reactor meltdowns and falling orbital debris. It took between three to five centuries for the planets to recover from the ecological devastation they endured. During that time, the level of development on the planets was anywhere from Earth’s Medieval period to the Industrial Age depending on the knowledge that was retained and remaining technology that could be salvaged. The knowledge and history of the New Unity Government unfortunately was a distant memory along with the long-faded knowledge of those that reside on other planets or their origins from Earth. However, none of those worlds were prepared, much less developed the means of space flight, by the time the Imperial forces showed up at their planets to enslave their populations. Humans and Hybrids alike on several worlds were enslaved, fitted with cybernetic implants to track and control, and forced to work in labor camps to improve the worlds that were once devastated. This included environmental cleanup and restoration of anything that related to the New Unity Government regardless of decay. Other planets that had little cleanup required were instead converted into agricultural worlds that the slaves were forced to work and cultivate. Anyone else who were not assigned to those duties were to work in terrestrial and astral mines for resources that can benefit the Empire including the construction of churches and temples. The only education the slaves received was a religious one unless it is a specialized task. While there were some in the Empire that believed this manner was a bit extreme, they realized that those enslaved sinned against God and do not deserve their mercy until their sins have been paid from hard work and repentance. Eventually, the Sol System was found and its population on Mars was subjugated as well.”

“And here I thought that the Imperial citizens for that brief moment actually grew a conscience,” Shea said. “Forced to work for a nation they do not even know or why they must work like that is already bad enough, but cybernetic implementation? That is inhuman!”

“No one is going to argue that point,” Veonis said. “There are more barbaric measures like what my predecessors did to their slaves using a biological agent but having something like a cybernetic implant attached to you like you are some form of machine is detestable.”

“What happens if the slaves managed to get access to the advanced technology?” Miya asked. “Would they not have been able to use it against their masters?”

“Despite not having any aggressive adversary with the same or greater strength that the Empire’s to fight,” Bilartini said, “the Amnon Empire knew that to maintain control and superiority over their slaves, they must remain a technologically superior force in their part of the Milky Way Galaxy. To that end, to prevent any slaves from learning the workings and specifications of the holy technology, no slaves are allowed on any military vessel. Instead, the vessels are maintained by skilled technicians of the Amnon Faith.”

“There goes that idea,” Miya said.

“What I am curious of is the fact the Empire went back to the Sol System,” Drew said. “Did the Empire investigate the changes to Earth in all that time?”

“They did,” Bilartini said. “Earth, long since abandoned, had changed after survey teams were sent to investigate the planet. Structures and landmarks had long since decayed from more than a millennium and a half of abandonment, and the remaining wildlife had adapted to the change in the planet’s rotation and reduced tides. Some of their slaves were relocated to Earth to restore that planet to a more natural state, though it was still not suitable for Human or Hybrid life in the long term. In the former cities of Rome, Jerusalem, and Mecca, Imperial-style monuments were erected to signify the importance of those locations to the Amnon Faith. Some researchers, knowing that the ancient moon of Luna had disappeared in that system, scanned for any possible trace of the wormhole that took it away. At that time, no trace of the wormhole could be detected. After a while, the survey ships were recalled, and no further scans were taken in the Sol System for the wormhole. After all the worlds of the former New Unity Government were now a part of the Amnon Empire, the Pope Empress Teresa the Fourth wanted to look out towards other star systems for former New Unity Government worlds that were not documented in ancient Imperial records that have yet to be found. She ordered ships to perform expeditions to neighboring regions of space, but no such worlds were discovered. However, she ordered the ships to continue exploring other star systems for any possible threats to the Empire while at the same time looking for worlds to colonize.”

“It may be a blessing that they did not find any trace of the wormhole that brought Luna here,” Drew said. “We were still only in the Lumen System by that point and we would have been unprepared for such a force. As for Earth, I am not surprised by what happened to it, but the fact they built monuments in the spots where those three cities once stood feels like a slap in the face of those religions in my opinion.”

“That is still more than fourteen hundred years from now,” Veonis said. “What did they do during all that time?”

“Over the next one thousand years,” Bilartini said, “the Amnon Empire continued to grow in territory and population numbering in a few trillion citizens at that time with the former restrictions on birth rates long since lifted after the isolation was over. While the number of slaves was regulated when they were first found, their numbers grew via breeding programs in proportion to the number of citizens to accommodate them and to work remedial tasks on other

worlds. By the end of the next millennium, the Amnon Empire had expanded to encompass nearly one thousand individual star systems without showing signs of stopping. On the first of January, 5000 A.D. on the anniversary of the day that the sinners were 'enlightened' by the Empire, the Cardinal Council and Pope Emperor Peter the Second decided to test the knowledge of those slaves who know the history and the rituals of the Amnon Faith. Those that pass with a perfect score would be deemed faithful, their sins forgiven, and would be released from bondage with all the rights of a free citizen along with their immediate family. They would receive proper education to be full-fledge citizens to contribute to the prosperity of the Empire. Those that do not pass it perfectly will have to remain as slaves and continue their tasks such as farming, mining, construction, and as servants to those of higher stature until the next test. Initially, the Cardinal Council and the Pope Emperor was looking at two hundred fifty years until the next test would be performed. However, out of all the slaves that took the test, only nine percent managed to make a perfect score. While those that passed were freed as promised and became full citizens along with their immediate families and later descendants, it was decided due to the low percentage of those that passed to wait another one thousand years before performing the test again as the sins of the slaves had not been fully paid yet, nor did it look like those that remained have fully embraced the Faith. However, those slave holders that feel that their slaves are ready for the tests were given the liberty to recommend them to take the test out of their holder's personal mercy. This was still rare over the next few centuries, but those that take the test have since passed perfectly."

"You cannot be serious," Drew said. "You either pass the test perfectly and be free, or if you miss even one question or possibly make a typo, you and your descendants must work the next thousand years because of a tiny mistake! That is completely messed up!"

"It is not as bad as the breeding programs they would have," Assefa said. "I am not sure what that would entail, but even using that term for sentient lifeforms is demeaning and disgusting to even think about!"

"Before we get too far off the topic," Vitam Councilor Glislar said, "I have been wondering for a while now of one fact that has yet to be explained. Maybe our guest has an answer to my question in this history lesson he is giving us."

"What is your question?" Bilartini asked.

"According to Admiral Trent's report, they encountered ships of the Holy Amnon Empire in the Southern Region. Do you care to explain how they managed to get here? You said your creators made a mistake. What did they do?"

"They underestimated the Empire's ability to continue advancing their technology even after they came out of their isolation. Their sensors continued to be refined as they did not want any surprises to befall their Empire. On the fourth of June, 5403 A.D., they deployed new sensors that my creators' observational outposts could no longer hide from. While my creators withdrew most of the outposts, one near the edge of known Imperial space was detected quickly. When an Imperial patrol arrived, there were signs of a wormhole in the vicinity after the outpost withdrew back to the star cluster. The wormhole had mostly disappeared before the vessel arrived at its location, leaving a fading singularity point. My creators thought there was no problem or issue as the wormhole would close on its own, but the ship that was sent to investigate deployed a stasis field around the singularity that kept it from fully closing."

"That was a serious oversight on the part of your creators, Bilartini," Glislar said. "I am being reminded of an old Human verbiage I once heard. They stuck their foot in the door to keep it from closing."

“An odd but appropriate metaphor. Unlike the disappearance of Luna, the hybrid colony vessel, or when the Empire tried to scan the Sol System after their isolation when scanning equipment was not as developed, Imperial scanners were now advanced enough that the particles and quantum singularity signature of the wormhole were able to be detected and recorded. On a theory that residual traces of both the particles and quantum singularity signatures might be found where Luna at least would have disappeared, another survey team was sent back to Sol with more sophisticated equipment to scan for them. Unlike before, they also took account of the galactic drift where the position of the wormhole would not be in the same location after less than three thousand years ago. Once they determined its location, they performed a scan of the area. The survey team confirmed a match.”

“That means that the Empire knew that the ones who created the crystals were back or observing them this entire time. I doubt they took kindly to knowing they were under observation that whole time or that your creators had the ability to come back to the Milky Way.”

“The knowledge that someone or something was either using the crystals to create more wormholes or created the crystals in the first place and planting them did upset them. The Empire began their research to find a way to replicate the process of artificially reopening the wormhole for their use or to find a means to track the wormholes to their source. After nearly thirty years of research and development, they were able to develop the equipment needed to reopen the wormhole they had in stasis as the other two that brought Luna and the colony ship were too old and degraded to utilize. By establishing a ‘gate’ of sorts, graviton particle energy was force-fed into the location of the aperture, resulting in the wormhole being strengthened and reopened. Carrying equipment to stabilize the opposite end of the wormhole, a fleet of ships went through and began to construct a gate at the opposite end of the wormhole. Once established, the wormhole was now stable, and transit was now possible into our region of the star cluster.”

“So, that is how they got here,” Drew said. “It may have been our saving grace that the wormholes that brought Humanity and Animality were unable to be used, but the fact they were able to get to the Southern Region and stabilize the wormhole allowed them to establish a beachhead into this star cluster. The question is why they were seeking your creators out and killing them?”

“One of my creators’ brethren managed to sneak a construct like myself on board one of their ships to get information on that matter by micro wormhole. It transmitted all it knew before it was found and terminated. Based on the information provided, Imperial exploration and investigation of this cluster would have been swift, but the current Pope Empress Linda the First erred on the side of caution. They knew my creators were able to transport themselves across a vast amount of space to a remote star cluster and was able to create wormholes to make that happen. Also, they knew there was the possibility that Luna and Animality’s colony ship were brought to this cluster as well. They believed that if you were here and you had flourished, you all had more than three thousand years to develop your own societies and ideologies, both of which are dangerous to the Amnon Faith and their Empire. There was also the premise that the disappearances of your ancestors were ‘acts by God.’ If the Empire at large knew that my creators were involved whether unintentionally or not in their disappearances, it would unravel one of the core beliefs of their Faith. Pope Empress Linda the First had meditated on how to explain this development to the Empire after ordering her forces to create a permanent station in the system that they now call ‘Access’ for lack of a better term at the far edge of the Southern Region. A few hours later, she had the answer to her question.”

“This ought to be good,” Drew said. “What was her revelation?”

“Her revelation was that God was still responsible for your disappearances to punish the sinful Humanity through an intermediary and those that now reside in the star cluster were forced to work off their sins away from your ancestral home. It was not known to them whether you all had managed to become religious or not in your isolation, but if you all did not or if your religion or religions were an affront to the teachings of the Amnon Empire, it meant to them that you all were still living in sin. The Holy Amnon Empire’s presence in this star cluster was God’s way of bringing his Word to you ‘sinners’ as they put it. This would also allow you all that live in the star cluster to return to the Milky Way, but only once you all were redeemed in the righteous faith of the Amnon. As for my creators who made the crystals, while they were an ‘instrument of God’ to punish Humanity, their continued presence in the Milky Way meant that the ‘warden’ was looking to escape their duties of containing the sinners God had locked away in the jail that is this star cluster. The warden’s dereliction of duty to keep you all contained or ‘jailed’ needed to be punished and the Amnon Empire chose to be responsible for bringing that punishment while taking over the duties as ‘warden’ of the jail. Strengthened with this newfound resolve, she ordered her forces to begin slowly and cautiously exploring this star cluster. Their mission: to find and punish those that were abandoning their duties as the ‘warden’ of the sinners, and to enslave the descendants of those sinners that disappeared with Luna and the colony ship that threaten the Amnon way of life.”

Drew sighed.

“So,” he said, “they killed your creators because they were viewed as the ‘wardens’ of this so-called jail we are in and they were neglecting their duties. I take it that your creators even after all this time had no ships or weapons to speak of?”

“The only weapons at their disposal was using the wormholes to either rip their vessels apart, suck out their singularity cores, or hurl asteroids and meteors in their direction. However, with as few of them as there were, this did not slow the Amnon Empire down enough.”

Drew took a deep breath as he knew it was time to ask the most important question that everyone in the room wanted the answer for.

“Is their knowledge of the Holy Amnon Empire the cause for their development and use of the MAR?” Drew asked.

“That is correct. My creators had feared that a time would come when the Amnon Empire would find a way to reach the star cluster, though they had hoped that you all would form a solid nation long before that point in time.”

“Was it ever used against the species of the Union?” Assefa asked. “Specifically, the ones that we called the ‘Lost Ten?’”

“Yes, it was.”

“Care to explain why?”

“The Amnon Empire lacks variety in their nation when it comes to their military. My creators wanted to diversify the species here and see who would be the strongest amongst select species, including Humanity. It came to their attention that Humanity and Animality are known to grow and develop quickly when conflicts are involved. Despite the Union having a few advancements, their placement in the sparse Northwest Region made the probability of interacting with the Novus Initium Republic slim for many centuries. The factor that was also not considered was the Republic ending their Expansion Era and keeping the same borders for many years. Thankfully, the seeds of conflict to allow Humanity to grow were first sown with Armani Draco, though the split with his family their eventual discovery of three of the species from the Union was quite an unprecedented factor. While the Lykans finally settled their wars, we needed

another spark for them to grow as well as they became the dominant factor in the Eastern Region. That spark came in the form of slavery using religion, the same philosophy the Amnon Empire uses right now to subjugate their charges.”

“Are you saying your creators had our king at that time twist our religious ideals to be the same as the Amnon when it came to slavery?!” Veonis asked.

“Do you know what hardships our ancestors in the State went through because of that?!” Glislar yelled.

“Do both of you see what occurred when that happened?” Bilartini asked. “With the assistance of the Camino Star Empire’s technology and the Republic’s faiths, the Royal Lykan Kingdom after becoming the Holy Lykan Republic became far more powerful in both faith and technology such as their armor repairer systems and current vessels. The five races of the State were united and developed their own culture, ships, and technology. They were fierce fighters.”

“What about the Councilors that were infected with the MAR?” Glislar asked. “Even after the First Interstellar War, your creators had them continue their conflict with the Lykans.”

“That led to the use and deployment of planetary shields to protect Lykan worlds and the Mandate showed they were just as able to fight as the Lykans and your forces. The Amnon Empire despite their advances have never developed planetary shields. This is one of your advantages over them.”

“What about Ghost Two who killed Armani Draco?” Drew asked. “What spurred that decision when your creators were feeding Armani with instructions and directions?”

“The Dominion was an attempt to develop a technologically advance culture more than the Republic while using religion as a focal point. While my creators were saddened with the level of natural destruction caused by Armani’s war machine, the fact is that your nations now possess ships that are large and heavily armed, capable of instantly traveling anywhere. Please note that I did not limit the Portal Drive as you call it to the star cluster.”

Drew pondered Bilartini’s words for a moment before he realized what Bilartini was getting at, almost causing him to go into shock.

“No way,” Drew said. “Are you saying that with the proper coordinates, any ship with a Portal Drive can jump directly to the Milky Way Galaxy?!”

Everyone in the room looked at Drew with shocked expressions on their faces before looking at Bilartini who remained straight-faced.

“You are correct,” Bilartini said. “This was the reason we allowed Armani to develop those drives. This is a major advantage that you have over the Amnon Empire. They only have the one access point to the star cluster. If you can take it out at both ends, the wormhole will close permanently. However, while your ships in the Milky Way once the operation is completed can return to the star cluster with the right preparations, if you feel compelled to liberate your brethren in the Milky Way from the Amnon Empire, you are more than welcome to do so.”

“Getting the coordinates for a point on the other side of the wormhole with require our ships to go through the wormhole itself first,” Drew said. “We also do not know what would lie in wait for our forces on the other side of that wormhole.”

Drew looked over at Trent since the *Marshal* was the first vessel to encounter the Amnon Empire’s ships in the Southern Region.

“Admiral Trent,” Drew said. “You personally encountered some of the ships from the Empire when you...found Bilartini. What can you tell us about these ships and their capabilities?”

Trent stepped forward and pulled out a small tablet from his pocket.

“We only encountered them for a minute or so,” Trent said. “I had my ship’s Science and Tactical officers coordinate their scans for as long as possible until we arrived back in Lumen.”

Trent pressed a button on the tablet and a holographic model appeared in the middle of the summit table. It was one of the ships that had engaged the *Marshal* from the brief footage Trent sent to Drew and Grand Admiral Mikey before they arrived, but it was not like any vessel Drew had ever seen before. Based on the gasps Drew heard from around the room, he was not the only one who had not seen these vessels before.

“According to the Identified Friend-or-Foe signals these ships put out,” Trent began, “We are looking at the Holy Amnon Empire’s Rome-Class Cruisers. We have identified that these vessels measure one thousand two hundred ninety meters in length.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Glislar yelled. “That is longer than our battleships after their refit! Are you telling us that vessel is one of their cruisers?!”

“It is,” Trent continued. “However, from what Bilartini has told us, that is the smallest combat vessel they have out of the three classes they currently possess. Unfortunately, we do not have any information or schematics to present that show the other two types of vessels.”

“If this is their smallest,” Drew said, “This does not bode well for anything smaller than a battleship that would have to engage these ships.”

“Indeed, but there are some things to note about their capabilities.”

“Such as what exactly?” Assefa asked.

“When compared to the technological development of the nations that are represented here, there are both advantages and disadvantages the Empire has over our forces aside from size. While each nation has used various power sources in our ships such as fusion, nuclear, solar, and matter-antimatter reactors, the Empire is the first among all known Human and Animal nations to utilize a singularity core that is visually seen on the outside of their ships.”

“That we do know,” Dicarín said. “Are you able to tell how they work or how they were created in your scans?”

“We have determined that these cores are created by using a zero-point generator the Empire developed upon the vessel’s initial startup. We were not able to get a detailed scan of this generator’s interior, however. The cores are maintained and harvested using a combination of stasis beams which hold the singularity in place and extractors that extrapolate the particles that are generated by the singularity. These particles are used to power the ship’s engines both sublight and their faster-than-light Fold Drive, weapons, shields, and secondary power reactors. In terms of output, the singularity core produces marginally less power than other power sources. We believe that Imperial vessels possess fewer energy-based weapons than other vessels that use such weapons due to this lower output. This also results in slower propulsion during combat as more particles are diverted to the vessel’s weapons and shields. This may have been how the *Marshal* was able to get away despite my ship being larger and having more mass.”

“So, they can be outrun or outmaneuvered if they are engaged,” Veonis said. “This may give us an advantage.”

“That may be the case at first glance, but we noticed that they have another advantage that makes that weakness a moot point. Despite Imperial vessels having fewer turrets than many of our ships, Imperial weapon turrets have two distinct advantages over ours. The first is that when they are deployed, the turrets are not physically mounted to the hull. Instead, they are held by tractor beams that also feed power to the turrets. The power supplied to the turrets is visible to the naked eye as a red beam.”

“They are almost like Federation weapons in how they work,” Shea asked.

“That is true, but that is only one of the advantages. Because they are not affixed to physical mounts, the turrets can quickly track ships from frigates to battleships. The other advantage is that the weapons are large enough that their weapon energy output is on par with those energy weapons found on battleships.”

“Those are battleship-grade turrets?!” Miya asked.

“Yes. These can track and fire at ships as small as frigates with battleship-grade guns.”

Drew was in shock and did not know what to say. He pondered why would the Empire need weapons that were considered overkill?

“From what we can gather,” Trent continued, “the turrets possess five barrels each and may utilize two firing modes with those barrels. The primary central barrel is used during standard operations as a mid- to long-range single beam in engagements that involve distance or with large targets. We saw these in use first-hand. We believe the four smaller barrels that surround the central barrel fire low-power short-range rapid-fire beams to screen the vessel from attacks and to quickly damage enemy vessels in close quarters combat. We do not believe all five barrels can fire at once or we would have seen that in use when the Imperial cruisers engaged us. We also do not know how effective their point defense guns or shields are in engagements, or if they have any other weapons available that we could not detect in time.”

“If I may make an observation,” Grand Admiral Mikey said as he got up from his seat against the wall behind Drew. “From what I heard, your ship only relied on its primary shields when escaping the Southern Region, is that correct, Admiral?”

“Yes, sir. During our escape, we diverted power from our weapons into the Portal Drive. While we were transitioning, our shield boosters and armor repairer system were offline. We also could not raise our auxiliary shield if our primary failed. By the time we completed going through the portal, we had thirty-two percent shield strength remaining.”

“Then you have done an excellent job.”

Trent was puzzled, and he was not the only one. Everyone including Drew wondered what Mikey had meant. Drew looked at Mikey.

“Please explain, Grand Admiral,” Drew said. “You appear to have lost most of us.”

“It is simple,” Mikey said. “Trent’s ship has provided the Imperial ships with incorrect data on his ship’s capabilities. Trent never fired a shot, which means they do not know what our weapons systems are. Also, Trent’s primary shields only had a third of its power remaining. They are not aware of the shield boosters, the secondary shields, the armor thickness, or even the armor repairer system. This means Imperial ships will underestimate our battleships’ defensive capabilities. Finally, all they have seen thus far is just a Republic battleship. They are unaware of the tactical capabilities of all of the military ships from the other nations in the star cluster.”

“I think I see what you are getting at here, Grand Admiral,” Glislar said. “We have the element of surprise on our side. With the Portal Drive, we can jump wherever we needed and engage their forces. It may not take them long to call for backup, but our forces can withdraw in ten minutes if needed.”

“We would still need the Paramount Dreadnoughts or the Federation’s capital ships if we are sending a massive fleet,” Dicarín said. “They can generate portals large enough for ships to go through.”

“That is true,” Shea said. “Their size would allow for fleets to pass through. However, the Federation does not have many dreadnoughts and supercarriers to use since they are recent additions to our fleet. The Paramounts however are far more numerous. The only problem I see is that they have yet to go through the refits that the Chancellor mentioned to us recently.”

“Going through a refit would be faster than tearing them down and rebuilding them into Enforcer Battleships,” Drew said. “The Enforcers may also allow for a fleet to go through if needed considering their size, but we will need to work out the details of how to deal with this threat. Bilartini, how long do you think it will take before the Amnon Empire finds the last generator and they bring down the field?”

“By your measurements of time,” Bilartini said, “it will take them at least two days to find it. Its output will be high enough to maintain then field once the generator in the system I was in is shut down that it will be easy to detect. It generally takes them one of your days to disable it.”

“They are not destroying them?” Drew asked.

“They are not. It is my assumption that they wish to use them once they have subjugated the rest of the cluster as slaves to separate you all from any chance of returning to your home galaxy. They will truly turn the star cluster into a prison for you all.”

Drew pondered Bilartini’s words. There was a lot to take in and think about. Maybe now was a good time to take a break and let the others think about their next course of action.

“I believe now is a good time to take a break,” Drew said. “We will break for a one-hour lunch. We need time to think about this matter carefully. Bilartini, you have coordinates for where the Empire is entering the star cluster, correct?”

“That is correct,” Bilartini said.

“Good. I just wanted to make sure. I do not know if you must recharge, but I will have the guards escort you to a holding area for the time being. Everyone can go except for Assefa, Trent, and Shibuya. I wish to speak with them for a moment in private.”

Drew noticed that Trent and Shibuya were looking at each other again and Drew was right about his assumption about how they looked at each other earlier. Assefa, however, looked quite puzzled as everyone else in the room got up from their seats and vacated the room through various doors. Once the room was cleared of everyone but the four of them, Drew took a deep breath. He needed answers to some questions.

“Trent,” Drew said, “I am going to ask you two questions. The first is how did you know where to find Bilartini?”

Trent had a stern look on his face.

“The day before I reported back for the Honor Guard detail,” Trent said, “a device similar in style to the one discovered with Armani Draco appeared in my house.”

“What?!” Drew was in shock, almost getting out of his seat. “Do not tell me that you have the MAR!”

“You know as I do that if I had that, the scanners in this building would have gone off.”

“That is true,” Drew said, calming down. “If that is the case, why did the device appear in your house?”

“Bilartini spoke through it, providing me with coordinates and his name.”

“That is odd. Did he know you were going to the Southern Region?”

“He did. He made it clear that there is a hidden observational post or satellite our current scanners have yet to detect in this star system. It is likely based on our conversation that there are more of these posts or satellites in other star systems spread throughout the cluster.”

“We will need to have a talk with Bilartini about those outposts. If they are the same as the ones that were used to observe the Amnon Empire, the Empire can already detect these posts or satellites. I am concerned that using a stealth vessel may not be a viable option if we wish to do any form of reconnaissance on the Empire’s forces both here and in the Milky Way.”

“The question is do we want to go back to the Milky Way? All of us currently alive were born and raised here in the star cluster. There may come a time that we may have to leave the cluster due to overpopulation or lack of resources, but that is a great deal of time down the line.”

“My concern is the Empire’s spread in the Milky Way, not to mention the subjugation of people whose only crime is not being a member of the Amnon Faith. This is not going to be an easy decision to make as to whether we should wage such a campaign in the Milky Way to uproot the Amnon Empire who have been an established entity for a few thousand years. Even their slaves do not know of any other life but one of servitude and turmoil. If they never knew freedom before, they may think that what they are doing is the norm and not be able to cope with any other life as easily.”

“If anything, our presence alone in the Milky Way would be a cause of concern for the status quo. The Amnon have labeled us as ‘convicts’ of a jail made by a god they worship. If we were to ‘escape’ this jail they say we are in and show we can fight back, this may change their way of thinking. For that matter, I have not heard of them losing to anyone other than to the tactics of an advance but now-extinct civilization. If they were to lose in an actual fleet engagement with our forces, it may drastically affect their morale and their belief that they are the righteous chosen to rule over others in the name of their religion.”

“I see what you are getting at. A resounding defeat would make a significantly impact and may give us room to negotiate. I will have to bring this up when we restart our session. Before then, there is something else I wanted to ask you. I wanted Assefa here for this since it involves a citizen of his nation.”

“Is there something the matter, Drew?” Assefa asked.

Drew looked over at Assefa.

“I noticed an interaction between Trent and Shibuya earlier that I felt might need to be addressed in light of what this summit is trying to accomplish,” Drew said.

Assefa looked at Trent and Shibuya for a moment, puzzled by what Drew had said. After a moment, Assefa had a look of realization on his face.

“You are not serious,” Assefa said. “Are you two suddenly attracted to each other?”

Trent and Shibuya looked rather embarrassed and ashamed. Drew took a deep breath.

“Trent,” Drew said, “you are recently divorced from your wife more than a week ago. I can understand if the loneliness is starting to get to you. Believe me, I know the feeling. What I do not get is this sudden attraction to this Skunk? No offense to you, Shibuya. I am sure you are a nice person and it has nothing to do with you personally, but we are talking about a completely different species here.”

“I would not say she is a completely different species, Chancellor,” Trent said. “Do not forget that Animality has Human DNA in their genetics thanks to their creators thousands of years ago. If you look at it from a genetics standpoint, there is a higher chance of compatibility if we proceed with a relationship and have children.”

“There is a problem with that notion,” Assefa said with a serious look on his face. “We have had citizens crossbreed before and this presented a number of complications, such as problematic health conditions, infertility, and most of all social acceptance from their peers.”

“I have been informed of these and the fact that there are no laws that make such relationships in the Union illegal,” Trent said. “I also accept that crossbreeding between two different species despite the common Human DNA trait that makes that possible has been problematic in the past because of the different Animal traits in the parents. However, there is something to take into consideration if Shibuya and I proceed with this relationship.”

“And what would that be?” Drew asked.

“Trent is completely Human,” Shibuya said. “He has no Animal DNA that would make crossbreeding problematic like the other cases. We also do not know how the child would come out between a Human and an Animal. I do not want this to sound bad, but do you two want to see what comes from a Human and an Animal if they have a child? It would be, for a lack of a better term, an interesting ‘experiment’ to see what happens in that regards.”

“An ‘experiment’ you say?” Trent asked as he looked at Shibuya. “I hope you are not viewing our possible relationship in that manner.”

Shibuya looked at Trent with a slight grin.

“I am not, smooth talker,” Shibuya said.

“Okay,” Drew said with his hands slightly in the air. “I get the point. As there are no laws in either the Republic or the Union that prohibits such a pairing being involved in a relationship, I will not stop you from proceeding unless Assefa has any objections.”

“I do not,” Assefa said. “I am curious to see what happens if you two produce a child. If the child is healthy and does not possess health problems, this may go a long way to building relationships for our societies. All I ask is that you wait until the current crisis is resolved before proceeding with this relationship. There is a lot to do ahead and we need to be focused.”

“Understood, sirs,” Trent said.

“I understand as well,” Shibuya said.

“Very good,” Drew said. “You are dismissed. Stick around in case we need you again.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” Trent and Shibuya said in unison as they saluted.

They turned and headed for the exit directly behind them. After they went through and the doors close, Drew took a deep breath.

“I never thought I would see such a thing during my term,” Drew said.

“Neither would I,” Assefa said. “I am already married to my lovely wife, but you are divorced like Trent?”

“Yeah, but it was not as recent. It makes me think that I need to start looking into dating again. Unlike Trent, I do not have a child.”

“He has one already?”

“In her twenties, yes. If those two have another child, she will have a rather unique half-sibling in her life.”

Assefa laughed.

“Does that make you want to have an Animal as a possible wife as well?” Assefa asked.

Drew sighed.

“I have not exactly given it much though, Assefa,” Drew said. “We have something else to focus on first. Let us make sure that we are able to continue our lives in the star cluster first before we talk about bringing new life into the cluster.”

“Valid point. Any thoughts as to what our agenda is going to be involving the Empire?”

“I am not sure yet, but we need to figure that out fast before the Empire manages to bring those fields down and we have only two days to get ready. We have a lot to do before then.”

* * * * *