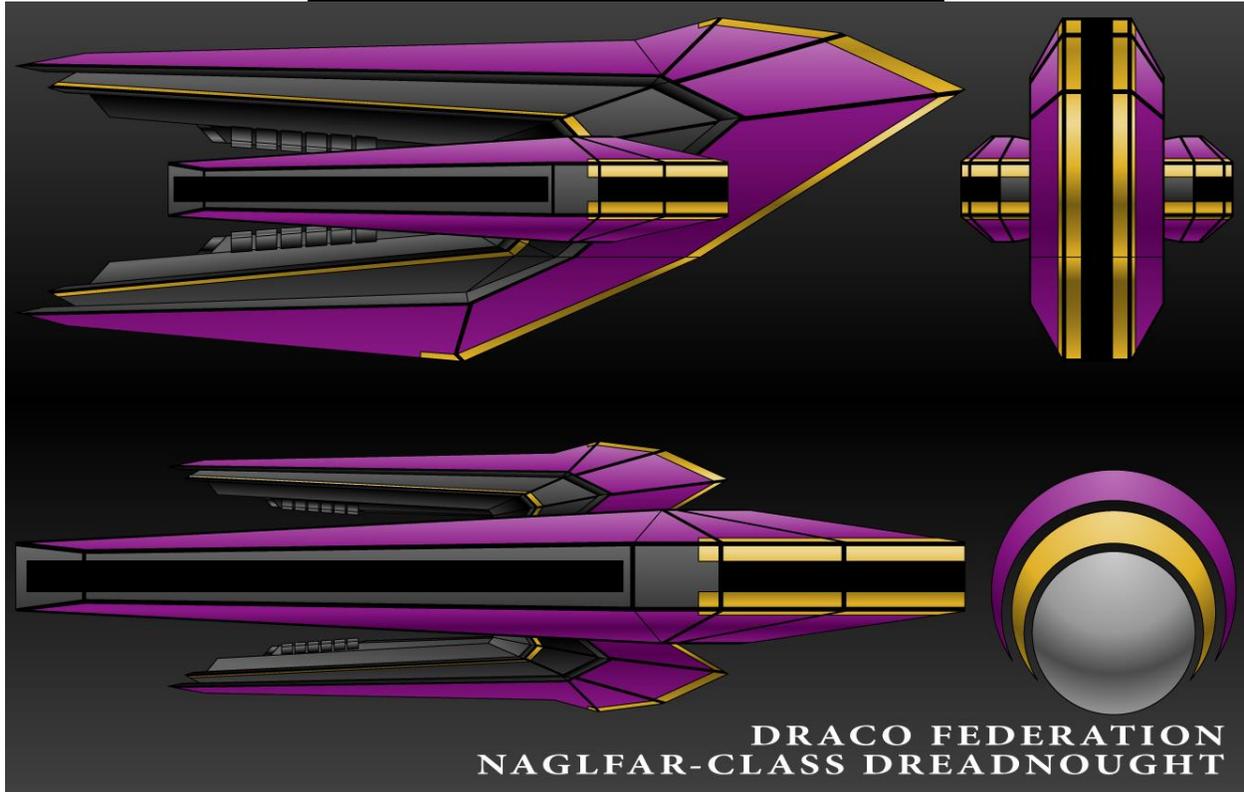


***Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga***  
***Episode VI: The Nations of Blood and Darkness***



**PART 9**

*Briefing Room, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Cavalier, Planet Tenebris Prime Polar Orbit  
Tenebris System, Southwestern Region, 119 Light-Years from Ruber System  
4:28pm, October 18, 5434 A.D.*

“This may be more difficult than I thought.”

Brenda could not hold her statement upon seeing images of the capital of the Tenebris Dominion after Lokia’s briefing. Some of the images were aerial shots from the shuttle while others were from atop buildings where the Specter Team members were taking pictures from. The architecture of the city was not quite as Brenda had expected. In the middle of the city was a rather prominent tower that stood almost a hundred stories high. Next to it were five buildings about half that height that surround the tower at equilateral points. Emblems were on each of the five buildings but what they stood for was a mystery. Surrounding the tower and the five structures was a massive ring with very few entryways going in. Attached to that ring at the same five equilateral points were massive cathedrals that appeared to be gothic in structure. They looked like they could hold thousands of people in them. There were other Cathedrals located near the edge of the city where their front entrances faced the tower.

The rest of the city, however, was not very impressive. The rest of the buildings had some businesses, but the majority looked to be residential structures in tall but block-shaped buildings, none of which were taller than the ringed structure. The buildings took up entire blocks leaving very little in terms of alleyways which could be used to sneak into the city. According to Lokia

when she and her team were surveying this city during their recon mission, the residential accommodations were no different than military barracks, meaning that the average citizen had no personal space or accommodations to speak of. While Brenda would think that this sort of living is rather cruel if not impersonal, she was quick to realize that if the individuals here were raised in this manner of living, they would not think of a standard of living that is any different.

There was one structure that stood out from the rest of these, however. Within the ringed structure, Lokia and her team had spotted a building that was on the southern side of the tower nestled between two of the five buildings that surround the central tower. This building was smaller but its style of architecture reminded Lokia of a library. It was also surrounded by a courtyard with walkways and grass with no trees. The only people who were going in and out of that building were all dressed in the outfit of the Tigris. The building was either a library, a museum, or both. It was probably their best bet as nothing else in the city resembled one. The problem was the fact that there was no easy location to insert Brenda and Lokia within the ringed structure such as an alley or an alcove. Landing on the roof was not an option as the roof had no entryway and it wasn't flat enough to even land on. That means that Brenda would have to be inserted into the city elsewhere, walk over to one of the entryways into the ringed structure, and go all the way to that possible library. It was not known what sort of security was found within the ringed structure and there is a possibility that someone or something would be able to identify Brenda as someone who was not from the city.

Whatever it was that was inside that building must be worth the kind of security needed to access it. There were even two additional guards at the entryway. Why the Tenebris deemed it necessary for such security to be in place was beyond Brenda unless there was something inside the leadership of the Dominion did not want the rest of the public to know or access.

"So, I have to ask," Luke said, "but how exactly do you plan to sneak into that library, if that is what that building is?"

"That is what I am trying to figure out," Lokia said. "I've never seen such security concerning a building that historically would contain public knowledge before. It's like they only want those who are privileged to access that information or they are trying to hide something from everyone else."

"There is a chance," Luke said, "that the Tenebris government may deem that the history of their nation is only need-to-know if it pertains to their job or task."

"Are you saying that they would deny the knowledge of their history to the rest of the Tenebris citizens?" Brenda said. "What purpose would that serve?"

"The control of knowledge can serve as a powerful tool in the obedience of a population. I guess you can say that the more knowledgeable a person can be, the more dangerous they can become. Ideas that could challenge or threaten the status quo could serve to change the rule of those in power, and that is something no government that has established this right of rule can afford to have."

"Regardless, I don't think we can sneak in while in plain sight," Lokia said. "If there are people that look alike roaming the city and Brenda is seen, there is a chance that someone will realize that she isn't from the city or worst that she isn't a descendant of the exiled Tenebris. It would appear as if we will need to sneak in under cloak after all to get the information that we will need."

"That still leads to the question as to how you two sneak in to that building," Luke said as he surveyed the photos.

"Before we get into that, there is one more thing I need to bring to your attention."

Lakia changed the image from the possible library to what appeared to be some sort of market or store. The only thing is that while the market was large, no one was bringing in any bags for shopping. They saw that those who were leaving were holding a few small boxes or containers that were unlabeled and no one could see into them.

“This is something else we noticed that got our attention,” Lakia said. “Stores like this one are found throughout the city, but they all have the same product. There is no selection process either. The people go in, present some sort of voucher on a digital device, and are handed a set number of these small boxes. That’s it.”

“That’s it?” Brenda asked. “What are those, rations or something?”

“We don’t know. None of my team could go in and grab a box. The people who are distributing these boxes are behind a security force field along with the boxes, so we cannot reach them. We thought about scanning them but those that got their supply were quick to leave and head on their way that we would not be able to get a decent scan of what was inside. Either whatever is inside is highly perishable that they have to rush home to get it in their refrigerator or they are only allowed so much time to get these before returning to work.”

“It sounds like we need to get one of these boxes to see what is inside,” Luke said. “If we must do that at the same time as getting the information, then we need to send two separate teams. Specter and Revenant One, you two will go and retrieve the information. I will leave it up to your discretion on how to proceed. If you both must use optical camouflage, then make sure there is a suit prepared for Brenda to use and give her a crash course in its use. I will also have you send some of your team to try to retrieve one of the containers either from someone who has already purchased it or from a supplier who is unloading them. Make sure they are as discrete as possible. We don’t want to attract unwanted attention. If they can find another way of getting it without drawing attention, then do so.”

“Understood, sir,” Lakia said.

“Now, I will head to my Ready Room so that I may start my preliminary report. I wish you all and your team success in this mission.”

Luke got up out of his chair and left the briefing room. After the doors closed, Brenda and Lakia looked at the photos of the building that was believed to be the library.

“So,” Brenda said, “how DO we sneak into that building or for that matter on the premises?”

Lakia looked over the building in the photos that were taken for less than a minute before a thought popped into her head.

“I think I have an idea,” Lakia said. “Let’s get you into a suit and prep you on its usage. I’ll cover the details with you while you are suiting up.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Grand Library, City of Sanctus Draco, Planet Propitius Esto, Capital of Draco Federation  
Draconia System, Western Region, 120 Light-Years from Ruber System  
4:51pm, October 18, 5434 A.D.*

“I’m almost finished.”

Amarria whispered her progress to Blair who came to check up on her after nearly three hours of downloading the history of the Draco Federation. Amarria’s feet were starting to hurt after standing for so long and she could tell Blair was starting to get bored. He stated he had already read up on the government structure of the Federation and transmitted the data to the

shuttle that was still waiting two blocks away for them to finish gathering the required information. The Grand Library would be closing soon as well, so time was of the essence.

“How much more do you have left to go?” Blair whispered to Amarria.

“I’m getting the history of the past year from the archives,” Amarria said. “It will be done in one minute.”

Amarria kept an eye on the download progress bar. Thankfully the tablet was able to hold all of the information they needed thus far without having to transmit any of it to the shuttle’s computer core outside. She had not had a chance to review any of it and no one among the library’s staff asked her for assistance as of yet. A few people have passed by and watched her get the information, but no one has asked her what she was getting or showed any suspicion of her activities. If everything goes well, they will be able to return to the *Templar* without any complications in their mission.

In other words, she would not have to put her backup plan into action.

The progress bar showed the download had just completed. She now had the entire history of the Federation in her hands. This was going to be an interesting read for her during their return trip back to the Republic.

“It’s done,” Amarria whispered as she put the tablet back in her purse. “We can head back to the shuttle now. What did you find out about the government?”

“It is modeled after a democratic system of checks and balances like the Republic,” Blair whispered. “They have a president, a house of representatives, and a supreme court.”

“It sounds closer to the democratic system the ancient United States back on Earth used, although they had both a house of representatives and a senate.”

“It does seem that way. So far, it seems to be working pretty well for them. I was surprised to read one detail though.”

“What’s that?”

“At one point, the President of the Federation was a member of one of the alien races.”

“Really? It only happened once? I would have figured that in a democratic society that more aliens would have been president than just once.”

“I don’t know all of the details. I just looked over the names and found just that one so far. I don’t know if it was due to some form of social pressure to discourage other races from running for the position or the fact that the other races are not as motivated to run for the office except for the one that did and won. Until we read up on the history of the Federation in full, we can only speculate.”

“Then it sounds like we need to get going before we linger here any longer.”

Blair and Amarria headed for the stairs to go back down to the first floor of the library. As they approached the stairs, they noticed that there was no one present on that floor anymore. Amarria figured that it was due to the library closing soon. However, she heard Blair hum slightly, as if he was suspicious about the floor being as vacant as it was. This made her begin to feel concerned that something was not right.

As they reached the stairs to the left and started to go down, they noticed that the first floor was also vacant except for the receptionist’s desk. They noticed the receptionist looking their way as they continued down the stairs before she looked back at her terminal. Amarria was growing more concerned that something wasn’t right and began to wonder if their cover was blown somehow. However, she could not figure out how if it was.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, they headed for the front doors as quickly as they could without running. When they were within ten feet of the front doors, metal plates

dropped from just above the doors, closing off the exits. Amarria and Blair stopped as the realization that they have been discovered was setting in. They heard multiple heavy footsteps like boots behind them. They turned around and saw what looked like twenty Federation law enforcement officers based on their uniforms they saw in the recorded transmissions they reviewed. These officers consisted of both Humans and the large boney-scaled aliens, the latter of whom were larger and scarier looking than what Amarria could imagine.

The officers pointed their guns at Blair and Amarria as the highest-ranking officer, a Human male, came forward with his gun pointed at Blair.

“Freeze!” the officer yelled. “Federal Police!”

“What is the meaning of this?” Blair asked.

“You know what this is about, Dominion spy! The library workers detected an unusually large amount of data being downloaded to a device that lacked a Federal approved access code! They called us, and we waited until you finished downloading the data! Now we have caught you in possession of that data!”

Blair was about to say something when Amarria put her right hand on his left shoulder. He looked at her, but she had a stern look on her face. She stepped forward.

“So, let me ask this,” Amarria said, “when is it a crime to get the history of a nation to know their past?”

The head officer had a puzzled look on his face as did the other officers. He turned and looked in the direction of the receptionist.

“Were they only downloading historical records?” he asked.

The receptionist looked at her terminal to investigate before looking back at the head officer.

“They were only accessing historical records,” the receptionist said, “but it was still with an unauthorized device.”

The head officer looked back at Amarria.

“The Dominion already knows our history,” the head officer said with a puzzled expression on his face, “so why would they want our historical records?”

Amarria smiled a little bit as she realized that she needed to use her backup plan after all.

“The Dominion doesn’t,” she said, “but the Novus Initium Republic which we belong to does.”

“What did you say?” the head officer said with a shocked expression on his face.

When the other law enforcement officers and even the receptionist heard the term “Novus Initium Republic” uttered by Amarria, everyone was in shock.

The head officer snapped out of his shock and pointed his gun at Amarria.

“I have no time for games, woman!” he said in a threatening tone of voice.

“Neither do I, sir,” Amarria said. “My name is Amarria. I am a citizen of the Novus Initium Republic and historical librarian for the Central Library of the Republic in the City of Luminous. Next to me is Colonel Blair of the Republic SAGATs. We came here after a covert exploration stumbled across the battle that took place in the Miranda System. We came here for knowledge and understanding of the Federation’s past. We are not here as part of any scout team for an invasion, only to learn about one of the two nations that developed and thrived outside of the Republic.”

Blair was in complete shock! He had no idea that Amarria’s plan should they ever get caught was to tell the truth about them, who they work for, and their mission into the Draco Federation! However, Blair’s biggest fear was how those law enforcement officers were going to

take to what Amarria had just told them. From what he could tell based on their expressions, they ranged from shock to fear. After all, it was the Republic who exiled the Human ancestors, so who knows how they along with the aliens would react.

The Head Officer still looked at Amarria with a stern look on his face.

“Search them,” he said, his weapon still pointing at Amarria. “Let’s see what they have on themselves.”

“If what I say is true,” Amarria said, “will you permit us to speak with President Shea?”

The head officer looked at her with a disgusted look on his face.

“And why would I permit that request?” he asked.

“I told you the truth from the start rather than lie to promote trust. I figured that would amount to something, wouldn’t it?”

“Trust is earned and that is only if you ARE telling the truth.”

Two of the Human officers, one male and one female, walked over to Blair and Amarria respectively. The officers had Blair and Amarria face the nearby wall with their hands on the wall and their legs spread apart. The officers searched them, and the male officer found the transmitter that Blair uses to speak with Benja in the cloaked shuttle that was still outside. The male officer showed the transmitter to the head officer.

“Well,” the head officer said, “that device doesn’t look like it was made in the Dominion, but that isn’t enough to convince me.”

The female officer searched Amarria but did not find anything on her. The officer then took Amarria’s purse and found the tablet, pulling it out and showing the head officer.

“So, that is the unauthorized device you used,” he said. “Very convincing in terms of its looks. Too bad I cannot say the same for its operating system which gave you away.”

The female officer set the tablet on the ground and continued to search Amarria’s purse. She came across one other item and pulled it out. It was Amarria’s wallet. Blair noticed the female officer pulling that out and was surprised to see that Amarria still had that on her. He couldn’t say anything now because he did not want to risk angering the male officer who had finished searching him.

The female officer opened up Amarria’s wallet and looked inside. The moment she looked at the contents inside, she gasped. Blair began to wonder what the officer found inside Amarria’s wallet to have such a reaction. Was it Amarria’s ID or was it something else?

The female officer took Amarria’s wallet over to the head officer and handed it to him. The head officer looked at the wallet, took a deep breath, and lowered his weapon.

“Give them back their things,” he said. “I will contact the Office of the President and inform them we have visitors from the Republic.”

Blair and Amarria turned around slowly as Blair was given back the transmitter. Amarria was given back the tablet. They noticed the head officer still had Amarria’s wallet as he took a picture of the contents with his mobile device.

“So,” Amarria said, “what convinced you that I was telling the truth?”

“While identifications can be forged,” the head officer said, “this is something that cannot be forged.”

He turned the wallet around. In it were only two things: her Republic identification card on the left side and a family photo on the right. The photo contained Amarria in a graduation garb when she got her Master’s Degree in the Field of History. Behind her to her left was her mother Laura and to her right was then-Vice Admiral Trent in his uniform. The photo must have been taken a few years ago.

“If there is one thing the citizens of the Dominion don’t do,” he said, “it’s them knowing who their genetic parents are, if even that.”

Amarria and Blair looked at the head officer with puzzled expressions on their faces.

“What do you mean by that?” Amarria asked. “Why don’t they know who their parents are?”

“Your reaction and that question alone is enough for me to know you are not from the Dominion, but it also means you haven’t studied or investigated them yet.”

“A separate team is doing that right now as we speak, but please, what do you mean about them not knowing their parents?”

“I’m going to leave that for the President to explain to you two. Receptionist, please raise the metal barriers. You two may contact your transport. Let them know what is taking place while I contact the President’s office.”

Blair looked over at Amarria while the head officer got on his mobile device.

“That was an awfully big risk you took telling him the truth,” Blair said. “What if they decided to dispose of us because they still harbored hostilities towards the Republic?”

“That is not to say that they still don’t,” Amarria said. “I have learned it is best to speak the truth in such instances as only telling lies would make people such as these officers not trust us and view us as deceivers. As the old saying goes, ‘the truth will set you free’.”

Blair laughed slightly as he activated the transmitter once the metal plates retracted.

“Benja,” Blair said, “we have been discovered by Federation law enforcement.”

“*What?!*” Benja said. “*What happened?*”

“Apparently, the tablet’s system did not have a Federation approved access code. We were not confronted with it until just a few minutes ago.”

“*Are you alright? Do I need to extract you or contact the ship?*”

“That won’t be needed. Amarria’s backup plan was to tell the officers the truth and after they saw her identification and photo in her wallet which she STILL had on her, they believed her about where we came from.”

“*She still had that on her? Wait, what is going on now since they are allowing you to contact me?*”

“Amarria had requested for us to speak with Federation President Shea. The head officer is putting in the request for us to see her right now. I want you to inform the ship of our situation. I’m going to have Amarria transmit the Federation history to you and you can forward it to the ship. I’ll let you know of any updates when I can.”

“*Understood. Be safe, you two.*”

“We will, hopefully.”

Blair turned off the transmitter and put it back in his pocket. He looked over at the head officer who appeared to be wrapping up on his call. The officer ended his call and put his mobile device back in his pocket before looking at Blair and Amarria.

“Alright, you two,” the head officer said, “I’ve gotten word that the President will honor your request to see you. We are to escort you to her office. She only asks that you don’t reveal who you are on the way there as it might start a panic.”

“Why would it start a panic?” Amarria asked.

“That is something else you can ask the President. We will need to go out the back doors to the building behind the library to avoid the public seeing you two. Follow me, please.”

The head officer turned around and headed towards the back of the library. Blair and Amarria followed behind him as the rest of the officers followed closely behind them. While

Amarria's backup plan had kept them from being incarcerated as Dominion spies, the fact that they were meeting the head of state for the Federation was something Blair knew the RCIA wanted to avoid. However, under the circumstances, it was better than being in jail or whatever means of detention the Federation uses.

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*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Templar, Planet Propitius Esto Orbit  
Capital of Draco Federation, Draconia System, Western Region  
5:00pm, October 18, 5434 A.D.*

"They were taken WHERE?!"

Tora was receiving a report from Benja who was still in the stealth shuttle over the capital concerning what had happened with Blair and Amarria after they were discovered. When Benja told her that they were being escorted to the Office of the President at Amarria's request after she revealed who they really were to local law enforcement, Tora was livid. She was already upset to find out that Benja had snuck onto the shuttle when he wasn't authorized to do so, but Amarria's actions put the whole mission in jeopardy by having the Federation aware that the Republic knows about them.

*"Like I reported, Captain," Benja said, "they are being escorted to see the President of the Federation. This was apparently Amarria's 'backup plan' that she had."*

"To tell them the truth and ask to see the head of state? Are you kidding me?! How is Aja going to take this when she finds out we made unauthorized contact with the Federation?!"

*"This may go better for us than expected, Captain. If the Federation actually harbored hostilities towards the Republic, they would have killed Blair and Amarria instead of honoring her request. Wouldn't you agree?"*

Tora thought about it for a brief moment.

"I suppose that is true. Maybe what Amarria said the other day about how the Draco Family and their descendants feeling remorse for their founding of the cult could be true. However, I doubt the rest of the Tenebris would feel the same as the Federation."

Tora took a deep breath.

"Very well," she said. "We will see how this goes. Let me know of any further developments, Ghost Two."

*"Before I forget, Amarria transmitted the Federation's history from the time they were exiled to current. Do you want me to transmit that to the Templar?"*

"No. If you transmit that much data, it will be picked up by the Federation and we don't need to expose ourselves before the rest of the Federation is aware of our presence depending on if the President makes it known or not."

*"Understood, ma'am. I'll remain on standby until further notice. Out."*

The communication disconnected while Tora leaned back in her chair. She was not expecting to get the kind of news she just received. While she wished that she could send a communication back to the RCIA station in Ruber, she knew the Federation's jammers on their borders would prevent her from sending and receiving transmissions at the moment.

She began to wonder what Amarria was thinking revealing who they were and their intentions for being at the Federation capital, but that would be something she would have to answer for when she returned to the ship.

\* \* \* \* \*

*President's Office Reception Room, Federation Capital Tower, City of Sanctus Draco  
Planet Propitius Esto, Capital of Draco Federation, Draconia System, Western Region  
5:05pm, October 18, 5434 A.D.*

“I hope this was the right thing to do, Amarria.”

Blair was beginning to feel nervous about Amarria's actions despite the fact it was the best option available to them when they were confronted in the Grand Library. As they sat on one of the couches in the reception room of the President's office, Blair looked around and noticed how similar it looked to the one found in the office of the Supreme Chancellor based on pictures he had seen. Part of him wondered if it was modelled after that room when it was built. He also wondered if the President's office was like the Supreme Chancellor's based on news broadcasts he had seen when the Chancellor addressed the nation.

The head officer that escorted them stood on the left side of the couch at attention. Two of the alien officers that also escorted them were by the exit doors while the rest of the officers were dismissed. Those aliens were still as imposing as they were at the Grand Library.

Blair looked over at the receptionist and it was a female of the avian race who was focusing on her terminal trying to avoid eye contact with Blair and Amarria. It was unknown to Blair what these aliens think of the Republic or if their impressions of the Republic is based on any form of bias that they were told by the Humans of the Federation. Hopefully, he and Amarria will soon find the answers to what they are looking for.

Amarria was taking a moment to read over some of the history of the Federation while they were waiting to see the President. She was more enthralled with the information on the tablet than he had ever seen someone before. It should come as no surprise, though. Who knows how much history she has read at the Central Library in Luminous, but now she was reading the history of a nation that she had never read before, like it was a brand new book.

He noticed that the head officer was looking at the tablet screen occasionally. It was Blair's guess that he was making sure it was the Federation's history that she was reading and not something else that wasn't accounted for. Obviously, Amarria was too focused on what she was reading to notice the head officer looking at the tablet screen.

After another minute or so, the receptionist put her feathered left hand up to the side of her head. Blair only now noticed that there was some electronic device in her ear. Her feathers made it difficult to see it. She nodded in agreement, brought her hand down, and looked in Blair and Amarria's direction.

“The President will see you two now,” she said in perfect English, though she had a small hissing sound in her accent.

Blair nudged Amarria to knock her out of her focus. She looked up at Blair, then at the receptionist when she realized they could go in. She turned the tablet screen off and placed it back in her purse before they got up off the couch. As Blair and Amarria headed for the door, they noticed that the head officer was not joining them. Instead, he stayed right where he was. Blair was not sure whether this was a sign of trust that they would not be doing any harm to the President or if there were people inside who would protect the President should they come to harm her. Whichever it was, there was only one way to find out.

Blair gripped the left door handle and opened the door up. What he saw at first glance was a room decorated with black and purple, accented with gold. Obviously, the common paint scheme of the Federation was apparent in the room. The layout of the room was the same as the Supreme Chancellor's room back in the Republic. However, the aesthetics were different in

terms of styles being more in line with the Federation's than the Republic's with the use of sharp edges and dark colors. There was also a lot more use of metals than marble by comparison. He also noticed there were three people sitting on the couches. Two of them were dressed in what appeared to be an attire similar to what was worn by the Grand Pope of the Great Maker faith, although just like the rest of the Federation, their colors matched everything else. They wore black outfits with purple and gold accents. The person on the couch opposite of them was a woman in a military outfit, possibly their space forces based on the uniforms Blair saw while investigating the wreckage of the Federation carrier in Miranda.

The three of them looked in their direction as Amarria entered the room first followed by Blair. The President was not facing them as her chair was turned around. There were chairs in front of her desk, but Blair did not know whether he and Amarria needed to sit down there or remain standing. The President turned her chair around. Much to Blair and Amarria's surprise, the President's hair was purple and stylized to be full-bodied. She also wore a purple button-down shirt with a black blazer. That was all that they could see of her attire while she was sitting down.

"Greetings, Republic citizens," the President said with a stern look on her face. "I am Shea, President of the Draco Federation. Joining me is High Bishops Brad and Kait to your right who are the leaders of the Draconian National Faith. To your left is Fleet Admiral Tara who is in command of the Federation Defense Forces."

The three people who were introduced bowed in the direction of Blair and Amarria. They returned the bow.

"Greetings to you all," Amarria said. "I am Amarria, historical librarian of the Republic Central Library in Luminous. Accompanying me is Colonel Blair of the Republic SAGATs."

"A librarian and a trooper," Shea said. "What an interesting yet suitable duo. I have quite a few questions to ask the two of you and you will provide me the answers. Please, have a seat."

Shea pointed at the seats in front of her desk. Blair and Amarria walked around the couches towards them.

"I, too, have questions, Miss President," Amarria said as she sat down in the chair to the left. "However, as you are our host, please ask your questions."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Cockpit, Stealth Shuttle One, City of Plena Tenebris Airspace, Capital of Tenebris Dominion  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
5:09pm, October 18, 5434 A.D.*

"I suddenly do not feel comfortable about this plan."

Brenda looked over her covert operations suit and gear. She had been instructed on what the suit can and cannot do. Her suit was one that was primarily designed for hacking a computer system but was repurposed to allow for the accessing and storage of large amounts of data for the historical information they were going to retrieve. It was meant to do it at high-speed since they were not sure how security would be on the inside or if access to their databanks or archives would set off an alarm. However, that was not why she did not feel comfortable about the plan.

They managed to reach the airspace of the Dominion capital. The layout and design of the city was just like how they were in the pictures that Lokia had presented with only the central area and the outer cathedrals being the only prominent buildings in the city. She could see the large tower and the five structures that surround it within the ringed wall or structure that the

other cathedrals were attached to. The building they believe is either a library or some sort of central data archive was coming into view as they approached. The building was in the massive shadow of the central tower as the sun began to set on the opposite side. Lights were starting to come on in the area with the brightest lights shining on the tower from its base.

A second team was also deployed to find one of those “ration” locations that was also explained during the briefing to get a ration pack to investigate the contents either by stealing one from a person who has one or from a store’s shipment if they can find one. How successful they would be during this time of day will depend on who would still be out during that time or if any of the locations were getting resupplied. If they can sneak a ration box from one of the shipments, that would be easier and would look better than assaulting someone.

When Lakia looked over the area around the possible library during the briefing to find a spot to land or infiltrate, she noticed that the sides of the building are not smooth. There were indentions going into the building that were the width of about two people shoulder to shoulder. There were also no windows on the sides of the buildings.

That gave Lakia an idea of how to get inside. While the shuttle was cloaked, she would use the shuttle’s holographic projector to create a section of the building in the target area small enough for them to be inside. It would also be small enough so that the shuttle’s power isn’t used rapidly. To accomplish this infiltration, they would use the indentions on the side of the building, primarily the south side of the building at the corner closest to the front entrance. She would make the holographic projection look like it was extending that corner towards the back. It wouldn’t be too big, but it will be big enough to house the two of them as they were lowered to the ground. From there, they would activate their optical cloaks and exit the hologram, making their way to the front entrance. If they followed someone into the building, they could sneak into the historical archive room and find a secluded corner or area for Brenda to get the information they needed. It was the best plan they had to work with.

However, there was also risk involved. Should the archive access be detected causing the facility placed on lockdown, they would need to find a means out. For that reason, Lakia would bring two weapons: a stun rifle to knock out personnel inside without hurting them and a high-powered laser cutter to burn through walls and barriers. However, even while she is cloaked, the use of either of these would reveal her position, so she would have to be careful and selective in their use.

“It’s a little late to back out of it now,” Lakia said.

“I know,” Brenda said. “I’m just concerned of the possible screw-ups that could happen. I was hoping to be able to walk right in there without anyone questioning me or being suspicious. Instead, we are sneaking in like we are thieves or something similar.”

“I wish there was a way to make that work, but the security in that building is just a little too tight to accomplish that. We are almost at the drop point.”

Lakia slowly piloted the shuttle closer to the south side of the building. As she passed over the ringed structure, she looked around to see if there was anyone who could visually watch that side of the building, either in the courtyard or one of the five buildings on that side, so that they don’t see the hologram being activated. Once she was sure no one was watching that side of the building, she flew the shuttle over the part of the building she selected as the drop point, bringing the craft to a hover right over that corner of the building.

“I need to take a quick scan of this section of the building so that the hologram matches the surrounding structure,” Lakia said.

Lakia scanned that part of the building briefly. After a minute or so, the layout of the side

of the building was inputted into the holographic projection system. After a few seconds, the hologram signaled that the image was ready. Lakia took a deep breath.

“Here we go,” Lakia said.

“Wait a moment,” Brenda said.

Lakia looked at Brenda with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Why do you want me to wait?” Lakia asked.

“You just scanned that section of the building, so you can map out a hologram, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Can you scan part of the building to make sure that this is the library we are looking for before we attempt to go in?”

Lakia thought about it for a moment. She soon realized that Brenda had a point.

“Alright,” Lakia said. “It would be best to make sure that this is the right building at least. I need to make this short and small so that we don’t set off any alarms.”

Lakia turned the scanner to a small part of the building towards the middle and did a quick scan of that section of the building. The scan lasted for less than a second. The shuttle’s computer displayed on a screen between Brenda and Lakia what it was able to detect.

The building was three stories tall, but it appears the building’s interior goes down below ground level. Most of the interior was made up of catwalks on the three floors that were scanned at ground level. The scan showed eight massive cylindrical structures that looked like computer cores going from the top of the ceiling and down below ground level surrounding a central area on each floor. This central area had a large terminal station in the middle of the room with what appeared to be twelve stations on each floor. However, most twelve stations were taken by people.

“This appears to be a data center of some type,” Lakia said.

“I can’t tell if this is a library or not, though,” Brenda said.

“The only way to know is to go in. Right now, this is our best bet at finding any information about the Dominion. You have that list that Amarria gave you to search and retrieve, right?”

“Yes,” Brenda said. “I stored the list in the suit and it will appear on my heads-up display. I need to get information from the first three years of the Tenebris exile as well as their religion, the development of their government, and when they discovered the Federation.”

“Wait, nothing on the development of the rift engine?”

“That information may be top secret or related to the military. Amarria found it best not to get that information or it would be flagged if we try to access it.”

“Maybe, but I would go ahead and see about getting it if you can. The Republic scientists and engineers may want to have a look at that. It’s time to go.”

Lakia turned on the autopilot so that the shuttle can maintain its position. Lakia took one last look to make sure no one was watching this side of the building before activating the holographic projector. Very quickly, the projector displayed an extension of wall towards the back of the building for only a few meters, enough for two people to fit in. Lakia and Brenda removed their seat harnesses and headed towards the back of the shuttle with Lakia going first. Lakia grabbed her helmet from a hook near the cockpit and put it on, activating it. Brenda grabbed hers on the hook on the opposite side of the door and put it on as well. Once activated, she could no longer see Lakia’s face, but her voice would be going through the helmet’s earpiece so that they could speak to each other. Lakia moved over to the wall on the left side of the shuttle towards a button. That button was connected to a metal rope on a pulley with a handle and a

footrest. It was one of a few buttons on that side of the shuttle. Another set of buttons were on the other side of shuttle that were also connected to similar metal ropes. Brenda was informed in advance that these would be used to lower them from the shuttle the moment they arrived.

Brenda went to the button connected to a pulley opposite of Lakia. They pressed the buttons at the same time and lowered the cable until the footrest was just above the floor. Lakia pressed a button on the control panel on her left forearm. A confirmation tone chimed on her arm.

*“There,” she said through Brenda’s helmet. “Now I can control the pulley system from here.”*

Lakia placed her left foot in the footrest, grabbing the handle above with her left hand. Brenda did the same.

*“You ready?”* Lakia asked.

*“Let’s do it,”* Brenda said as she raised her right foot off the floor, her right hand gripping the cable.

*“Here we go, then.”*

Lakia reached up with her right hand and pressed a button on the control panel. The floor beneath them slid open. Below was pitch black. Brenda looked down and noticed the darkness but her heads-up display showed how far down the ground was.

*“Why is it dark down there?”* she asked.

*“If light was let in through the hologram, it would appear translucent,”* Lakia said.

*“Don’t worry, though. As you may have noticed, our helmets display where the ground level is, so I know when to stop the pulley. Here we go.”*

Lakia pressed another button on the control panel. Both pulleys began to lower the women into the darkness. The moment they left the shuttle above them and entered the hologram, the shuttle and any light from it disappeared, surrounding them in complete darkness. Brenda could see based on the display that the ground was getting closer but it also showed her a silhouette of where Lakia was as they descended. Once they were close to the ground, Lakia stopped both pulleys. Lakia let go of the cable and dropped to the ground. Brenda did the same.

*“Activate the optical cloak,”* Lakia said. *“Once we pass through the holographic projection, follow me. You will see me as a silhouette on your helmet’s display as you are seeing me now. We will be heading for the front entrance and wait for someone to either enter or exit the building. Here we go.”*

Brenda activated her suit’s optical cloaking device. A few seconds later, she went through the holographic projection, and was nearly blinded at first by the sudden light. She quickly got her bearings and saw that she walked out facing the direction towards the back of the building towards the central tower. The wall of the possible library was to her right and the courtyard was to her left.

As she turned left to go around the corner, she saw Lakia moving ahead of her towards the front of the building. Brenda quickly followed behind her. As they approached the front side of the building, Brenda saw a small flight of stairs going up towards the front doors. She also noticed that the doors were sliding doors flanked on each side by guards from the Aspergillus family group. They approached the base of the stairs and stopped near the side railing. They waited to see if anyone would come towards the building as they did not feel comfortable waiting at the top of the stairs near the guards.

Brenda then heard some footsteps coming from the direction opposite of the front doors. She turned to look as did Lakia towards that direction. Coming their way were two ladies of the

Tigris family, based on the fact they wore the attire of that family. They each looked to be holding a tablet in their hand and tucked under their right arm. What surprised Brenda was that they were not conversing with each other, and their steps were in unison. They also did not look to be happy but rather they had serious expressions on their faces. At second glance, she quickly noticed that they had the same face!

“Do you think these two are twins?” Brenda asked Lakia, knowing her own helmet prevents sound from escaping so that others could not hear them. “I know you showed us during the briefing of identical looking people, but this is starting to bother me.”

*“I’m not sure,”* Lakia said. *“We’ll figure that out later. Right now, we need to follow these two. Tread lightly so that your steps cannot be heard.”*

While Brenda continued to ponder why they looked the same and acted the way that they were, the fact is that they were heading towards the front entrance of the building and they were the only chance Brenda and Lakia had for getting into the building. As soon as the ladies passed by them, Lakia and Brenda followed behind them.

Even when going up the steps, the two ladies were in unison with their steps. Not taking any chances of being heard, Brenda and Lakia went up the stairs, matching their steps to the ladies in front of them but doing so softly enough to not attract attention. After reaching the top of the stairs, the ladies pulled out badges from their blazers’ inner pockets and showed them to the guards. Brenda started to feel relieved that they did not go with the original plan or she would have been stopped by the guards because she did not have an identification badge. The guards pulled out scanners and scanned the ladies’ badges. After getting a confirmation sound, they nodded in acknowledgement that they were clear to enter. The guard on the right turned and pressed a button on the panel behind him, a panel Brenda and Lakia did not notice before. The doors slid open and the ladies began to walk inside. Brenda and Lakia quickly followed behind them. As soon as the two of them cleared the doorway, the doors quickly closed behind them.

The main foyer they entered appeared to serve to separate the outside from the data room. The room was painted red with silver accents and lacked any real aesthetics outside of being made of metal. Aside from the double sliding doors at the far end of the foyer, there were restrooms to their left, meaning that there may not be any inside the data room. There was a terminal on each side to the entrance to the data room opposite of the entrance. The two ladies they were following moved on ahead towards the terminals. Brenda and Lakia soon followed and stopped close to them. The two ladies took out their badges again and inserted them into the terminals at the exact same time. Both terminals gave a confirmation sound and the doors started to slide open. The ladies removed their badges from the terminals and started to enter the room with Brenda and Lakia following quickly behind them. Just like with the main entrance, the data room doors were quick to close behind them.

As the two ladies continued forward, Brenda and Lakia got a look around the room. The scans were accurate about the eight massive pillars and the central areas going three stories above ground level. However, as they looked down, they could see that they go another five stories down below ground level! The room was more massive than they had anticipated.

“So, where in the world do we go to find the information that we need?” Brenda asked.

*“You’re asking the wrong person,”* Lakia said. *“Let’s head for the central area and see if we can get the information there.”*

Brenda and Lakia walked down the central catwalk towards the central terminals. There were not many lights illuminating the rest of the room but there were enough illuminating the central terminal area on all floors. Catwalks extended to the eight surrounding columns from the

central area on all floors. Whether these served for maintenance purposes or direct access to the databanks, they were not sure. As they approached the central terminal area, they could see that not every terminal was occupied as one was vacant near the opposite side on the left. All of the occupied seats were taken by women of the Tigris family. Based on the number of seats that were present, there were twelve terminal stations that surrounded a small central pillar. It was not known whether this central pillar served as a computer or a central hub for the terminals. Once they reached the central terminal platform, they slowly made their way around the left side. Thankfully, there was enough clearance between the ladies who were seated and the railing for them not to bump into any of them.

As they made their way to the empty station, Brenda took notice of an access port just to the right of the terminal. It looked to be a small cylindrical insert about two centimeters in diameter. She saw that one of the two women that they followed took a station nearby and plugged a cord from her tablet into the closest port to her station. Brenda looked back at the empty port in front of her.

“Looks like this is a data access port right here,” Brenda said as she pointed at the access port, knowing Lakia can only see her pointing it out on her own helmet. “Will the access jack I have work with it?”

*“The jack is designed to modify the end of it to access any possible terminal it is plugged into,”* Lakia said. *“Once you put it in, it will check the connections and adjust. Give it a try. I don’t want to stay in here any longer than needed and we don’t know how long this station will remain vacant.”*

“Understood. I’ll get started now.”

Brenda extended the cord with the access jack at the end of it out from the right side of her belt. She inserted the jack into the access port and held it there with her right hand. She felt some vibrations from the cord as the jack modified itself to connect to the access port. After a few seconds, her helmet’s display showed it was connected. A status bar appeared showing it was “negotiating with the host” to gain access. Brenda could only hope that this state-of-the-art hacking system is as good as she had been told and won’t set off any alerts as it attempts to gain access. She also hoped that the Dominion did not have any firewall or protection systems that would make access more difficult.

After ten seconds, her display showed that access was granted. Brenda felt a sigh of relief as she raised her free left hand and used hand gestures as if she was working with a holographic display to guide through the Dominion database. The files were in some hierarchy form but thankfully were easily labeled for her to search.

“I have access to their database,” Brenda said. “Their file system isn’t as complicated as I thought it was going to be. Their base folders appear to be divided by department such as government and population.”

*“What about their history?”* Lakia asked.

“I’m looking under ‘Library’ to see if anything is there.”

Brenda entered the “Library” folder and saw that they were divided by centuries, but they only went as far back as a few years before the Tenebris were exiled. She picked the oldest century and found it was divided into decades, followed by years and months as she dug further.

“Talk about being specific. They go from centuries to decades all the way to months.”

As she looked at the oldest entries, she found files that were detailing the beginnings of the Tenebris cult. After opening and briefly viewing the file, she closed it and backed up as far as the centuries. She selected them all and checked to see how big the folders were and to see how

long it would take to download. Much to her surprise, most of the folders were empty! The files that were in the folders would only take five minutes to download or less!

“This doesn’t make sense,” Brenda said, perplexed. “There isn’t much history at all in these folders. It would only take a few minutes to download.”

“What?” Lakia said. *“Wouldn’t that normally take only a few hours to download over six centuries of history? Why are there so few files in that folder?”*

“Could it be that only important moments in the Dominion’s history is recorded? If that is the case, what do they teach their children?”

*“We’ll figure that out later. Grab their history and move on to the next item. We only have so much time to work with.”*

“Understood. Copying the history into the storage unit.”

Brenda brought up a menu over the History folder and selected to copy the entire folder to the data storage unit on her back. She looked over the list again and could only hope that the first three years of the Tenebris exile and when they discovered the Federation would be among their history. The only things that would not be in there would be the current governmental structure and their religion as well as the info on the rift engine. She looked over the other folders for clues as to where to find the government structure and the religion, but nothing popped out at her among the folders she was looking at. Most of the folders pertained to their population and “cultivation” records which she figured was not needed.

However, she did spot something that she found curious. Some of the records were referring to the five families as “tribes,” as if each family was a separate faction or entity. Was the Dominion some form of tribal nation? She investigated one folder concerning the population of the Tigris “Tribe” to get answers about members of this group. She was shocked by what she had found in that folder. There were records pertaining to DNA engineering so that everyone in that Tribe looked the same using cloning and test tube fertilizations! Brenda looked at all the women in the room which she did not do so before. They ALL had the same face!

“THAT’S why they all look the same!” Brenda said. “They’re using genetic manipulation and cloning to keep everyone looking the same!”

“What?” Lakia asked. *“Why would they resort to such measures? Are they trying to preserve their looks or something?”*

“I’m not sure but it definitely is a good thing we didn’t attempt our first plan. The moment I started walking in the streets, I would have been stopped or detained for looking different.”

*“That makes me wonder if their leaders look alike. Do you think they look the same?”*

“Who knows at this point. I can’t find any information on their leaders in the database.”

*“What about their religion? Are they still using blood or sacrifices?”*

“I can’t find any folders that pertain to the use of blood...wait a moment.”

Brenda stopped herself for a moment. Something bothered her a little when she remembered seeing the folder marked “cultivation” earlier. It was near the top of the folder hierarchy, as if it was very important to the Dominion.

“I’m going to check something based on a hunch,” Brenda said. “Give me a moment.”

Brenda opened the folder. Just like the history folder, this one was also separated into centuries, but this time the subfolders went all the way down to days. Brenda opened up yesterday’s folder and saw hundreds of records. She opened a record and began to read some of the text inside.

The file explained about the amount of blood harvested from “livestock” clones,

enriching it with nutrients and supplements, and the delivery of “blood rations” across the population of the entire Dominion!

Brenda felt like she was going to be sick. It took every ounce of willpower she had to keep her lunch earlier down. Lokia could tell something was wrong with Brenda.

*“Are you okay?” Lokia asked. “What did you find?”*

“I know what the other team is going to find in one of those ration boxes,” Brenda said. “They are using blood harvested from what they call ‘livestock’ clones, enriching it with nutrients and the likes as a source of food consumption across the entire Dominion!”

*“WHAT?! That’s disgusting! Are you telling me that the enriched blood is their primary or only source of food?!”*

“It sure looks that way. There is no question now that they are still using blood, but I wasn’t expecting this. I’m grabbing this folder for evidence in our report.”

*“I hope the other team doesn’t open that box or they will be in for a surprise. Can you find anything else on the list before looking for the information on the rift engine?”*

“The only thing I have found is that the families have developed themselves into tribes. If that is the case, it could mean that there are ‘chiefs’ to these tribes that may govern each one. Hopefully, the history I copied will have info involving that development.”

*“Then it sounds like the only thing remaining that we need is the information on the rift engine.”*

“Let me see if I can find that information but remember what I said earlier.”

*“I remember.”*

Brenda backed out of the cultivation folder she was in after copying it to the data storage unit. She looked around until she came across a folder marked “military.” Not exactly original but at least it was easy to find. However, the moment she tried to access the folder, it required a passcode for her to continue.

“I shouldn’t be surprised that the folder needs a passcode,” Brenda said. “Should I continue with trying to get the information?”

Lokia looked like she was pondering the thought.

*“As much as I would like for you to continue in order to get it,” she said, “it is probably best for us to not pursue the matter further for now. If you attempt to hack or bypass the passcode, it would raise an alarm and we are still on a covert mission. If we are lucky, we can only hope that the team sent to the Federation will have better success than we are. For now, we have all the information we can get right now. Let’s make our way back to the shuttle.”*

“Very well. Besides, knowing that everyone in this room has the same face is starting to creep me out.”

*“Be glad your ancestors chose not to be part of the cult. Otherwise, this could have been you.”*

“I’m wondering if they even have names?” Brenda said as she unplugged the access jack from the port. “Look at them, though. They are not even socializing with others right now. You said you saw others around locations involving art and culture, right? Were they like this?”

*“I may need to look again, but I believe they were this reserved as well. Also, those places I said I spotted them were near the cathedrals surrounding the city. Those were the only locations that had any artwork or signs of culture my team spotted earlier.”*

“Those were the only locations? You mean to say that there wasn’t any form of culture elsewhere in the city besides the cathedrals? Why didn’t you bring that up earlier?”

*“I didn’t think it was important to be that specific, but it would appear I needed to be*

*after seeing this.”*

Lakia starting walking around the central section towards the catwalk leading towards the exit. Brenda followed behind her.

*“Back during Earth’s Dark Ages, it has been said that the church was the dominant force in the culture and literature of towns across the continent of Europe. It even served as a center of authority for the local towns. A lot of that power was due to both the religion and the fact that many during those times could not read. I believe we are seeing something similar here. If I am right, those five buildings in the center of this compound may be where the heads of each tribe reside with the central tower being the meeting point for them all, but that central tower may also be the main cathedral for the entire Dominion. This is just a hunch, though.”*

“It is a hunch that fits the layout, but I am wondering why they kept everyone looking the same?”

*“I believe it is conformity that we are witnessing where the population is kept the same in terms of looks and behavior. I’m willing to bet that there is no such thing as marriage here. I haven’t seen the other so-called tribes interacting with each other outside of a business or professional relationship, if that term can even be used as such. If this is to keep the population from having or forming independent thinking or divergence in their society, it is a rather screwed up system. I doubt these people even have individual names, but instead have ID numbers.”*

“If that is the case, a thought came to mind. What about the original descendants of the Tenebris families? I wonder if they are the only people who are different?”

*“If they are, then that means that there is elitism in the Dominion by separating those naturally born and different from the rest of the clones. Most likely those who are natural descendants may even be in positions of power. We will need to read the history you obtained and see if that is the case.”*

Brenda and Lakia walked down the catwalk towards the exit. When they reached the doors, they realized that with no one around to open it for them, everyone inside would see no one going in or out and could possibly raise an alarm. Thankfully, the exit did not require badges to open from the inside.

*“We may have to make a run for it once we exit this room,”* Lakia said. *“I will press the button to exit. Once the doors are open enough for you to get through, make for the exit button on the outer doors. The difference in pressure between the outside and inside of the building will be felt and we will need to be out of the building before they realized something is wrong. Are you ready?”*

Brenda prepared herself to sprint out of the door.

“Ready,” she said.

Lakia went over to the exit button on the right side of the door.

*“Here we go!”* Lakia said as she pressed the exit button.

As the doors opened and were wide enough for her to pass through, she ran out and made for the exit button on the right side of the front exit. When she reached the button and pressed it, the front doors opened and a gust of air due to the difference in pressure was felt leaving the data room. Everyone inside that room would have felt that gust of air leaving the room, which meant they needed to hurry before drawing any further attention. She noticed the guards outside had felt that gust of air and were looking inside to investigate. Lakia managed to get out of the data room and run towards the front door, passing between the two guards. Brenda followed as the guards looked around the doors

“Who opened both doors?!” the guard on the right yelled after Brenda passed by them.

As the two of them ran down the steps, they heard the other guard say something.

“Did you hear steps like someone is running away?” the second guard said.

“I did!” the first guard said. “We have cloaked intruders on the premise! Sound the alarm!”

“*Slag!*” Lakia said. “*I wasn’t anticipating this! Get to the shuttle fast!*”

Once they reached the base of the steps, they turned right towards the south side of the building where the holographic projection was located. The projection’s location appeared on Brenda’s helmet display as Lakia who was in front of her ran into the projection. Brenda followed inside as Lakia grabbed one of the cables. Brenda grabbed the other. Both ladies deactivated their cloaks. Lakia pressed a button on her forearm and the cables were being pulled upward towards the shuttle. An audible alarm started to sound outside as they passed through the cloak, being briefly blinded by the light after being in the darkness of the hologram. Once the cables stopped, the floor closed underneath them and they stepped down from the cables. Both ladies removed their helmets.

“We need to get out of here fast,” Lakia said as she walked towards the cockpit, hanging her helmet on the hook by the door.

Brenda followed her, placing her own helmet on the opposite hook. Lakia sat back in the pilot’s seat on the left while Brenda sat in the seat on the right. Both strapped themselves into the seat harnesses. Lakia then deactivated the hologram, no longer concerned whether anyone saw it disappear at this point or not. She disengaged the autopilot, and then flew the shuttle out of the central compound past the circular structure over the city airspace. Lakia took a deep breath.

“Looks like we made it,” she said.

“What about the other team?” Brenda asked.

Lakia checked her instruments. She spotted the second cloaked shuttle far ahead of them in the upper atmosphere.

“Looks like they completed their mission as well,” Lakia said. “At least, I hope they did. However, considering we know what’s in the rations, it may not matter now.”

The communication system went off as a message was coming in from the other shuttle.

“Looks like they are messaging us,” Lakia said. “They are asking if our mission was successful. I will tell them that we did retrieve most of the information, but it will have to be reviewed once we returned.”

“Ask if they have opened the ration pack yet,” Brenda said.

“Alright. I will message that as well.”

Lakia sent the message. After a few moments, a response came back. Lakia read the message.

“Looks like they haven’t yet. They are waiting until they return to the ship to open it.”

“That’s probably best,” Brenda said. “While I would like a good laugh, now may not be the time for it.”

“What’s wrong?”

Brenda looked over at Lakia.

“What’s wrong is everything about the Dominion that we have seen thus far! I cannot believe they have resorted to this sort of lifestyle or culture that I am seeing. Clones, tribes, blood as food, it just feels so wrong that it makes me sick that I was related to them in the past! I’m beginning to see why some of my ancestors committed suicide so long ago. Who would want to be associated with people who have such backwards and sadistic thinking as the Dominion does today?”

“How do you think I feel? Remember, I am also one of those whose family was related to the Tenebris. I’m just as sick and appalled as you are, but you must remember that you and I are not them. Before we even knew of our connection to these cultists, we lived our lives in our own way, not by some predestined guidelines. I didn’t have to join the SAGATs, but I did so because my father was one and I admired him for his service to the Republic. I chose to honor him by being a member of that branch of the military.”

“I chose to become a field reporter so that I can travel around the Republic and see other places I had only seen in videos and pictures. I wanted to get out of my home town and see things I had never seen with my own two eyes before. I didn’t do it because of my family like you did. For that matter, my family did not want me to go at all.”

“I see. There’s no problem in my opinion if you did it to travel around the Republic. I would love to visit all of the Republic’s attractions if I had the chance and I wasn’t in the SAGATs. However, as you have seen and experienced, sometimes traveling around the Republic for something new and exciting isn’t always going to be the case.”

“I found that out when I ended up being stationed in the Serenus System. It’s especially true outside of the Republic like what we just witnessed. Let’s just get back to the ship so that we can look over the data. I need some time to let this all sink in.”

“I understand. I’ll get us to the *Cavalier* as fast as I can. I wonder if you will be in the mood for dinner by the time we arrive?”

Brenda looked over at Lokia with a disgusted look on her face.

“How can you think of dinner at a time like this?!” Brenda said.

“I was kidding,” Lokia said. “I was trying to lighten the mood that you were in. I’ll get us back to the *Cavalier* now.”

Lokia pulled back on the control stick and piloted the shuttle towards the upper atmosphere heading north into space. As the shuttle’s nose pointed upward and to the left, Brenda pondered what she had seen. All she could hope for is that the information was worth the time and effort it took to get to the Dominion capital, but she learned more about the Tenebris than any historical record she had read.

What she saw and learned about the Dominion for that brief time mortified her, and she knew she would not be the only one when everyone else on the *Cavalier* as well as the RCIA and the Supreme Chancellor finds out, too. They must get past the jammers first and that will take over a week for them to do so, but the sooner they get out of Dominion space, the sooner the Republic knows about what is happening in this twisted nation.

\* \* \* \* \*