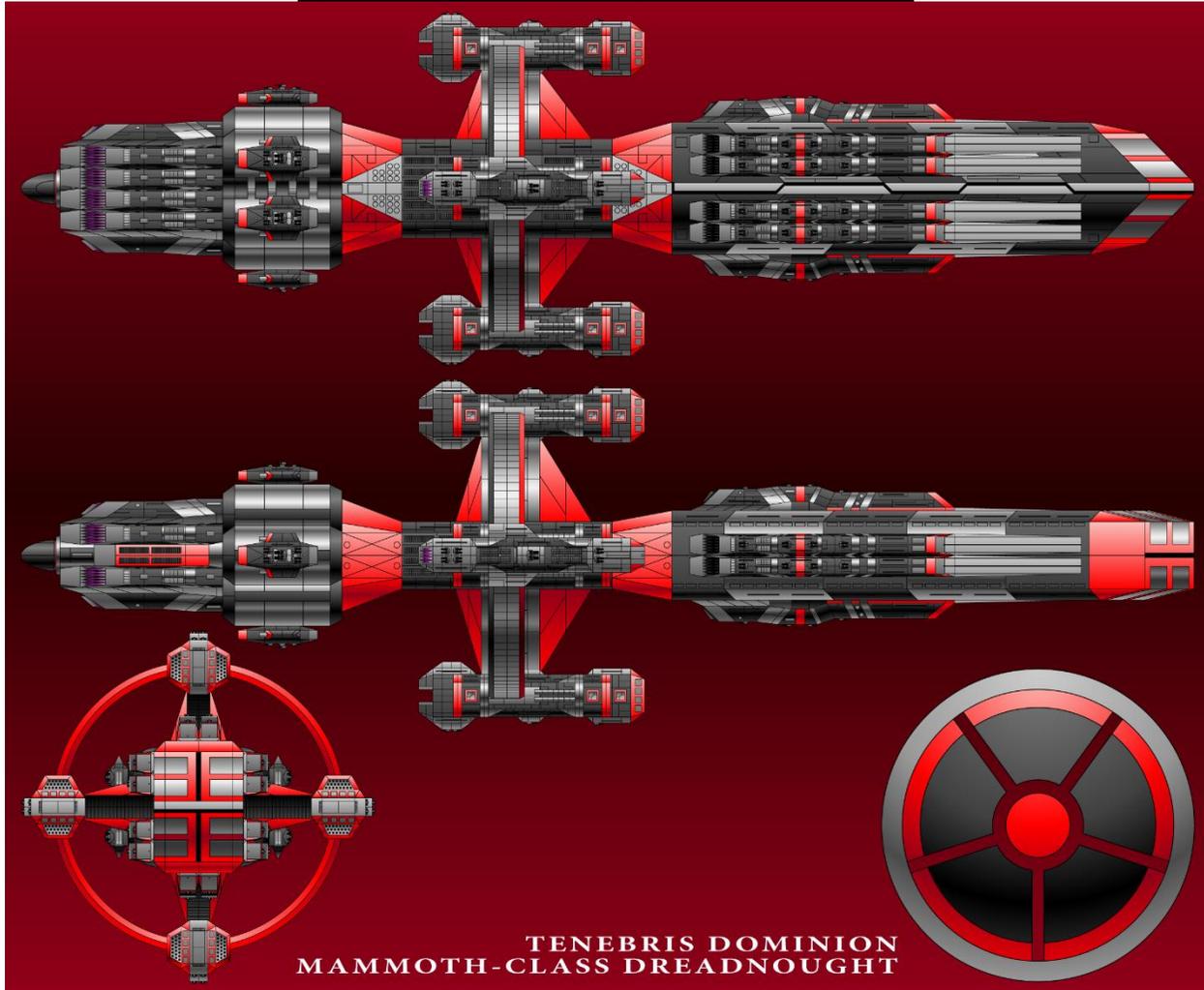


Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode VI: The Nations of Blood and Darkness



PART 5

*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Cavalier, Departed SW-61 “Miranda” System
On Route to NIR Space, Southwestern Region, 57 Light-Years from NIR Border
10:32am, September 26, 5434 A.D.*

“Good work, gentlemen.”

Captain Luke stood in front of his seat as he greeted Blair and Benja. The moment the two groups returned to the *Cavalier*, the ship turned and warped out of the system to head back towards the Ruber System in Republic space, the stealth vessels port of call. While Luke had not seen the information that the two teams managed to recover from the wreckages they were assigned to investigate, he felt confident that they did not leave those wrecks empty-handed.

“Thank you, sir,” Blair said. “Sadly, due to the timeframe that we had, my team was only able to retrieve a map of the Federation territories. We were unable to retrieve their history.”

“It was the same for my team as well,” Benja said. “We barely managed to make it out of that Dominion warship with our lives when the Federation ships opened fire on the wreckage.”

“I understand, gentlemen,” Luke said. “I don’t blame you for the circumstances of which you had to work with. We knew that the Federation would open fire on those wrecks to avoid them from impacting the surface while intact. None of us, however, would have expected the shockwave from the destruction of a Dominion warship to have pushed them all and thus accelerating their descent towards the planet. You did well to even have the maps of both nations. This will give us some information at least into the size of the nations.”

“What I don’t understand is where those three vessels came from?” Blair asked. “I heard reports that they came into the system through rifts similar to what the Dominion ship came through.”

“That is correct. We don’t know who developed the technology first or if they jointly made it before they separated. What we do know is that only the larger vessels were capable of using or creating the rift. The smaller Federation vessels appear to not be able to do so.”

“Do you think it has to do with the amount of power needed to create the rifts?”

“That would be my theory,” Yuki said, looking in Blair’s direction. “Rifts such as those would require a lot of power to create. It’s possible they need a vessel the size of a dreadnought like what we witnessed in order to create it. How it is created is still a mystery to us.”

“Regardless of how or why they need such vessels, the fact is that they are still a threat to the Republic if either or both factions ever decided to set their sights on the Republic. Let’s hope they don’t do so for a long time. Speaking of factions, I have a question concerning your data recovery of the maps of each faction. Do we know if the maps of the worlds or systems for each faction contained the location of their capitals were among the information?”

“I know my information from the Federation vessel contained it,” Blair said.

“We found the capital for the Dominion as well, Captain,” Benja said.

“That is good news, gentlemen,” Luke said. “Are the maps being uploaded into the ship’s database for review and analysis?”

“Ghost Five from my team and Ghost Eight from Ghost Two’s team should have uploaded that information by now,” Blair said.

“Excellent. Yuki, can you pull the information and provide a proper map of both of their territories?”

“I’m on it,” Yuki said. “It may take some time as the information from both the Federation and the Dominion’s databases will overwrite our initial information including names and positions on those star systems under their control.”

“How long?”

“About fifteen minutes, sir.”

“Very well. Gentlemen, we will be reviewing your findings once Yuki has finished uploading and compiling the maps. I would suggest you and your team get some rest. We are on route towards Republic space to report our findings to the RCIA and the Supreme Chancellor. Now that we know where the Tenebris in general including the Draco family or its descendants are located, it will be up to them to determine our next course of action.”

“What about the *Templar*?” Blair asked. “Are they going to be notified as well about our findings so that they can head back to Republic space as well?”

“Once we are a safe distance away from Dominion and Federation forces, we will transmit a message to them to return to Republic space since we found our objective. Part of me is wondering how close they were to Federation space but that is a moot point at this time.”

“I have one last question, sir. In your opinion, what are your thoughts on the Dominion and the Federation based on what you have seen and what we have reported on so far?”

“My opinion in general or something specific? In general, what I witnessed leads me to believe that whatever notion we, the RCIA, or the Supreme Chancellor had about the Tenebris in general being small in their numbers and weak in military power has been thrown out the nearest airlock. We don’t know the history between these two factions or why they are fighting each other, but I do know that their military capabilities are on a level that would appear to exceed those of the current Republic military. Before today, I thought we had the most advanced technology in the star cluster, but that comparison was shortsighted because it was based on the level of technology from the other nations we had come across.”

“Technically, Humans do still have the most advanced technology in the star cluster, but now we are talking about a group of Humans who have advanced it further to fuel whatever ambitions they had, whether it was for protection, experimentation, or just outright conquest.”

“While that is true under the circumstances, the only advantage we have right now is the fact that the Draco Federation and the Tenebris Dominion are focused on fighting between each other. The Novus Initium Republic is not on their minds right now and since it appears that they were not able to detect us and our cloaking technology, this gives us the advantage when it comes to espionage. Considering that both of you were unable to get their histories from their computer cores, the next mission may very well come to that.”

Blair gave a stern expression as he knew what Luke was talking about, considering he brought up something similar earlier to his team.

“You are referring to infiltrating their capitals and getting their history of both factions from there, aren’t you, sir?” Blair asked.

“Exactly,” Luke said. “Since I doubt we want to try going back to that battlefield again to retrieve that information, it is highly likely that we will be assigned to go to their capitals and infiltrate any library or information source to get the history for each one of them as well as their cultures. We need to see how much the two nations have changed in over six centuries compared to the Republic.”

“Their cultures, sir?” Benja asked. “Why is their culture important?”

“We need to know how civilized they are and if they actually pose a dire threat to the Republic the way they are now or not. I’m going to frank here, but any notion the RCIA or the Supreme Chancellor had of rounding the Tenebris descendants up for any possible crimes they have committed including the unauthorized formation of separate nations outside of Republic control might as well be thrown out. The Dominion and the Federation are full-blown nations that exist today and have the military means to defend their territories if threatened. Given the fact that it has been proven in the case of the Federation that they have involved other alien races in their nation, whether peacefully or by force, those aliens are also part of this scenario we face. Part of the reason studying their culture is important is to find out if either or both nations are ruling their people justly and without any form of oppression among their citizens. If that nation or both nations show that they are governing their nations like the Republic, the possibility exists to recognize each nation or both formally, including its government and its territorial claims.”

“My guess is you are saying that because they are too large size-wise as nations for our forces to just ‘waltz right in’ and take them into custody, right?” Blair asked.

“I haven’t seen the maps you two have retrieved yet, but I am assuming that both nations are rather large that you can’t tell me otherwise, correct?”

“The Federation spans more than half of the Western Region, sir,” Blair said. “They have some holdings in the Southwestern Region as well.”

Benja looked at Blair in shock.

“They only take up that much territory?” Benja asked.

Blair looked at Benja with a curious expression on his face.

“Yes,” Blair said. “Why?”

“The Dominion has claimed over seventy-five percent of the Southwestern Region!”

Blair’s eyes widen. He looked at Luke who in turn shared his expression. Blair looked back at Benja.

“There’s no way they could have expanded to that size in over six centuries!” Blair said.

“This would put them larger than the Empire, the State, the Mandate, or the current Lykan Republic,” Luke said. “How could they have grown so large in territory?”

“Do we know for a fact that the size of the Dominion is due to them wanting some sort of ‘buffer’ zone against invaders,” Blair asked, “or do you think it is for resource purposes?”

“Based on what pieces I could see during the download,” Benja said, “it is probably both and due to the size of their population. I didn’t get a good look as their population count wasn’t available, but I did spot several worlds on that map with populations from millions to several billions of people.”

“Billions in six centuries?” Blair asked. “Those families were not very big at the time they were exiled. There is no way even with a high fertility rate among the women of each family could their numbers grow to such size in that many centuries.”

“Indeed,” Luke said. “It took three millennia for over ten thousand survivors of the ‘Luna Incident’ to reach five trillion. While I do not know how many of the Tenebris cult managed to flee into exile, I highly doubt that they could have reached the size of the population they are now. At least, not through natural methods.”

“What do you mean by that?” Blair asked. “Are you saying that they could have used artificial methods such as cloning and mass artificial insemination to reach the size of their current population?”

“It would make the most sense. We know that some members of the cult had the knowledge to do so, and I wouldn’t put it past them to have used such methods to increase their numbers. However, all we can do is continue to speculate on the matter until we can get solid proof about the state of both the Dominion and the Federation. For now, all we can do is give our report, rest, resupply, and be prepared for the next mission. Now, go get some rest.”

Blair and Benja nodded in agreement but did not salute before walking away from Luke. While Luke may have been scouted by the RCIA and was an officer of the Republic Navy, his youth and his position made it hard for the two SAGAT veterans to respect his authority. Luke had once brought it up with them the first time they failed to salute him, but Luke was quick to understand why they would not salute him. After all, Luke was the commanding officer of an RCIA vessel, which was still considered a civilian vessel and not a military one. Since then, it did not bother Luke. However, he did ask for them to nod their heads when he dismisses them just so that they understood each other at least.

Blair called for the elevator when they reached the doors. It arrived within seconds and the doors opened. They stepped inside and pressed their destination on the console after the doors closed rather than verbally say it. Blair took a deep breath.

“I know he’s supposed to be talented,” he said, “but it’s still difficult to respect him.”

“Believe me,” Benja said, “he’s not like Trent. He was someone we could respect but that was due to our history with him. Luke is a different story.”

“I still prefer him over Tora. The fact that she was given command of the *Templar* before we were assigned here would have made things more difficult if we had to deal with her.”

“Wait, she’s in command of the *Templar*?! I thought she was just assigned to the ship?!”

“She was assigned to command that vessel. I thought you knew this?”

“No, but now I’m glad even more so that we were not assigned to her ship. That would have been the worst-case scenario to find ourselves in.”

“That makes two of us. Still, do you think the RCIA and the Supreme Chancellor would actually order us to go to those nations’ capitals to gather intelligence on them?”

“I can’t speak for either one of them as to how they will respond to this information. If these nations, especially the Dominion, are as big and as powerful as we are led to believe, the Republic will need to handle this matter VERY gently. Those two nations are already fighting each other and the last thing we need is to present them with both a common and old enemy.”

* * * * *

*Ready Room, R.N.S. Marshal, Paladin-Class Battleship, Novus Initium Navy Fleet Headquarters
Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
11:32am, September 26, 5434 A.D.*

“Is this all the information on him and his grandsons?”

Trent was researching former Admiral Coleman and his grandsons to find out more about their behavior and their actions before and after Trent was given command of the *Marshal*. However, every time he came close to finding anything that related to their actions, he hit an information “dead-end” each time. He didn’t know if this information was all there was or if there was an intentional block from accessing it any further. If the latter was true, it would make Trent begin to wonder who blocked that information. For now, Trent would not be able to investigate the matter any further.

Trent turned off the screen on his terminal and reclined in his chair, pondering his next move. Should he press further and see if he could try to access the information or should he just forget about the matter altogether? If he decided to pursue the information, there was one person he could try to contact to see if they could help. The only question is what she would want in return. He needed to know, to have some closure in the matter concerning Coleman’s grandsons and their actions that killed fifteen innocent crew members.

Trent leaned forward, reactivated the terminal screen, and began typing in the contact information for Head Agent Aja of the RCIA. Trent had not contacted her directly since he commanded the *Templar* a year ago. After several seconds, Aja’s image appeared on Trent’s terminal with a bit of a surprised look on her face.

“Vice Admiral Trent?” Aja said. “I’m sorry, it’s ‘Admiral Trent,’ now, isn’t it? To what do I owe the pleasure of you giving me a call?”

“As weird as it is to be asking this from you,” Trent said, “I need some help in researching information of a former admiral and his grandsons.”

“I’m assuming you are referring to former Admiral Coleman, correct?”

“The fact that you knew the name of the person I was inquiring about before I even bring it up leads me to believe that you know exactly why I am contacting.”

“Sharp and to the point, I see. I’ve noticed you were trying to find information in regards to Coleman and his family all morning.”

“Then that alone also leads me to believe that there is something involving his family’s background that you did not want any other person to see, especially if you were tracking anyone who was researching his information.”

"It appears your keen observations serve you well, Admiral. I guess your time in service to the RCIA was both enlightening and a bit of a hindrance depending on the information."

"Then let's cut to the chase, Aja. Why is the information for Coleman inaccessible? What is it about his background that would force you and the RCIA to lock that information down?"

Aja gave Trent a stern look.

"I know that your daughter Amarria told you about the Tenebris, correct?" Aja asked.

"Don't change the topic, Aja."

"I'm not changing the topic, Trent."

Trent gave a puzzled look at Aja before he realized where she was going by bringing up the Tenebris.

"Amarria did tell me about the Tenebris and how they escaped over six hundred years ago. She also told me that both the *Templar* and the *Cavalier* were looking for them. Are you telling me that the Tenebris are already here and that Coleman is somehow related to them?"

"Not exactly. MOST of the Tenebris families fled into exile but family members that were on other planets or were serving in the military stayed behind. While they are not as devote followers of the cult now as they were back then, some things remained in their family bloodlines and traditions including strictness towards duty and obligations. Apparently, Coleman and his family are one of those families. Whether or not they realize the origin of that strictness to the military way of life based on family ties has yet to be determined."

"If I remember what Amarria said, the Tenebris family that upheld such a militaristic lifestyle was the Aspergillus family, but that family's genealogy was from the ancient African American bloodline. Coleman and his family were Caucasian in their skin tones."

"While the Tenebris seemed to stick to marrying those with the same genealogy or heritage, the same cannot be said for those that were still in the Republic. They did eventually intermarry with others who shared the same values and principles they did. Coleman and his family are a good example of that."

"I see. Is there any chance Coleman's family knows about their history to the Tenebris?"

"Not likely from what we can tell, but the strict militaristic lifestyle definitely coincides with the Aspergillus way of life."

Trent noticed that when Aja brought up about the Aspergillus way of life, she looked away momentarily, as if something bothered her. Trent wonder if by chance Aja was also...

"Aja," he said, "you know more about the Aspergillus and the Tenebris than you let on. You were never this interested in them until six months ago when Amarria first brought them up to you. Now you seem highly interested in them and it isn't because this was one of those unsolved cases the RCIA was sloppy about back then. You are related to the Aspergillus family as well, aren't you?"

Aja took a deep breath, then smiled subtly.

"Even the Supreme Chancellor figured that out, but he had to do some research. I guess with you, it was not hard to hide that fact. Yes, I am related to them."

"Then I must ask, but what is your true motivation for wanting to find the Tenebris? Were you also hiding Coleman's information to protect him and yourself?"

"Those are valid questions to ask. However, for the latter, I did not hide his information to protect him or myself. I am going to handle Coleman and his grandsons. I feel somewhat responsible for him and his family considering that we are related, though distantly. As for the former, I want to find them in order to right the wrongs they had committed in the past, and to do away with the specter that has haunted me ever since I found out about my lineage."

“Did you ever talk to your parents about your lineage or the Tenebris?”

“No, I didn’t, though I doubt they knew either or they would have told me. I was also brought up rather strictly in the militaristic lifestyle as both parents served in the military. However, I was the ‘rebel’ of the family as I wanted to go into information gathering. As the old saying goes, ‘knowledge is power’ and the more knowledge I have, the more power I wield.”

“I can see that being the case, considering your current position. However, as to the topic at hand, what will you do with Coleman and his grandsons?”

“His grandsons have committed a grave felony and manslaughter on a military ship. That will be up to a military tribunal and the courts to decide their fate. As for Coleman and his involvement, we have confirmed that he indeed gave those orders by encrypted messages. I guess he forgot how well our decryption programs are. Since he is no longer in the military, he will be put on trial in a civilian criminal court for his actions. I will be giving him a thorough interrogation prior to that to see how much he really knows about his bloodline. However, there is a more pressing matter for me to attend to. In fact, your call was nicely timed.”

“Oh? How so?”

“I have received a preliminary report from the Cavalier. They found the Tenebris, but some interesting developments have led me to believe that the Republic is in some deep trouble involving them. The Cavalier will arrive at the resupply depot in one week. Her captain and the SAGATs on board will be traveling to the capital to give their report to both me and the Supreme Chancellor. The same will go for the Templar as well. Currently, I am asking for you, Laura, and Amarria to join us at RCIA headquarters as well.”

“Why do you want the three of us to be there?”

“I want you there for your perspective on the matter as well as others, not to mention Amarria was the first one to bring up the Tenebris to begin with. I will make sure that Supreme Chancellor Drew and Grand Admiral Mikey don’t deploy your fleet before then. By the way, how is your crew taking the loss of the fifteen crewmen who died in the explosion?”

“They’re still shaken up but the party last night which served as both a memorial party and a welcome party seemed to help some. The fact that I read off their names made them realize that I care for this crew and I for one do not intend to let them down in such a way again.”

“You know, that is one trait about you that I can honestly say I admire. You inspire confidence in your crew no matter what ship you are on, and you take every measure you can to assure that they make it home in one piece. That was the case on the Renaldo and the Templar. You may have had a rough start and some losses due to Coleman’s grandsons, but that should not reflect your ability to command the Marshal.”

“I got a similar pep talk from my new Commanding Officer. I think she and I will get along just fine going forward.”

“Good to hear. I need to continue going over the preliminary report that I received from the Cavalier. I will get with you again on the exact time and date as to when you and your family should arrive at RCIA headquarters.”

“Very well. Until then, Aja.”

Aja nodded before the call was disconnected. Trent leaned back in his chair once again. He wondered why Aja would want his entire family to be there. It was true that Amarria was the one responsible for bringing the Tenebris case back into the limelight, but Trent did not wish to be involved in commanding a stealth recon vessel again and Laura has no experience in such matters other than the fact she knows about the Tenebris as well. Whatever the reason was for Aja to be asking for all three of them to be there next week, they needed to be there. Whatever it

was that the *Cavalier* found concerning the Tenebris must be very important. He could only hope that it wasn't really bad news.

He activated his terminal again, but this time in audio only.

"Captain Dani," he said, "please report to my Ready Room."

He deactivated the audio on the terminal and waited a few seconds before the doors to his Ready Room opened. Captain Dani entered through the doors and saluted once she was in front of Trent's desk. The doors closed behind her.

"Yes, Admiral?" she asked, her arm still saluting.

"Please," Trent said as he motioned to the seat to her left, "take a seat."

Dani lowered her arm and sat down in the seat that Trent gestured for her to sit in.

"I've been trying to review the case involving Coleman and his grandsons this morning," Trent said. "I ended up coming across an information dead-end, so to speak."

"So, I take it that the motives for their actions may never be known?" Dani asked.

"Not through normal means, no. Based on a hunch and my experience with this sort of information blockage, I just contacted the RCIA Head Agent directly. Turns out they were responsible for the blockage on the information."

"They are? Were you able to find out why?"

"If you mean to ask why they blocked the information, it is rather sensitive information and I know why that is. At some point you will know why but for now, it is best if neither of us investigate the matter any further. If you are asking as to why Coleman ordered his grandsons to perform this act of sabotage, the only thing I can tell you is that it has to do with their family's history and how they have handled themselves when it comes to the military in general. While their predecessors have never shown or demonstrated the level of aggression we witnessed yesterday, I can say that their views have been thoroughly entrenched for centuries."

"That answers both of my questions, though whether or not I like the answers remain to be determined."

"One more thing before I forget. Any personnel not helping on the repairs of the ship is free to go on shore leave. Apparently, I am being requested to attend a meeting in one week at the RCIA headquarters in relation to the matter involving Coleman. They will be making it where we will not be deployed before then. This order is also being extended to the rest of the Seventh Fleet as well."

"I understand, sir. I'll inform the crew and the fleet immediately. Is there anything else?"

"Just one thing. There is a good chance that we will be deployed immediately after my return from said meeting and it may involve traveling to the edge of Republic space. Make sure all ships are prepared and supplied for prolonged deployment before then."

"At the edge of Republic space? Which edge and why?"

"I'm not sure on both counts. I'm only assuming we will be deployed but if I'm going to the RCIA headquarters, then they may require the services of this fleet in some form or fashion. I just have this feeling that we will somehow, and I want us to be prepared for when that happens."

"Understood, sir. I'll make the necessary preparations."

"Thank you, Captain. Dismissed."

Captain Dani stood up from the chair and saluted. She then turned and headed out of the doors of the Ready Room. Trent knows she doesn't have to salute him but that may have been one of the things entrenched by Coleman while he was on the *Marshal*. Either that or she was doing it out of respect.

Regardless, he now had to tell his wife about the good news of being home for a week, but also the bad news of where they would be going at the end of that week. He was not looking forward to that conversation with her.

* * * * *

*Presentation Room, Republic Central Intelligence Agency, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
2:28pm, October 3, 5434 A.D. (One week later)*

“I thought doctors were the only ones who were very thorough.”

Trent continued to make sure he had everything on him once he had reached the doors to the Presentation Room in the RCIA headquarters. Upon entering the building, any “visitors” were to be searched thoroughly with every means possible to ensure items such as recording devices were not on said person while they were in the building. Trent was informed ahead of time to make sure that no one in his family had devices on hand when they entered the building. To that end, he made sure both Laura and Amarria left their phones at home or secure in the cars. They were still checked thoroughly regardless but at least they did not run into any problems.

The three of them were escorted by a couple of RCIA security guards to the Presentation Room located on the main floor of the twelve-story-tall building. Obviously, the rest of the building is still considered off-limits to them or any other visitor without the proper clearance. The security guards opened the doors and directed the three of them to enter the room. As they did so, Trent recognized the room. Whenever the RCIA had to make any public announcement, this was the room they had used to do so. There were several rows of seats, totaling twelve rows on each side of the center walkway. Trent noticed that there were already people inside conversing with one another.

He could see that Supreme Chancellor Drew and Grand Admiral Mikey near the front right side talking with each other along with the other Joint Chiefs. He was also able to identify Tora on the left side of the room, but she was talking with a young man in a uniform like hers that he did not recognize. He saw some gentlemen in uniforms on the second row to the left, but their backs were turned to him. The last person he saw was a lady on the second row to the right that was sitting down on her own minding her own business. Laura moved a bit forward past Trent as it looked like she may have known that woman.

“What is she doing here?” Laura said as she walked ahead of Trent towards the woman.

Trent and Amarria walked behind Laura. As they approached everyone else in the room, one of the gentlemen sitting in the seat right next to the aisle turned towards Trent.

“Well there’s someone I hadn’t seen in a while,” Blair said as he smiled at Trent.

“Blair?” Trent said in shock. “What are you doing here?”

“We were on assignment on board the *Cavalier*. Benja and I just got back from our mission earlier this morning. I take it you are here because of what we had found?”

“Yes, but I don’t know who all in this room knows about them.”

“So, I see your wife is here. I also see that she is talking to that reporter named Brenda.”

Trent’s eyes widened as he recognized that name. Brenda was the reporter from the Serenus System where a Lykan-made clone of him during the First Interstellar War stole a destroyer. The clone was attempting to use it to start a war between the Republic and the Camino Star Empire. When she was reporting the scene, the station’s loud speakers came on and said

Trent's name as the one stealing the destroyer. Trent knows Brenda was not at fault for the fact his name was heard so he did not harbor any ill feelings towards her for that.

Trent turned around and looked at that row as Laura started asking Brenda some questions as to why she was here. He was curious as to why she was here but something told him that Brenda was requested to take part in this mission they were about to be briefed on.

"I have to ask," Blair continued to say, "but who is this young lady accompanying you?"

Trent turned back towards Blair, knowing he was asking about Amarria who was behind him. Before Trent could answer, Tora came up to Trent along with the young man she had been talking with.

"That is Amarria, Colonel Blair," Tora said. "She is the daughter of Trent and Laura, and is a librarian for the Central Library here in Luminous. She was the one responsible for bringing the matter involving the Tenebris back to the RCIA's attention."

Trent looked over at Tora. She was still as bothersome as ever. Trent had hoped that he would never see her again, but alas here she was and as coy as ever.

"So, this is Amarria," the young man said. "I remembered seeing your name in the report I was given involving the Tenebris months ago."

"And who might you be?" Trent asked, starting to become protective of his daughter.

"My name is Luke and I am the commanding officer of the *Cavalier*. It appears you already know Tora who commands the *Templar*."

Trent raised his right eyebrow at what Luke had said.

"You are in command of the *Templar*, Tora?" Trent asked.

"Head Agent Aja thought it would be best for the ships to be commanded by RCIA-approved officers," Tora said. "I was selected for the task as was Luke here."

Trent looked over at Luke but for some reason he looked like someone else he knew.

"Luke," Trent said, "who are your parents? You look like one or two people I know."

"I'm not at liberty to say, Admiral," Luke said. "Personally, I don't want anyone else to know outside the RCIA who my parents are as they don't know of my current assignment."

Trent figured that would be Luke's response, but he noticed that when Luke said "Admiral," both Blair and Tora looked at Trent's rank insignia, not realizing that it had changed. Both were shocked to see the new insignia.

"When did you become an admiral?" Blair said, surprised. "I know I've been gone for a while, but I wasn't expecting you to be promoted during that time!"

"I'm equally as shocked," Tora said. "The only reason I could see you being promoted is if someone else who was an admiral retired, but that would mean you would have a new ship and fleet as well, considering the military structure of the Navy."

"You would be correct," Trent said. "Admiral Coleman, the Flag Officer of the Seventh Fleet and the battleship *Marshal*, retired after some...questionable issues were brought to light. I was given command of the fleet and the vessel not too long after."

"What do you mean by 'questionable issues'?" Tora asked.

"I don't know whether it will be brought up in this meeting or not that Aja had requested for all of us to attend, but if she doesn't, then I will tell you about it afterwards."

Trent felt a hand suddenly on his right shoulder. Trent turned to see who it was but already realized the hand was Laura. She still had a shocked expression on her face.

"Trent," she said, "Brenda was asked by Head Agent Aja to be part of a mission of 'high importance.' Do you have any idea why she would be called here?"

“Let me see,” Trent said as he looked past Laura at Brenda. When Brenda noticed Trent was looking, she suddenly had a shocked expression on her face as she got up out of her chair.

“Vice Admiral Trent!” she said as she bowed. “I must apologize for that report that I covered in the Serenus System that forced you to withdraw from the Navy over a year ago!”

Everyone in the room was suddenly looking between Trent and Brenda. Trent took a deep breath and slightly laughed.

“We all know that it was not your fault,” Trent said. “There is nothing to apologize for. By the way, it is Admiral Trent now.”

Brenda straightened up and had a puzzled expression on her face before she saw the rank insignia and realized Trent was telling the truth.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Admiral Trent.”

“It’s okay, but I’m still wondering why Aja called you here?”

“It’s because they needed someone to blend in,” Amarria said.

Everyone looked at Amarria with puzzled expressions on their faces.

“What do you mean ‘blend in’?” Laura asked. “Blend in to what?”

“The Tenebris,” Aja said as she came from a door on the left side of the presentation screen on stage.

Everyone turned to face her. Most of the people in the room knew what she meant as she walked towards the center of the stage, though Trent can only surmise that Brenda had no clue who they were.

“Please take a seat, everyone,” Aja said as she withdrew a remote from her pocket.

Trent, Laura, and Amarria took the front row seats to their left along with Tora and Luke. Drew and the Joint Chiefs sat to the right on the front row.

“Before we begin,” Aja said, “I want to bring everyone up to speed involving the Tenebris, namely Brenda who is sitting behind the Supreme Chancellor and the Joint Chiefs.”

Aja pressed a button on the remote and the holographic screen came to life. Several pictures were put up on display. These pictures looked to show a small colony with some people at first while others showed an altar, and what looked like dead bodies on the altar. The last few pics were the smoldering remains of that colony.

Trent could easily guess that the pictures were taken over six hundred years ago and were focused on the Tenebris colony and their gruesome cult ways leading to their destruction.

“There are some things our history classes don’t teach us,” Aja said. “A lot of times, this is intentional to keep certain events from happening again. What you see here is one such event from over six hundred and fifty years. During the Republic’s Expansion Era, this colony was founded on a twisted belief involving ritualistic sacrifice to some sort of blood god. They were called the Tenebris, the ancient Latin word for ‘dark.’ They consisted of six families, all very large and highly intelligent. All of them followed this belief for years but originally used the blood of animals in their rituals. They soon resorted to the idea of kidnapping select Humans from other worlds and used them for their sacrifices. The blood of these individuals was drained, cleansed of toxins, and infused with nutrients to somehow ‘absorb’ that individual’s knowledge and strength. Eventually, they kidnapped someone who authorities could trace and managed to track them down to their colony. The military was mobilized to help put an end to their practices. While the last person they kidnapped didn’t survive their ritual, the military managed to burn the Tenebris colony to cinders, and the rest was blown away through the passing of time.”

Aja pressed the button again and the screen changed to a three-dimensional render of the planet the Tenebris colony was on.

“However, that was what those who were there were led to believe,” Aja continued. “The Tenebris had family members in the military at that time. Those family members managed to get a warning to the Tenebris colony who soon evacuated the planet. The ships sent to destroy the colony showed in their logs that they didn’t detect the fleeing Tenebris, but the logs also showed that key people had accessed those sensor logs and modified them to be unable to detect the ships the Tenebris used to flee. The descendants of those traitors continued to live in the Republic, unable to join their distant family members as they did not know where they went or if they survived. It has been recently discovered that former Admiral Coleman of the battleship *Marshal* and his family are among some of those descendants.”

“He was a descendant of those cultists?!” Mikey yelled.

“Yes, he was. We’re not sure if the cult’s teachings had something to do with the way that family handled themselves within the military, but their genealogy does tie them to the Tenebris. Whether they are aware of their ancestry or not is something that hasn’t been determined yet.”

“Do we know if they are still practicing that religion?” Brenda asked.

“While we have not seen any signs of cult-like activities like the Tenebris, we cannot rule out the possibility that they may be doing this in some other fashion that has gone unnoticed. However, other descendants that have been discovered after further investigation.”

Aja took a deep breath.

“I am also one of those descendants,” she finally said.

Most of the people in the room were in shock. Trent wasn’t as he already knew. Trent noticed that Drew didn’t react to the news either.

“Before anyone asks,” Aja continued, “I was not aware of my genealogy until six months ago when a historian at the Central Library was researching historical texts involving the Expansion Era. That historian’s name is Amarria...”

Aja pointed at Amarria on the front row.

“...Who just so happens to be in the room and is the daughter of Admiral Trent and local news anchorwoman Laura. Since then, I’ve continued to research the subject while the *Templar* and the *Cavalier* began their search for the remaining Tenebris survivors that escaped.”

“How do you know for certain that they survived?” Brenda asked. “Also, even if they survived, what danger do they pose for the Republic if they did?”

“We know they had the necessary knowledge of creating a sustainable warp drive engine several centuries before we did. Also, in light of recent events, we can say for certain that they did survive their possible destruction and they pose a great danger to the Republic.”

“To what recent events are you referring to?” Drew said.

Aja looked over at Luke.

“Captain Luke of the *Cavalier* can tell you about it,” Aja said before stepping aside.

Luke got up from his seat and approached the stage. Once he stepped up onto the stage, Aja handed him the remote. She then stepped out of the way. Luke turned towards the crowd.

“Simply put, Supreme Chancellor,” Luke said, “we found the Tenebris.”

Drew and the Joint Chiefs started to talk to themselves while Brenda pondered this news. Trent and Laura looked over at Amarria to their left who was shocked at the news. Amarria was not sure what to say about the fact that she was right about them still being around.

“If I may continue,” Luke said, “I know you have questions, but at this time we may not have answers for all of them. Let me continue my report, please, before I address them.”

Luke pressed a button. The screen displayed a star chart of the Southwestern Region. Stars were highlighted beyond the Republic border into the region.

“These are star systems the *Cavalier* has explored over the past several months so far,” Luke said. “This last system...”

Luke pointed at the SW-Fifty-Four System on the map.

“...Was where we were exploring before we started receiving transmissions from a star system a few light years away, but they had a lot of interference leading us to believe that they were short-range transmissions. We immediately warped to that system to get a look at what was the source of the transmissions. We eventually arrived in the SW-Sixty-One System over the fourth planet that was inhabited, and what we found there was this.”

Luke pressed the button on the remote again. This time the screen changed to footage of the battle between two fleets of ships in high orbit, the point-of-view coming from the *Cavalier*.

“We found these two forces engaging each other in low orbit,” Luke continued. “The massive ships on the left belong to the Tenebris Dominion.”

“Those massive vessels?!” Mikey asked. “I know you said to hold off on any questions but how big are they?”

“Our estimates indicate that they are four kilometers in length making them two and two-thirds larger than our own *Paladin*-Class Battleships.”

Everyone in the room was silent, including Trent. He watched as the footage continue to play, trying to think of how a battleship could possibly compete with one of those behemoths. Questions started to rise in his head, but while Mikey asked the question even though he was told to hold off, Trent would withhold his until the end.

“I will get into more details about their visible combat capabilities shortly,” Luke continued. “As for the opposing forces you see on the right, they belong to the Draco Federation. While I know Head Agent Aja hasn’t gone over this with everyone yet, one of the families in the Tenebris was the Draco family, the largest family and the one whose head was responsible for the creation of the cult to begin with over six centuries ago. We believe this Federation was formed by that same family.”

Trent was surprised to hear that detail but couldn’t figure out why the Draco family, the same family who created the cult, would be fighting the rest of the Tenebris. Amarria leaned forward in her chair.

“Could this have something to do with the son of the original religious leader so long ago?” Amarria said out loud.

Luke looked at Amarria with a puzzled expression on his face.

“It seems you know why they might be fighting each other,” Luke said, “Can you please elaborate?”

Amarria, realizing she said what she did out loud stood up.

“While I may not know how events have unfolded to lead to what we are seeing on the screen, I found that the son of the religious leader did not always see eye-to-eye with his father. In fact, there were videos the son submitted on social media about his issues with the cult.”

“Such things are available in the Central Library?”

“Sites are documented and logged for various reasons with the Central Library. There is a chance that when the Tenebris fled, he may have taken the Draco family elsewhere without the rest of the Tenebris knowing. I’m not sure how that would be the case, but if the son of the cult leader managed to reject his father’s teachings and chose not to follow the rest of the Tenebris, that would explain the formation of the Federation. This is only speculation, though.”

“Maybe it is,” Luke said, “but it would happen to fit the scenario of what we are seeing. If I may continue, there is more that may surprise you all.”

Amarria sat down in her seat, intent to listen on as was everyone else.

“Sadly,” Luke said, “while our team of SAGATs managed to infiltrate the wreckage of ships from both fleets, they only had enough time to get the maps of the nations before the wrecks were forced into the upper atmosphere due to the destruction and resulting shockwave of one of the Tenebris warships. I will display that part of the battle momentarily, but first, there is one more bit of shocking news. The Federation managed to discover aliens in the Western Region long before the Republic ever did.”

Luke pressed the button again, changing from the scene of the battle to three-dimensional bodies of three alien life forms.

“Three distinct life forms were found in the wrecks of one of the Federation ships alongside Humans. These recreations of the alien bodies show characteristics we have not seen before, nor are they related meaning they all came from different alien worlds. We also found them all in uniforms that matched those that Humans of the Federation were wearing. This means that these alien races have been fully incorporated into the Federation of life, whatever that may be. No such alien life had been found on the Dominion ship that was investigated.”

“An integration of aliens into a Human-based society?” Drew said. “We were lucky to even get a chance to talk to the Camino, the Lykans, or even the races of the State, let alone consider the option of integrating them into our society. This makes me wonder what the Federation offered those races for them to join.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t know right now. What I am about to show you may also shock you, however. Based on projected estimations before we knew of this war between the Dominion and the Federation, we assumed that if the one hundred and ten Tenebris cultists survived, their numbers would be ranging between five hundred thousand to forty million depending on the birth rate and life longevity. However, those numbers are far from the case.”

Luke pressed the button on the remote and the three holographic alien bodies disappeared. The map of the Western and Southwestern Regions were back on the screen.

“Here is the size of their territories and their population counts for just Humans in both nations.”

Over fifty percent of the Western Region and less than ten percent of the Southwestern Region was highlighted in purple representing the Draco Federation. Over seventy-five percent of the Southwestern Region was highlighted in red that represented the Tenebris Dominion. A dozen or so systems overlapped on the map leading one to conclude that these systems were under contention from the war they were waging with each other. The size of the nations shocked almost everyone in the room, but then the numbers of the populations soon appeared over each nation on the map and the shock was even more felt.

“As you can see,” Luke continued, “there are over one hundred fifty billion Humans in the Federation, but those numbers are small compared to the two trillion Humans that are accounted for in the Dominion.”

“How can there be that many in either nation?!” Drew yelled. “It took the Republic three millennia to reach the size of the population we have now! How did the Dominion reach half that number in over six centuries?!”

Before Luke could answer, Amarria stood up again.

“They did it through cloning,” she said. “Some of the Tenebris cultists back then were also masters in the field of biology and Human DNA. With the right knowledge, cloning would not be far behind if they wanted to increase their population for the sake of defense and stability, or just simply conquest of an entire region to match the strength of the Republic. I can see that

being the case for the Dominion, but the Federation's number being much less than the Dominion could be due to the appearance of the alien cultures within their ranks."

"Well," Drew said, "that is definitely insightful and would explain the numbers. You seem to rather knowledgeable about the Tenebris, Miss Amarria."

"I tried to study as much about them from their past as I can in case we did come across them, Supreme Chancellor. However, I think I'm beginning to get an idea as to the reason you called all of us here, Head Agent Aja."

"Oh?" Aja said as she came up on the stage again. "What would that reason be?"

"As Captain Luke has mentioned, the SAGATs that were assigned to retrieve the information from the wreckage only managed to grab the maps, but most likely they were requested to grab each nation's history to get an understanding of the events that unfolded within and between each nation. Since that information could not be obtained, the next viable option to get that information is to retrieve it from the libraries or archives of both nations most likely found in their capitals. This is the reason you called me and Brenda in the second row to my right. Because each family in the Tenebris came from different ethnic backgrounds, you needed people who could blend in and retrieve the information without raising suspicion. Based on Brenda's physical characteristics, she would be able to blend in with one family in particular: the Tigris family."

Brenda raised an eyebrow as she looked at Amarria but was suddenly puzzled by what she said. Trent noticed this and wondered if Brenda knew something about the Tigris family or if something sounded familiar to her.

"What about the use of my team and those on the *Templar* to get the information?" Blair asked. "We can use our optical cloaks to sneak into the libraries to retrieve the information."

Amarria looked over at Blair.

"The only problem with that is the possibility of running into or bumping into people at the libraries while cloaked. That would raise alarms that would make it difficult going forward to get any further information. The notion of 'hiding in plain sight' would work best in that regards so long as the person looks like one of the original families to not raise suspicion."

"Very well done, Amarria," Aja said. "You are as sharp and insightful as your father."

Trent raised his right eyebrow and smiled. It was not the first time someone has complimented Amarria like being her father, but it was always nice to hear someone say it.

"You are right in why I asked Brenda here today," Aja continued. "Like I said earlier, there are other descendants of those families that were in the Republic. Brenda just so happens to be a descendant from the Tigris family."

"What?!" Brenda yelled as she looked at Aja. "I'm related to those cultists?!"

"It isn't the first time you heard the Tigris family name, though, isn't it? The Tigris name in your lineage went away sixteen generations back, but you are not like the cultists. I asked you here since you are part of their family. Bear in mind that we still believe that the Tenebris as a whole are responsible for using some form of advance radiation to manipulate the mind of the Lykan King that ordered the enslavement of alien races like the Vitams, as well as the aggressive nature of the State Executive Council in trying to continue their conflict with the Lykans after the First Interstellar War. We need your help as well as Amarria's to solve that mystery."

"I understand, but this bit on advance radiation is news to me. Was the reason this was never reported because you didn't want the population to know about the Tenebris yet?"

"Correct. While the Lykans and the State know that their people were somehow manipulated into the events that have thus far shaped their nations, those in the Republic are

unaware of the current speculation as to who was responsible for those actions. Until the time comes for us to go public with this, the knowledge of the Tenebris remains with the select few here. I will point out though that should you chose not to go, we will have your mind wiped of this meeting. We cannot risk information about the Tenebris going public and start a panic over some blood worshipers who are still alive numbering in over two trillion outside out nation.”

“Do you really think either group is still practicing their heinous religion?” Drew asked.

“We won’t know until we investigate their capitals and their culture. Once we get a better picture of what their culture and society is like, we will leave it up to you to decide how we should act, Supreme Chancellor.”

“I take it the path of diplomacy is out of the question then if we simply approach either one of those nations?”

“I’m surprised you would actually call them ‘nations’ considering they were formed without any approval of the Republic, sir.”

“Approval or not, these are full-blown societies that have grown and developed without the regulations or laws of the Republic for over six hundred years. It’s not like we can waltz in, say that their nations don’t exist, and round them up for any heinous acts they may have committed that are illegal in the Republic. No, we are well past that point.”

“You are correct. As for your initial question concerning diplomacy, even I am not sure. Six hundred years is a long time and the descendants of the initial Tenebris, whether they are part of the Dominion or the Federation, have had all that time to foster ill-will and resentment towards the Republic for exiling their ancestors for a faith that they may still hold dear to them. Again, we don’t know if they are practicing this religion still or not. If the Humans of the Federation are still practicing this faith, how has it affected their relationship with the aliens that are part of their society? What is the standard of living of the average citizen for both nations? Again, we won’t know the answer to these questions until we are able to investigate both nations’ histories and their societies.”

“Very well. Is there anything else you will need for the next mission?”

“I know this may be sudden and possibly an odd request, but I would like for the Seventh Fleet to be deployed to the Ruber System where our facilities are located that serve as the resupply and communications facility for the stealth ships. Its location puts it on the edge of Republic space and at the divide between the Western and Southwestern Regions.”

“Why the Seventh Fleet?” Trent asked. “Better yet, why any fleet?”

“My reason for your fleet to be deployed, Admiral Trent, is that you are aware of the Tenebris thanks to your daughter. I would prefer you to anyone else because of that knowledge. Also, you will be one of the only fleet commanders to bear witness to what the Dominion and the Federation can do when it comes to their military strength. Captain Luke, continue with your report. Please explain the combat abilities of both fleets to the Supreme Chancellor, the Joint Chiefs, and to Admiral Trent so they know what to prepare for should war come to us from either or both parties.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Luke said.

Luke pressed the button on the remote once again and the screen changed back to the battle the *Cavalier* had recorded between the Dominion and the Federation.

“Please watch the rest of the footage. I will go over the abilities of the ships at the end of the footage.”

Luke stepped aside as the video recording continued to play. As it played, the eventual arrival of the additional Dominion warship happened and almost everyone leaned forward

slightly except for Blair and his team. Trent was wondering what he was seeing when that vessel came out of a portal. It was not a jump drive, but it was something he had never seen before. What were the Dominion ships using to jump onto the battlefield?

So far, Trent could identify that both fleets were using fighters and some form of energy weaponry. The Dominion was also using missiles and a point defense beam weapon system. However, when the new ship turned towards the planet, opened its front portion, and fired a large beam weapon at the planet, almost everyone in the room gasped at what they witnessed. After that, one of the Federation ships fired a beam near the impact point that the Dominion ship fired towards. A few moments later, Federation reinforcements arrived by warp. The battle raged on for several minutes before three portals like what the Dominion ships used appeared above the Federation fleet and large warships of Federation design appeared to come through them! After the large Federation ships along with the rest of their fleet fired and destroyed one of the Dominion ships, the footage stopped, and Luke walked in front of the screen again.

“I know the footage is shocking to see,” Luke said, “but I will give you a rundown of what we can tell are the combat and defensive capabilities of both nations. One thing to note is that this planet is lacking a planetary shield system. From what we could tell, there was no planetary shield active at all or ever as we did not detect energized particles in the air which is common of the use of such a shield. Also, the two orbital strikes you witnessed were against a Federation military base that the Dominion ship attacked, and the Federation cruiser fired on the Dominion ground troops that provided the coordinates of the Federation base.”

Luke pressed the button on the remote and the screen changed to three-dimensional renders of the Federation ships.

“From what we can tell of the Federation ships, they only seem to possess two offensive capabilities. The first is their unmanned drone fighters. Their cruiser and battleship types appear to only have a few fighter squads on board, but their carrier types hold far more by comparison. The dreadnoughts as we call them that appeared do not possess any fighters, but the supercarrier that arrived obviously possesses more than we could count. We have no clue how many the carriers and supercarriers can hold. Obviously, as you witnessed, those are not their primary offensive capability. Their primary and only offensive weapon is a particle beam both small and large with the latter like what we saw the Dominion use against the base on the planet. As some of you know, particle beams are banned in the Republic not too long after they were used against the original Tenebris colony in favor of laser-based weapons. Obviously, the Dominion and the Federation still utilize those weapons, but the Federation has gotten more advanced in their use.”

Luke pressed the button again, and the screen focused solely on the cruiser. It highlighted strips that were found along select edges of the hull.

“The Federation’s particle beam system is a two-part system. These strips are in fact a combination of energized particle emitters and electromagnetic field generators. The particles are released first from these strips and are attracted towards an electromagnetic bubble. Once enough particles are inside the bubble, a hole in the bubble appears in the direction of the intended target and the particles are released or ‘fired’ at the target. While most of the time we see the Federation firing a lone powerful beam at targets one at a time, we have noticed they can fire a few small beams on occasions at other targets. However, these smaller beams were not as powerful, leading us to believe that their available particles for their beams are limited in their generation at a given point in time. While we can surmise that the ships could generate several more powerful beams, it is our belief that doing so would take a longer time than generating one beam at a time. What makes this weapon system even more dangerous is that the Federation ships don’t have a blind

spot as these strips are found at every key location and direction on the ship. The only spot where they cannot fire is right along the hull. Speaking of their hull, that leads me to my next topic: their defensive capabilities.”

Luke pressed the button once more. The strips were no longer highlighted, but now the hull in general was highlighted.

“The Federation ships have little to no seams outside the strips that I mentioned earlier. Their armor is built in a similar style to the Camino Star Empire ships and as such the Federation has also utilized an armor repair system. While it is quite quick and efficient like our own and the Empire’s, it can only repair so much damage at a time. The Dominion’s offensive capabilities have shown that the Federation’s defenses can be overwhelmed but generally with overwhelming firepower. While this leads me into my next topic, I do want to point out that we ran simulations of their armor repair rate of the Federation against other nations like our own and they are comparable to the repair rate of the Republic, the Empire, and by extension the Lykan Republic.”

Luke pressed the remote button once again. The screen changed to show the Dominion warship type of vessel.

“The Dominion’s offensive and defensive capabilities by comparison to the Federation’s is by far more powerful, but we are attributing that to the warship’s immense size. Unlike the Federation, the Dominion utilizes traditional turrets and launchers for their weapons. We have been able to count the weapons based on what we can tell from the battle. Based on what we have witnessed, we can all agree on the heavy mega particle beam cannon the warship used against that planetary target. We also noticed based on one of the wrecks that the ship also possesses four medium mega particle cannons mounted on the front of each of the four weapon pods mounted on the midsection. We believe these either supplement or work independently from the primary weapon should they not need as much destructive force. We also noticed twelve light mega particle beam cannons pointing aft mounted in pairs on the ship ‘cannisters’ between the engines and the midsection. We also counted the remaining turrets on board with ten heavy octo-barrel particle cannon turrets and forty-eight quad-barrel particle cannon turrets.”

“How in the cluster is it powering all of those particle cannons?” Mikey asked.

“We’ve located a massive particle engine or reactor located between the engines in the back. It is believed that the generator created the particles needed for the warship to fire. It may also be filling up the cannisters we are seeing with the same particles to supply for combat, though this is only an assumption. The worst part is that the particle cannons are not the only weapons the Dominion uses. Rounding out its arsenal are two hundred fifty-two forward firing torpedo launchers, ninety-six aft firing torpedo tubes, a massive number of vertical missile launchers that we were unable to count, and lastly several point defense guns all over the ship for anti-missile and anti-fighter combat that we were also not able to count. Lastly, as you can see by the runways, the ship also possesses fighters, but these are manned based on how we witnessed the battle. We don’t know how many fighters the ship can hold.”

“That ship is a flying behemoth of war.”

“Ironically, we have been looking at codenames for these ships, but we know based on the team that infiltrated the wreckage of one of these ships that it is called the ‘Mammoth Dreadnought,’ so we will be sticking to that name.”

“So, both sides have dreadnoughts, huh? I would have never thought that any nation would be coming up with massive warships that they would be given that designation. However, I think we all have one more question concerning the dreadnoughts.”

“You’re talking about the portal those ships came through in the battle, correct?”

“Yes. Do we know anything about how it was formed or if it was using the Salire Purpura crystals in some new unknown fashion? How does both sides have such a system?”

“We don’t know which side created it first or if it was created before their war. We also don’t know how it works. The crystals always tend to create wormholes when used by either star gates or when used by ships to make an emergency jump. While we know these dreadnoughts and supercarriers are too big to fit through standard star gates, we can only assume that one or both nations opted to test out other theories of jumping their vessels from point ‘A’ to point ‘B’ where and when they are needed. In this case, the ships seem to be able to create some form of fold rift in space. It is unknown about the power requirements for such an engine to work but we do know it needs a lot. A good example of this is the fact the Federation’s smaller ships still use star gates and warp drives but did not use portals at all. I will get to the defenses of the Dominion dreadnought in a moment as we noticed something about those too, but when their ship was preparing to fire its primary weapon at the planet, it didn’t fire any other weapons and that reactor started to really glow. The moment it fired, the generator’s glow faded heavily as if it was mostly drained. We know these ships don’t have unlimited power, so it must take time for these ships to jump and to fire their primary weapon. We don’t know if the same holds true for their Federation counterparts.”

“What about the Dominion dreadnought’s defenses? You were bringing up about those a moment ago.”

“Their dreadnoughts appear to rely on their shields for defense. However, we noticed that they don’t have any shield boosters like we do. On the other hand, two things we’ve noticed don’t make that a huge issue. The first is that the shields are incredibly powerful for a ship this size. Whether that power is coming from the particle generator or some other power source on board, the shields are easily more than six times more powerful than our own. The other thing that we noticed when observing the shields was the fact that they were also actively being strengthened or ‘hardened’ to resist the particle beams of the Federation. This was actually visible from time to time though we did not see it at first.”

“Are you saying they were using some form of increased resistance to the type of damage the Federation was shooting at them?”

“Yes. Particle cannons share similar properties to the Empire’s blaster turrets which they use at close range. Because they are energized or superheated particles, the particle cannons deal in thermal and kinetic damage against targets. While our laser weapons also deal thermal damage, they also deal in electromagnetic damage. This means that unless the Dominion has the means to resist EM damage, our weapons will be effective, albeit not at full strength.”

“So, they are not invincible, but it is easy to see why the Federation is having a hard time in defeating them without utilizing their own dreadnoughts. I must admit, though, shield hardeners or resistors would be interesting technology along with the rift engines they are using to incorporate on our own ships. We may have to investigate ways of acquiring that technology.”

“Agreed,” Aja said. “However, before we start thinking about somehow taking another nation’s technology, it is best to see where they stand as a society and with the Republic.”

“I concur with Aja,” Drew said. “While in a military sense they pose a threat to the Republic, I want to see if they really are a threat to this nation or not. So, Aja, what’s the plan?”

“As I stated earlier, I would like Admiral Trent and the Seventh Fleet to head to the Ruber System, taking our teams with them back to the stealth ships that are docked there. They will serve as our first line of defense in case the Dominion and/or the Federation learn of our presence in their nations. Captain Tora and the *Templar* will take Blair’s team this time. The

Draco are based on the ancient Caucasian American bloodline, so he can blend in. Also, I would like for Amarria to go on this mission to research the Federation's history and culture."

"WHAT?!" Laura yelled.

"Like I would allow that!" Trent said.

"Mom, dad, it's okay," Amarria said calmly. "I want to go. I've always wanted to try going to the outer reaches and experience some excitement such as this. Besides, if Blair is going, I will be fine. I remembered all of the stories you told me about him."

"So, I'm the topic of some stories, huh?" Blair said rather coy. "Do tell."

"Some other time, Blair," Trent said. "Amarria, this could be dangerous. I want to make sure you are prepared for this. If you are discovered by the authorities in that nation as a Republic citizen..."

"I have my own plan to handle that should it occur," Amarria said. "I will be okay."

Trent took a deep breath.

"As long as you have your own plan for that scenario, then I guess I can't stop you. You are a grown woman and you have the right to make this decision."

"What about me?" Laura said looking at Aja. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I want you to prepare a report about the Tenebris," Aja said, "and be ready to broadcast it as a special report. We will want the rest of the Republic and even our alien allies to know what we are dealing with. We will provide you with the information and let you know when to broadcast it."

"Shouldn't that be my responsibility?" Drew asked.

"Laura has the face and the personality that people can trust. There are still those in the Republic that believe that the lack of transparency concerning the Tranquillus ordeal caused trust issues with the government. We will make sure to let them know that this report comes with your approval. She will need time to get the material together as well. Right now, you will have to figure out how to give your report to the Senate once we know more about both nations."

"Talking to the Senate about the Tenebris. That won't be fun."

"When has your dealings with the Senate ever been 'fun'?"

"If you have someone going to the Federation to research them," Brenda said, "then I will go to the Dominion and get information on them for you."

"Is that your journalistic curiosity at work, Brenda?" Aja asked. "Or rather, is it you need to understand your lineage better from those who may still possess the Tigris name?"

"If my boss' daughter is willing to risk her life to get the information that is needed to deal with such a threat, then it is only right that I should do the same. Besides, even Laura cannot deny that I need something exciting to do and Serenus is FAR from exciting nowadays."

"Very well. You will be going with Captain Luke and the *Cavalier*. All of you will need to depart tomorrow at the earliest aboard the *Marshal*. It will take two weeks to get there so we will have cover stories for Amarria and Brenda ready by then. Supreme Chancellor, as commander-in-chief, you have the final say in the matter of deployment."

Drew stood up and cleared his throat. Everyone else stood up.

"Everyone, this mission is of the utmost importance to the Republic. The events going forward today will either be the start of new bonds or the start of a new war, or both depending on each nation takes to us. I want you all to be careful, to make sure you are not discovered, and get us that information in one piece. I wish you all to be safe and to come back unharmed. Dismissed."

* * * * *