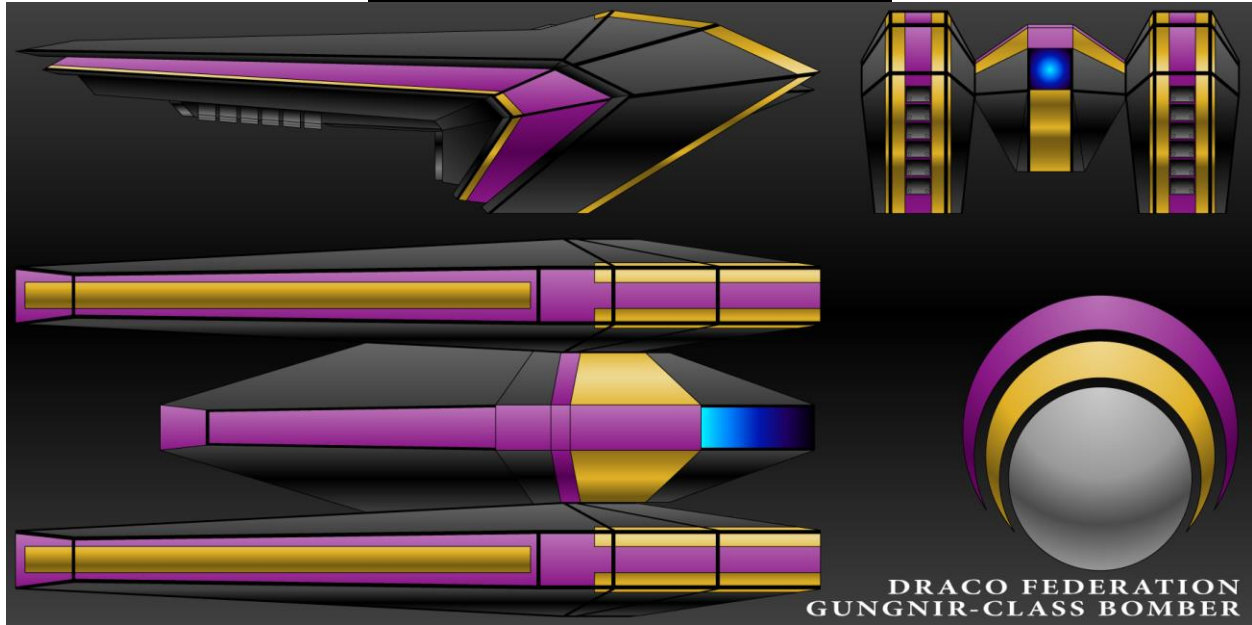


***Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga***  
***Episode VII: The Tiger and the Dragon***



**PART 3**

*Dominion Intelligence Room, Central Tower below ground level, Capital City of Plena Tenebris  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
12:21pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“Have we located her shuttle yet?”

Armani returned to the Intelligence Room after he changed back into his holy attire. After he executed former Tigris Tribe Chief Carol, he needed to focus on finding her granddaughter Miya. There was no doubt in his mind that she evacuated on a shuttle with Carol’s accomplices while Carol distracted Armani in her last moments. Once Miya is found, he will force her to remove the file containing the “true history” of the Dominion from the Central Database before having her executed. He will issue his decree to have the remaining Tigris Tribe eliminated afterwards. She along with the rest of the Tigris Tribe will no longer be a hindrance to his everlasting regime.

Alpha looked at Armani with a strict look on his face.

“Sir,” Alpha said, “we have located the shuttle that Miya is on. It is currently ascending into the upper atmosphere into space.”

“Good,” Armani said. “That shuttle is not capable of jumping away and only has warp drive to reach other areas in this star system. I will need a line to Military Command. They need to be intercepted.”

“There is another problem that needs to be dealt with.”

Armani looked at Alpha with a stern look on his face.

“There should not be any further problems than capturing Miya,” Armani said. “Carol is dead, so there should not be any further issues.”

“We know she is dead,” Alpha said. “We saw it.”

Armani raised his right eyebrow.

“What do you mean you saw it?” Armani asked. “Were you able to access the observation device that was left at the Tigris residence?”

“No, we were not able to access it directly. Carol appeared to have altered the device and have it record your meeting with her in its entirety.”

“If you were not able to access the device, then how...?”

Armani stopped himself when a thought came to mind. A look of shock suddenly came over his face.

“No,” he finally said. “Don’t tell me that it was recorded and uploaded to the Database!”

“It was uploaded a few minutes after you left their residence. She must have tied it to something nearby to record the meeting.”

Armani’s face was filled with anger.

“TAKE IT DOWN IMMEDIATELY!!” he yelled.

“We can’t,” Alpha said. “It’s using the same encryption as the history Carol put up. We need her password to access it. We are working on hacking the password but it will take time.”

“How many have watched or downloaded it?”

“That is where it gets worse. The moment it arrived in the Central Database, it was immediately broadcasted to the whole Dominion. It is highly likely that this was either set up by Carol or her accomplices in the Central Database.”

Armani was wide-eyed when he heard that.

“The WHOLE Dominion has seen what has transpired?!” Armani asked in fear.

“Anyone who was near a monitor, yes,” Alpha said. “However, word would spread quickly about what happened.”

“What is the response of those in the Tigris Tribe?”

“It is too soon to tell what the response will be at the moment. We haven’t gotten any reports yet.”

“This was not the situation I was expecting to have to deal with now, but then again, NOTHING today has been what I wanted to deal with.”

“So, what will you do? Will you still order the execution of the Tigris Tribe?”

Armani gave a slight laugh.

“Thankfully,” Armani said, “the order will only pertain to those who remain in the Tigris Head Family. The rest will be simple to execute. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must prepare to enact my will on that Tribe. Continue to track Miya’s shuttle. I will deal with her and the rest of her non-cloned family soon after.”

Armani turned and headed back towards the door. As the door closed behind him, Alpha was beginning to feel uneasy about what Armani had planned. He began to wonder if Armani had the same idea for all of the Tribes including Alpha’s own. He would have to wait and see what Armani was going to do to the Tigris.

He never had such thoughts before. Everyone in the Dominion was to have complete and total obedience to His Majesty Pope Armani without question. However, that footage was rather disturbing for him to watch. If Armani had the means to enact punishment to an entire Tribe in place and can do so quickly, it means that it can be done to EVERYONE in the Dominion. He began to wonder if Armani’s rule and authority is based on religious devotion to the faith or if it was out of fear for what he could do if his will is not followed.

He needed to know what Armani was going to use to deliver punishment, and how he can help his Tribe to counter it when the time comes.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Inner Sanctuary of His Majesty Pope Armani, Central Tower, Capital City of Plena Tenebris  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
12:32pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“Now, it is time for the Cleansing to begin.”

Armani reached his Inner Sanctuary, his room of solitude that allows him not only to collect his thoughts, but was also where he went to perform his routine of daily prayer for the entire nation. It was a small circular room with no windows, with one door located behind him to exit and another located in front and to his left. The walls and ceiling were painted black while the shallow carpet was dark red to offset the overall color. Black and red tapestry draped from the ceiling in front of the walls. Most of the lights in the room were built into the floor shining up towards the tapestries. One light was in the ceiling in the center of the room, shining at the black marble altar from where Armani performed his duties and rituals. A camera unit mounted into the floor a few feet away from the altar was pointed towards the direction where Armani was standing. While facing the camera, there was a red leather chair and side table to his right which he uses to sit and review reports and scriptures in private. To his left was a dining table with a single chair for him to consume his three intakes a day of enriched blood farmed from clones. Behind the camera was his bed, which lacked any lavished decorations. It was a metal bed frame with a thick mattress, a blanket, and two pillows all wrapped in red. The second door between the bed and the dining table was his closet that held his clothes and a few personal belongings, though not much.

This wasn't only his sanctuary, it was his own small apartment. He intentionally had it designed this way on purpose. He knew that he would be alone, the only Draco in the entire Dominion after his son took the rest of his family to someplace unknown at the time. He needed to focus on running the Dominion as its sole leader. Lavished furnishings were a distraction from this goal. He needed solitude from the rest of his followers and this room allowed him that only luxury.

Armani had placed on the altar a tablet on it with one side elevated where the display would only be seen by him from the camera's viewpoint. This tablet normally held the holy texts he would read to the followers of the Dominion, but it also served other purposes including allowing Armani to access files and reports at his leisure. It served one other function, one only he could access and it gave him almost absolute control of the clone population. He set it up where this function would activate once he snapped his fingers.

Unknown to the clone population, each clone late in the gestation period was embedded with a control implant device where the brain and the spinal cord meets. Those who implanted the cybernetic devices were told that this was their means to identify the clone when needed as well as track them should they commit some crime. The reality is that this device was designed with another purpose in mind, one he was about to implement.

He had to hand it to the three Draco family scientists that still followed him instead of his son centuries ago for coming up with this implant before they were terminated.

Armani took a deep breath before he pressed a button on the tablet, activating the camera. It was time to address his Dominion.

As the camera activated, he raised his arms up as if he was about hug someone.

“Attention, my followers of the faith,” he said. “Today is a solemn day. Today, a great heresy has been spoken by one of our Chiefs, a heresy that needed to be cleansed from their minds and their lips to make our Dominion pure once again. However, this Chief has decided to

defy our faith, along with their family members, and brought about nothing short of sabotage and rebellion against our faith and our nation.”

Armani brought down his arms to his sides.

“Chief Miya, who has spoken this heresy, has ran from her divine cleansing, aided by unknown accomplices. Her grandmother, former Chief Carol, has taken it upon herself to not only wipe away ALL of our records both holy and essential to our nation, but she also uploaded some heretic history out of malice that defies our holy texts. I will not stand for this heresy and I have a team attempting to wipe this heresy from our records. Adding to this heresy is a video that was suddenly released that shows that I killed former Chief Carol and things were said to attempt to validate this written heresy in our Database. This is a computer-generated forgery and I have a team attempting to wipe this from our records as well. Do NOT be deceived by those who have been struck with delusions and lunacy. While Chief Miya is still at large, the actions of both Chiefs of the Tigris Tribe has led me to one disturbing conclusion: the Tigris Tribe can no longer be trusted.”

Armani raised his right hand, his fingers poised for him to snap them to activate the function on his tablet.

“As such, all clones of the Tigris Tribe will be punished by holy decree of our red god.”

Armani snapped his fingers. The tablet, upon hearing that sound, activated the function in the Tigris Tribe clones’ implants. That function was the complete disconnect of their nervous system from their brains. The implant also shot a small surge of electricity directly into their brain, frying it in an instant.

To those outside of the Tigris Tribe who witnessed a clone from that Tribe afflicted by this act, a Tigris would suddenly drop dead with the tops of their heads fried and hot to the touch.

Armani brought his right hand down.

“From this moment on,” he continued, “clones of the Tigris Tribe is no more. Every Tigris outside of those of the head family are now dead. Any member of the Tigris Tribe’s head family that is still at large is to be found and executed immediately. Anyone found harboring them from this decree will also be executed without mercy. So it shall it be done.”

With those words, Armani pressed the button on the tablet to stop the broadcast. He took a deep breath and he suddenly felt at ease. There would finally be no more heresy to speak of.

Now all that is left is for Miya to be captured and killed.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Shuttle 658A, 60 Kilometers Northwest of the Capital City of Plena Tenebris  
Planet Tenebris Prime Airspace, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
12:41pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“What kind of farce is this?”

Miya was watching Armani’s broadcast as it concluded but she did not know what to make of what just happened. Armani said that the Tigris Tribe clones are no more after just snapping his fingers, but what was the significance of that? How could the snapping of his fingers mean that the Tigris Tribe clones were dead?

As the tablet she used to watch the broadcast went dark, she looked over at Tonya to see if she knew what Armani meant. She looked just as dumbfounded as Miya was.

“What do you think he meant by that?” Miya asked.

“I’m not sure,” Tonya said. “I need to check with some of my contacts to see what is

going on in locations that have a lot of Tigris around. Give me a moment..."

Tonya pulled out her phone and activated the screen. She searched her contacts and found one of the members of her head family named Marcus who was near a training site close to where there are plenty of Tigris Tribe clones working at a local school. She tapped on his name and the phone started to call him. After a few seconds, she was able to connect to him by audio.

"Tonya?" he said over the phone. *"What do I owe the honor of this call?"*

"Marcus," Tonya said, "I need to know if anything has happened to any of the Tigris Tribe clones. I know you saw the broadcast just now from His Majesty Pope Armani but I wondered if something has happened to them."

*"I was wondering about that, too. I heard some screaming coming from the school nearby. It sounded like it came from the children. I've already sent someone from my office to check on the school right now. They should be contacting me momentarily."*

"Very well."

*"By the way, where are you? Chief Ebony has sent out a request to know where you are. I'm hearing that the mothers of the Pistris, Aquilam, and Lupus Tribes are missing, too."*

"I wish I could tell you, but it is really none of your concern, nor my daughter's."

There was silence from Marcus for a few seconds.

"I understand," he finally said. *"Do you want to wait while I get a report on the Tigris Tribe members from my subordinate?"*

"Send me a message once you hear something. I have an urgent matter to address."

*"Understood. I will let you know...wait a moment. I'm getting a call from my subordinate I sent. Do you want me to connect the call?"*

"No. Take the call and inform me what they found after they conclude their report."

*"Understood. Give me one moment."*

Tonya heard the call go silent while she was put on hold. She looked over at Miya who had a concerned look on her face. Tonya knew why Miya was concerned as Tonya was starting to become equally concerned. After a few minutes, she heard the call reconnecting.

"Miss Tonya?" Marcus asked.

"Yes," Tonya said. "What did they find?"

*"It...wasn't pretty. Tigris Tribe members both teacher and student alike were lying on the floor. Their heads were hot to the touch and they could smell burning flesh. It's as if their brains were flash-fried from the inside."*

"Every Tigris was like that regardless of their age?!"

*"Yes, ma'am. I told my subordinate to evacuate the children from the building while local law enforcement comes out to investigate and remove the bodies. However, if this happened here, it is most likely that every Tigris in the Dominion outside of their Head Family is dead in the same fashion."*

"All of this at the snap of Armani's fingers. This could happen to any of the Tribes if we disobey him."

Tonya looked at Miya who was anxiously waiting to be told about the Tigris Tribe clones. Tonya was still trying to fathom the scope of Armani's control over his Dominion.

"Thank you for letting me know," Tonya continued to say to Marcus. "I will need to figure out how to handle this information and situation. Tell no one that I spoke to you."

*"Understood, ma'am."*

Tonya disconnected the call and put the device back in her pocket. She looked back at Miya who was still waiting to know what happened.

“Brace yourself, Miya,” Tonya said. “What I have to tell you won’t be pretty.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Ebony’s Office, Aspergillus Tribe Head Family Residence, Capital City of Plena Tenebris  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
12:55pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“I can’t believe they are all dead...”

Ebony was in her office when Armani made his announcement and judgement over the Tigris Tribe. After he made his announcement, she had members of her Tribe from different sectors of the Dominion from cities to dreadnoughts check on any nearby Tigris Tribe members to see what happened to them. Everyone who checked in reported with the same results.

Every Tigris Tribe member was dead, their brains being flash-fried.

She tried to ponder how Armani was able to kill them all with the snap of his fingers. There was a trick to how he did it. While she wanted to believe that there was some divine ability to be able to accomplish this feat, she also wondered why the Tigris Head Family spared the same immediate fate. There was something the clones have in them that was absent from the Head Families of the Tribes, but what that “something” could be was a mystery to her. She doubted that the other Tribes know about it or it would have been known by now.

The only possible group that *might* know about what the clones have in them are members of the Aquilam Tribe as there are doctors and surgeons that come from their Tribe. Ebony debated about contacting Chief Nicola concerning the matter, but she also wondered if Nicola knew anything about it herself. Right now, that was the only lead she had to follow.

After a few moments, Ebony decided to contact Nicola. She needed answers as to what happened to the Tigris Tribe. She activated her terminal and contacted Nicola. After a few seconds, Nicola’s image appeared on the screen with Nicola looking a little puzzled.

“Ebony?” Nicola asked. “*Why are you calling me right now? Don’t you know we have a crisis on our hands right now?*”

“If you are talking about what just happened to the Tigris Tribe’s clones, I am well aware of what just happened to them,” Ebony said.

“*It’s more than that and you know it. Miya has gone missing, her grandmother is confirmed dead which is making people believe that the footage that was broadcasted was not a forgery, and all of our mothers are missing as well. I’m beginning to think our mothers are helping Miya, but for what purpose I do not know.*”

“We will find Miya and our mothers eventually, but I need to know something from you. Do you know anything as to how His Majesty Pope just killed the Tigris Tribe clones with the snap of his fingers?”

Nicola was rather silent, leading Ebony to think that Nicola knew something about it.

“Nicola, please tell me what you know about how he did that. Your Tribe has doctors and surgeons among them, and if they have implanted something within those clones as well as the clones from our own Tribes, I have to know.”

“*I’m...not at liberty to tell you.*”

“What do you mean you’re not at liberty to tell me? You know what happened to the Tigris Tribe’s clones, don’t you? You realize that whatever happened to them can happen to all of our clones, right? So, tell me what is going on?”

Nicola took a deep breath.

*"I only found out a few minutes ago how it was done when I inquired about the dead Tigris Tribe clones. I was also told that it was a procedure first implemented by the first Pope at the formation of the Dominion."*

"First Pope? Have you even considered what was said during that footage when Carol was executed?"

*"I know that Armani said that it was a forgery and I believe what he says. This whole thing about him being a clone is nothing but a farce. The Pope is our leader and after showing his display of power to the Dominion, I will obey his orders and divine decrees."*

"Don't you realize that Miya was trying to tell us the truth in the Council meeting today? Armani may in fact be a criminal who created a cult that we are currently following! I'd never thought I would say this, but I'm beginning to question our faith and our way of life."

*"Ebony, it is not our duty to question our beliefs or our leadership. The only thing we have to do is follow our faith and the guidance of His Majesty Pope Armani."*

"Nicola, listen to me. I'm not sure why you are so dedicated to him when it is becoming clear that what Miya was trying to say about him is true."

*"You don't seem to understand the gravity of the situation, do you? We just lost a fifth of the population of the Dominion when Miya defied the wishes of our Pope. I know how it was done but I am not about to see my own people suffer the same fate by defying his wishes."*

"Are you telling me that we have to live in fear of him possibly wiping us out if we don't follow his orders?"

*"A nation whose people don't follow their leader is no nation at all. It is anarchy and we have been a nation for more than six centuries. I'm not about to see all that destroyed in one day because someone uncovered some 'truth' about our nation's origins. I would rather serve the wishes and divine path of our Pope than succumb to the madness that has enveloped the Tigris."*

"You're not even open to the possibility that everything we knew is based on a lie?"

*"Ebony, I would suggest tempering your thoughts on this matter. Your Tribe forms the backbone of our military, and the last thing we need is for our forces to suddenly be without soldiers and officers to fight our war with the Federation right now. Of course, Armani could always try to wipe your mind to make you more compliant as well."*

Ebony was suddenly in shock that Nicola would say what sounded like a threat.

*"Now, I have to focus on my Tribe's disposal of the Tigris Tribe's remains. Armani will most likely assign the tasks that the Tigris were responsible for to one of our Tribes tomorrow. I hope that your temperament towards the situation has cooled down by then. I also hope that you will have your Tribe double their efforts on tracking the shuttle that Miya escaped on. I'm willing to bet our mothers are on there as well and they will likely pay for their mistakes."*

"You seem to be rather hostile considering everything that is going on. There is more to this than you are willing to talk about."

Nicola cut off the transmission without saying anything further to Ebony. There was more to this than Nicola was leading her to believe. Her attitude towards Ebony means she fails to see the reality in front of her or she is being threatened or frightened into obedience. The way Ebony sees it, Miya is an obvious threat to Armani and his control of the Dominion. Without the rest of the Tigris clones, the only people Miya can rely on are fellow Tigris Tribe Head Family members who are currently being hunted and executed by Armani's decree, and those who would be her accomplices in her escape.

Ebony began to wonder why her mother and the mothers of the other Chiefs decided to help Carol with Miya's escape. She leaned back in her chair and pondered this for a moment.

She thought about what Armani had said about Miya's mother stating the same sort of "heresy" as Miya. Ebony thought about how their mothers felt when Miya's mother was sentenced only for her to end up brain dead.

Ebony soon realized that she knew exactly how her mother felt in that situation. Ebony was helpless to stop Armani from sentencing Miya to get her mind cleansed as well. Ebony's mother and the mothers of the other current Chief's had to bear the guilt over the death of Miya's mother every time Carol was present in their meetings. That must be the reason why their mother's helped Carol. They felt guilt for not stopping what had transpired back then and wanted to prevent the same thing from happening to Miya.

Ebony sat up in her chair. She was beginning to understand her mother's actions. She was doing what she felt was right. At that moment, Ebony felt proud of her mother. She was making up for her mistake even if it meant she would be executed for her actions.

That must be the reason Nicola felt the way she did. Instead of feeling proud of her mother, Nicola was ashamed and angry with her. Ebony did not know if Gisselle or Beverly felt the same or not, but it may be best for her not to find out right now.

Ebony knew at that moment that Miya and the Chief's mothers need help. Miya had the right idea that peace was needed to end the war between the Draco Federation and Armani Draco. This was not heresy. She pleaded for peace and stability in the Dominion before the Republic becomes involved and tries to take it away. She just needs additional help to try and accomplish this feat.

Nicola was right about one thing. Ebony's Tribe forms the backbone of the Dominion military, and with that force at her disposal, Ebony would be the help that Miya needs.

Ebony no longer feared Armani. Armani needed to fear her.

Ebony got up from her seat in her office and headed out the door to the Family Room. Designed exactly like the Tigris Tribe's room and to that extent all off the Tribes, she walked in and headed straight for the lowered section of the room, walking fast down the steps to her left and right up to the holographic display that activated once she was close. This display showed a star chart of the current Dominion controlled space. Ebony pressed a few buttons on the console, having the star chart focus on Tenebris Prime's airspace. In orbit were several dreadnoughts on their patrols. Ebony accessed the flight traffic from over the past hour, looking for the shuttle that left the central complex's shuttle bay after Miya was escorted from the Tribal Council Chamber.

Only one shuttle had departed since then, and Ebony began to track it up to its current position. The shuttle was slowly climbing into the upper atmosphere into space. The problem is that the shuttle was only equipped with an interplanetary warp drive and could not leave the star system. She wasn't sure where they were trying to escape to, but if Ebony was quick enough to create an escape route, she would provide them with the means to escape the star system.

That was provided, of course, that she does not end up spooking them into running away when a dreadnought suddenly intercepts them.

She found the closest dreadnought to their current flight path and contacted the commanding officer of the vessel. An image of a middle-age Aspergillus male appeared on a holographic screen that appeared within the display in front of Ebony.

*"Captain ATC-A-B11857924 of Dreadnought AF-2312,"* the captain said. *"What is your order, Chief Ebony?"*

"Captain," Ebony said, "I'm sending you the flight path of a shuttle that left the central complex of the capital a little while ago. I need you to intercept it."

*"Does it contain Tigris Tribe Head Family members?"*



Ebony knew she had to be careful with how to phrase her next words. She knew members from other Tribes work on the bridge of the dreadnoughts and would be more willing to follow the orders of their own Chiefs or Armani than Ebony's.

"It is unknown, but I want them taken alive regardless."

"Ma'am, His Majesty Pope has ordered that anyone who is a Tigris or is helping them is to be executed."

"I am aware of that decree, Captain. I still want them taken alive, understand?"

"Understood. Are there any further orders?"

"Yes. I will be transmitting a message to all commanding officers shortly, but for now, I wish you a two-finger salute for good luck."

The captain was wide-eyed and shocked when Ebony said that, but quickly regained his composure.

"Thank you, ma'am. I will contact you when we have the shuttle and its crew in custody."

The captain cut off the transmission. It appeared that the captain knew what Ebony meant by a "two-finger salute." Any Aspergillus who was trained to be an officer in the Dominion fleet knows that code.

In Short, it meant that only the orders of the Tribe's Chief would be obeyed, not the Pope's. This was nothing short of either a mutiny or a rebellion against the head-of-state.

Ebony will need to get the message out to the rest of the fleet. It was time that they took the same initiative as Miya and bring peace to the Dominion.

It was time for Armani to face the consequences of his actions, past and present.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Shuttle 658A, Upper Atmosphere, 133 Kilometers Northwest of Plena Tenebris  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
1:03pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

"What did you say?"

As the shuttle carrying Miya and the mothers of the four current Chiefs continued to ascend into space, Tonya was told over the speakers by Misty, the mother of Aquilam Tribe's Chief Nicola and the pilot of the shuttle, that a dreadnought was moving to intercept them in lower orbit. Tonya unbuckled her seat restraints and proceeded into the cockpit to confirm what Misty was saying.

As she entered the cockpit, Misty was to her left in the pilot's seat while Sandra, the mother of Lupus Tribe's Chief Beverly and the co-pilot of the shuttle, was to the right. Sandra was the one monitoring the dreadnought that was moving to intercept them. There were two additional seats in the cockpit with communications to the left and a VIP seat to the right. Both of those seats were vacant.

Tonya looked at the display on Sandra's display. The dreadnought designated "AF-2312" was approaching their flight path. The shuttle was quickly approaching the weapons range of the dreadnought.

"If that dreadnought is coming to intercept us," Tonya said, "it means they know who we have on board. I was hoping the response was going to be slower than this. I don't know whether to be impressed at their response time or upset that they managed to find us so quickly."

"Now is not the time to be impressed," Misty said. "What do we do? If we change course, they will know we are hiding something or someone on board. On the other hand, if we continue

on our current flight path and get within range of their weapons, they will destroy us just in one shot if they know we have Miya on board.”

“Let me contact them. If I can convince them to let us pass without them knowing that Miya is on board, we will be able to warp away to safety.”

“Are you sure about this?” Sandra asked. “If they know you are on board, they will ask questions which would put us in jeopardy.”

“Members of my Tribe command those vessels,” Tonya said as she sat down in the communications chair. “I’m confident that I can get them to leave us alone even if they were following Armani’s decree.”

“I hope so,” Misty said. “Otherwise, this will be a rather short trip for us.”

Tonya pressed a few buttons on the communications console to activate a channel and establish a connection with the dreadnought that was approaching their position. After a few seconds, a male Aspergillus captain appeared on the station’s screen.

*“Captain ATC-A-B11857924 of Dreadnought AF-2312,”* the captain said. *“Former Chief Tonya, Chief Ebony has been looking for you.”*

“And you have found me,” Tonya said. “I have important business to take care of, captain, and yet I noticed your dreadnought is about to intersect our flight path.”

*“This was intentional, Miss Tonya. I was ordered by Chief Ebony to take your shuttle and your crew into custody. I was even given a two-finger salute for good luck by her.”*

Tonya stopped for a second with a puzzled expression on her face.

“She gave you a two-finger salute personally?” Tonya asked.

*“Yes, ma’am. That is why I am requesting for you and your shuttle to land on my ship. Ebony said she wanted the crew of the shuttle alive. I wish to follow her orders on that matter.”*

Tonya took a deep breath.

“Very well. We will land on your ship. Be ready to receive us.”

*“Understood, ma’am. I look forward to seeing you.”*

As the transmission was cut, Misty and Sandra turned their chairs slightly to look in Tonya’s direction with upset looks on their faces.

“What are you doing, Tonya?!” Misty yelled. “Are you trying to get us killed?!”

“We won’t be harmed,” Tonya said as she looked in their direction. “I’m not sure what has transpired for Ebony to give that captain a two-finger salute, but if she did that, it means she is opposing Armani as well.”

“What do you mean?” Sandra asked. “What’s a ‘two-finger salute’?”

“It is a code that only Aspergillus officers know. It was developed around the time of the Dominion’s formation. I’ll tell you more about it later, but what I can tell you is that the captain will not harm us, including Miya.”

“So, if that captain says we won’t be harmed because Ebony gave him a two-finger salute, does that override Armani’s decree? Isn’t that risky for her as she could be labeled as a traitor for issuing such a code?”

“Yes, and that is why I was surprised that she did that. I can only hope that we will get answers as to why she issued that code. It may have to do with the death of all the Tigris Tribe clones. We will know after we arrive, but at least we know we won’t be shot down. Go ahead and land on that dreadnought. I need to tell Mary and Miya what is going on before we land.”

Tonya got up from the seat and started heading back towards the passenger section of shuttle. When she reached the door, she stopped herself from grabbing the handle for a brief moment.

“I just hope that they don’t freak out about what I am about to tell them.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Family Living Room, Aspergillus Tribe Head Family Residence, Capital City of Plena Tenebris  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
1:09pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“They managed to arrive on board?”

Ebony waited patiently for the captain of Dreadnought AF-2312 to report whether the shuttle that launched from the central complex had arrived on board his ship or not. Based on the fact that the captain was calling her now either means he managed to convince them to land on his ship or they managed to flee if they didn’t trust him or know the code.

*“I’m happy to report that they did,” the captain said. “Your mother as well as the mothers of the other Tribes and Miya were on board the shuttle. I have them in a holding cell for their own protection.”*

“From non-Aspergillus members of the crew?” Ebony asked.

*“Exactly. I’m chatting with you from my Ready Room in private so that my bridge crew doesn’t hear me talk to you about this topic.”*

“I wondered about that.”

*“So, what do we do now? I can hold them for only so long before someone on board realizes that I am holding a Tigris Tribe Chief on board and acts on His Majesty Pope’s decree to terminate her.”*

“I know. Part of me wishes that I could be there, but if I leave from here, someone will know and report my actions to His Majesty Pope. While I doubt he would do what he did to the Tigris Tribe to our Tribe due to our value and battlefield presence in our current war, that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t attempt to have my mind cleansed like what he was trying to do to Miya.”

Ebony thought for a moment about her next move. It only took her a few seconds before she came up with a plan.

“What I’m about to suggest is going to be risky considering your ‘captives’ and the fact your crew comes from Tribes who are still faithful to Armani or scared of his ability to easily take lives.”

*“That part I find the most messed up about him.”*

Ebony looked at the captain with a surprised look on her face. He quickly noticed her expression about his remark.

*“Was I out of line, ma’am?”* he asked.

“No, I’m just surprised you were as outspoken as you were. I’ve not come across that in a clone before.”

*“Maybe I’m being a bit more cynical considering how disposable we are to the Pope. So, what do you have in mind?”*

“What are your thoughts of having your ship jump into a Federation-controlled system?”

The captain suddenly had a shocked look on his face.

*“You want us to jump from here to a Federation-controlled system? May I ask for what purpose?”*

“Miya was trying to propose peace with the Federation earlier today in the meeting. She can either do that now directly or she can ask for asylum from the Federation. Her knowledge and information would prove useful to them.”

*“What about my crew and I, or your mothers for that matter?”*

“If our mothers can get asylum, then they should do so. Coming back here would result in their execution for being accomplices in Miya’s escape. However, by taking them on board your ship, you have also become an accomplice. I will leave it up to you if you want to request asylum or not along with your crew. I am fine with the rest of the Aspergillus on board if they wish to seek asylum, but I’m not so sure about the rest of your crew from the other Tribes.”

*“I know. Having them on board will complicate matters. I’m beginning to think this arrangement of multiple tribes on board was intentional in that if one Tribe tries to take over a ship, the others can take action to prevent that from happening.”*

“You make valid point. If you attempt to jump, one of the other Tribes will stop you and your ship.”

*“What we need is a way to get them to Federation space without the whole dreadnought jumping. This leaves only one viable option, but it is still risky.”*

“I think I know what you have in mind. Are you talking about having your ship open a small portal for only the shuttle to reach Federation controlled space? Do you think you and those of the Aspergillus Tribe on board could pull it off without the other Tribes on board discovering what you are up to?”

*“It is a more doable plan than trying to take the whole ship into Federation space. I can make that happen, but the tricky part is activating the drive to create a portal without our helmsman and the engineering team realizing that we are creating a portal.”*

“That’s actually easy to explain to them to avoid any problems. Inform them that I have ordered a Special Ops team to proceed deep into Federation space for an espionage assignment. I’ll let you pick the system for the target. Since these teams are completely staffed with Aspergillus Tribe members, it will be easy to convince the other Tribes on board of that intent. I recommend putting your ‘guests’ in Special Ops outfits since their helmets can cover their faces. It will be the easiest way to get them off of your ship.”

*“Looks like this is the best plan if not the easiest to work with. I will get started right away. There is only two problems I can foresee with this course of action, though.”*

“You’re concerned with them returning to Dominion space and what happens if an investigation team manages to track the shuttle’s departure back to you, correct?”

*“Yes, but the latter is workable. I will have the shuttle they used to arrive here depart from my ship on autopilot with their bio-readings on board to fool sensor logs. I will order our gunners to target the shuttle and destroy it. Since we are close to the atmosphere, the pieces of the shuttle will disintegrate upon reentry. I will say that because your mother has the credentials and codes to deactivate our security protocols, she used them in order to escape.”*

“If asked why they were captured and not destroyed from the start, you will say that I ordered them captured in order to get answers for their actions. This plan sounds like a very solid one. As for their return, it is probably best for them not to return until they are able to get help. Please let those Aspergillus who go with them know that they may not return either until then.”

*“I will. They will do their duty for you without fail, but did I hear you correctly? You want them to get help from the Federation instead of starting diplomatic negotiations?”*

“I thought that they could start such a thing, but I’m quickly realizing that they would not have the backing of our nation to begin such negotiations. At this point, they are fugitives in our nation and refugees in the Federation if they are granted asylum. We need help and when you think about it, since His Majesty Pope Armani is a member of the Draco family, it makes sense for the Draco Federation to deal with one of their own.”

*“That makes sense to me. Let me get things started on this end before any investigation team arrives. I need to bring both the Special Ops team and our guests up to speed on this plan as soon as possible. Do you have anything else to bring to my attention, ma’am?”*

*“Yes. Tell Miya that I am sorry for all of this happening to her, and I wish her well in trying to fix the mistake that is Armani Draco.”*

*“Understood, my Chief.”*

The captain cut communications and the screen went away. Ebony took a deep breath. She could only hope that this will bring about change in the Dominion. Whether it will be a good change or a bad one remains to be seen.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Holding Cell, Brig #2, Deck 15, Dreadnought AF-2312  
Planet Tenebris Prime Orbit, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
1:25pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

*“Was this really a good idea to land on this ship?”*

Miya sat on the bench on the far wall of the cell from the opening that was sealed with a force field. The walls on each side of the cell also have benches with Tonya and Mary to Miya’s right. Misty and Sandra sat to her left. They were escorted to the brig the moment their shuttle had landed on the dreadnought’s shuttle bay by Aspergillus guards only. Of course, they are the only Tribe that does security on ships in the Dominion Fleet, and considering the “kill order” on all Tigris Tribe head family members that Armani had ordered, it was better for the Aspergillus to be the ones escorting them. Tonya trusted that the five of them would be okay, but that was after she was told by the captain about a “two-finger salute.” Whatever that was, Tonya became more trusting of her own Tribe despite being an accomplice to Miya’s escape.

Miya looked over at Tonya. She needed to know why Tonya trusted the captain after being told about that salute.

*“Miss Tonya,” Miya said, “what is a ‘two-finger salute’ and why do you trust the captain after he told you that Ebony did that to him?”*

Tonya looked at Miya with a stern look on her face, then looked over at the guard at his desk in the center of the room. The guard heard the question and looked in Tonya’s direction.

*“The security feed is on a loop,” the security guard said. “Your conversation will not be heard or recorded by anyone who is watching it.”*

Tonya nodded her head to acknowledge what the security guard said. She then looked back at Miya with the same stern look on her face.

*“Centuries ago,” Tonya said, “when our ancestors traversed the stars after their self-imposed exile from the Republic, many among the Aspergillus family were concerned about the actions of Armani Draco. Obviously, many were unaware of the fact that his mind was being transported to the new location by those who were fanatically loyal to him at the time. At the time, most of our ancestors thought he was dead and that his son would take over. If his son decided to lead the Tenebris, we needed a code of some sorts in case the Draco family led us down a path of destruction that we did not want to follow. This was before anyone knew that Armani’s son fled the Draco family elsewhere in the star cluster.”*

*“That code is the ‘two-finger salute’?” Miya asked.*

*“Yes. When that code is presented or delivered to those from the head of the Aspergillus family, such as the current Chief, it means that the current head-of-state, in this case the Pope,*

has either been compromised or is no longer able to command the military. In that case, only the head of the Aspergillus family can issue commands and for those within the family to follow that Chief's orders only. If Ebony issued that code, it means that she no longer believes that Armani is capable of governing our forces or the nation for that matter."

"I can see that when you consider his actions against the Tigris," Mary said. "However, it is a risky move. That code of yours was created before any of us knew about the level of control Armani has over the clones. If an entire Tribe defies him, he can wipe out most of them in one swift stroke just like the Tigris."

"The Aspergillus function as the military strength of the Dominion," Sandra said. "If he were to wipe them out, he would suddenly find himself with crews who may not know how to properly control our ships such as the weapons on board. Even worse, he will find himself without an army when it comes to ground assault missions. Unless he has a stopgap measure in place to make it possible for our nation to continue the war with the Federation, it would be a death sentence for the Dominion due to a sudden lack of defense."

"There is another option that Armani could do if the military doesn't abide by his wishes," Misty said. "He could do what he was trying to do with Miya and have Ebony's mind wiped. He may even go so far as to have her totally obedient to his will, rescinding the code that she had given the captain and anyone else in the Aspergillus Tribe."

"Maybe," Tonya said, "but there is one problem with that option. There was never a code to counter the 'two-finger salute' to begin with."

Everyone looked over at Tonya with shocked expressions on their faces.

"You mean to tell me that once that code is implemented," Miya said, "there is no means to cancel the code once things have been resolved?"

"Like I said, if the head of the nation has shown that he is no longer fit to lead us, there would be no reason for my Tribe to change our minds about it until a new head of state is put in charge. Since Armani has been the head of state since the Dominion's formation centuries ago using clone bodies to transfer his mind to each time and he would be reluctant to ever relinquish that control, that means that our code would remain in effect until he is no longer in charge."

"That's a little excessive, isn't it?"

"Let's just say that if it wasn't, you and I would not be here having this conversation. We would be dead instead because of Armani's decree."

"Valid, but what's our next move? An investigative team would arrive on this ship once they know that our shuttle landed here and they would not hesitate to kill all of us at that point."

Before Tonya could reply, the main doors of the brig opened, and the captain of the dreadnought walked in with his hands behind his back. He was accompanied by four Special Ops personnel in full armor attire and he looked in the direction of his "captives" as the doors closed behind him. The Special Ops people were holding a spare outfit each. The captain brought his hands forward, showing that he was also carrying one of their outfits. As they approached the cell, the guard dropped the force field.

The captain stopped just short of entering the cell. He looked at everyone in the cell who gave him expressions ranging from confused to suspicious considering what he was holding.

"Ladies," he said, "I come bearing gifts and a plan to get you to safety, but we must act quickly before Armani or one of the other Chiefs sends an investigation team to this ship."

"Who came up with the plan, captain?" Tonya asked.

"Your daughter and I did, and it is the best course of action to secure your freedom."

Tonya took a deep breath.

“Very well, captain,” Tonya said. “What’s the plan and how does it relate to those Special Ops armors you are holding?”

“The plan is simple,” the captain said. “We will be taking your bio-signatures along with your current clothing and place them on the shuttle you used to arrive here. That shuttle will look like it is escaping from our ship and once it is clear, we will destroy it. It will look like you all were killed trying to flee our custody. Soon after, under the orders of Ebony for recon on a potential target to start mounting a counterattack, you along with this Special Forces team will be taking a covert shuttle into Federation space through a small portal we will be generating. In truth, you all will get in contact with the Federation and request asylum using information on the Dominion as the means to get them to agree. Chief Ebony is hopeful that the information will allow the Federation to launch an invasion into the Dominion capital. She believes that this war should be between Armani Draco and his descendants in the Federation. This leads me to believe that our military will not interfere with a Federation operation to seize him.”

“However,” Misty said, “that doesn’t mean that the other Tribes will stand by and watch their home invaded by a foreign power. Armani may threaten the other Chiefs into having their Tribes fight whether they know how to or not.”

“True. We still have to contend with those from the other Tribes aboard this ship, but by the time this all happens, there will be enough disorder among the different Tribes on each ship that none of them will operate their ships accordingly if at all.”

“This plan is risky,” Miya said. “Based on the information about what our nation has been doing to Draco Federation citizens, how do we know they won’t terminate us or the capital in one fell swoop? We will be fighting an uphill battle to gain their trust.”

“That is quite true,” Mary said. “It will be even harder when we are dressed as Special Ops when we meet them, provided they don’t shoot us down first.”

“We can complain about the possibilities that are stacked against us all we want,” Tonya said. “However, we are on a time crunch and so far this is the only plan presented to us that will allow us to escape.”

Tonya looked at the captain.

“Do what needs to be done, captain,” Tonya said. “We’ll get changed and prepare for departure shortly.”

“Understood,” the captain said as he brought the armor over to Miya. “This was sized for you, Chief Miya. Quickly get changed and these Special Ops personnel will escort you to their shuttle afterwards. I wish you all luck.”

Miya stood up and grabbed the armor from the captain. She gave him a stern look.

“Thank you, captain,” she said. “We’re going to need all of the luck we can get.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Dominion Intelligence Room, Central Tower below ground level, Capital City of Plena Tenebris  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
1:39pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“What is the status of the shuttle with Miya on it?”

Armani walked into the Intelligence Room after taking some time to pray concerning his actions with the death of the Tigris Tribe clones. In his room, stored and locked in his altar in his room, was an artifact that was a round-tipped cone with four curved spires positioned equally apart from each other. The whole thing was golden bronze in color with a thick black line near

the top. This line would glow and pulse red whenever he prayed in front of it as if the red god was answering his prayers.

He was not sure where this artifact originally came from, only that when he had his vision centuries ago, this artifact appeared in his bedroom afterwards. It had to be transported secretly during the exodus to Tenebris Prime so that no one else would see it. Only he has seen and prayed in front of this device, especially whenever his mind was transferred into a new clone body. Each time he transferred to a new clone, he didn't feel the same as before. The moment he prayed in front of the artifact and that line glowed red, he felt like he did before he changed clone bodies. To him, he felt right again. He never submitted the artifact for examination. To him, it was a link to the red god and should not be defiled by the hands and tools of the unworthy.

After he prayed, he came down to the Intelligence Room to see about the shuttle that had launched from the central complex. It didn't take much for anyone to determine that Miya was on that shuttle, but it would appear that she was not the only one on board. The mothers of the other Chiefs have gone missing and there is a strong possibility that they assisted with Miya's release. Armani could not figure out why they were helping Miya unless they were indebted to the late Carol for some reason. However, since they allowed themselves to be accomplices to helping Miya escape Armani's divine decree, they are subject to execution just like anyone else who was harboring any remaining Tigris Tribe members.

As Armani walked into the room and asked his question, Alpha turned to face Armani.

"Sir," Alpha said, "the shuttle was last spotted landing on Dreadnought AF-2312 after that ship ordered them to land."

"They were ordered to land on that ship?" Armani asked with a puzzled look on their face. "Who ordered that ship to allow that shuttle to land instead of destroying them like I had decreed?"

"We detected a transmission from Chief Ebony's residence to the dreadnought prior to the shuttle being ordered to land. The last report we had received stated that the crew and passengers of the shuttle were apprehended and taken into custody."

"Unacceptable. If Miya was on that shuttle, I want the crew of that shuttle killed without mercy. Send an investigation team along with an execution squad immediately. If Miya is found on board, have them killed along with the captain. I will deal with Chief Ebony once Miya is found on board that ship."

One of the station's alarms suddenly went off. The station was the one that Epsilon sat in front of. Armani and Alpha looked in his direction.

"Sirs!" Epsilon said. "Dreadnought AF-2312 is reporting that the prisoners have escaped from the brig and have boarded their shuttle!"

Armani again had a puzzled look on his face.

"How did they escape?" he asked.

"According to the dreadnought's communications officer, former Chief Tonya used her access codes to deactivate the brig's force fields and provide them direct access towards the shuttle bay. The shuttle is leaving the dreadnought!"

"Give us a visual," Alpha said as he looked at the main screen.

The image on the screen changed to a satellite image of the dreadnought's port side. A shuttle departed from the portside shuttle bay. Its identity code appeared on the screen matching the code of the shuttle that launched from the central complex.

"Scan the shuttle for passengers," Alpha said.

Epsilon pressed a few buttons on his console, but before he could scan the shuttle, one of



the dreadnought's turrets turned towards the small craft. The turret fired a shot from one of the barrels at the shuttle, hitting the shuttle. The small craft instantly exploded, its debris spreading across the area. Soon after, the debris began to get pulled towards the planet due to the planet's gravity into the upper atmosphere. The pieces started to burn once they entered the atmosphere.

Almost everyone in the room was in shock over the sudden turn of events, but Armani remained skeptical over what he saw.

"Scan that wreckage!" he ordered. "Make sure they were on board!"

"Yes, sir!" Epsilon said as he quickly adjusted the scanners towards the debris.

With only moments before the remaining wreckage would begin to burn up upon reentry, Epsilon tried to scan as much of the wreckage as possible. After a few seconds, he got five positive bio-readings from the wreckage. He cross-referenced their DNA with Miya's and the four former Chiefs.

They were a match to all five women.

"Confirmed," Epsilon said. "The bio-readings match that of Miya Tigris, Misty Aquilam, Sandra Lupus, Mary Pistris, and Tonya Aspergillus."

Armani looked at the screen as the wreckage began to burn upon reentry. He took a deep breath. He still had his doubts about the events that had just unfolded.

"This may be a ruse," he said.

"How so?" Alpha asked as he looked back in Armani's direction.

"If Tonya had the means to escape the brig and steal back their shuttle, she would not be forgetting to disable the dreadnought's weapons system. Even she would know that they would be destroyed if they remained active. This sudden escape is highly suspicious to me."

"Unless she didn't have time to deactivate the weapons system or didn't have access to make that possible. Who knows what the conditions of their escape were until further investigation is done. Do you still want to send the investigation team to analyze their escape to prevent it from happening again?"

"Yes, and see if they can pull the transmission that was sent to the dreadnought from Chief Ebony. I need to know what she said to that captain that made him bring those five on board rather than shoot them down."

"What if the transmission is deleted from the ship's computer?"

"Then have him arrested for treason and I'll have Chief Ebony submitted to a mind cleanse. I'm not about to have another Tribe's Chief commit treason against my Dominion. Keep an eye on any further activity from that dreadnought. Inform that dreadnought that no other craft is to leave their ship, neither shuttle nor fighter, until after the investigation team completes their task. Anything launching from that ship will be shot down immediately."

"Understood, sir."

"I will be heading back to my Sanctuary. Inform me of the investigation team's results."

"Yes, sir."

Armani turned and headed back towards the exit. He knew in his mind that the shuttle's escape and destruction was a ruse. All he needed was proof and Ebony would pay for her treason. He would have to start taking measures to ensure that the Head Families of the four remaining Tribes are completely obedient to his will. From this day forward, he will make sure that everyone in the Dominion will have those devices in them. No one will ever betray him and his divine reign over the again.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Cockpit, Special Ops Shuttle F-1281, Hangar Bay, Dreadnought AF-2312  
Planet Tenebris Prime Orbit, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
1:45pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“They want us to launch now?”

Tonya in the full Special Ops armor with the helmet on sat at the communications station of the Special Ops shuttle that she, Miya, and the other former Chiefs would use to escape to Federation space. The shuttle the five of them initially used to reach the dreadnought was just destroyed as a means to fake their deaths. Not only were their bio-signs used via artificial transmitters, the clothes they wore were also put on the shuttle to add to the authenticity of their deaths. Considering this left the five of them with their undergarments and one-piece jumpsuits under the armored suits and helmets, they would have to get new clothes once they were able to do so. Only the wearer’s eyes were visible through the helmet until the tint is turned on.

While the other four were in the back with two of the Special Ops personnel, the other two were in the pilot and navigator’s seats. Tonya offered her services at the communications station to hear from the captain about their departure. When the captain contacted the shuttle, he told them that they needed to launch immediately, making Tonya concerned something else has happened.

*“You need to get out of here now,” the captain said on the terminal screen. “They are still sending an investigation team to assess the validity of the escape, and they have ordered us to not launch any small craft until after they have completed their investigation.”*

“But if we leave now, you would be arrested and Ebony would be punished once they know what really transpired!” Tonya said. “I can’t risk having her go through what Miya was about to have done to her!”

*“I know and I was aware of the consequences if my collaboration was exposed. I thought that the escape and the destruction of the shuttle was enough to make them think that they would not need to send an investigation team. Apparently, I was wrong on that assumption.”*

“Not when Armani has any level of paranoia about Miya and the knowledge the Tigris possessed. We will depart immediately, but what about the portal? It’s not under your direct control.”

*“Not manually, no, but I can command the computer to activate one briefly enough to get you to a point in Federation space from my Ready Room where I am right now. Leave the ship and proceed to our bow. I can only open the portal a few seconds before action is taken by my crew to close it. I will make sure the portal is directly in front of you. Maintain your speed when you go through. I cannot guarantee what will happen at your exit point though as you will be going in blind. I can’t even guarantee that there will be any Federation ships at your exit point.”*

“I understand. Let Ebony know that I love her and that I wish for her to be safe.”

*“I’ll send her the message as soon as you get through the portal. Now hurry. You’ve already been cleared for departure and the investigation team’s shuttle is already approaching.”*

“Very well. We’re leaving now.”

The line with the captain was disconnected. Tonya turned to the pilot.

“Did you get all of that?” Tonya asked.

*“I did,” a male voice through Tonya’s helmet said. “We’re taking off now. I only hope that the captain times the portal’s activation accordingly.”*

The shuttle lifted off of the deck and was already facing towards the bay doors. The doors opened a few seconds later and the pilot flew the shuttle out of the bay the moment the doors

were open wide enough for the shuttle to pass through. The pilot flew the shuttle to the left quickly and headed towards the bow of the dreadnought.

*“Get ready, everyone,” the pilot said. “This is where the fun begins.”*

Not long after the pilot said that, the communications station went off, indicating an incoming message was being received. Tonya put it on audio only.

*“Shuttle F-1281,” a male voice said. “You do not have authority to launch per the Dominion Investigation Bureau. By order of His Majesty Pope, you are to cut your engines immediately or be destroyed.”*

“Should I respond?” Tonya asked.

*“No,” the pilot said. “If you establish a connection, they can remotely take control and either shut us down or turn us around. They could even activate our self-destruct if needed.”*

“Understood. Let’s hope the captain activates that portal shortly.”

As the shuttle continued to fly towards the front of the dreadnought, Tonya was beginning to get nervous about whether the captain could activate the portal in time before someone stops him somehow. The engineering team and the helmsman were from different Tribes and could easily shut down the portal drive if they know the captain was working against the wishes of the Pope, even when acting on orders from Ebony.

As the shuttle cleared the bow of the dreadnought, a small portal appeared in front of them. It was over a hundred meters away and they were closing in on it fast.

“There it is!” Tonya said. “Hurry before it closes!”

*“I’m flying as fast as I can!” the pilot said. “Entry in five seconds!”*

As the shuttle closed in on the portal, the stability of the portal was starting to give, meaning that power to the portal was starting to fade. Either the engineering team, the helmsman, or both were quickly aware what was transpiring and they were trying to cut power to the portal drive. However, the power was not cut off fast enough as the shuttle made it through just as the portal closed right behind them. The shuttle soon found itself in another part of space, with a planet that looked to be habitable to their right and a different color star in the far distance.

The star’s light, however, was quickly blocked as the shuttle soon found itself in the shadow a Federation supercarrier directly in front of them. Its escort ships surrounding the massive vessel took up positions to surround the shuttle.

“Well,” Tonya said as she tried to establish contact with the Federation fleet, “if we ever wondered if we were in Federation space, that fleet’s presence answers that question.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Family Living Room, Aspergillus Tribe Head Family Residence, Capital City of Plena Tenebris  
Planet Tenebris Prime, Tenebris System, Southwestern Region  
1:52pm, October 26, 5434 A.D.*

“Looks like they managed to escape.”

Ebony was monitoring the events that were taking place around Dreadnought AF-2312 to ensure that the plan went without any problems. However, the one thing she did not take into account when going over the plan with the captain was Armani’s level of paranoia, leading to the deployment of an investigation team regardless of the shuttle’s destruction. The fact that the dreadnought was ordered to not deploy any small craft until the investigation was completed was proof that Armani did not believe in the termination of Miya, Ebony’s mother, or the mothers of the other Chiefs.

Ebony could explain that the captain's actions for allowing the Special Ops shuttle to leave was due to him following existing orders from her. However, the problem is that the orders for the dreadnought to not launch any small craft came from Armani whose authority is higher than Ebony's, and therefore was a violation of orders from a higher authority regardless of reason or prior orders. She wasn't sure what was going to happen to the captain when the investigation team arrives, but she knew the moment that team reviews the transmissions and the "two-finger salute" comes up that the team will want answers about that code. The fact that the captain took action to launch the Special Ops shuttle on his own without the support of his bridge crew is also incriminating, and that there was no reason to launch a Special Ops team in the first place into Federation space is also too suspicious for the team to overlook even if Ebony stated it was to help launch a counterattack against the Federation.

Regardless, Ebony would be held accountable for having a captain defy Armani's orders, and Armani seems very inclined to make the Chiefs obedient to his commands. Nicola's behavior is proof of that, though whether she was already subjected to a mind wipe or if her behavior is a result of fear is unknown.

At this point, it was probably best for Ebony to disappear for a while before Armani attempts to have her mind "cleansed." If Armani has become paranoid enough to send an investigation team because he doubts Miya and her accomplices are dead, that paranoia is enough for him to question Ebony about her orders involving the Special Ops team. Eventually, he would ask about the code too once the investigation teams finds out about that as well. It wouldn't take much for him to believe Miya and the others were on the Special Ops shuttle.

She delayed sending the "two-finger salute" message to all dreadnought captains until the Special Ops team was clear of the system as a precaution. Now that they were away, she sent that message out to every captain telling them that orders going forward are only to come from her and not Armani. In Ebony's mind, Armani was no longer fit to lead this nation. He was scared and afraid of something. She did not know if the Republic was the cause of his fear, but this whole situation started when he became afraid of the information the Tigris possessed of the Republic and how the Dominion started to begin with. Ebony grabbed a copy of the history that was uploaded into the Central Database and placed it on a tablet as she deactivated the holographic display.

For her to issue orders without having her mind wiped to be more "obedient" to Armani's bidding and thus undermining the code's intention to begin with, it was best for her to leave the capital and go into hiding. She knew of several ways to get out of the central complex without being noticed but she had to hurry. Now that the die has been cast, the events that unfold going forward will either lead to Armani being thrown out of power or the death of her Tribe if not the entire Dominion.

Either way, things needed to change and only outside help would allow that to happen.

\* \* \* \* \*