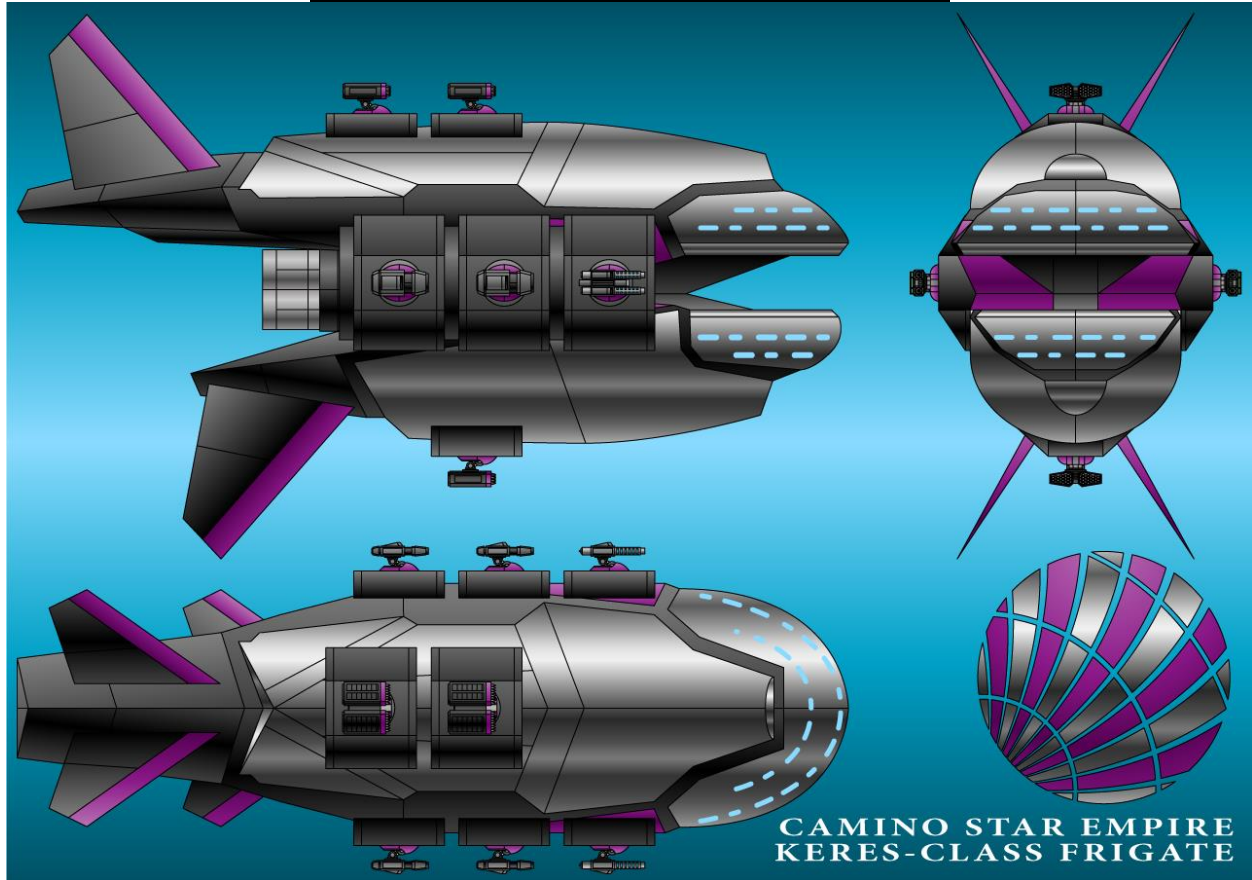


Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode VI: The Nations of Blood and Darkness



PART 3

*Shuttle Cockpit, Main Bay #3, Novus Initium Navy Fleet Headquarters
Planet Luminaire Orbit, Lumen ("Light") System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
11:56am, September 25, 5434 A.D. (The Next Day)*

"This is the moment of truth."

Trent took a deep breath. He had gone over what was about to happen in both his head and with the bridge crew of the *Marshal*, the battleship that he was about to take command of the Seventh Fleet from. A lot of what he was feeling was a mix of both anxiousness and fear. It has been a long time since he was given command of another ship officially. He felt like a child who transferred from one school to another. He knew that he had to make a good first impression that would loosen the tension with everyone on board in an effort to start undoing the strict regimen that former Admiral Coleman, the ship's former flag officer, had done. He talked with the bridge crew yesterday about a few ideas after they were more open with him in a relaxed setting. Thanks to their feedback, he was able to come up with an entrance that will help "break the ice" as the old saying goes.

Trent had to admit, though, that the bridge crew were actually happy at the end of the meeting if not excited for the prospect of what was about to transpire. Trent can only hope that his entrance does not disappoint them or the rest of the crew.

As the shuttle made its way through one of the main bay areas, there were several smaller bays designed to accommodate battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. However, in the advent of the introduction of frigates, some of the destroyer and cruiser bays were modified to help accommodate those ships as well. Some of the ships were arriving and departing through the main bay as the shuttle made its way to one of the smaller bays, namely the docking bay that the *Marshal* was docked at.

As Trent looked at the ship whose engines were facing the shuttle, it was externally the same as any other *Paladin*-class Battleship, indistinguishable from the others. The only thing that separated it from the others was the registration number found on the hull as well as the name. At least Trent knew that once he was on board the *Marshal*, its layout would be exactly the same as the *Renaldo*. He won't get lost if he needed to get anywhere like the bridge or his quarters.

The shuttle came up along the *Marshal's* starboard side as it approached the rear starboard hangar bay. Trent noticed that the hangar bay doors were already opened with the force field activated. He could see that the crew were already filed in two large rectangular-shaped formations split down the middle with the crew arranged by department based on their uniform colors. He noticed a raised portion of the deck with a podium near the shuttle's landing point where Trent would address the crew once he disembarked. Flanking the podium with four on each side were the bridge officers that Trent spoke with just yesterday.

Trent's nervousness shot up as he saw the display of the crew. He quickly remembered a similar experience the first time he took command of the *Renaldo*. He never expected to have to start over again with a new ship and crew. He took a deep breath to relax his nerves and think about how things were going to play out in just a moment.

"We have almost landed, sir," the shuttle pilot said. "Are you ready for this?"

"As ready as I will ever be," Trent said. "Do you remember your part?"

"I do, but I still think it is a bit silly, with all due respect, sir."

"I know it is, but this crew needs to lighten up and there is no better way than making the entrance I am about to make."

"I understand. I just hope you made the right song selection once I open that door."

"I talked with the bridge officers yesterday and they helped make this selection."

"Very well. Preparing to land, sir."

The shuttle came into the bay and turned to the left to have the starboard-side door face towards the podium. Trent got up from his seat as the shuttle touched down on the hangar bay deck and stood behind the starboard-side door. He took another deep breath and exhaled.

"Play it," Trent said.

"Yes, sir."

The shuttle pilot pressed a button on his console and opened the door. Music played outside as the door ramp descended onto the platform. The music was not a marching tune nor anything militaristic, but rather the most recent song by famous pop idol Sheryl. The bridge crew decided on this song as it was both unexpected and was currently topping the charts. If there was any song that would loosen the tension, this would be it.

Trent smiled as the ramp descended enough for Trent to see the crew. Aside from the bridge officers who were smiling because they knew this was coming, Trent could see the surprised and confused looks on the faces of the crew. Some were desperate to hide their smiles or laughter as they no doubt feared retaliation of some sorts for not remaining professional.

Trent stepped down the ramp onto the deck and walked towards the podium. Once he got to the podium, the music faded and went away. Trent looked over the crew once more. He

noticed a couple of camera drones floating nearby. They activated and two large holographic screens appeared on each side facing the crew. He saw the time on one of the walls showing it was after twelve. He brought the floating microphone in closer before taking a deep breath.

“Good afternoon,” Trent said with a smile. “I am Admiral Trent, former Flag Officer of the *Renaldo* and the Eleventh Fleet, and, yes, that song was from pop idol Sheryl. I met with your bridge officers yesterday and found out a few things about how this ship and the Seventh Fleet operated under the command of former Admiral Coleman. I heard that he ran a very tight ship and tended to keep his distance from everyone on board. In other words, you all could not socialize while at work, you all did not have any fun, and the most alarming of all is the fact that you all were not allowed to know each other as people and not someone you just work with. I played that song for a reason. I played it to give you all a chance to loosen up. Speaking of which, you all are at ease. You can relax.”

The crew looked at each other with surprised expressions but relaxed their postures. Trent continued.

“While I was on board the *Renaldo*, I was approachable, I understood my crew, and we tried to have fun within the limits of what we could do while on duty. I allowed for the crew to be sociable with each other even on the bridge to foster better relations with their fellow crew members. We can be on assignment for prolonged periods of time and silence in the workplace can be very maddening for some including myself. I have an open-door policy most of the time while I am in my Ready Room if you all have something that needs to be brought to my attention for any reason. Obviously, the only exceptions are when I am in a private meeting, on the bridge unless it’s very important, or when we are at either Yellow or Red Alert.”

Trent gave the crew a moment to let that sink in as he heard a few people talking among them. After a few seconds, Trent continued.

“As I spoke with the bridge officers of this ship, I realized that there is a lot of work that needs to be done to promote a friendlier work environment on this ship and the rest of the fleet which I have no doubt is watching this as well. It is my wish while serving aboard the *Marshal* to undo some of the institutionalization that Coleman has done to you all. However, I still expect everyone to help run a tight and efficient ship and fleet. I just don’t want anyone and everyone to be so strict when there are lulls during your shifts. I want you all to foster in open communications with each other, to actually socialize and make friends with each other. You may find there are people on board that may share the same interests as you that you never knew about. The point is that when you know more about each other and what you all can do, you may actually be more efficient than when everything was so strict.”

Trent looked around at everyone’s expressions, seeing that everyone looked to be a bit happy about what he had to say. Now was the part that Trent knew was going to be a bit difficult for him as this was not going to be scripted.

“Now I have one last thing to say,” Trent said, feeling nervous. “If any of you have any questions you would like to ask me in a public setting such as this, please raise your hand and we will have a microphone head towards you.”

Trent looked out among the crowd and noticed a hand raised very quickly from his left side far towards the back of the crew. Based on the color of the uniforms in that section, the crewman would be part of the security personnel. A second microphone came out of the podium and Trent pointed in the direction of the raised hand for the microphone to fly in that direction. As the microphone headed in that direction along with one of the camera drones, Trent noticed some commotion around the raised hand that sounded like some concern.

“Oh, no,” Captain Dani said from Trent’s left. “I forgot they were also on board.”

Trent covered the microphone near him and leaned towards Dani.

“Who are you talking about?” Trent asked.

“Admiral Coleman had three grandsons on board. All three of them were meant to serve as Coleman’s eyes and ears if anyone was not following any of his established protocols and regulations. As such, they were assigned as part of security with special privileges to report to the Admiral of infractions.”

“That’s against established military regulations! They sound like enforcers for slaves than security personnel following Navy regulations! Why has no one reported this before?”

“Coleman made it clear that anyone who went over his head to report anything that goes against his rules would find themselves court-martialed for insubordination.”

“That is NOT how a ship should be run! Why wasn’t I told this detail yesterday?”

“I’m sorry but I think none of us even remembered about his grandsons since the Admiral oversaw the bridge crew on his own. I would have hoped that they would have transferred to another ship upon his retirement.”

Trent noticed the second microphone and the camera drone had reached the one who had his hand raised. A holographic screen appeared over the person and it was a young man whose face looked so angry and upset that Trent thought he was ready for a fight. This must be one of Coleman’s grandsons.

“To who am I addressing?” Trent decided to ask.

“I am Security Officer Lieutenant Bart, Admiral Trent,” the young man said. “I am one of former Admiral Coleman’s grandsons.”

“You appear to have a question, but you also appear to be asking with a rather angry face. What is your question, Lieutenant?”

“My question, Admiral, is why you feel the need to change this ship and the fleet that Admiral Coleman has taken the time and effort to conform into the perfect example of how a military ship should be run?”

“What you call a ‘perfect example,’ I call a strict dictatorship, Lieutenant. Have you ever heard of any ship aside from this one that is run in the same fashion?”

“No, and that is because their commanding officers as well as their flag officers were too lax during times of peace. A military ship needs to run like a well-tuned machine, and what you are proposing would only gum up that machine.”

“Is this your own personal belief or the beliefs of your grandfather?”

“I was raised to believe in this philosophy, Admiral, and have seen how well it works.”

“Let me ask you this question, Lieutenant. Do you have a girlfriend or wife?”

“That is a personal question, sir, and does not fall into the discussion we are having involving military regulations.”

“I will take that as a ‘no,’ and considering your mentality, it would not be hard to see why that is.”

“Sir, if you continue to badger me on my personal life, I will have to report you, sir. Your actions and comments do not comply with Regulation Three...”

“Lieutenant, are you citing regulations to a superior officer?”

Lieutenant Bart was about to say something, but stopped himself once he realized that citing regulations to a superior officer was a punishable offense against him.

“Before you go any further, Lieutenant, I would like to remind you and everyone here that I am quite familiar with military laws and regulations. How I ran the *Renaldo* and those

aboard did not break any of those regulations. My former crew got to know each other, pursue relationships whether romantic or just friendships, and came to trust one another. None of that caused issues in how the ship was run as there was a great amount of trust among the crew. I promoted social interaction among the crew and that is something I intend to have happen here. What your grandfather did here to this entire crew was a travesty and an injustice, and you along with his two other grandsons who are here helped to enforce that injustice.”

Trent noticed that Bart was fuming but either he was waiting for Trent to finish or he could not figure out what to say in defense of upholding Admiral Coleman’s actions. Trent decided to continue before Bart would get a chance.

“Let me ask this of the entire crew by a show of hands,” Trent said. “How many of you here want to actually keep the enforcement of Admiral Coleman’s policies and regulations?”

Bart immediately raised his hand and Trent could see two other arms go up who were no doubt Coleman’s other two grandsons. Not surprisingly, none of the other crew members raised their hands. Trent noticed that Bart’s expression on his face on the holographic screen went from anger to concern as he looked around at everyone else. No doubt the other two grandsons were feeling the same way of being highly outnumbered.

“So tell me something, Lieutenant,” Trent said with a bit of a smug look on his face. “Does it look like everyone was happy with how Coleman ran things on this ship?”

Bart lowered his arm and continued to look around him. Trent could see the expressions from some of the people around him on the screen and they looked at Bart with disgust and disdain.

“I tend to be a rather tolerant man,” Trent continued, “but I think it is about time you and your fellow relatives reevaluated how the military is run, Lieutenant. The three of you will disembark from this ship within the next hour and be placed under immediate house arrest pending an investigation by a Navy tribunal on the treatment of your fellow crew members. Coleman may no longer be part of the military but he will still be held accountable for his actions to this crew if the tribunal sees fit. Security, confine them to their quarters to pack their things. As for everyone else, I look forward to working with you all starting today. Dismissed.”

The holographic screen with Bart on it disappeared as Trent could tell security was grabbing him along with his other two relatives. The crew stuck around to witness the trio being taken away and cheered. Their response to the three being taken away was enough proof of the strict enforcement Coleman had over the crew.

The only question Trent had at this point was why Coleman did this? Military regulations being enforced is one thing but this was more than that. This needed to be investigated and he also needed answers.

Trent stepped away from the podium and walked over to Dani.

“I’m going to get in contact with Grand Admiral Mikey,” he said. “This needs to be investigated as to why Coleman ran this ship and the Seventh Fleet the way he did. There must be some cause as to why he did all of this. Military regulations being enforced is one thing but he took it further than anyone else I know.”

“You think it was something that could have affected him personally in his past to have caused this?” Dani asked.

“If you mean psychological, then possibly but the fact his grandsons were so eager to enforce his control makes me think there might be something more to it. I’ll make sure my things are in my quarters before I contact him about this matter.”

“Do you need me to do anything in the meantime?”

Trent looked over the crowd who was starting to disperse but were now more sociable with each other.

“If you want to, you can throw a party for everyone later today with my permission,” Trent said with a smile. “I think they all deserve it.”

“Understood, sir. I’ll let you know about a time as soon as possible.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you then.”

Trent walked away from Dani and headed down a ramp on the right side of the platform. He walked around the crowd that remained in the hangar as he headed for one of the doors. As he walked by the crowd, several of them noticed him and began to applaud and cheer him. Trent looked their way, smiled, and waved at them. While he had a different plan in mind to get them all to open up and like him, things turned out better than he had anticipated. However, there was still work that needed to be done.

He managed to get through the doors and head for the nearest elevator to take him to his quarters. He found one and pressed the call button. The elevator arrived within seconds and the doors soon opened. There was no one inside which suited Trent fine as he needed some time to collect his thoughts.

“Deck Ten,” Trent said.

The elevator gave an acknowledging chirp and began to move upwards. Trent leaned against the left wall of the elevator, trying to determine what to say to the Grand Admiral concerning this whole thing involving Coleman. Trent also wondered if Mikey knew about this whole thing.

After several seconds, the elevator halted on Deck Ten and the doors opened. Trent stepped out of the elevator and headed to his right towards his quarters. After going a few doors down, he came to his quarters and put his right index finger on the pad next to the door. The pad confirmed his identity and the doors opened. Trent walked in as the lights turned on and he looked around. His things were still in transport containers which did not surprise him as he had to do his own unpacking. He walked around and checked all of the containers making sure everything had arrived.

When he confirmed that everything was present, he walked over to the monitor that was located to the right of the door. He pressed a few buttons and attempted to contact Grand Admiral Mikey. After fifteen seconds attempting to connect the call, an image appeared of the Grand Admiral sitting behind his desk, his fingers interlocked while resting on the desk surface.

“Greetings, Admiral Trent,” Mikey said with a somber look on his face. *“I trust you are settling into your new position?”*

“I just got on board the *Marshal*, Grand Admiral,” Trent said. “However, prior to coming aboard, I spoke with the bridge officers of the *Marshal* and they brought a matter to my attention concerning Admiral Coleman.”

“Are you referring to his very strict regulations and protocols involving his crew and his fleet?”

Trent’s expression changed as he was shocked at what Mikey had said.

“You knew about what was going on aboard the *Marshal*?!” Trent asked. “How long have you known?”

“It came to my attention five days ago about the actions he has taken towards his crew.”

“Five days ago? Wait a moment, what did you do when you found out?”

“I think it would be pretty evident. I gave Coleman two choices. He could either resign his position and rank and thus his actions would not make the public news, or he could be

dishonorably discharged with his actions broadcasted for all to display. Either option meant he would not receive any pension from the military but he would be paid for any leave he had accumulated.”

“So, I am to assume he picked the first option?”

“He did and we did humor him with a retirement party at least as he did have some friends among the Admiralty. The hardest part was finding someone to replace him that could undo what he had done to the crew and the Seventh Fleet.”

“I take it that you eventually picked me, correct?”

“I looked over crew feedback over the years under your command and you tried to promote social interaction among the crew whenever possible prior to the First Interstellar War. You seemed the likely choice to take command of the Marshal. I had not asked but I take it that Shannon was surprised and excited about her promotion?”

“She was, yes. However, going back to the topic of Coleman, I found out that he had three grandsons on board the *Marshal* that helped enforce his protocols as security personnel. Were you aware of this?”

“No, I wasn’t. This is news to me. Have they caused any problems for you already?”

“I just came from my address to the crew and they started lecturing me on regulations in the crowd. They seemed determined to continue their grandfather’s protocols and regulations in his absence which would have hindered my progress to undo what Coleman has done. I have had the rest of security detain them for the time being. I’m going to have them disembark from the ship within the hour and held on house arrest awaiting an investigation by a tribunal if possible.”

“I see, Admiral. I will try to get a tribunal together for you but it sounds like some investigations and interviews with both his grandsons and the crew will be needed for evidence into this matter.”

“There is one thing that still bothers me, though. When you confronted Coleman concerning his actions, did he ever tell you why he went so far as he did, maybe something that would also explain why his grandsons were so eager to enforce his actions?”

“No, he didn’t tell me, but that is a matter that we may have to bring to Navy Intelligence if not the RCIA to investigate. While part of the deal with Coleman was that we would not investigate his personal background, the same cannot be said for his grandsons who are still military officers. I will send an escort to your ship to retrieve his grandsons for questioning within the hour. Let your security staff know they are coming.”

“I will, sir.”

“Hopefully, you won’t have any further problems with your command going forward, Trent. I will have orders for you and your fleet in the next couple of days while you settle into your new surroundings and crew.”

“Thank you, sir, and thank you again for this position.”

“You are welcome. Take care, Admiral.”

The screen went dark as the transmission was cut. Trent looked around his quarters as he realized he needed to unpack both here and in his Ready Room. That and he also had a party to attend, but first he needed to contact the security personnel to let them know that a security detail was on its way to get Coleman’s grandsons in less than an hour.

This day was already turning out to be quite an eventful day, whether Trent meant for it to be or not.

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Office of the Supreme Chancellor, Republic Parliament Building, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
12:37pm, September 25, 5434 A.D.

“This is a very interesting proposal, Ambassador.”

Drew held a tablet in his hand, the same tablet that Forneido was given by Lykan Prime Minister Voenis. Forneido arrived from Lykana over two hours ago after staying overnight there. Drew did wonder why Forneido stayed overnight there. He knew what Forneido’s feelings were towards his people having their capital back on their home planet after all of the effort their race went through to restore their world from centuries of war before the formation of their former Kingdom. The Kingdom made it a law that the only citizens that were allowed on the planet were those devoted to their faith and to maintaining the beauty of the planet. That law was still in effect, but the Holy Lykan Republic recently modified it to allow their capital to be built on the planet. Tourists were allowed to visit outside the city provided they had an experienced guide.

Drew assumed that Forneido decided to partake in that beauty and he was right. According to Forneido, one of the other ambassadors managed to convince him to stay and admire the natural beauty of Lykana. Forneido came back slightly changed and a bit happier than Drew had seen him in a while.

It was obvious though that Forneido went back to Lykana for political reasons and the tablet Drew was presented was proof of that fact. Voenis appeared to be proposing an agency for policing and regulating the borders between the nations. It was a rather interesting proposal but also problematic.

“I know the proposal is going to have some issues with all of the nations,” Forneido said, seated in front of Drew.

“Issues would be a bit of an understatement,” Drew said. “I can already tell there will be problems from several aspects such as racial tension, financial backing, and local law enforcing just to name a few.”

“Then let me ask you this, sir. What are your personal thoughts to such an agency existing?”

Drew thought about it for a moment as he skimmed the proposal again.

“If you are asking me about my personal opinion on the subject,” Drew said, “I would say that such an agency would be a good thing to help ease and promote interracial social interaction and cooperation between all of the known races. It may even go so far as to help mend old wounds between the nations, like your people and the State, and promote a sense of unity in this part of the star cluster.”

“I feel that there is a downside coming, though,” Forneido said.

“You would be right. While I can see this favorably from my perspective, there are those within the Senate that would have issues with this idea. A lot of it would be the funding of such an agency and its operations from logistics to hardware such as ships. There are also issues with the handling of local customs and law enforcement since every nation has different laws.”

“Would they be willing to be more cooperative towards the proposal if the other nations agree to it?”

“The Senate may rethink the matter if the other nations agree, but even I would foresee them having problems as well. I was lucky enough to get the Senate to agree to fund the development and construction of our frigates. I doubt I can make them agree to this, though.”

“I see. I guess they would have problems financially backing this proposal.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I think Prime Minister Voenis’ intentions are in the right place with what he wants to do, but I think that this might not be the right time for any nation or government to implement what he is wanting to do at the moment. The First Interstellar War ended over a year ago and the Yintaka Conflict was six months ago. Those conflicts are still fresh on people’s minds and such things take time to heal.”

“You make a valid point. Even I found that it took time for me to forgive myself for my actions concerning the destruction of High Charity and our kind now inhabiting our home planet once again outside those tasked with maintaining the planet.”

“You mean when you stayed overnight at Lykana?”

“That is correct. It took some convincing from one of our fellow ambassadors to make me stay even one night there. Otherwise, I would have been back here before the end of day yesterday.”

“Regardless, I don’t see this passing through the Senate, much less them ratifying it, any time soon. It is best for this nation to wait until everything has been stabilized one again before considering this proposal. I can say the same for your nation when you consider that your current government is only a year old. Your nation is still new to having a democratic government and there may still be things your nation will need to work out to make the transition complete.”

“I know. It hasn’t been easy for us but we are still recovering from the war. I guess the Prime Minister was just being very optimistic about this proposal of his.”

“There is no problem with him being that way. You don’t get many leaders like that nowadays. However, I would tell him that while I like the thought behind his proposal, it would be best to hold off a few years before trying to submit this proposal to all of us for the time being. I cannot speak for the Empire and the State, though. If they both think that the proposal is a good idea, then I will reconsider and try to push this through the Senate. However, even then I cannot make any promises. Does that sound fair?”

“I think it does. I will let him know your decision and that it might change either based on what the Empire and the State decides or after some time in the future when things have settled down.”

“Thank you. Was there any other business you needed to discuss with me?”

“I am curious to know where the other ambassadors are right now. Why are they not here for this discussion since their nations were also being sent this same proposal?”

“As odd as it sounds, they are actually at a play, a theatrical production done on a stage in front of an audience of spectators for the sake of entertainment.”

“They are? I wonder why they didn’t invite me to that play.”

“They heard you were going to be heading back to Lykana and they did not know when you would be back. That is why they did not invite you to go see it.”

“Oh, I see. I have been curious about seeing some of the arts of Humans, but I did not realize they were equally as curious as I am.”

“If you wish to go, I will contact them when they get back and forward you the information on the play they went to. Performances such as that usually last for a few days.”

“Thank you. For now, I will have to contact Prime Minister Voenis and tell him what you have told me. By the way, have the *Templar* and the *Cavalier* discovered anything new while I was away?”

“Not at this time, no. They haven’t discovered any new sentient and intelligent life yet.”

“I see. I was curious. I must go now. I will let you know if anything changes or if the Prime Minister has anything new concerning his proposal. Until next time, Supreme Chancellor.”

Forneido bowed and then proceeded out of Drew's office. Drew set the tablet he was handed on his desk. He knew the *Cavalier* was heading towards possible descendants of the Tenebris and that none of the other nations know about them yet. In a way, what Drew had told Forneido was true from a certain point of view.

They had not discovered any *new* sentient and intelligent life, only monsters from the Republic's past, and it was the responsibility of the Republic to deal with its own monsters.

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*Ready Room, R.N.S. Marshal, Paladin-Class Battleship, Novus Initium Navy Fleet Headquarters
Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
12:57pm, September 25, 5434 A.D.*

“Just a few more drinks and this fridge will be packed.”

Trent had taken the time to unpack his personal items in his quarters. That alone did not take too long as he usually did not bring a lot of items with him, leaving those items that he held dear at home. This did not mean he did not bring specific items with him that he liked to have with him at all times, but the items he could not bear to see lost for any reason he usually leaves at home.

After he had unpacked and arranged his quarters, he brought a box marked “Ready Room” up to the Ready Room to unpack his things in his new office. A couple of the bridge officers offered to help him, but he said he can handle it and he wanted to arrange things on his own. In reality, he needed some time to think about what Mikey had said concerning how he handled Coleman and why Trent was promoted to be the Seventh Fleet's new Flag Officer.

As Trent packed the fridge in his Ready Room full of the same drinks that his bridge officers like along with his own, he felt like he needed to get this matter off of his chest. For that matter, Trent was wondering who it was that issued the complaint to the Admiralty about Coleman's practices aboard the *Marshal*? Whoever was the whistleblower as the old saying goes effectively put these whole series of events in motion to have Coleman removed and someone else, namely Trent, put in his place. It would not be hard to find as one could easily track the communications records for any outgoing calls, but did Trent really want to do that? Thinking about it further, the person who brought the whole matter to the Admiralty would not want to have themselves known as it would cause repercussions if Coleman or anyone in his family found out.

With this weighing down on his mind, and the fact that he finished putting all of the drinks in the fridge, Trent closed the box which was now empty and set it to the side. He went over to his desk and activated the bridge speaker system, still standing.

“Captain Dani,” Trent said, “could you please come to my Ready Room?”

Trent turned off the speaker system and sat down behind the desk. A couple of seconds later, Captain Dani opened the door and walked in. She looked around the Ready Room at the things Trent had brought in and arranged. Trent smiled a little bit as she looked curious about the things he had brought. No doubt it brought a different impression to the room than when Coleman was here, if he had anything in the room at all.

Dani looked back at Trent.

“You wanted to see me, Admiral?” she said.

“Please have a seat,” Trent said smiling as he gestured to one of the seats before her.

Dani walked over and sat in the seat to Trent's left.

“You look a little surprised at what I decorated the room with,” he said.

“There are good reasons behind that, sir,” Dani said. “Hardly anyone has ever been called into the Ready Room when Coleman was here and when anyone was called here, he did not have any personal items on display short of his commendations and medals. Since he kept to himself, the only reason anyone was called into this room was when they were in trouble for something they were not supposed to do.”

“So, for you and the rest of the crew, this room holds some negative vibes that no one wants to be called in here for, am I right?”

“Correct, sir. I thought I had done something wrong. I haven’t, have I?”

“Oh, no! Of course not! Believe me, I would let you know in advance if that were the case. I called you in to have a chat with you about some developments that have come to my attention after I talked with Grand Admiral Mikey concerning Coleman’s grandsons.”

“What developments were those?” Dani asked, puzzled.

“Would you believe me if I told you that five days ago, someone aboard this ship reported Coleman’s practices and policies to the Admiralty?”

Dani’s eyes grew wide.

“Someone aboard the *Marshal* reported about Coleman?!” Dani said, shocked. “I would never have thought someone would report on Coleman for fear of repercussions if he ever found out who it was! How did the Admiralty validate the claim?”

“That part I neither asked nor was I told, but they must have investigated the claim privately before reaching a decision to have Coleman removed.”

“I’m guessing that the Grand Admiral didn’t tell you who made the claim either, did he?”

“No, he did not and it is best for us not to know who it was. While Coleman may have been forced into retirement, if he found out who it was or a member of his family does, they would find some way to retaliate against that person which is something that we should not allow.”

“I can understand that reasoning. Still, this does explain how and why Coleman had to retire.”

“All I ask of you on that subject is to not let the crew know that someone had reported to the Admiralty about his actions. If any member of the crew were to investigate the matter, they would somehow find out and then it would be known to the point that it would get out.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“Thank you. Now then, how is the party coming together?”

“Oh, yes! I know we were given rather short notice but the party will be ready by eighteen-hundred hours today. The crew has been very enthusiastic about it.”

“I’m sure they are, but I should point out that there is to be no ‘adult’ drinks being served as this is still a military ship.”

“I figured as such so I’ve already ordered the crew not serve such drinks at the party.”

“It’s good to know you thought ahead about it. Now, I have a few more things to look over before the party such as getting familiar with key members of the crew and looking at some of the more recent logs of this ship before the party. Also, I’ve stocked the fridge over there with drinks that you and the other bridge officers liked from our meeting yesterday. You and the other bridge officers are welcome to have one a day but please ask first. In a meeting, I will offer them to you all freely but I have to ask that you all finish them before returning to the bridge. You already know the regulations about having drinks that cannot be resealed on the bridge, right?”

“I do, sir. I figured that you wouldn’t be lax on that regulation because of the equipment.”

“You would be right. By the way, has the security detail that Grand Admiral Mikey sent to get Coleman’s grandsons come for them yet?”

“I heard a moment ago that they just arrived at the dock and are about to board the *Marshal* to retrieve them. I will be happy to see them gone from this...”

Before Dani could finish her sentence, shocks were suddenly felt all over the room and the lights suddenly turned off. Two seconds later, emergency lights came on and an alarm klaxon started to sound throughout the ship.

Trent looked at Dani.

“Please tell me that those three had their security clearance revoked?” Trent asked.

“Of course they were!” Dani said. “Those felt like explosions!”

“No doubt they came from Engineering. Let’s get to the bridge.”

Dani nodded in agreement as both her and Trent got up from their seats and headed for the door. However, the door did not slide open.

“What in the world?” Dani said. “Even under emergency power, the doors should still be working.”

“There is more to those explosions than what it appears,” Trent said as he went over to a panel on the right side of the door.

He pushed in on one side of the panel and it popped out on a hinge. Inside was a lever designed to be pulled and pushed.

“I didn’t know there was such a lever in the wall,” Dani said.

“It was designed in case the doors malfunctioned electronically,” Trent said as he started pumping the lever.

The door slowly started to open as Trent continued to pump the lever. The bridge officers on the other side were almost in a panic as they were getting and receiving reports from their stations. The door was soon open enough for Dani and Trent to get through.

“Report!” Dani said. “What is happening?”

“There were explosions in Engineering as well as weapons systems and shields,” Kristi said. “Fire suppression teams are working to put out the fires. The main computer is also offline. We are currently on the backup computer and auxiliary power.”

“Would that keep the doors from working?” Trent asked.

“No, sir,” Kristi said, puzzled. “The doors should still be working.”

“The doors to my Ready Room weren’t working just now. I had to use the manual lever to open it.”

“Let me check the door control system and see if that is the only problem.”

“Sierra, do we have any casualties?”

“We have multiple injuries reported, sir,” Sierra said. “There have been a total of fifteen casualties.”

Trent took a deep breath. There were now fifteen people dead and he has only taken command an hour ago. The ship hadn’t even left port yet! He needed to steady his nerves while he figured this whole thing out and that would start with the only ones that could have been responsible for this act.

“Sierra,” Trent said, “check the status of the quarters for Coleman’s grandson.”

Sierra looked at Trent with a puzzled look on her face.

“Sir?” she asked.

“Please do it, Sierra. This is important.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“Why are you curious about their quarters?” Dani asked.

“Those explosions did not happen by accident,” Trent said.

“Sir,” Kristi said, “the door systems are offline but damage control teams report that the system was not damaged from the explosions.”

“That is the reason I want someone to check on their quarters,” Trent said. “The explosions and the shutdown of the door systems were intentional, not accidental. Whether this was designed as a diversion, a means of sabotage, or both, there are now fifteen members of this crew that have died needlessly. We make sure those three are held accountable if they’re responsible.”

“Sir,” Sierra said, “the guards at their quarters are not responding to my inquiries.”

“Kristi, can you confirm whether those three are still in their quarters?”

“Internal sensors are offline, sir,” Kristi said. “I can’t tell you if they are active or not.”

“I will get security down to their quarters to confirm their status, sir,” Sierra said.

“Glad to see you knew what I was about to say,” Trent said. “Kristi, is there anything else offline right now?”

“I’m still getting damage reports from those sections affected,” Kristi said. “I will try to run a ship-wide systems check to make sure nothing else is offline.”

“In the meantime, I want security posted at all airlocks and hangars. Lockdown the escape pods as well just in case those three attempt to use them to escape.”

“There is something I don’t get, sir,” Dani said. “If those three had their security clearances revoked, how is it possible that they were able to do all of this?”

“They could have set all of this up in advance before I even came on board. Whether they are acting on previous orders from Coleman or on their own, they may have set all of this up to go off either from a signal from some other source or a lack of a signal like a kill switch.”

“But why would they go through the trouble of setting up all of that?”

“If I were to guess, it has to do with their grandfather being forced into retirement because of his questionable regulations. With him gone, his grandsons’ enforcement of those regulations would start to come into question and they could face charges that would eventually lead to a court martial. To avoid that, they planted the explosives in advance before my arrival and waited to see if I would carry on their grandfather’s regulations. When I showed that I would not and I had them arrested, they either sent a signal before being confined to their quarters or shut off their signal depending on how the explosives were triggered to detonate. They also must have programmed key systems to make it where they could escape.”

“So in other words, this is their act of rebellion and their means to escape punishment.”

“Precisely. This sort of action has been unheard of in centuries in the Navy, but it doesn’t mean that it could not happen. Kristi, I know the internal sensors are offline, but can you see if the DNA scanner is also disabled.”

“I just checked that system, sir,” Kristi said. “It is also offline.”

“That means that we cannot track them if they escaped their quarters,” Dani said.

“I may have to correct you, Captain,” Sierra said. “The security personnel I sent to their quarters have confirmed that their door locks are offline, the security that was guarding them prior to the explosions are unconscious, and Coleman’s grandsons are no longer there.”

“So, they were indeed behind this whole thing!”

“I figured they would be,” Trent said. “They are the only ones with a motive.”

“So how do we find them, Admiral? With the internal and DNA scanners offline, it would be tough to find them on a ship this size.”

“Their objective now is to escape the ship using any means possible. With security at the airlocks and hangar, as well as the escape pods being locked down, their means of escape is severely limited.”

“Sir,” Kristi said, “I’ve been trying to get some of the escape pods locked down but there are a few that I have not been able to secure. It is saying that I don’t have the authority to do so.”

“So they managed to plan that far ahead,” Trent said. “Cunning, but not cunning enough. I would venture to guess that the escape pods in question are located in different parts of the ship, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I thought so. Our security personnel are already spread thin with securing everything else. Tell me, Kristi, which pod is the farthest from their quarters?”

“It is Pod Two-Three-Five located on Deck Six on the port side.”

“Why would you want to know where the farthest pod is from their quarters?” Dani asked. “Wouldn’t they go towards the closest one?”

“They know we would think that and post security there,” Trent said. “The farthest pod would seem the least likely option for someone who is not a strategist. However, I have experience in covert operations due to my time on the *Templar*. I know how these three are thinking and they would think we would do everything by the book. I intend to show them otherwise.”

Trent walked over to a panel near the Ready Room doors and opened it. Inside were a total of six laser pistols and six portable scanners. Trent grabbed one and checked to make sure it had a charge. After it showed it had a full charge, Trent lowered the power level down, setting it to stun. He grabbed a belt holster, attached it to his belt on his right side, and put the pistol in the holster. He also grabbed a portable scanner and adjusted its sensors to scan for DNA. He had the scanner download the DNA for the three grandsons for it to scan.

“Just in case,” Trent said, “I want all of you except for Kristi and Sierra to grab a pistol and defend the bridge in case those three decided to come here instead. I’m going to that escape pod.”

“You’re going to face them alone?” Dani said. “At least take a security detail with you.”

“Traveling with a few more people would make a lot of noise and cause those three to go elsewhere. I will be fine on my own. Besides, those three are practically picking a fight with me. I figured to oblige them and fight back. Kristi, are the elevators still working?”

“Yes, sir,” Kristi said.

“Good. Most likely those three are using either the ventilation shafts or engineering access corridors and tubes to move about the ship. This would hamper their progress to that escape pod which gives me some time. Try to get those systems back online and coordinate the damage control teams to put out the fires. Don’t contact me unless those three show up somewhere else.”

“What about the security detail from the Grand Admiral?” Sierra asked. “They are outside asking for a progress report.”

“Tell them what has happened and inform them we have locked down the ship save for a few escape pods they have managed to secure for their escape. We will update them once they are either in custody or, in the worst case scenario, they managed to escape.”

“Sir, Admiral.”

Trent walked over to the elevator as Dani went to the panel the pistols and scanners were located to hand them out. Trent pressed the call button for the elevator and took a deep breath.

“Dani,” he said without turning around, “when I get back, I want the names of those that were killed in the explosions. I want to know about the people whose lives were lost in this act by cowards and their insubordination.”

Dani looked over at Trent. She wanted to ask him why he needed those names but stopped herself when she realized that this person was not Coleman. He cared for the crew of his ship and those deaths would be under his command, a weight that Trent was not supposed to have only an hour after assuming command.

“Yes, Admiral,” Dani said. “I will get as much information about them as you need.”

“Thank you,” Trent said as the elevator arrived.

The doors opened and Trent stepped in. Instead of saying the deck he needed to go, he pressed the button instead. He didn’t want to run the risk that the computer would transmit or inform the three fugitives that he was heading to that deck somehow if said verbally. The elevator soon began to move as Trent began to feel a sense of hatred.

This was NOT how he wanted his first day on the *Marshal* to go. Today, he was supposed to break the ice with the crew and celebrate his appointment to this ship. He wanted the crew to be able to socialize and become friendly with one another. It was supposed to be a happy day for everyone. Now he has fifteen crew members dead because of Coleman’s three grandsons with many others injured because those three could not face the consequences of their actions they did under the authority of their grandfather while he was in command.

Those three will have a lot more to worry about when Trent catches them. They made a mockery of this day and they would pay for their actions.

The elevator soon reached Deck Six and the doors opened. Trent ran to his left towards the portside escape pods. Trent stopped when he reached the adjacent hallway that had the escape pods lining one whole wall. Trent looked to his left. The escape pod that could not be secured was three pods down from the hallway Trent had stopped in. He took out the scanner and looked around for any access points to either the maintenance shafts or the ventilation tubes to make sure he would not be seen.

Suddenly, his scanner was detecting the DNA that he had uploaded to the device. It detected three DNA signatures that matched what he was looking for. According to the scanner, the signals were coming from within the bulkhead between him and the unsecured escape pod. Trent looked down the hall and saw an access panel with an air vent. He quickly noticed a small thin camera module poke out from the vent. Trent quickly hid back around the corner. The three fugitives must have not had enough time to get scanners of their own in their escape but must have had a portable camera on them or obtained one on the way.

Regardless, Trent had to hide to make sure that the camera did not see him. It appeared that Trent was right about where those three were heading. Trent waited until he heard the access panel open from down the hall. The panel was directly across from the escape pod, so Trent had a short window between the time the panel opened, and they reach the entrance to the escape pod. Thankfully the pod doors were closed and they needed to use the access panel next to the pod in order to open it up. That panel would be Trent’s first target.

Trent removed the pistol from the holster, checked that it was on stun and the safety was off, and waited to hear footsteps. Once he heard them, he peeked around the corner. Trent could see the three grandsons, one of which was Bart who was reaching towards the panel to the escape pod door with his right hand. Trent came around the corner, aimed at the panel, and fired. The shot connected, and the panel short-circuited. The sparks hit Bart’s hand, who withdrew his hand in pain as the other two men looked to see where the shot came from. Trent would not give them

time to draw any weapons that they would have in their possession as he fired a stun shot at the other two grandsons. They hit the ground with a thud, leaving only Bart standing and nursing his slightly burned hand. Bart looked at Trent with both rage and pain in his expression as Trent pointed the pistol at him.

“How did you know we were going to be here?!” Bart yelled. “This would have been the least likely place for us to go!”

“Exactly,” Trent said. “You are dealing with not only a seasoned Flag Officer, but also a former covert operations officer while I served aboard the *Templar* during the First Interstellar War. I guess that part of my record you were not aware of, now were you?”

“So that is how you knew, eh? ‘Expect the path that no one else expects,’ is it?”

“Correct, and I also knew that if I had brought a security detail here, you would have heard them and took another escape pod somewhere else. You know, it is one thing for you to have to answer for your questionable enforcement of your grandfather’s regulations, but now you and your relatives have added some very serious charges to that list. Not only have you sabotaged and damaged Republic military property, but there are now fifteen crew members who have died because of your actions. You can forget a dishonorable discharge at this point.”

“Like I would feel guilty for those who would betray our grandfather and his ways! Everyone on this ship is ungrateful and unruly and all you did was stir them all up in their rebellious ways! This is not how the military is run!”

“Have you ever served on any other ship aside from this one? I have never seen a single ship that operated under the same strict rules and regulations as your grandfather had chosen to implement on this ship. Your grandfather practically made everyone on this ship a slave to those rules when that is against any form of Human rights, and you three supported those rules! Seriously, what Flag Officer doesn’t allow their crew to celebrate national and religious holidays?”

“They’re a waste of the military’s time and money! Holidays and celebrations only brought complacency to our forces! That’s why our forces were losing ships during the First Interstellar War! We should have been able to roll over the Kingdom’s forces with ease with our superior technology!”

“Do you honestly believe the garbage you are saying?! I fought in that war, too, and I saw things from a different perspective! The Lykans were not pushovers during the war and they are definitely not pushovers now! I don’t know who fed you all of that nonsense or even how you passed the psychological evaluations with that mentality, but I can assure you that spouting such things only serves to disgrace those that died during that war! I for one will not tolerate such unpatriotic remarks from someone who killed fifteen people using the cowardly acts of bombing! Since we are on that topic, answer me this, Bart! Did the three of you pull this act on your own accord or were you ordered to do all of this if things did not go your way or your grandfather’s?”

Bart kept his mouth shut. Trent knew based on the fact that Bart did not come out and say it was the three of them over their grandfather that it was the former Admiral who ordered this of his grandsons. They will have to pull records somehow to tie Coleman as the mastermind behind this, but at least Trent now knew that Coleman was involved.

“Your silence has answered that question,” Trent said. “If it was the three of you acting alone, you would have said so, but you didn’t. Now we know your grandfather is involved.”

Bart looked like he was about to say something, but Trent fired a stun shot at him, causing him to lose consciousness and fall to the floor. Trent lowered the pistol and took a deep breath, looking at the three lying unconscious on the floor. These three were severely misguided

for whatever reasons, whether in the military or in their family lives. Whatever their reason, their actions resulted in at least fifteen families that now have to mourn the deaths of their loved ones. The military will obviously compensate them by handling the funeral arrangements as was customary for those who have died in the line of duty. As for the fate of these three, that will be up to a military tribunal and the courts. Coleman would be a different story. If he was the one who ordered his grandsons to commit such a heinous act, he would also be brought up on charges as this was not covered under the terms of his forced retirement.

Trent walked over to the nearest intercom and pressed the button on the panel.

“Bridge, this is Admiral Trent,” he said. “Send a security detail to my position. The three fugitives are here and they are stunned. Inform the Grand Admiral’s security detail they can come aboard and retrieve them along with a list of the new charges that they have done. I will wait until they arrive.”

“Understood, Admiral,” Dani said. “*In light of current events, I am about to announce the cancellation of the party.*”

“We are not cancelling the party, Captain. The party will proceed as scheduled. I will tell you why when I see you in a moment.”

“Yes, sir. *Security is on its way.*”

Trent turned off the intercom and pointed the pistol at the three fugitives to make sure none of them woke up until security arrived. Trent tried to calm himself after his argument with Bart but it would take a while considering the actions those three had done.

Thankfully for Trent, he did not have to wait long. After a few minutes, security personnel arrived on the scene followed by the security detail that Grand Admiral Mike had sent to take the three into custody. The three were relinquished to the Grand Admiral’s security as Trent did not want those three fugitives on the *Marshal* any longer.

After the detail detained and took the three away, Trent headed to the nearest elevator, sighing in relief. He pressed the elevator call button and waited for the elevator to arrive. One did several seconds later and was thankfully empty when the doors opened. Trent stepped in and pressed the button to go to the bridge. Trent leaned against the wall of the elevator as it got underway. He was still filled with anger but sadness and regret soon crept into his thoughts as he reflected on the day.

Moments later, the elevator stopped at the bridge and everyone looked in Trent’s direction once the elevator doors opened. They were relieved to see him and they returned to their stations as updates were coming in. Dani still looked at Trent as he got off the elevator.

“Are you alright, Admiral?” Dani asked.

“I will be,” Trent said as he headed over to the panel where he got the pistol and scanner. He returned them to their holders which started to charge them.

“You won’t be needing those pistols anymore,” he said as he turned towards the rest of the bridge officers. “Put them back when you get the chance. Captain, can I speak to you in my Ready Room...oh wait, are the doors working now?”

“Yes, sir,” Kristi said. “The main computer is back online as well. You should be able to enter and exit without any problems.”

Trent looked over at the doors to his Ready Room and noticed they were already closed.

“Captain,” Trent said, gesturing for Dani to follow him.

Dani got up from the command chair as Trent walked to the Ready Room door. He pressed the button on the side and the doors slid open. They walked in and the doors closed behind them. Trent let out a heavy sigh before turning towards Dani.

“What is the situation with the affected areas?” Trent asked.

“Reactor One is offline but thankfully we did not have a breach,” Dani said. “The fires are contained and extinguished but there is damage to affected systems. Damage control and engineering teams are saying it will take a couple of days before the ship will be fully repaired. They are making sure that there is no structural damage in the affected areas.”

“Any idea as to how the crew is taking this whole thing?”

“Not at the moment considering we have been on the bridge. I’m willing to bet though that everyone is shaken up about it. Fifteen people suddenly dying would also have some impact mentally as well.”

“It’s one thing if this were an accident due to improper maintenance. At least at that point, the explosions would not have been maliciously started, but everyone by now must know who was responsible and I’m concerned if this may undo my efforts to try to have the crew open up to each other. That might have been the intent all along but I won’t know that until those three go on trial. That reminds me, we need to have some personnel investigate the communications log for anything linking Coleman to this.”

“You think he is responsible?”

“When I confronted Bart with the question of whether he and his relatives were responsible or if it was his grandfather, he remained silent rather than taking responsibility. That leads me to believe Coleman is responsible.”

“I understand. I will get some crew members together to review the logs.”

“Also, did you get the names of those that died?”

“I did. I had them sent to your terminal on your desk for review. I know you want to review the names of those who died while under your command, but after you left, I spoke with the bridge officers. I want you to know that what has happened today is by no means your fault, Admiral.”

“That’s not true, Captain. My actions had led to the series of events that have unfolded and caused those needless deaths.”

“Admiral, I know it is not right to argue with a superior officer, but in this situation I feel validated. Coleman’s grandsons viewed your appointment to this ship as a threat to their authority. They planted those explosives before you even came on board this ship, and only detonated them when your way of running things would undermine the authority their grandfather had given them. The only ones to blame for this whole thing are the people who took malicious action against this ship and its crew because their authority was put into question and removed. No one is going to blame you, sir. You saw the looks on everybody’s faces when you came aboard and made your announcement. That was the happiest I had ever seen them get since I have been aboard this ship! You offered them hope for a new change. As I think about it, I can see why you want to continue the party. You don’t want to disappoint them, do you?”

“You are correct in a lot of aspects. The first is that you shouldn’t argue with a superior officer. Thankfully, what you had to say was validated as I needed to hear that. Maybe you are right. Just about everyone wanted change on this ship and I still intend to give them that. Those fifteen who died will still be honored. At least they were happy about the party up to that point and the party will be used to commemorate their sacrifice. Hopefully, their souls will rest in peace knowing we are thinking about them at that party. As long as the damaged areas are stable enough to not cause any problems, I would like to see everyone there.”

“I understand. I’ll keep an eye on the progress and if we can get some help from repair teams from either headquarters or other ships, we can make that happen.”

“Very good. Well, go make sure all of that is being taken care of. I’m going to review the names of those fifteen momentarily as well as create a speech, but I need to contact Grand Admiral Mikey to give him my report on the fugitives and their capture.”

“I understand, sir. I’ll get back to monitoring the progress on the repairs and the party preparations. I will let you know of any developments that require your attention.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Dani nodded in acknowledgement before turning around and heading back out the door. As soon as the door closed, Trent took a deep breath and turned to look at the terminal on his desk. This was one report that he really did not want to give but hopefully, this was the worst he had to deal with for a long while.

* * * * *

*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Cavalier
Approaching SW-61 System, Southwestern Region, 58 Light-Years from NIR Border
9:12am, September 26, 5434 A.D. (The Next Day)*

“We will be arriving at our destination in a few minutes.”

The helmsman’s words started to fill Captain Luke with some excitement. It had been a long few days from his perspective. The closer the *Cavalier* got to the source of the transmissions, the clearer the signals became. According to the communications officer, it was indeed true that whoever was fighting in the system that the *Cavalier* was approaching, they were Human for the most part. While the confirmed names of the nations that were fighting were the Tenebris Dominion and the Draco Federation, it was abundantly clear that they were Human based on the English language that was used between them. However, the communications officer noticed that there were some accents or speech among the Federation’s transmissions that did not seem Human. Either there were several among the Federation’s citizens or officers that had speech impediments or the Federation also consisted of alien races that either the Federation conquered or willingly joined it.

What Luke was still wondering about was the cause of the division between the Draco family and the rest of the Tenebris? Why were they fighting each other and how long have they been doing so? Hopefully they would have their answers once they arrive on the scene. It would also give them the chance to see what the military capabilities of both sides are.

Luke knew very well that the Tenebris prior to their self-imposed exile in order to flee from Republic forces had consisted of many experts in several fields of science based on the report he was given. Without Republic laws to put any dangerous scientific experiments in check, the Dominion and the Federation could have developed horrific weapons of mass destruction among other things. Human and/or alien experimentations, cloning, bio-weapons, mind controlling, advance methods of enslavement, all could easily be possible if unchecked. That is what Luke and the higher-ups at the RCIA and the Supreme Chancellor were concerned with.

However, Luke knew that the *Cavalier* was just one ship and their task was only a reconnaissance one at that. They were not sent out here to fight the Tenebris. They were out there to find them, study them, see what they have done, how much they have grown, and report their findings back to the Republic. The fact that they are now split and were at war with each other only manages to complicate matters. Now they would have to work around a warzone to figure out all of the above and WHY they split from each other to begin with. Hopefully, they can probe

any of the ships from both sides, whether active or destroyed, to find the answers that they were seeking, all while not being detected by either nation or faction.

Detection was Luke's last concern. Stealth technology, namely optical cloaking and ECM/ECCM technology was only recently implemented on a ship-size scale with the *Cavalier* and the *Templar* but the technology had been in use for years by the RCIA. However, the Tenebris whether before or after their split could have already developed it, used it, and found a means to detect a ship that still uses it. There was no way to know whether this was the case or not until they arrive in the system, but if the *Cavalier* can be detected by either faction the moment they arrive, those two would have a common enemy to fight and may cause a cease-fire between them. Having them fight each other means that they might not be thinking about fighting the Republic. The last thing Luke needed to do was change that.

Luke looked at the countdown timer on the screen. Thirty seconds remain on the clock till they reached their destination. He took a deep breath.

"Is the optical cloak and the ECM/ECCM system ready and active?" Luke asked.

"Yes, sir," the tactical officer said. "We will be undetectable the moment we drop out of warp speed."

"Hopefully, we will be undetectable from their scanners. We will know if we are from their scanners soon enough."

"We will be dropping out of warp in ten seconds," the helmsman said.

Luke leaned back in his chair as the timer counted down. As it hit zero, the *Cavalier* dropped out of warp. The local star shined brightly in the distance but it was bright enough for Luke to cover his eyes momentarily before the main screen's automatic filter kicked in to reduce the brightness. As Luke looked at the screen, he noticed that the ship had dropped out of warp in high orbit over a terrestrial planet that was "Earth-like," or rather a planet that can be habitable by Humans or other beings that lived in similar planetary conditions. It was nighttime over the part of the planet that the *Cavalier* was orbiting over. Because it was nighttime, Luke could see on the planet lights that indicated cities and towns that dotted the surface.

The one thing that Luke did not see was any signs of combat on the surface.

"I don't see any battles happening on the ground," Luke said.

"Sir," the communications officer said, "the transmissions are not coming from the surface. They are coming from directly ahead."

Luke looked up on the screen and could see in the distance several small lights flickering against the darkness of space. Some were being connected by lines of light. Some after being connected by that light suddenly shined brightly before being extinguished. It was clear that those lines were weapons being fired with ships being destroyed after being hit enough times.

"Tactical," Luke said. "Can you magnify that area?"

"Yes, sir," the tactical officer said as they pressed a few buttons.

A rectangle outlined that area of space on the main screen. It then zoomed in and focused. As soon as it did so, Luke's eyes widened as a feel of shock and dread filled his face as he saw what he did not expect to see.

"Great Maker," he said. "I was not expecting to see this..."

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