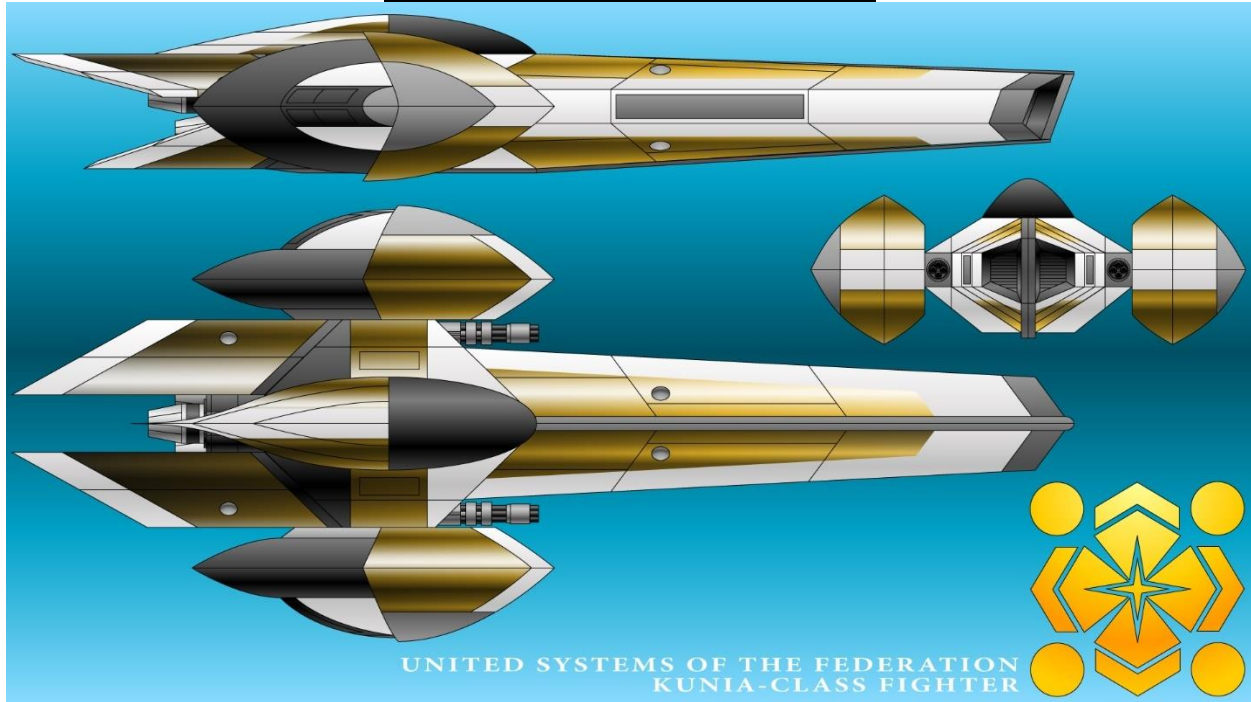


*Warring Factions: Alternate Timeline Remake*  
*The Cost of Peace/The Divide Within*



**PART 4**

*Renee's Quarters, Deck 6-Aft Section, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
On route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border  
5:32am, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“Time to face the music, I guess.”

Renee looked at herself in the mirror after she got dressed in her military uniform. After her dinner was delivered to her quarters last night, she received a message from Deandre to report to him in the CCC fifteen minutes before the start of her shift. It was obvious that he wanted to talk to her about the events that occurred yesterday, allowing the senators into the flight simulator control room without proper authorization. It was entirely possible that she would be demoted for her actions, resulting in her transfer to shared quarters. She was not looking forward to that conversation when she arrives in the CCC.

Normally, Renee would eat breakfast in the Galley prior to her shift, giving herself plenty of time to eat before going to the CCC. However, due to how she felt, she was not hungry for a full breakfast, instead eating one of her meal bars she had in case of such a situation. It was unwise to not have a meal before her shift, especially when it was not known what they would expect to encounter when they arrive at their destination. Hopefully, depending on what Deandre wanted to talk about, she would be able to keep it down if he was the bearer of bad news.

After making sure that her uniform was in pristine shape, she took a deep breath and turned towards her door to leave her quarters. As she opened the door, she was suddenly in shock to see Commander Alto standing there, flanked by a pair of armed SAGNATs. None of them looked particularly thrilled to be there. She began to wonder how long they waited there for her.

“Lieutenant Commander Renee,” Alto said, “you are late to breakfast.”

“I ate a meal bar, sir,” Renee said as she stepped out of her quarters, closing the door behind her. “I was not very hungry this morning. How long have you all been standing here?”

“Since zero-five hundred hours. That is when you usually go to the Galley. I was about to knock to make sure you were up.”

“If I knew you were coming, I would have informed you of the situation.”

“A fair statement. I had assumed you were going to continue following your normal morning routine, but I should have accounted for a deviation such as this.”

“I take it you are here to escort me to the CCC?”

“We were here to escort you to the Galley first before the CCC, though in hindsight that would have drawn some unneeded and unwanted attention. Regardless, if you are ready to go to the CCC now, we will head that way since Rear Admiral Deandre is expecting you soon.”

“Understood, sir.”

Alto turned to his right and began walking down the hallway towards the elevators. Renee followed behind him with the two SAGNATs following behind her. She was not looking to escape and that would be far too difficult to do so anyway if she wanted to. As they reached the elevators and Alto pressed the call button, a couple of female crewmen, one Human and one Centauri, had turned a corner from twenty meters down the hall and were chatting about something that was difficult to hear. Alto turned his head to look at them with a serious expression on his face. The two crewmen looked his way and were suddenly silent with shocked expression on their faces. They turned around and headed back the way they came without saying a word. It was obvious that word of Renee’s armed escort was going to spread throughout the ship after this, but who knows what awaited her when she reached the CCC.

When the elevator had arrived, its doors opened and there was no one on it. Alto gestured with his left hand for her to enter the elevator first. She did so with the SAGNATs following behind her. She was at the back of the elevator with the SAGNATs with Alto in front of her facing towards the doors as they closed. The elevator descended past one level without stopping until it reached Deck Eight. The doors opened and Alto walked out first. The SAGNATs stepped aside inside the elevator to allow for Renee to exit next. She exited the elevator and the SAGNATs followed behind her again.

Alto led them down the hallway to their left heading towards the CCC. As they approached the portside access door, they passed by the Observation Room door and Renee began to think about Senators Julana and Tiffany who she helped enter the flight simulation control room yesterday. She knew they would not be in that room right now until the *Kasagi* was almost at its destination. She wished they were in that room right now so that she knew she would not feel so alone in this meeting she was about to have with Deandre. It would be nice for someone to have her back under the circumstances.

Alto went around the corner and approached the portside CCC entryway that was flanked by two SAGNATs. They saw Alto approach and the SAGNAT guard on their right opened the door to let them in. While Alto and Renee entered the CCC, the two SAGNATs that escorted them did not enter. The SAGNATs that guarded the door closed the door behind Alto and Renee.

“Follow me,” Alto said as he made his way down the stairs to the Command Pit.

Renee followed and noticed that the night crew were still at the stations including her own. The day shift would start to arrive in the next twenty minutes. A few members of the night shift noticed Alto and Renee had entered and had puzzled expressions on their faces. Renee also saw that Deandre and Daniel were already in the Command Pit in their seats. They looked to be

having a discussion with each other, but as to what they were discussing, Renee could not determine from afar. However, they saw that Alto and Renee were approaching, stopped their discussion, and got up from their chairs.

Renee had never set foot in the Command Pit before. Whenever she started her shift, she always walked around on the operations level to reach her station. She was almost reluctant to step into the Command Pit when she reached that last step, but it was only for a second as she knew she was ordered to see Deandre in the Command Pit. Alto stopped halfway between the stairs and his seat.

“Lieutenant Commander Renee,” Alto said towards Deandre, “as you have requested.”

“Good,” Deandre said with a serious expression on his face. “Take a seat.”

Deandre pointed towards the seat generally reserved for the CAL on the opposite side of the table from Daniel’s chair while Alto walked to his seat. Renee was slow to walk towards the CAL’s seat as one would consider it an infringement of military protocol to sit in a reserved seat for someone else. Deandre pressed a button at his station to activate the soundproof field around the command pit. As the energy field extended from the ceiling to the floor, Deandre noticed Renee’s reluctance to sit in the CAL’s chair.

“If you are concerned about infringing on protocol,” Deandre said with a serious look on his face again, “be aware that I ordered you to take a seat in that chair. The CAL is not here right now, and the seat is available at this time.”

“Understood, sir,” Renee said as she approached the CAL’s seat.

When she sat down, she could not help but look around and get a perspective view as to what the CAL would see in meetings. It was brief as Deandre, Alto, and Daniel sat down at their seats, looking towards Renee. She now felt like she was at a military tribunal with how the three of them were staring at her.

“Now then,” Deandre said, “I called you here because I need you to answer a few questions, Renee. Your answers will determine what we are going to do about your actions last night. Is that understood?”

“Understood, sir,” Renee said.

“Good. Now for my first question: how was dinner last night?”

Renee looked at Deandre with a puzzled expression on her face. She figured his first question would be in relation to what happened in the flight simulation control room, not on the meal that was sent to her quarters. She figured it was best to indulge him as there may have been an ulterior motive to his question.

“It was very good, sir,” Renee said. “If I may ask, what was it called?”

“It is a variation of a dish from a long time ago called Chicken a la Queen,” Deandre said. “I provided the recipe to the ship’s cooks to prepare for the meal last night.”

Renee was quickly beginning to realize that Deandre had taken measures to prepare for dinner and thanks to Renee and the Senators, those plans were ruined. Deandre looked over at Alto after he answered Renee’s question.

“Told you it was good,” Deandre said. “The chefs prepared it exactly as I wanted it.”

“I still say it needs a little more salt,” Alto said looking over at Deandre.

“Salt would have ruined the unique flavor of the dish!”

“Excuse me,” Renee said, puzzled, “but did you have me come in early to only ask about the flavor of the meal last night?”

Deandre and Alto looked at Renee with the former having a curious expression on his face. He soon brought his right hand up to his mouth before nonchalantly clearing his throat.

“No, it was not,” Deandre said. “I do have questions that do not involve the meal last night. Now, from what I hear, you took the Senators to the Recreation Room and played a few rounds of bowling, is that correct?”

Renee was not sure if this question was relating to what happened in the flight simulation control room but seeing as how she and the Senators were in the Recreation Room prior to going to the control room, he may be leading up to that point.

“Yes, sir,” Renee said. “I took them there and we taught Julana how to bowl.”

“How well did Julana bowl?” Deandre asked with a look of anticipation on his face.

Renee was beginning to wonder what point Deandre was trying to get at by asking such questions. Did these questions serve a purpose for this inquiry or why she was even there?

“She improved with each game, managing to break over one hundred points,” Renee said.

“Julana is a fast learner,” Deandre said, “but she did better than I thought she would have in a short amount of time.”

Renee was genuinely puzzled about the direction the conversation was going. She looked across the table at Daniel who she assumed would be just as puzzled. However, there was no such look of bewilderment on his face. Either he knew these questions were going to be asked or if he was ordered not to act surprised by them. Alto was sharing the same expression as Daniel. Renee was soon beginning to wonder if this was some sort of elaborate prank or setup the three of them were putting her through as some form of punishment.

“Sir,” Renee said as she looked back at Deandre, “you asked me here this early before my shift for what I believed was my punishment for my actions last night. Why does this feel like we are having some form of casual conversation instead?”

Deandre shook his head but kept a smile on his face.

“Because of what happened last night prior to dinner,” Deandre said, “I was not able to ask how the day went yesterday with both of the Senators or you. I was hoping to have this conversation at dinner, but that did not happen.”

“I understand, sir,” Renee said, “and I know I am to blame for what happened.”

“Are you, now?” Deandre said as the smile went away but he raised his right eyebrow. “You did provide access to an area that is normally off-limits to civilians, but in retrospect, that only makes you an accomplice, not the perpetrator. You did not pull the plug, so to speak, on what happened in the control room last night.”

“That still is considered a dereliction of duty, sir.”

“Is it? It appeared to me that you unknowingly contributed to following an order that I wanted accomplished.”

“What do you mean?” Renee said with a puzzled expression.

“You are aware that Commander Alto was ordered to stop the simulation dogfight that took place, correct?”

“Yes, after the fact.”

“Therefore, the order was carried out by those who both knew and felt consciously that the conflict taking place was a detriment to the morale and teamwork of this ship’s crew and pilots. Would you say that such a statement is a fair assessment to what happened?”

Renee was in shock. She did not expect Deandre to somehow take such a situation that would normally have her demoted at best, court-martialed at worse, and turn it into a favorable outcome. She looked over at Commander Alto, who looked to have begrudgingly accepted this outlook on the matter despite the actions he took in response to their conduct. She was not sure if Alto was upset or not that his actions were possibly viewed as “overreacting” by others now.

“I will say,” Deandre continued, “that the circumstances for the actions taken last night have brought a matter to my attention that seriously needs to be addressed. I knew that there were still some problems between Natural and Enhanced Humans, but I did not know that such segregation was self-imposed on each other in this manner outside the CCC. I guess there are those that take professionalism over racism in this environment but save the racism until after they leave this room. I am hoping that is not the case with you, is it?”

“It is not, sir,” Renee said. “I was only eleven when the Colonial War occurred, and I did not understand at the time what was happening or why. It was only once I became a teenager and enrolled in intermediate school that I began to understand more of the world outside the colony I was born in. By then, the First Interstellar War was already underway, and I became aware of other lifeforms outside of Sol. My parents were still judgmental about Natural Humans and I believe they tried to instill that in me. However, I was too fascinated at seeing other races and other worlds that I was more interested in joining the newly established Federation forces to get that opportunity. That decision left a split between myself and my parents.”

“Wait a moment,” Alto said. “From what I heard, you had your genes altered when you were conceived, a procedure done normally on first-generation Enhanced. Are you saying your parents were Enhanced as well, making you a second-generation child?”

“They were,” Renee said. “I am a second-generation Enhanced.”

“But that does not make sense. If your parents were already genetically enhanced, their genetics should have been passed down to their children without the need to go through the procedure. Is that not the case or were they trying to enhance their offspring even further?”

“Wait, are you telling me that you are not aware of...”

Renee stopped midsentence, feeling as though she said something she should not have said. Deandre, Daniel, and Alto looked at each other in bewilderment, wondering what Renee was talking about. They looked back towards Renee.

“Renee,” Deandre said in a serious tone, “what is happening with the second-generation of Enhanced? If there is something that we need to know that may affect them, the members of this crew, or even the Federation at large, we need to know.”

Renee took a deep breath.

“I guess I let that slip without realizing it,” Renee said. “Altering the genetics of the first-generation of Enhanced has its positives as we are all aware. However, there were drawbacks to altering genetics through science that could not have been foreseen. While the alterations were applied to a person permanently, this resulted in an incapability to bear children with those same genetic alterations naturally due to those changes. Every attempt to do so has resulted in the mother having miscarriages every time. Instead, a Natural donor was needed to first replace those genes that were altered for the conception to happen. Once that occurred, the genetics of the embryo were then altered to make them Enhanced. However, the success rate of conceiving a healthy Enhanced child and bring it to term was roughly forty percent. While it appears that the Enhanced population has more than doubled, you can imagine that with a forty percent success rate how many were never born or come to term due to that sixty percent failure rate.”

Deandre, Daniel, and Alto were all in utter shock over what Renee said. It was clear that they had no idea that this was happening to the Enhanced population or the number of attempts overall that were made just to increase their population with the second generation.

“I have to ask,” Deandre said, “but exactly where did they find Natural Human donors for this procedure?”

“They were volunteers from the Lagrange Five colonies,” Renee said.

“I should have known. They are the only colonists the Enhanced still trusts after all this time. However, you do realize what this means, do you not?”

“What?” Renee asked with a puzzled expression on her face.

“It means that every second-generation of Enhanced started as a Natural for a moment, or rather they had been infused with Natural genes before they were altered. I am trying not to spin this as a failure on the part of the Enhanced, but if they cannot reproduce naturally, there is a good chance that there may not be a third generation once word of this gets out. This needs to be addressed as soon as possible or the Enhanced are going to try something foolish or risky to their own genetics that may only make the matter worse.”

“I must ask that you not report this, sir,” Renee said with a scared expression on her face. “If word of this gets out, there is going to be a lot of scrutiny and anger over the number of potential embryos that were sacrificed just to increase our population. There is also the potential for Natural extremists to take advantage of this information and renew their campaign of making the Enhanced extinct.”

“They may not have to take any action at all if this continues unchecked. There is no way the Enhanced could keep this secret or maintain this method of artificial reproduction for much longer. You may have slipped on your wording which brought this matter to our attention, but it could have easily been anyone else. The fact is that we cannot turn a blind eye to a society that finds these measures acceptable.”

“There is something else to take into consideration, Admiral,” Alto said. “The notion that an Enhanced being in a relationship with a Natural is considered ‘taboo’ among Humans, but it appears that such a relationship may be the only way to save the Enhanced.”

“How so?” Deandre asked.

“Remember what Renee just said. They used Natural Human donors to repair the genetic alterations that were made for a child to be conceived before making the alterations again to convert them to an Enhanced. However, while I am not an expert in the field of genetics, it is possible that the genetics of an Enhanced that cannot be used would be overwritten by the genetics of a Natural, allowing the child to be conceived naturally. However, this does mean that the child will likely be born as a Natural in the most likely scenario. There is a slight possibility, though, that the Enhanced genetics will be the dominant traits in such a conception, which would allow those enhancements to hold and result in the birth of an Enhanced child under natural circumstances. A genetics expert would likely be able to tell us the percentages of any of these scenarios happening, but obviously, testing would be required.”

“Wait a moment,” Renee said. “You are not bringing this up because of the situation between Janice and Jake, are you? Are you saying that there is a possibility that if they pursue a relationship that would result in possibly starting a family that Janice could have a child that would not require an artificial procedure to be conceived?”

“The possibility exists that they could successfully have a child, yes. However, how that child will develop will depend on the genetics that hold versus those that are rejected. Military doctrine aside concerning their ranks, I am curious now that I know these facts how this will progress and the cultural implications that this will cause. This may be what is needed to finally bring Natural and Enhanced Humans back together.”

“An interesting development, indeed,” Deandre said. “We will need to explore this further later. Right now, we must focus on our mission today. Renee, I must thank you for bringing this matter to our attention. I know you had your concerns about reporting here earlier, but there will be no punishment for your actions.”

Deandre looked at the time on his console as it was a few minutes until six o'clock, the start of the day shift in the CCC. Because of the soundproof barrier, he did not notice that the day shift had already walked into the CCC and they were preparing to switch with the night shift. He also noticed that some of them had seen Renee in the Command Pit sitting at the CAL's seat.

"I think there is already enough attention on you for being in the Command Pit at the CAL's seat," Deandre said as he looked back at Renee. "We will be arriving in the Termine System in a little over five hours. I would like you to go ahead and plot a patrol route for the entire fleet within the system so that there are no surprises before the refugees arrive."

"I take it the CAL will be addressing the pilots on board this ship on their own patrol routes?" Renee asked.

"That is correct. Once you plot the patrol route, forward that to the CAL and he will come up with a patrol path in conjunction with our own. We will inform the rest of the fleet upon our arrival. Now, please report to your station."

"Understood, sir."

Deandre deactivated the soundproof barrier from his console. The sounds of the CCC began to fill the Command Pit as the field dissipated. Renee got up from the CAL's seat and walked towards her right towards the closest stairs near her station on the Operations Level. Renee was feeling some levels of relief that she was not punished for her actions but leaking the knowledge about the second-generation Enhanced was bound to have consequences for her once word got out about the conception issues. She could only hope that serving in the Federation military and the resources at the Federation's disposal would cause the Enhanced to accept any assistance to remedy their problem with reproducing children without the need to repair or resort to genetic manipulation.

Only time will tell after this mission whether she helped save the Enhanced or if she doomed them to extinction with that knowledge.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Fitness Center, Deck 10-Aft Section, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
On route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border  
6:58am, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

"Just keep focusing on the routine."

Tristan quietly spoke aloud while he was performing his early morning exercises inside the fitness center. He had done thirty-nine pushups out of the one hundred he normally does during his routine. Some of the other pilots from Cobra Squadron who were in the room were doing their own exercise regiments and routines based on their personal requirements. This kept them all fit and ready whenever they were needed.

However, in the case of Tristan, he was doing his routine to forget what he possibly overheard last night. The sounds Jake and Janice were making last night were running through his head on and off, making him wonder what exactly they were doing in the starboard Pilot Ready Room. He increased his pace, trying to get those sounds out of his head as he began to visualize what those sounds could have been. It is not like he had any feelings for his squadron leader. He had nothing but respect for her and her skills. He had a girlfriend of his own back home in the Enhanced colonies that he wanted to get back to soon after this assignment was over.

His problem with the sounds and images he was visualizing was the quick realization that his squadron leader was interacting in an inappropriate manner with a Natural Human when she was an Enhanced, a taboo that was heavily discouraged. He never liked the Naturals and their

mentality towards a superior race. In his mind, they were just as undereducated, spiteful, and uncivilized as they were during the Colonial War. His parents had raised him on those principles his entire life. His father who helped to develop the unmanned combat machines that were used to fight the UEC forces during the Colonial War told him horror stories of the Naturals drive to exterminate the Enhanced that there was proof they would use the forbidden nuclear weapons to do so. Thanks to the EMP warhead used against UEC forces, they were able to avert disaster.

He and his kind were superior both physically and mentally to Naturals. This was an undeniable fact. The Enhanced should have won that war and brought the inferior Naturals into submission, but a sudden shift of political opinion in the UEC Senate drove the party who lobbied for war out of power, allowing for those who want peace to present a truce with the help of citizens from the Lagrange Five colonies who the Enhanced trust. That truce had kept the Enhanced from becoming the rightful masters of Humanity over the Naturals. His father felt his development of those unmanned weapons was a waste of his talents and Tristan hated seeing his father like that. Tristan wanted to investigate the continued development of unmanned weapons when he got older to renew the war with the Naturals, submitting them to the rule of the Enhanced. Unfortunately, the First Interstellar War the following year and the Federation's formation put any plans of fighting the Naturals again on hold permanently.

Tristan recalled the argument that Senator Julana had yesterday before he was knocked out by Janice throwing her helmet at his face. Who was she, an alien outsider from another culture and planet, to judge a race that she was not a part of?

The biggest problem right now was the fact that Janice was not in the fitness center currently. She had not even arrived yet, and Tristan tried to keep any further images as to why she was not there from popping into his head.

The starboard doorway into the fitness center opened suddenly as Janice walked in, dressed in her flight suit.

"Cobra Squadron!" she yelled. "Get cleaned up and meet in the pilot briefing room in thirty minutes! The CAL will be going over the details of our mission before the fleet arrives in the Termine System!"

Before they could respond and acknowledge her order, Janice walked out of the fitness center just as quickly as she arrived. Everyone except for Tristan was surprised about her sudden appearance and departure. He may not have known the reason as to why she quickly came in and departed, but he could tell something was different about her. She appeared to be more energetic when she gave those orders, which concerned Tristan even more than before.

It was best for Tristan to not focus on that matter right now as he got up from his pushups to turn towards his fellow pilots.

"You heard her, guys!" he yelled. "Hit the showers and get cleaned up on the double!"

Yelling in that fashion to his fellow pilots made him feel a bit better to get his frustration out. The question now is how much longer he can keep what happened last night contained.

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*Pilot Briefing Room, Deck 8-Midsection, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
On route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border  
7:28am, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

"Cobra Squadron, take your seats."

Tristan and the rest of Cobra Squadron filed into the pilot briefing room after they got cleaned up from their workouts. The room was more designed like a college or flight academy



training classroom with seats being raised towards the back of the room on “steps.” The front seats were on the base level of the room and the seats behind them were raised on platforms like bleachers. Pilots enter from the back of the room or from the side entrances near the front of the room and walk around to the base of the steps on either side of the platforms.

Panther Squadron was already seated as Cobra Squadron came around from the starboard side. The pilots of Panther Squadron looked to see who was walking around on that side of the seats and groaned under their breath. Jake, however, was not affected by their arrival as he sat in the front row on the far-left side. He seemed rather alert and focused on the meeting that was about to begin. He only looked their direction briefly before turning his head towards the front.

Tristan, however, knew that Jake was more focused on Janice, who was in front of the briefing room with Panther Squadron’s leader and the *Kasagi’s* Combat Air Leader, Lieutenant Commander Michel. The two of them were at the podium quietly going over the details that everyone else was to be briefed on soon. Michel and Janice noticed Cobra Squadron’s arrival.

“Hurry and take your seats,” Michel ordered.

Cobra Squadron walked up the steps to their seats but did not look thrilled to be sitting next to Panther Squadron. Tristan knew that the two squadron leaders would see their behavior and body language, but those two also knew that the events of the competition last night would also influence this attitude. As Tristan sat in the seat in the far right opposite of Jake, he could see both Janice and Panther’s Centauri leader had looks of disapproval on their faces.

While Tristan has no personal quarrel with the Centauri that leads Panther Squadron, he began to wonder how the rest of Cobra Squadron will act taking orders from what they consider an alien. The one fact that he could not deny was the Centauri’s quick reflexes that were on par with an Enhanced. For that, Tristan has some respect for the CAL, but the Centauri may not have that same respect from other members of Cobra Squadron considering their attitude towards the CAL’s squadron.

“Let us begin,” Michel said. “At eleven-thirty-five hours today, this ship will come out of the hyperspace fold jump near Planet Verima in the Termine System. Upon arrival, this ship and the fleet along with all squadrons will be deployed to patrol the system. The goal is to make any Liekan surveillance think that this is just a routine patrol of a border system. We will be maintaining this cover until seventeen-hundred hours, the expected time of arrival of the refugee’s shuttle. At that time, the ship will move towards the system’s outer edge, two kilometers from the Liekan border zone. The zone was designed as a ‘buffer’ that no ship from either the Federation or the Liekans are to cross. The same rules apply to the Dexigalian border. As the shuttle contains refugees who gave us advance notice, we will not be firing upon them once our scans confirm who is on board. All squadrons are to form a ‘web’ formation thirty meters from the border. The purpose of this formation and distance is to give the refugees a point of reference as to where the border is and when they are considered ‘in the clear.’ There is a strong possibility that they are being pursued, but we do not know whether their pursuers will break off once they are in the buffer zone or pursue them through. Worst case scenario is their pursuers will go so far as to enter Federation space to catch them.”

“What if they are firing on the refugees or they continue to fire after the refugees past us while they are still inside the buffer zone?” one of the Panther squadron’s pilots asked.

“All fighters are expected to provide cover for the refugees and their shuttles while they come aboard our ship. You all will be extremely close to the edge of the buffer zone, so be careful of your piloting and your spatial position relative to the buffer zone. You all are playing defense on this mission unless one or more of their Liekan pursuers decides to cross their vessel

into Federation space. Only then will you and all other fighter craft go on the offensive to repel them. However, even at that point, you are still not authorized to cross into the buffer zone unless ordered to do so.”

“So, we are nothing but shields and road signs, is that right?” Tristan asked.

“That is correct,” Michel answered. “The primary reason Cobra Squadron is here is because we have no idea how the Liekans may have progressed in a military sense. We know there are rumors of the Liekans and the Dexigalians defeating the Fulari/Corimei Alliance. How this was achieved is not known and we may be seeing how they did it firsthand. We needed a squadron that can adapt quickly to the situation. If the situation comes to that, Panther and other squadrons will provide escort for the refugees.”

“So, we get stuck with the messy job while Panther and the other squadrons cowers away with the target, huh?”

Janice was finding Tristan’s tone of voice quite irritating.

“Tristan,” Janice said, “escorting civilian refugees is just as important as defending our borders and our fleet.”

“Besides,” Michel said, “not all of the other squadrons will serve as escort for the refugees. Others will serve as backup for your squadron should the situation call for it. The refugees need only to make it to the *Kasagi’s* shuttle bay. At that point, should the Liekans decide to continue fighting, Panther Squadron and any remaining escorts will rejoin in the border defense. Once the refugees are safely aboard and the fighting has stopped, all fighters will be recalled to their ships while the fleet provides covering fire.”

“If I may ask,” Jake said, “when would the senators on board become involved? They are here for a purpose, correct?”

“One of the senators will be in the hangar bay to greet the refugees while hopefully the other senator will try to contact the pursuers and persuade them to cease their pursuit. If someone from the Federation military tried a similar measure, it is doubtful that the pursuers would listen to them over a senator.”

“Can I ask something?” Tristan said. “Has anyone ever seen what these Fulari refugees that we are supposedly picking up even look like? I have heard rumors that their appearance is like demons from old religions.”

Janice looked at Tristan with a look of disapproval on her face.

“Lieutenant Tristan,” she said with the sound of seriousness in her voice, “not every race or species we either come across in the galaxy or that are already in the Federation is going to win some beauty pageant, especially if judged by Human standards. What about the reptilian Zaurions from the Vega system or the amphibious Lurions from Granala? They are not exactly the most eye-catching races in the Federation for Humanoids, you know. The Fulari are a people who were wrongly conquered and enslaved along with the Corimeins by the Liekans who, I will remind you, are a bipedal wolf race. Humanity as a race trusted the Liekans at the start of the First Interstellar War over the thin and long-limbed aquatic Dexigalians because we found the Liekans a rather majestic race. However, what happened when we left our solar system and headed for the Alpha and Proxima Centauri star systems for the first time? We saw the actions they were taking against the Centauri and realized that they were nothing more than a race of vicious murderers of any race they consider inferior! Humanity would have been next!”

“The Liekans’ actions saw the genocide of a tenth of my people’s population I may add,” Michel said. “On that day, Humanity were our saviors when we were facing extinction.”

Tristan was beginning to feel rather low for ever bringing the matter up.

“Tristan,” Janice said with an angry look on her face, “ever since we came on board the *Kasagi*, I have seen you become rather prejudice to other races and to Natural Humans, as well. Until I find a reason to clear you through a psychology test, you are off this mission!”

Tristan stood up, pissed off at what she said.

“What, you are going to trust your new boyfriend, Jake, over there?!” he said, pointing in Jake’s direction.

Both Cobra and Panther Squadron pilots looked between Jake and Janice with surprised and dumbfounded looks on their faces at what Tristan just said. Janice was also shocked!

“What are you talking about?” she asked. “Where did you get that idea from?”

“I heard the two of you making some strange noises in the starboard Pilot Ready Room last night,” Tristan said. “I can say that those sounds were not of any form of exercising in a traditional sense from what I could tell.”

Both Jake and Janice were in shock. The fact that neither of them were denying Tristan’s allegations was proof to Tristan that they were making love in that room. He was hoping he would be proven wrong and accept any punishment for a false accusation. However, that did not appear to be the case from their responses or lack thereof.

Both squadrons’ pilots were beginning to ask questions directed at Jake, Tristan, and Janice when Michel pulled out a horn from the podium and blew it. The loud deafening sound silenced everyone in the room as they looked in his direction.

“That is quite enough!” he yelled. “Tristan, you are confined to your squadron’s pilot quarters for the remainder of this mission! All other pilots are dismissed except for Janice and Jake. I want to talk to the two of you in private right now!”

“Yes, sir,” Janice and Jake said with disapproving looks on their faces.

Tristan did not know whether his actions were in the best interest of himself, his team, or his squadron leader. At this point, there was no use debating what the best course of action was as the deed has been done, both his own and those of Janice and Jake. The other pilots left with Tristan following behind them. Whatever the outcome, he was sitting this mission out.

After everyone in the room left, Michel looked between Janice and Jake who had looks of concern on their faces. That reaction alone gave Michel a feeling of concern about what the two of them were doing last night in the starboard Pilot Ready Room.

“Alright, you two,” Michel said. “I need you to be honest with me. Did the two of you engage in sexual relations in the starboard Pilot Ready Room?”

“It was my fault,” Janice said without looking at Michel. “I allowed many years of self-imposed chastity to get the better of me and allowed this to happen last night.”

“Do not take the blame for this in its entirety,” Jake said before looking at Michel. “Sir, this was a mutual decision by both of us. We met in the starboard Pilot Ready Room, where Janice asked, and I agreed. We let our emotions and instincts get the better of us over our duty. I cannot allow her to take the blame all on her own.”

“I figured you would not allow that,” Michel said. “You are a pilot who is honest, and I know Janice is a pilot of whom is sworn to her duty. Had this matter been kept quiet or handled in a discrete manner, I would have said to put this relationship on hold until after the mission had concluded. I was present at the end of your match last night and I can understand what months if not years of pent up frustration can do to a person when there is no longer a need to hold back. However, thanks to Lieutenant Tristan, everyone in both squadrons now knows what happened between the two of you and word is going to spread quickly about this matter.”

“That means that eventually, both the Flag Officer and Executive Officer are going to find out,” Janice said.

“Exactly,” Michel said. “When that happens, I am going to be called in and have to both explain what happened and what measures I took to prevent this from happening again.”

Janice and Jake looked at Michel with a look of worry now on their faces. It was obvious that they knew that Michel would have to enact some form of punishment as the ship’s CAL. Michel was not looking forward to doing something like this today, but now he has no choice.

“I can tell that you both know what I must do,” Michel said. “I am already going to be one pilot down for this mission, so I cannot suspend you both. Therefore, for the remainder of this mission, you two are hereby banned from seeing each other unless called together for a meeting or while on a mission in your fighters. If you two are caught within twenty meters of each other, an alarm will sound and the SAGNATs will detain you. I know that is a bit extreme, but you both know that engaging in such relationships is forbidden on military vessels and an example must be made. Believe me, it is better that I do this instead of the Rear Admiral or the Commander. They would probably do worse.”

Michel pulled out his tablet from the podium and pressed a few buttons.

“I have programmed the ship’s sensors with your bio-signatures,” Michel said. “With the exception of this room, it will keep track of your movements. If you get close to each other, a small beeping tone will warn you. Once you are within that twenty meters...”

“We know,” Janice said. “The SAGNATs will come after us and detain us.”

“This will only last until the remainder of the mission. Once we return to port, I will have a talk with the Rear Admiral and the Commander about what to do involving your relationship and your military careers at that point. Until then, you two are dismissed. I would suggest taking different doors and paths upon exiting, though. Once you leave, the ship will start to track you both and I doubt you want to set it off immediately. Janice, take the starboard door. Jake, you can leave in a few minutes out the port door, just to play it safe. I will leave afterwards and head for the CCC. I better put in my report about this before the Rear Admiral and the Commander hear about this by word-of-mouth instead.”

“Understood, sir,” Janice said.

“Yes, sir,” Jake said.

It was easy for Michel to hear the tone of disapproval in their voices with his cat-like ears, but this was the best he could do without either putting them in the brig or suspending them from this mission and be down by three pilots. Janice proceeded towards the starboard side door without turning to look at Jake. Michel figured that she did not look at him to not feel or show regret for their actions, but he was not about to ask her why at this moment.

After Janice left the room, Jake leaned back in his chair looking rather upset. Michel was not surprised at all at his reaction. He could only hope that Jake will understand one day that the alternative punishment would have been far worse than this. For Jake’s sake and Janice’s, Michel could only hope they do not try to make the situation worse than it already is.

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*Hallway to Cobra Squadron Barracks, Deck 8-Aft Section, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
On route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border  
8:08am, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“Wait until I get my hands on that eavesdropping loudmouth idiot.”

Janice was highly irate as she stormed towards the barracks for Cobra Squadron. She knew that Tristan had to be in that room after being ordered by the CAL to be confined inside for the rest of the mission. She could only hope that the rest of the squadron was not inside as well asking Tristan for all the details he could have heard. The fact that he overheard Jake and Janice in the starboard Pilot Ready Room was bad enough, but for him to announce it to the entire squadron along with Panther Squadron was the biggest embarrassment of her life. She finally found someone who she could be with and while things did go a little fast in a moment of passion, she felt it was right. For that to be taken away because of Tristan was unacceptable. Tristan may have received his punishment from the CAL, but not from his direct superior.

She was going to make him pay for his outburst, and it may not be just verbal.

As she approached the barracks for Cobra Squadron, she heard some commotion inside the room. It sounded like Tristan was talking to the rest of the squadron with some of them either laughing or sounding excited. As she approached the door, she stopped to listen in on the conversation even though the door that was closed was rather thick.

“How long were you there listening?” one of the pilots asked in anticipation.

“For a few minutes,” Tristan said. “The moaning and groaning were quite audible even through that door.”

“That is disgusting,” one of the other pilots said, his tone matching his feelings. “To think that our leader would stoop so low as to have intimate relations with a lowly Natural. He only won due to having a technological advantage. He would not have won on his skills alone.”

“I fully agree with you,” Tristan continued. “That is why I had to report it. This indecent taboo must be stopped before other Enhanced like her follow suit and stoop so low.”

“Can we really say that she is one of us anymore?” a third pilot asked. “She allowed primal instincts to take over and dictate her actions. I have lost all respect for her. Maybe she should just stay in his quarters and produce some degenerate offspring with him. I would not be surprised if she has already conceived by this point. Such a child will never find acceptance with Enhanced or Naturals. It may end up even worse than ‘Little Ren’ if you want my opinion.”

Janice was on the verge of utter rage at the words her squadron was saying inside. If she continued to hear their words, she would find the nearest weapons locker, pull out an assault rifle, and litter the barracks with their carcasses. She knew that her squadron has racist views and tendencies towards Natural Humans, but she never heard them speak this way before. Worse yet, now they were wanting to treat her like a traitor to her own people. Maybe she was for have a relationship with Jake, but for them to talk about her behind her back this way was unacceptable. She needed to stop this and the first person she needed to address was the whistleblower, Tristan.

She immediately reached for the door handle and opened it with a great deal of strength. The heavy door suddenly swinging open had all the occupants inside look in her direction with looks of surprise followed by fear once they realized who was in the doorway.

“Tell me something, losers,” Janice said through her teeth. “Who wants to be the first one to have their hind-end served to them in a royal fashion that they will not be able to sit down in a chair, much less a cockpit, for about a week?”

No one in the room spoke, but they all shook their head in fear, not wanting to suffer the wrath of their squadron leader. It soon became obvious to them that she had overheard part of their conversation, and now they must deal with her wrath.

“I will deal with you all later,” Janice said. “All of you, get out except for Tristan. He and I need to have a talk and you do not want to be in here when that occurs. Unless of course, you want to be a part of that conversation?”

The other pilots looked back and forth between Janice and Tristan and quickly agreed in silence that they did not want to be around when Janice talks to Tristan. They headed out of the room past Janice who never took her eyes off Tristan. As soon as the last of the pilots left the room, she turned and closed the door behind her, locking it. When she turned to look at Tristan, he was suddenly more scared about being in a locked room with her.

“It was not enough that you eavesdropped on me and Jake last night,” Janice said, “nor was it enough for you to open your mouth about what occurred in a room full of your fellow pilots and the CAL. You continue to talk about it with members of this squadron like it was the hottest and juiciest topic on this ship! Was embarrassing and ridiculing me not enough for you? Now the rest of the squadron is talking about no longer having respect for me and calling me a traitor to other Enhanced!”

“You know as well as I do that having any intimate relations with a Natural is a taboo among our kind,” Tristan said. “How could you go and defile yourself with one of their kind and think that you still have any form of self-respect or the respect of your squadron after doing something so heinous as that?”

“You know as well as I do what has been going on with the second generation of Enhanced, Tristan.”

“We may be in a sealed room, Janice, but that topic is also considered taboo among our kind. If any of the Naturals hear about that, the extremists among them will take the opportunity to wipe us out for good. The more patient ones may not have to do anything at all. They can easily wait for our kind to die out completely without lifting a finger if a solution cannot be found soon.”

“You already know that a solution has been found, but it is obvious to me that you do not agree with that solution at all.”

“No, I do not. Tell me one thing, though. You did not engage in such intimate relations with Jake to produce a child as an example for others of our kind to follow suit, did you?”

“It was my hope that I would be able to have a child that shows that we can coexist with the Naturals, yes. I am looking towards the future, Tristan, but you and the rest of the squadron remain stuck in the past with your ideals, even though the entirety of Humanity has been part of an interstellar nation for twenty years. You saw how that senator reacted to our competition last night. That alone should be enough to convince others that this bickering is pointless. Unless, of course, you can find a reason to prove to her and to me that it is not pointless?”

Tristan looked like he was trying to find reasons and answers to her questions, but he could not think of anything. After fifteen seconds, Janice shook her head.

“I guess you see my point,” she said. “We will discuss this later, but this talk about what I did in the starboard Pilot Ready Room ends here. It does no good for our morale before our mission and provides nothing but a distraction. I am trying not to think about it, but because of you, I cannot even see Jake until after this mission is completed.”

“I guess one good thing came out of opening my mouth, after all,” Tristan said, only to quickly realize the mistake of saying those words.

He looked over at Janice who stared at him with eyes full of rage.

“When we return to dock,” Janice said, “I am going to see to it that your wings are clipped for good, and that the only thing you fly is a logistics freighter! I may have my own problems to contend with when we get back, but your act of insubordination against me and your racist views against others ends here. The Federation military has no room for people with such outdated ideals. When we get back, I will inform the Senate of what is going on with the second

generation of Enhanced Humans to find a way for our kind to survive. Our pride can no longer get in the way if we hope to find a way towards the continued survival of the Enhanced. I no longer care about any of the consequences that would await me once this gets out, but I know now it is the right thing to do, and you only have your attitude to blame for that.”

“You cannot do that!” Tristan said. “If we show any sign of weakness, the extremists will find a way to end our kind for good knowing our ability to reproduce is greatly hindered!”

“It is either I tell them, or we die out regardless. Either way, I would rather we get help utilizing the vast resources of the Federation than sit back and slowly disappear from existence. If I so much as hear that you spoke about this to the rest of the squadron, I will guarantee that you will be dishonorably discharged. You will not be able to fly anything ever again and be kicked out of the service. Do I make myself clear, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tristan said, holding back his frustration.

“You better be glad I calmed down, just so you know. I was about ready to beat you to a pulp for what you did, but I think the threat I have provided should be more than efficient. After all, you do like to point out how we are far ‘superior’ to the ‘barbaric’ Naturals, right?”

Janice felt good about throwing Tristan’s racist remarks right back at him that she had a devious smile on her face. This upset Tristan even further, but he knew better than to argue about his own remarks that he had made.

“I am going to go to the gym,” Janice said. “Afterwards, I am going to go see the CAL about this situation and see how we want to proceed before we arrive at our destination. I would suggest you take this time to reflect on your actions. You will not be in this squadron, much less be a fighter pilot in the Federation, for too much longer.”

Janice turned and opened the door. Part of her was expecting to see the rest of Cobra Squadron hanging around the door and eavesdropping, but thankfully that was not the case. As she exited and closed the door behind her, she looked back inside briefly to see the look on Tristan’s face. He was angry and upset, but in her mind, he only had himself to blame for his actions from earlier today.

Now, she needed to get to the gym to vent her frustrations and to give her a moment to think how she was going to handle this situation both with the Enhanced and with Jake.

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*VIP Quarters, Deck 6-Aft Section, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
On route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border  
8:30am, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“Is it really that late?”

Tiffany stretched as she got up after silencing the alarm that woke her up. She and Julana were up late last night discussing practically everything that had occurred yesterday, much of it involving their marriages after having their husbands confine them to their rooms due to their actions. At least the two of them got to stay in the same room that had two beds available. Otherwise, they would have to talk through a terminal screen that entire time. However, they needed to get up and see if breakfast could be served to them in their quarters since they were not allowed to leave until they arrived at their destination.

As she slowly got up from her bed, she began to wonder how Renee was doing. Tiffany and Julana got her in trouble as well since she allowed them to enter the flight simulation room without the proper authorization. Tiffany would not be able to communicate with Renee for the rest of the mission, so Tiffany can only hope that Renee is in the CCC when the two of them

arrive in the observation room in the next few hours. If she is not, then Tiffany at least would feel very guilty for getting her into trouble on their behalf. Provided they can do so after the mission, Tiffany and Julana will need to apologize to Renee for their selfish actions. Hopefully, she was not severely punished and currently in the brig.

Tiffany turned to her left to look at the other bed to see if Julana was awake, but she was still asleep despite the rather loud alarm Tiffany had set. Tiffany scratched her head, thinking of how Julana slept through the alarm and what the best way would be to wake Julana up without her getting upset at Tiffany. As Tiffany began to ponder how to wake Julana, she suddenly heard Julana muttering some words in her sleep.

“Ah, Certya Falls,” Julana mumbled in her sleep. “Look Deandre...such beautiful flowers...lovely scent...”

Tiffany sat on her bed while smiling. She knew what Julana was dreaming about, and she knows it was a very good dream. Julana had told Tiffany once about how she and Deandre first met on Julana’s home planet of Celestia. Deandre was at the rank of commander at the age of thirty-two and was assigned to a destroyer that was ordered to Celestia shortly after the planet joined the Federation to be part of the defense fleet. That occurred roughly fourteen years ago. Deandre was on shore-leave at that time and was touring some of the sites on the planet to understand their culture. He and Julana accidentally ran into each other when they were both admiring Certya Falls, a massive series of waterfalls that would rival Earth’s Niagara Falls on the North American continent. The two of them hit it off quite well after Julana volunteered to serve as Deandre’s guide to more of the planet’s natural sites, including fields of flowers that were like Earth’s moon lilies that only bloomed at night under Celestia’s twin moons. After a few dates, they were officially in a relationship, and they were married a few years later.

Julana’s dreams of when she and Deandre met made Tiffany start to reminisce of how she and Alto met. Unfortunately, Julana continued to mumble in her sleep, distracting Tiffany from reflecting on her own memories.

“Hmmm...honeymoon cruise,” Julana continued before suddenly smiling and giggling. “Deandre in...banana shorts...”

Tiffany quickly realized that Julana was about to go into the realm of “too much information” and needed to wake up Julana before she hears things that she really did not want to hear involving Deandre and Julana’s honeymoon.

“Wake up, Julana!” Tiffany yelled.

Julana quickly woke up, startled at Tiffany’s sudden yelling.

“Tiffany?” Julana said as she stretched her arms and wings. “Is something wrong? I was having a wonderful dream involving me and Deandre.”

“I know,” Tiffany said. “I am not sure you are aware of this or not, but you were talking in your sleep just now.”

“What are you talking about?” Julana asked, confused about Tiffany’s words. “I do not talk in my sleep.”

“Are you telling me that Deandre never noticed that trait before or he has not told you that you do?”

“I can assure you, I do not talk in my sleep.”

“Then let me ask this: Do ‘banana shorts’ ring any bells?”

Julana suddenly turned red, her eyes wide open with a shocked expression on her face.

“You cannot be serious,” Julana said, still in shock. “I actually said something about that in my sleep just now?”



“Along with Certya falls, yes,” Tiffany said. “I am beginning to wonder if Deandre knew about it and did not tell you or if this has only started to happen recently.”

“I do not know, but this is quite embarrassing. I am going to go ahead and get cleaned up first, if that is alright with you?”

“Go ahead. I need to see what I can have brought to our room before we arrive at our destination in the next few hours.”

Julana got out of her bed and headed for the bathroom. After Julana closed the door, Tiffany got out of her bed and stretched her limbs, yawning in the process. Tiffany walked over to the terminal on the desk in the “living room” area of the quarters. The one thing she misses when on trips to other systems is the lack of windows in the room. While the only thing that could be seen at this time are different shades of blue swirls and streams while using the Fold Drive, it at least gave the impression that they were still in transit. As she got to the terminal, she pulled up the menu from the galley to see what was available that could be delivered. She also had to consider what items for breakfast Julana would want.

As she looked over the list and heard the shower start to run in the bathroom as Julana got in, Tiffany was starting to miss those days when Alto was home instead of on a mission. Even though she was on the same ship he was on, he still felt so distant. When the two of them met at a zero-gravity sporting event in one of the colonies years ago, she remembered how confused he looked about the game and asked her questions since his seat was next to her seat. She thought it was adorable how innocent and curious he was about such events. They eventually started to date and get married a few years later. Alto was already in the military, but Tiffany had only been elected into the Senate a few years after they got married. She was working as a clerk for one of the Senators at the time.

The two of them were very good at their jobs, but it was slowly becoming apparent that their social life started to suffer when he made the rank of Commander becoming the *Kasagi*’s Executive Officer and she was elected as a Senator for the Sol System. Since then, they have seen less of each other, resorting to communicating through a terminal from a distance. It was not the same as when they were physically together. Just like Julana, she was hoping that this mission would allow them to physically be together with their husbands. Obviously, that did not work out as well as they had planned. Once this mission was over, it may be best for all four of them to go to some form of marriage counselling to deal with how their relationships have been declining, provided Deandre and Alto can spare the time to actually go to a session.

The only other problem now that Tiffany has, thanks to Julana, is trying to get the image of Deandre in banana shorts out of her head.

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*Portside Access Hallway to CCC Observation Room, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border  
11:26am, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“I am not looking forward to entering that room with both of them inside.”

Tiffany and Julana finished getting cleaned up and ate breakfast over two hours ago. They spent the last couple of hours initially talking about how to address the refugees when they come on board, but the conversation quickly changed to talking about their marriages and the problems they were having with their husbands. When Tiffany brought up the idea of marriage counseling to Julana, she agreed that it was in the best interest of their marriages that they proceed with that option in order to try and save their marriages.

The only problem now was to break the news and the idea to their husbands. They already decided it was best to bring it up after the mission was completed instead of during the mission. Both senators knew their husbands will be more focused on their duties and the thought of going to marriage counselling was going to be a distraction from the task at hand.

While they were going to hold off on telling their husbands the news, seeing them from the observation room while knowing the news that they wanted to tell their husbands started to make the senators feel rather uncomfortable. The two of them were hoping that once the mission itself was underway, they will focus more on their element as diplomats than wives at that time.

The two of them were being escorted by four SAGNATs with two in front of them and two behind them from their quarters to the observation room. This was to prevent them from going to any other part of the ship after last night's events. By now, they reached the door to the observation room and one of the SAGNATs in front opened the door for the senators. Only the senators entered the observation room as the SAGNATs stood guard outside to escort them to the hangar bay once the refugees were on board.

After the door closed, they looked out the window into the CCC. The first people they were looking for were their husbands Deandre and Alto, and they were not surprised that both were in their seats in the Command Pit. They saw that the star chart with their route was active on the holographic display over the table in the center of the room. It showed that the *Kasagi* was approaching its destination in more than six minutes.

"I am not surprised to see them in their seats," Julana said as she continued to look down at them. "Can they see us?"

Tiffany looked at the controls to the left of the window that controlled the window's transparency. The panel indicated that the window was "opaque."

"No," Tiffany said. "They cannot see us right now. It would be better if they do not. It would allow them to focus on the task at hand."

"I am actually scared right now," Julana said as her hands began to shake. "I do not know how Deandre is going to take the news about going to marriage counseling. I am afraid he may leave me after I suggest that idea."

"I am scared, too," Tiffany said as she gripped Julana's hands. "For right now, though, let us focus on what lies ahead in the next few hours. There are people that are counting on us and our position to grant them asylum. Just like our husbands down there, let us focus on the task we had volunteered for, alright?"

Julana took a deep breath to calm her nerves.

"Alright, Tiffany," Julana said. "Politics first, then personal matters later."

Tiffany nodded in agreement. She let go of Julana's hands as they both took a seat in the two middle chairs out of the four available. Until they are needed in the hangar bay, they could only sit there and wait while listening to the chatter in the CCC through the speakers.

Tiffany looked around the CCC at the other faces of the crew that manned and controlled various parts of the ship. When her eyes panned over to the two helm stations behind Deandre, she recognized the female crewman at the closer of the two stations.

"I see Renee is at her station," Tiffany said as she pointed Renee out to Julana. "At least she is not in the brig for what happened last night."

Julana looked in Renee's direction where Tiffany was pointing.

"Thank goodness," Julana said, feeling relieved. "I would have been devastated if my actions resulted in her being punished by being in the brig."

"That is good news," Tiffany said. "I hope she is not mad at us for what happened."

“I hope not, either. Hopefully, we will have a chance to talk to her later after the mission is completed.”

Tiffany looked back at the Command Pit as Deandre and Alto looked at the map. A timer soon appeared with five minutes remaining. Tiffany could only hope that this trip and the mission was worth all this drama.

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*Combat-and-Control Center, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border  
11:30am, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“Our estimated time of arrival is five minutes, Admiral.”

Renee’s reminder may not have been needed by Deandre and Alto who were watching the display as it counted down. For anyone else in the CCC who were focused on their tasks or not watching the holographic screen in the middle of the room, it was a reminder that the vessel was about to disengage its Fold Drive, and normal operations would resume for every station involved in the CCC. This also included fleet communications once the rest of the Twenty-First disengaged their Fold Drives as well.

The display zoomed in on the Termine System and the fleet’s current position as they approached their destination. Alto looked at Deandre from across the holographic table.

“It appears we will soon know whether the message from these supposed ‘refugees’ is legitimate or not,” Alto said.

“I have my doubts, too, Commander,” Deandre said. “However, there is always a chance that the message is authentic. For us to be here and making it look like we are patrolling the system is still overkill in my opinion, but I am wondering if headquarters is expecting us to get involved with a fight with the Liekans, though.”

“If the Liekans are involved in anything, I would always expect a fight out of them. They are not the kind of species that would back down from retrieving their prisoners.”

“What is the likelihood that the refugees arrive early towards the rendezvous?”

“Far less than if they do not show up at all. I would say that there is a nine percent chance of them arriving early, but the chance they may not arrive at all either due to being caught or that this is some farce is more than sixty-four percent.”

“There are days I have to ask where you get these probability percentages from.”

“It is better you do not know. I already have a hard time sleeping at night once those numbers are running through my head.”

Deandre was about to ask Alto whether his wife knew this or not, but he stopped himself as he knew that both of their wives would be in the observation room by now and personal questions near the start of the mission would be a distraction.

“Are the pilots standing by in their fighters?” Deandre asked.

“I have word from the CAL that all pilots are in their fighters ready for deployment, sir,” Alto said. “Are you disturbed by the report we received from the CAL two hours ago?”

“Yes, but that will be addressed once the mission is complete. Are you and the CAL going to talk to those two about their developing relationship?”

“Relationship?” Renee spoke aloud, overhearing the conversation between Deandre and Alto before covering her mouth.

Deandre turned and looked at Renee with a curious look on his face. Alto cleared his throat to get Deandre’s attention.

“Lieutenant Commander Renee was present as you know during the events of last night,” Alto said. “She and Cobra One are friends before Renee’s assignment to this vessel. She is aware of the other party’s identity and I assume she will keep that information to herself, am I right?”

“Yes, sir,” Renee said. “Sorry, sir. I was just in shock.”

“I understand,” Deandre said, “but stay focused. We are approaching the destination point and I need you focused on piloting this ship.”

“Yes, sir,” Renee said with a stern look on her face as she focused on her station’s console and controls. “T-minus thirty seconds until defold, sir.”

“Understood,” Deandre said as he turned back around to his station and pressed a button to activate the internal ship communications system. “Attention, all hands. This is the Admiral. We will be defolding near Planet Verima in the Termine System in twenty seconds. Prepare for normal space operations and prepare to launch fighters for patrol duty. That is all.”

Deandre turned off the internal ship communications and looked up at the display again as the timer continued to countdown towards zero with less than fifteen seconds left.

“Helm,” Deandre said, “give us a countdown at five seconds.”

“Yes, sir!” Renee said as she prepared to deactivate the Fold Drive. “Lieutenant Bryan, standby for sublight control.”

“Ready,” Bryan said as he grabbed the flight controls at his station.

“Defold commencing in T-minus five, four, three, two, one. Defold commencing!”

As Renee deactivated the Fold Drive, everyone on board felt a slight pull to the front of the ship as it exited from fold space and decelerated. As the holographic map began to detect the rest of the Twenty-First Fleet coming out of fold space around them, a live view appeared showing a ringed gas planet that the fleet was nearby off the portside of the ship. It had swirls of black, blue, and dark gray among the gasses in its atmosphere while the thick silver ring was tilted at nearly a forty-degree angle.

Deandre could hear Renee checking her instruments.

“Defold successful and our destination is confirmed, sir,” Renee said. “We are near Planet Verima in the Termine System.”

“All ships of the Twenty-First Fleet are present and accounted for, Admiral,” the Tactical Officer said behind Alto on the Oversight Level.

“Very good,” Deandre said. “Intel, forward the flight plans for all ships and their fighters for patrol duty.”

“Understood, sir,” the Intel Officer said from behind Alto.

Deandre looked over at Alto from across the table.

“I hope that we are alone in this system,” Deandre said. “The last thing I need is some surprise lying in wait for us.”

“I could not agree more,” Alto said. “This close to the buffer zone, who knows what we can expect to see or find here. Should I go ahead and launch our fighters as well?”

“Do so. Make sure that Panther and Cobra Squadrons are on different patrol routes. I do not want some issue to arise out there between them after last night.”

“Are you referring to a personal issue or a racial one?”

Deandre raised his right eyebrow at Alto.

“At this point, both,” Deandre said.

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