

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



PART 1

*Bridge, Covert-Ops Stealth Warship Cavalier, SW-54-3 Orbit
SW-54 System, Southwestern Region, 37 Light-Years from Novus Initium Republic Border
10:19am, September 23, 5434 A.D. (Six months later)*

“What are the results of the orbital surveys and scans of this planet?”

Captain Luke was starting to get bored with the current assignment that he was given. For nearly a year, the *Cavalier*, one of the two covert-ops stealth warships created by the Novus Initium Republic, has been surveying planets and systems in the Southwestern Region while the *Templar* surveyed the Western Region. After the First Interstellar War, their primary weapon, the heavy railgun, was removed and replaced with equipment designed to scan and survey celestial bodies such as planets, asteroids, and stars. This information would later be stored along with navigation data to be sent to the Republic Central Intelligence Agency during the ship’s monthly return to Republic space to resupply. A depot owned and operated by the RCIA just on the edge of the border resupplies both the *Cavalier* and the *Templar* when they return and transmits the data and information they collected back to RCIA Headquarters. They use that data to update stellar cartography and navigational charts should the Republic need to send their forces through or consider potential colonization locations in the future.

Luke was assigned to this mission after being scouted by the RCIA at the end of the First Interstellar War to command the *Cavalier* despite his young age. However, based on experience,

the RCIA has resorted to using younger officers with a high potential to command a ship since officers who were more along in age would be noticed if they went missing or were on some form of hiatus. His entire crew was made up of young officers from the Republic Navy as well as RCIA operatives and SAGATs. However, he had to make sure that his parents were not aware of his absence by telling them that he was being trained for covert operations that would put him out of touch at times. He created e-mails to send to his parents with some fictional story that had to be approved by the RCIA so that they would not worry. Other members of his crew did the same thing as well to keep friends and loved ones from worrying about their absence. While the general missions of the *Templar* and the *Cavalier* are known to the public, the names of those who are serving on board those ships are not.

The one mission not known to the public is the one given to both his ship and the *Templar* six months ago. During their last resupply and data transmission, he had received a report from the RCIA Headquarters about an amendment to their mission as well as some history concerning said change. It was concerning the Tenebris, a dark cult that focused on blood for their “deity” to the point they were kidnapping people for their sacrifices over six hundred and fifty years ago. Apparently, it was discovered that their supposed “demise” was covered up by sympathetic members of their families within the military and that they possibly managed to flee into either the Southwestern or Western Regions using their own version of a sustainable warp drive. The fact that such people may still exist and live outside the law of the Republic was something that concerned Luke. The fact that he was charged to find them while exploring the Southwestern Region made him even more concerned. The Tenebris have had all that time to grow and prosper provided they had the means to be self-sufficient. However, without knowing what their activities were during that entire time, who knows if those from other alien races, if any, have been treated because of them or the bad name they were giving Humanity.

Unfortunately, surveys done for an entire system take time and even after a while year, the *Cavalier* has not progressed very far from Republic space. They haven’t found any trace of the Tenebris and this made Luke begin to wonder if the Tenebris were even in the Southwestern Region or if they were not able to be self-sufficient enough to survive on their own. However, they also receive information on what has been explored so far by the *Templar* and vice versa, and the *Templar* has not found any trace of them either.

Luke understood the potential threat the Tenebris could hold to other alien races that might not be as developed technologically compared to the level Humans possessed at least currently, but he could not understand why the Republic was concerned about the Tenebris now after so long? He doubted the Tenebris were any threat to the Republic considering the Republic’s capabilities, and the cult’s population could not have increased so drastically when one considers the small number of people there were in each of the six families. However, the Republic may view the threat the Tenebris possesses in relation to what they may have developed since they were left unchecked by Republic laws and regulations.

The only thing worse than that is the possibility the Tenebris would encounter an alien race or nation that was considerably stronger than them and were wiped out but not before leaving any information about the origins of their ancestors. This would lead that hostile force back to Republic space that would not have any clue why such a force was coming unless the *Templar* or the *Cavalier* detected them first.

The only other thing that Luke found rather disturbing as of late was the sudden need of nations like the Republic to suddenly build frigates to supplement the Navy’s existing fleets. He has not been out of the loop when it came to the events that had unfolded six months ago

involving the Yintaka System within Holy Lykan Republic's space. The introduction of frigates by the United Vitam State, which were designated the *Harpy*-Class Frigate by Supreme Chancellor Drew, was quite a surprise to all the nations including the Camino Star Empire who was not even present in the star system. Their proposed effectiveness, only subverted by slowing the ships down so that they could be hit, made the other nations consider making their own frigates. However, their development had their drawbacks. For the Novus Initium Republic, it was trying to get the Senate to agree to make a fourth class of vessel after so many centuries of only having three. For the Camino Start Empire, it was trying to develop a viable craft that didn't have too many compromises. The Holy Lykan Republic had it harder than the others because of the size of their ammo and the fact that they did not want to compromise their offensive and defensive capabilities. The Liberigi Mandate worked with the Lykan engineers to come up with the frigate design that would allow them both to be able to utilize the same design with their weapons systems. It took them all some time to develop their respective frigates but they were able to do so and put them into mass production. The Novus Initium Republic developed the *Sentinel*-Class Frigate, the fastest vessel of them all due to the eight engines that propelled the vessel. The Camino Star Empire developed the *Keres*-Class Frigate, an average vessel with a good amount of firepower but less armor than usual that relies primarily on long-range attacks with railguns and missiles, though it can brawl if needed with its blasters. The Holy Lykan Republic developed the *Magnate*-Class Frigate, the largest of the frigates, but possesses the heaviest firepower and defenses for its size. The Liberigi Mandate variant of the *Magnate* is called the *Anathema*-Class Frigate equipped with laser weapons instead of the Lykans' projectile weapons. Their numbers have grown considerably in each nation much like the United Vitam State's *Harpy*-Class Frigate, but this has also affected the command structure of each nation in order to crew those vessels. The only thing Luke could hope for was that there would be no need to develop any other class of vessel in the future that was designed for combat. He understood the need to develop frigates after the State introduced them, but there should not be a need for any more types of vessels.

It is these lulls between the surveys that forces Luke to think about these sorts of things to help pass the time. Otherwise he would find himself very bored when he had nothing to do while on duty. He often wondered if his mother who was also the captain of a ship had felt the same way when she had nothing to do other than patrol the Republic border near the Northern Region. His father on the other hand is usually busy being in service to the people of the faith that he was ordained to lead. Many people know the two are married but work very far apart. Thankfully his father's faith allowed for such marriages since it occurred prior to his ordination but that distance had its issues within the family to where they must communicate remotely. Rarely would one parent be able to visit the other but they try to make it work the best they can with the situation. That distance may have helped Luke be where he was today though. If it didn't, he would not have been selected for this mission without one or both of his parents noticing.

For now, though, Luke would just have to handle the command he was given and hope that the Tenebris are no longer around at all. The last thing he needed to do was look for trouble only for trouble to find him.

"The results are coming in now, sir," Yuki said from the science station.

The science station was a recent addition to the *Cavalier's* bridge stations as well as the *Templar's*. Located to the left of the commanding officer's chair opposite of the tactical station, the science station was now responsible for more non-combat oriented sensor scans such as celestial objects and properties among others. This reduced the work the tactical officer has to do

when it came to sensors and allows the tactical officer to focus more on the offensive and defensive capabilities of the ship. It is said that a science station would soon be implemented in the same manner on all ships.

Another change in the bridge arrangement was the removal of the operations station and exchanging it with an engineering station instead to make it easier to monitor power output and supply as well as damage control teams and hull damage. The RCIA Headquarters deemed it “unnecessary” for there to be an operations station on the bridge when this is not normally handled from the bridge but rather by a dedicated quartermaster station located elsewhere on the ship. This arrangement is currently being tested on the stealth warships but would be implemented on all existing ships in the Republic after the stealth vessels have tested the implementation while on their exploration mission.

Yuki was selected by the RCIA after she received her Master’s Degree in the Field of Stellar Cartography at a young age. She was scouted after the end of the First Interstellar War like everyone else on the *Cavalier* when the decision was made for the ships to explore the unknown Western and Southwestern Regions. Having a few dedicated scientists in various fields makes the job easier for the crew but sometimes their work also takes a while because they all want to be thorough in their surveys.

“Scans have identified ninety-seven elements found on the planet,” Yuki continued. “Atmosphere is comprised of sixty-six percent carbon dioxide, seventeen percent methane, and sixteen percent oxygen with the remaining one percent composed of various other gases. Environmental suits would be needed on the surface but this planet is rich for mining metals and liquids.”

“Very well,” Luke said. “Any signs of life?”

“Only microbial life in various pockets near water-enriched locations but that is all. The scans of this lifeform are being sent to our biologists on board for further examination.”

“Understood. Are we done at this planet?”

“I’ve got the information sent to our archaeologists and topography team for further study, so we should be good for the time being.”

“Do we still need to give them time to sort through the data and catalogue everything?”

Yuki turned towards Luke.

“Sir,” Yuki said, “I know this sort of thing tends to bore you but exploration is never about rushing into the unknown.”

“I’m aware of that fact,” Luke said. “For some reason, I thought this would not take as long as it has been. I’m also worried about the possibility of running into the Tenebris if they are indeed out here. I also feel rather out of touch with current events as of late.”

“Maybe this will help. Have you thought to consider how early explorers of the Republic during the Expansion Era essentially had to do the same thing as we are doing but had to jump into the unknown without any data as to what they were jumping into?”

“No, I haven’t thought about that.”

“There was always the possibility that they would jump right into something that could instantly destroy them. In this case, we are getting that data without the need to jump so that in the event the Republic needs to expand this way, the likelihood of them running into something is greatly decreased.”

“Perhaps but the decision to expand past our current borders would be decided by the Senate. They were reluctant at the beginning of the First Interstellar War to establish defenses in what was once called the Defensive Zone. Now those systems are part of the Republic and the

first time since the Expansion Era that our nation expanded. The only thing that would get the Senate to expand in this direction is if the Tenebris are out here, but to my knowledge, the Senate is not aware of the Tenebris as the only people who know are those affiliated with the RCIA like ourselves and the Chancellor. Not even the public knows about them as far as I am aware of.”

“Sir?” the communications officer said.

“What is it?” Luke said.

“I’ve been monitoring all communication frequencies and interferences since we have been in this system. I thought it was interference at first from the local star but there is something highly distorted that I have been monitoring that I can tell is some form of communication.”

Luke was beginning to wonder if this was in relation to the Tenebris or possibly another alien nation that they might have discovered. Either way, he didn’t feel like following it if the former was the case. Regardless, he needed more info before he decides what to do next.

“Are you able to determine the language used?” Luke asked.

“Not with this much interference but I can tell it is not natural,” the communications officer said. “I may be able to tell which direction it is coming from, though.”

“We haven’t finished our survey of this system, yet,” Luke said “I don’t think our research teams would feel happy about leaving to track down the signal. You can go ahead and track the signal to its source as best as you can and continue monitoring it. Since we will be moving away from the star to the next planet, the signal might get clearer. Once we determine what the communication is about, we will determine our next move.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Maybe it is just me,” Yuki said, “but it almost seems like you are not excited about the possibility of finding another alien race?”

“My issue is if those transmissions are from the Tenebris instead,” Luke said. “You were briefed about them and what they’re responsible for. I personally would like to avoid them if at all possible, but I know that if we came across any sign of them, we are to find and report them.”

“I may be out of line for saying this, but I could tell for a while that you were bored with the current assignment. I figured that this would bring some excitement to this assignment if anything.”

Luke groaned slightly. Yuki had a point whether Luke liked it or not. It was a chance for them to do something that was exciting at least. This may even get them to stop exploring the area for a little while.

“Very well,” Luke said. “Helm, lay in a course to the farthest planet in the system. Let’s see if we can reduce the interference from the local star to get a clearer signal.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” the helmsman said.

Luke pressed a button on his chair to activate the ship-wide intercom system.

“Attention all hands, this is the Captain. We are about to move away from the third planet in this system to the farthest planet. Our communications officer has detected transmissions of artificial origin that are highly scrambled due to interference from this system’s star. There is a possibility that these transmissions are coming from either the Tenebris we are looking for or from a new undiscovered alien race. We will be going to warp to the source of the transmissions once we have determined their origins and the content of the transmissions. All hands, be prepared for silent running in ten minutes. Out.”

Luke pressed the button to turn off the intercom system.

“Helm,” Luke said, “you may proceed.”

“Yes, sir,” the helmsman said.

The *Cavalier* turned to starboard fifty-eight degrees until the bridge heads-up display showed they were pointing towards the ninth and farthest planet in the system. The helmsman then activated the warp drive as the third planet slowly moved away. The planet quickly disappeared as the warp drive came to full speed with the surrounding space suddenly filling with waves and fluctuations due to the warp drive.

After a minute or so, the ninth planet came into view as the *Cavalier* began to slow down its approach. The waves and fluctuations began to disappear as the warp drive began to decelerate. The rocky and cratered surface of the ninth planet was more prominent once the warp drive disengaged but so was the lack of light from the local star.

“We are now within proximity of the ninth planet,” the helmsman said. “Warp drive has been deactivated.”

“Communications,” Luke said, “how are the transmissions?”

“They are still a bit garbled and undistinguishable,” the communications officer said. “This may actually be due to distance than interference. However, I am locating their source which has gotten a lot easier now that we are further away from the local star. Give me a minute and I can give you a point of origin.”

“Very well. Helm, be prepared to get underway again once the communications officer locates the origin of the transmissions.”

“Yes, sir,” the helmsman said.

The communications officer worked the controls of her console to try to locate the source of the transmissions. It took her a little bit of time but she could zero in on their location.

“The source of the transmissions has been found,” the communications officer said. “They are coming from the star system bearing two-five-nine mark zero-zero-five, distance twenty-two Light-years.”

“At that range, shouldn’t we be able to receive those transmissions?” Luke asked.

“These may be either short-range transmissions or they are encrypted. Either way, that is their source.”

“Very well. Helm, you heard the direction we need to go. Prepare for long-range warp flight.”

“Yes, sir,” the helmsman said.

The ship began to turn to the left to face the star system the communications officer pointed out. The trip would take a few days for the *Cavalier* to reach its destination. Hopefully the transmissions are not of Tenebris origin but they won’t find that out until they get there.

All Luke could hope for was that he wasn’t about to be the one to possibly start a new war or find one instead.

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*Office of Vice Admiral Trent, Novus Initium Navy Fleet Headquarters
Planet Luminare Orbit, Lumen (“Light”) System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
11:06am, September 23, 5434 A.D.*

“It does feel good to be back in this office again.”

Vice Admiral Trent had not been in his office since May of last year. It was on that day that he was assigned to take his fleet to the Tranquillus System on what was publicly known as training exercises. The truth was they were on a mission based on information from the RCIA about alien transmissions coming from beyond the Republic border. Those transmissions were

later identified as belonging to the Royal Lykan Kingdom and the United Vitam State once their forces jumped into the Tranquillus System.

Trent was unable to come back to his office due to the events that happened on and after that fateful day. Advisor Forneido of the Lykans scanned Trent's DNA and the map of the Republic to give them an edge in infiltration and strategic targets. This was discovered when a clone of Trent was snuck aboard a Republic destroyer in a "dummy" shell from a Kingdom battleship. That same destroyer was sent by order of the imposter to the Serenus System near the Northern Region, was stolen, and later jumped into the territory of the Camino Star Empire, an enemy of the Kingdom. They wanted the Empire to start a war with the Republic, but that backfired when the real Trent requested for his DNA to be removed from the military database. This caused the stolen destroyer to imprison the imposter who later committed suicide but it also imprisoned the real Trent aboard his own ship. Trent was escorted off his ship and back to Luminaire until something could be done about future infiltrator clones with his DNA. The Empire would later enter the war on the side of the Republic and the State against the Kingdom.

Trent would later be employed by the RCIA to command a new tactical stealth vessel that was capable of sustained warp drive operations to infiltrate and hamper the Kingdom's war efforts. This included the liberation of the five home planets of the State, though that ultimately backfired when it was discovered the stations that orbited them were supplying a pseudo-antidote for a drug introduced to those races. This caused them all to die horrible deaths when their nervous systems eventually shut down. However, his efforts also stopped an invasion into the Republic capital when the Lykans used their jump crystal reserves to multi-jump a star gate that could jump their fleet into Lumen. However, the Lykans' efforts were noticed and defenses were put in place. Trent helped secure the gate on the other side to allow Republic forces to enter the staging system of Dellino. The facility which also developed the clones and the bioweapon the Lykans were planning to use against Humanity was also destroyed. The Republic would use that system as a staging ground for an attack on the Lykan capital system of Heronia two jumps away.

No one expected however that the Lykans would have their own internal conflicts after Forneido broadcasted to the entire Kingdom the King's order to move military forces from the frontlines without evacuating the civilians. This caused a rebellion of sorts as well as a revelation of their true religion and what it truly meant. A joint operation between the Republic and the insurgent Royal Navy invaded the Heronia System, took out the Royal Guard fleet and their orbital capital city with the help of the head of the Royal Guard who sacrificed himself to atone for his crimes against his people. The State and the Empire did not participate due to their own issues with the Kingdom, especially the former with their long history with the Lykans.

The Lykans would later reform their religion, their nation into a republic like the Humans, and their relations with the remaining slaves they released. Those slaves would later form the Liberigi Mandate but they did so due to the continued hostility the State had towards the Lykans. This resulted in the Novus Initium Republic, or the NIR for short due to their now being two republic nations, delivering planetary shield generators to Lykan border planets. Technically this was done near the end of the war as the State, despite the Lykans revolution and later reformation, pressed their attack on the frontlines that resulted in civilian casualties.

Six months later, the State attacked the Yintaka System while Trent's fleet, who has since been reinstated into the military following the war, was delivering the last shipment of the shield generators. Trent's forces engaged along with the Lykan and Liberigi forces against the State's new frigates. It was eventually drawn to a close when ambassadors from the NIR, the Holy Lykan Republic, and the Liberigi Mandate confronted the State's Executive Council personally.

During their meeting, the Council suffered from severe headaches at the same time. It was later discovered that the Council members were exposed to some form of radiation that was artificially programmed to alter their mental states. They were removed from their positions after they passed out and the Representatives Parliament took over for a short time. New Councilors were elected while the original members remain in intensive care as the radiation they had suffered was tricky to remove. The new Councilors have been far more cooperative with the other galactic powers and have been working with members of both the NIR and the Mandate to bring culture back to the State. The State is still somewhat hesitant when it comes to the Lykan religious influence of the Mandate citizens but the Mandate understands their issues and they are working things out between them without involving that sensitive subject.

Once Trent's fleet had returned to NIR space and was repaired, his fleet was sent on patrol for months before being called back for some news by Grand Admiral Mikey yesterday. After meeting with the Admiralty yesterday and talking with Grand Admiral Mikey earlier this morning, Trent walked into his office for the first time in a long time. Thankfully, the military enveloped the room in suspended animation to prevent dust and dirt from forming. He was also told by his wife and Amarria about Amarria's involvement with the RCIA involving the Tenebris, a dark cult from over six and a half centuries ago. Trent had hoped that the NIR would have lasting peace for now after everything that has happened but now there is a chance that peace won't last very long if the Tenebris were actually out there among the stars of the cluster.

Now was not the time for him to be worrying about some ancient cult. As he sat at his desk, he prepared himself to give his visitor who he had requested to have them meet in his office some good news, both for him and for her. It did not take too long though. Within minutes of Trent sitting down at his desk, his door chimed.

"Enter," Trent said.

The doors opened and standing there was Captain Shannon, Trent's Commanding Officer of the battleship *Renaldo*. This was the first time Trent has seen her since she had her son a couple of months ago. She looked a little worried. She's never been "summoned" by Trent to his office since he took command of the *Renaldo* and the Eleventh Fleet. She has been summoned to his Ready Room aboard the *Renaldo* on more than one occasion, but never to his office at headquarters. Once she came in, the doors closed behind her. Shannon steadied her nerves and came to attention. She saluted Trent.

"Captain Shannon, reporting as ordered, sir," she said.

"At ease, Shannon," Trent said. "Please have a seat."

Trent directed Shannon to one of the two seats in front of his desk, namely the one on her left. She approached the seat and sat down in it. She was trying to hide her nervousness as far as Trent could tell.

"You seem a bit tense, Shannon," Trent said.

"This is my first time here, sir," Shannon said. "Forgive me if I seem a bit on edge to be here in your office at headquarters."

"You can relax. You are not in any trouble. In fact, it is quite the opposite."

Shannon's demeanor changed from nervousness to curiosity.

"What do you mean, sir?" she asked.

"I just came from a meeting with the Admiralty of the Republic Navy including Grand Admiral Mikey. I heard some interesting news you may want to hear."

"Go on, sir."

“Admiral Coleman of the Seventh Fleet retired after nearly fifty years of service to the Navy. He made this announcement a couple of weeks ago and his retirement party was held last night, which was one of the reasons why I did not return to the ship.”

“What was the other reason?”

“They needed someone to take over the Seventh Fleet as their replacement Flag Officer. Apparently, my dedication and actions in *Tranquillus*, the missions I engaged in on the *Templar*, and my actions in Yintaka have not gone unnoticed. Therefore, effective immediately, I have been promoted to the rank of Admiral and given command of the Seventh Fleet.”

Shannon was in shock by this news, as Trent had expected. Her mouth was wide open and she was practically speechless. She looked at Trent’s rank pins and noticed that he was not joking. He was wearing full Admiral rank insignias!

“Congratulations, sir!” she finally said. “I have to ask though, but who will be taking command of the Eleventh Fleet from the *Renaldo*?”

Trent smiled.

“Funny you ask that,” Trent said.

He opened a drawer to his desk on the right and pulled out a small black box. He closed the drawer, got up from his seat, and walked around to the front of his desk where Shannon sat. He extended his right arm with the small box in his hand. Shannon looked between the box and Trent with curiosity still on her face.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Take it and open it,” Trent said.

Shannon looked back at the box and took it from Trent’s hand. She brought the box close to study it before opening the small hinge cover on top. Inside the box was a pair of rank pins. These pins marked the rank of a Rear Admiral Lower Half in the Republic Navy.

“As of this moment,” Trent said, “you are hereby promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral Lower Half and to serve as the new Flag Officer of the Eleventh Fleet aboard the battleship *Renaldo*. Congratulations, Shannon.”

Shannon looked at Trent with wide eyes, now more shocked than ever. She looked back at the rank pins for a few seconds, possibly to make sure that she was not dreaming. She then looked back at Trent.

“This is not a joke, is it?” she finally said.

“It is not,” Trent said with a smile. “This is genuine. When the Admiralty promoted me, I put in a recommendation to have you promoted to fill the position of Flag Officer of the Eleventh Fleet. They agreed almost immediately due to your knowledge of both ship and fleet functions. They did say that either they could find someone to fill in the position of Commanding Officer for the *Renaldo* or that you could find someone either on the ship or not to fill in that position. Bear in mind, though, that anyone aboard the ship who you feel can fulfill that position will need to have their own position filled.”

“I understand. I will have to look at a list of likely candidates for the position. Wait, does this mean that I will get my own office here at headquarters?”

Trent laughed.

“Since you were just promoted,” he said, “you need to give them time to set you up with one. Now, I took the liberty of having my personal affects be moved from the *Renaldo* to the flagship of the Fifth Fleet, the *Marshal*. You can start moving your personal affects to both the Ready Room and into your new quarters.”

“I understand, sir. I know the crew is going to miss you. It was hard for them to get used to your absence after that fiasco with the clone infiltrator. Hearing that you are leaving again for another assignment might hit them just as hard. After all, you’re not even giving them a chance to hold a farewell party for you.”

“Okay, I understand. Go ahead and inform them to hold a party for me for tomorrow night. I don’t take command of the *Marshal* until the day after tomorrow so that should give them time to get everything ready. Besides, I also have a meeting with the Commanding Officer of the *Marshal* who should be arriving shortly.”

“Should I go ahead and leave then before they arrive?”

“You don’t have to. I figured you would want to meet the *Marshal’s* CO to see what she is like.”

“So, does this CO have a name?”

“I will let her introduce herself when she arrives.”

“Very well, sir. I am a bit nervous, though.”

“What are you nervous about?”

“I’m nervous about being a Flag Officer. It is one thing to command a ship, but an entire fleet is something completely different.”

“Believe me when I say that I was the same way. In fact, I will be surprised if more than half of the Admirals at headquarters were not scared the moment they were promoted to that position. What helped me was remembering what the Flag Officer above me when I was a Captain did when he called the shots for the entire fleet. I’m hoping you took some notes by comparison, but ultimately, you must make those decisions on your own and deal with the consequences good or bad going forward. That was what I was told by my former Flag Officer when I was promoted.”

“I understand sir, and thank you. I wonder how the crew of the *Marshal* and the Seventh Fleet are like compared to the Eleventh Fleet.”

“That’s hard to say, really. I heard that Admiral Coleman ran a rather tight ship and fleet. Thankfully, I am not as strict or at least I hope I wasn’t while on the *Renaldo*. Was I?”

“No, you were not. You were dedicated and protective, yes, but not very strict.”

“Good to hear. I find that if a Flag Officer is very strict with his or her crew that they tend to be unapproachable a lot of the times. This causes a lot of issues and development of several aspects. If the crew of the *Marshal* is like this, then I will need to try and undo that somehow. That is part of the reason why I requested the *Marshal’s* CO to come here so that I can talk with her and get an idea of how they have been disciplined by Coleman. I would like for you to be here to help confirm if that is indeed what I am dealing with as a fellow Flag Officer now.”

“Very well, sir. I will stay to help you evaluate this Command Officer you are about to meet.”

Shannon got up from her chair and quickly removed her Captain rank pins. She changed them for the Rear Admiral pins she was handed. Once she put the Captain pins in the box, she handed them to Trent.

“I know we are not allowed to keep the rank pins we had in the past,” she said.

“True,” Trent said as he took the box with the Captain pins back. “The only way you can keep them is if you are retiring. The pins however would be kept in a memorial plaque unless they are used or requested otherwise like at veteran events. However, in the case of these rank pins, you will be giving them to your next Commanding Officer.”

Trent handed the box back to Shannon, who took them back.

“I understand, sir,” she said. “I guess I better choose my next Commanding Officer wisely.”

A few seconds later, the door chime went off.

“Looks like my new CO is here,” Trent said. “Come in.”

Shannon put the box with the rank pins in her pocket as the doors opened. Standing there was an average height woman with long red hair. She walked into Trent’s office and stopped just enough for the doors to close. She saluted the moment the doors closed.

“I am Captain Dani of the battleship *Marshal*,” she said in a strict voice. “I am reporting as ordered, Admiral Trent.”

“At ease, Captain,” Trent said. “Please, have a seat.”

Trent directed her to the seat opposite of the one Shannon was sitting in a moment ago.

“Yes, sir,” Dani said as she approached the seat.

She stopped before sitting down as she looked over at Shannon before looking at Trent.

“Sir,” Dani said, “I was not aware that this meeting also involved a Rear Admiral.”

“Oh, right,” Trent said. “This is Shannon. She was my Commanding Officer aboard the *Renaldo* at the rank of Captain. She was just promoted today and even put the pins on just before you arrived. She will be taking command of the Eleventh Fleet in my place.”

“I see,” Dani said as she looked at Shannon, and then saluted. “Congratulations on your promotion, Rear Admiral. I’m sure the Eleventh Fleet is in good hands.”

“I hope so, too,” Shannon said as she returned the salute. “I’m still here only because I am curious about you and the Seventh Fleet that the Admiral will now be commanding. Now, please take a seat.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Dani said as she lowered her arm and sat down in her seat.

Shannon sat back down in the seat she was in earlier. Trent walked back around to his chair on the other side of the desk.

“Now then,” Trent said, “Captain Dani, I have called you here to assess the overall feel and structure of the *Marshal* as well as the Seventh Fleet. If there is one thing I have learned in all these years, it is that different Flag Officers tend to run their ships and their fleets differently. Based on your posture and your greeting earlier, I can only surmise that Admiral Coleman was a very strict Flag Officer, am I right?”

“Yes, sir,” Dani said with a stern look on her face.

“Relax, Captain,” Shannon said. “Not to undermine the Admiral but I served under him for a good number of years. You don’t have to be so strict with him.”

Dani looked at Shannon with a slight look of curiosity and disgust in her face.

“But it is disrespectful to not show proper military decorum in front of a superior officer,” Dani said.

“Decorum is one thing,” Trent said, “but when you are serving with other people and crew of a ship, you cannot put yourself and your Flag Officer at such distances. I briefly read up on the former Admiral and how they ran things. I noticed that Admiral Coleman kept his distance when it came to any activities outside the normal operations of the ship and the fleet. In other words, he kept to himself in either his Ready Room or his quarters isolating himself from the crew. When you all were in the same room, namely the bridge, he always wanted respect and protocol to come first in his presence. Any deviation of that would result in disciplinary action. Would all of this be accurate?”

“It is, sir,” Dani said somberly. “He ran a very tight ship and fleet, but this allowed us to be effective and efficient during the First Interstellar War.”

“I respect running an effective and efficient ship and crew, but for a Flag Officer to be isolating themselves and putting themselves up on a pedestal so high that they cannot be approachable is something I have issues with. When I took command of the *Renaldo*, I made it clear that I have an ‘open door’ policy that should they have something they want to approach me with that they feel needs to be addressed, they are more than welcome to come into my Ready Room provided they are not on duty or that it doesn’t interfere with their current job. Being on a ship with a full crew on board can get very lonely when you distance yourself from everyone.”

“I read your history briefly before coming here, sir. I know that for a few months you had to leave the *Renaldo* due to that clone infiltrator that the Lykans used. How did your crew react to that?”

“From my standpoint, they looked concerned for me, maybe even lost, when I was forced to leave the ship once my credentials were removed from the military database.”

“Speaking from the standpoint of being the former Commanding Officer of the *Renaldo*,” Shannon said, “we were all disappointed and worried about him having to leave. We were concerned that we would be forced to get a replacement Flag Officer to command the Eleventh Fleet and that it would not feel the same without him. Even worse, it would have felt like he was never coming back. Thankfully, headquarters deemed it unnecessary for the Eleventh Fleet to move from the Tranquillus System considering its position and importance at the time. They gave me the temporary rank of Commodore so that I could command the ship and the fleet at the same time until Trent’s return. If I may ask, and do speak freely about this in your own opinion, but can you honestly say that you felt the same way when you heard of Coleman’s retirement and that he was leaving the ship?”

“Honestly?” Dani said. “I can say no, we did not feel the same way as you did with Admiral Trent. He didn’t request a farewell party as he viewed that as a waste of the Navy’s time and money. All he requested from us was to line up the corridors from his Ready Room to the docking port for a final farewell with all of us saluting. I have to say that once he was off the ship, we all for the first time relaxed some. However, it did not take us long to realize that we would be getting a replacement soon. In fact, it only took half a day before we heard that it was Admiral Trent who would be taking over the role.”

Dani looked back at Trent.

“We hadn’t reviewed your entire record, sir,” she continued. “We did not know how you ran things on your ship. I did not have the time to research you and your records completely before you summoned me to meet you here today. I wasn’t sure what to make of you compared to Admiral Coleman.”

“I can see why you might have been concerned considering your experience with Coleman. However, I won’t be as strict though it would appear that I have some work to do to help undo some of that strict military structure that Coleman put into place.”

“Do you mean that you wish to push the same policy on the *Marshal* that you have done on the *Renaldo*?”

“I do. It sounds like you all are far too strict and, for lack of a better word than I can think of, institutionalized for me to effectively do my job like I have been doing it. So, here is how I wish to take the first steps in hopefully undoing some of what Coleman has done with the *Marshal*. Just like on the *Renaldo*, anyone on the *Marshal* can come to me and talk to me directly at any time so long as it doesn’t interfere with their assignment or while I have a private meeting. The second is that I wish to address the crew of the ship directly if possible.”

“I can arrange that. I just need to tell them when and where.”

“I can address a lot of them from the hangar bay where my shuttle will be landing.”

“You’re taking a shuttle? Sir, the ship is docked. Why would you want to fly a shuttle into the *Marshal*’s hangar bay when you can walk onto the ship?”

“Because I want to address as many of them as possible the moment I board the ship. I can’t do that walking onto the ship from the docking port.”

“I have this feeling that this is your way of making a grand entrance.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Shannon said. “He did the same thing when he first came aboard the *Renaldo*. How he greeted the crew was still something to behold at the time.”

“What do you mean?” Dani asked.

“Oh, I’m keeping that a surprise.”

Dani sighed.

“I’m starting to become worried now,” Dani said.

“As to when I will take command,” Trent said, “it will be in a couple of days. I first want to speak to the rest of the senior staff before doing so to get to know you all a bit better. This way, I can see how you all are before I begin to work with all of you officially. Can I have you all be here by this time tomorrow?”

“I can get them together. That is no problem.”

“Splendid. Also, could you ask them what their favorite drinks are?”

Dani was suddenly puzzled by Trent’s question.

“Why do you want to know that?” she asked.

“Well, I figured it was best to have everyone’s favorite refreshments while we talked, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess that seems as good of a reason as I can think of. I will get you that list, Admiral. When do you want that drink list by?”

“Sometime before eighteen hundred hours. I need time to go out and shop for them. Also, make sure the drinks are those that you would not drink at some night club, if you know what I mean.”

“Children safe, I assume? I’ll make sure they list such drinks. Is there anything else, sir?”

“That should be everything I can think of. After you get those orders and send them to me, you and the rest of the crew are free to do what you want, but remember that I want to see the senior staff here by this time tomorrow. Also, make sure the crew is back on the *Marshal* by eighteen hundred hours tomorrow. I don’t have any official orders from the Admiralty concerning our next mission or assignment yet, but I want to make sure the ship and the fleet is ready to depart once I get settled in.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Thank you, Captain Dani. You may go now.”

Dani got up from the chair and saluted.

“Admiral,” she said.

She turned towards Shannon while still saluting.

“Rear Admiral,” Dani said.

Dani put her arm down and headed for the door. She proceeded to let herself out of the room. Once the door closed behind her, Shannon looked over at Trent.

“Being saluted to by someone who had the same rank as me only moments ago is going to take some getting used to,” Shannon said.

“I know,” Trent said. “It is going to be awkward for a while but you’ll get used to it. So, what are your thoughts concerning the *Marshal* and her crew based on what Dani has told us?”

“Well, I know that there are Flag Officers that tend to run things differently in each fleet but I don’t think I have ever heard of such a strict method of running a fleet, at least not to the best of my knowledge. I have communicated with other Captains from other fleets but so far none of them have had this same level of strict protocol.”

“I won’t ask for names or ships but which fleets were those?”

“They are the Twelfth, Fourteenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Fleets. I have friends who graduated in the same class with me at the academy so I try to keep in touch.”

“Understandable, though your conversations with them might get a bit awkward considering your recent promotion.”

“True, but we try to keep things social and only mention work related items when applied.”

“That makes me wonder what you have talked to them about when it comes to me.”

“I’ve only told them good things about you. You haven’t given me anything bad to talk to them about, except when you had to leave the ship because of that clone infiltrator. Our conversations during the war though were restricted to electronic mail and only those things not related to the military got through. They helped me through that ordeal even though the Eleventh Fleet didn’t engage in combat after our first encounter in Tranquillus.”

“They sound like good friends. As long as your rank doesn’t alienate them, they are worth holding on to.”

“Thank you. I know that was off-topic but the point is that my friends in those fleets have not told me they were treated any differently than how you have treated me.”

“However, those friends of yours are among the smaller main fleets. None of them are in the ten largest fleets of the Republic. Those Flag Officers may treat their crews the same as Coleman but I haven’t heard anything in relation to that at all. Of course, I never bothered to ask so that doesn’t help.”

“Why not consult with the Admiralty about how they treat their crews and their fleets? It might be interesting to see how they run things and how they might differ from each other.”

“As interesting as the thought might be to do so, I’m concerned that such an inquiry might cause possible friction within the Admiralty. For someone like me who was recently promoted, it would make them think twice about the promotion if I was only starting trouble or friction between them.”

“I guess that would make sense. Well, I have to start the selection process of possible candidates for my replacement Commanding Officer and give the crew of the *Renaldo* as well as the Eleventh Fleet the news. I also have to plane your farewell party.”

Shannon got up from her chair and saluted Trent.

“Admiral,” she said, “I will see you tomorrow at the farewell party.”

Trent got up and returned the salute.

“I will see you at the farewell party, Shannon. I look forward to it. I’ll make sure I have a speech prepared.”

Shannon brought her hand down. She extended it towards Trent instead to shake his hand with a smile. Trent smiled and took her hand in a handshake. After a few seconds, she let go of his hand and turned towards the door. After she let herself out, Trent sat back down in his seat to contemplate how things were going to be like going forward. For whatever reason, he started to become filled with some excitement towards his new position and command.

For him, things were about to get interesting.

* * * * *

Office of the Supreme Chancellor, Republic Parliament Building, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
12:13pm, September 23, 5434 A.D.

“So, the *Cavalier* found something?”

Supreme Chancellor Drew reclined in his chair behind his desk as a holographic screen was hovering in front of him just above his desk. On the screen was Head Agent Aja of the Republic Central Intelligence Agency. While she was in charge of the entire RCIA, the Commanding Officers of both the *Cavalier* and *Templar* stealth vessels report directly to her so that she can relay the information to Drew. So far her reports were involving the completed surveys of dozens of systems.

This time, however, the *Cavalier* in the Southwestern Region had detected something and was following it to its source.

“Yes, it did,” Aja said. “It detected transmissions that were artificial in origin but the distance as well as local interference has made distinguishing the transmissions difficult to determine. The ship is warping to their source right now. Hopefully, the transmissions will become clearer the closer they get.”

“The fact they even found any sort of transmissions is still surprising,” Drew said. “After being told about the Tenebris months ago, I was hoping that they were not able to survive on their own. Now there is a possibility that they could still exist.”

“Have you determined what you wish to do once they’re existence is confirmed?”

“I have been trying to think this through. A lot of what will influence my decision as to how to handle the Tenebris will be based on what they are doing and their actions over the centuries. The number of scenarios that are possible are limited but even then it is hard to determine how to proceed.”

“My biggest question is what happens if there is a need for military action. The *Cavalier* is a good number of jumps away from the nearest Republic station. It would take a lot of crystals to make that many jumps just to get to where the *Cavalier* last reported from.”

“I know. In all honesty, I am hoping that military action will not be needed and that the possible Tenebris threat is nothing but a lot of hot air.”

“Have you at least determined which fleet or fleets to send to the border of both the Western and Southwestern Regions in case they are needed?”

“Not yet. If I start sending fleets towards those regions, it will start to raise a lot of questions from both military personnel and civilians. That whole situation in the Tranquillus System last year has raised the population’s awareness of fleet deployments and has practically put them under a microscope. If they see a major fleet heading somewhere that has not had any need for one in the past, they will know something is up and demand an explanation. Saying that they are there for training exercises no longer is a valid reason to give to the military or the public. If the Tenebris are indeed confirmed to be in the Southwestern Region where the *Cavalier* has detected those transmissions, we would need to inform the public of the possible threat.”

“You do realize that this would cause a panic, right?”

“That all depends on how it is presented to the public. With the Tenebris being so far out from the Republic, not to mention how long ago they have fled, there may not be any need for there to be any initial worry since they may not be even aware of our stealth ships once they

arrive. So unless you can find a way for a fleet or two to go unnoticed traveling through Republic space, we may not have much of a choice but to tell the public about them.”

“I can think of a way of how you can deploy a fleet or two out to the border without raising suspicion.”

“You came up with a solution that quickly? What do you have in mind?”

“While I would give the Flag Officer of any fleet you are sending their true orders, you can inform the public that in light of the events of the First Interstellar War, should the stealth ships come across any hostile nation or force in those regions that they are exploring, you are deploying fleets to the border as a precaution should they suddenly become aware of our nation and seek to do harm to our Republic. The public after seeing how things have gone and knowing we are not alone in the star cluster would easily accept that line of reasoning.”

“You would think so, but there is the chance that some people would take that to mean that we already found a hostile race and we are sending our forces to protect our borders from such a hostile force.”

“Perhaps but right now such people would only be going off speculation unless they have evidence to show otherwise.”

“There are a lot of possibilities that we have to deal with in this situation, Aja. I have a lot of concerns about how to proceed going forward but right now it all hangs on what the *Cavalier* has found, and we won’t know that for a few days. I intend to wait and see what they have found before I make any decisions on deploying the fleet.”

“I can understand your concerns and your reservation. It is your call after all as the Commander-in-Chief of our forces. I just want to make sure our forces are ready once the Tenebris are found.”

“You know, ever since you found out that the Tenebris were possibly still alive, you have been rather focused on finding them. Is there a reason behind this motivation to do so as well as your need for me to deploy the fleet?”

Aja was suddenly silent. Something about the expression on her face from that question made it seem like she was hiding something whether she meant to exhibit that expression or not.

“It...isn’t something that I would want to talk about right now. You are right. We will wait for the Cavalier’s report on the transmissions they are detecting. Once we know what they have found, we will proceed to act based on those findings.”

“Very well, Aja. I would still like to hear your reasons at a later time, though. Until then, we will wait for the *Cavalier*’s report.”

Aja nodded in agreement before she disconnected the transmission. Drew took a deep breath. Something was bothering Aja and this was the first time Drew had seen her like that. Whatever it was that was bothering her had something to do with the Tenebris. The question was what was bothering her concerning them to warrant her personally looking into the matter six months ago with that librarian/historian? It was more than it being an unsolved case from more than six centuries ago.

Maybe it was time for Drew to do his own investigating into the connection between Head Agent Aja and the dark cult known as the Tenebris...

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*Luigi’s Italian Restaurant, Cultural District, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
1:25pm, September 23, 5434 A.D.*

“So, did anything exciting happen to you lately?”

Laura could not resist asking that question every time she and her daughter Amarria went out to lunch. Laura has asked that question for the past six months after their “eventful” lunch encounter with Head Agent Aja and the whole incident involving the research on the Tenebris. Part of the reason for her asking that question was to know if Amarria had uncovered anything else that would lead to some excitement. On the other hand, the other reason was whether or not this would cause problems or a scene involving Aja or another RCIA agent in the restaurant while they were eating lunch.

So far, neither one of those have happened in all of that time.

“No, mom,” Amarria said. “Work has been a bit slow so I have taken some time to research other bits of history that I have been curious about, none of which would be considered classified.”

“Like what?” Laura asked.

“I tend to read up on the logs and journals of explorers during the Expansion Era. There is a lot of adventure and drama that can be found in their tales when Humanity ventured out and explored the stars of the cluster.”

“So, it sounds to me like you are a bit of a romantic.”

“Maybe I am. There was a lot of excitement among the crews and settlers when they ventured out. Their stories are filled with hope, excitement, drama, sadness, hardship, and pride in their accomplishments. Reading their stories makes me feel like I was there with them in spirit sharing in their experiences.”

“What made you want to read up about them? I know you had an interest in Human history before Luna jumped up in the star cluster, but I didn’t think you had that much interest in the Expansion Era.”

“I guess a lot of it has to do with me telling you about the...article... I read.”

Laura knew that Amarria was talking about the Tenebris but they were both careful about mentioning it aloud in public.

“How is it so?” Laura asked.

“After reading that one article, part of me had been curious to know how other early settlers managed to cope with moving to strange new worlds that may or may not be filled with danger. There are a lot of stories during that time that thankfully have been recorded and logged in the Library for everyone to read and reflect. Part of me has wondered about the unknown reaches of the cluster and what they hold.”

“I know you saw the news a long time ago. Both the *Templar* and the *Cavalier* are exploring those systems right now and logging their findings. Unfortunately, those findings are only for the RCIA to analyze for now.”

“Yeah,” Amarria said sounding depressed, “but that is not the same. It removes the element of surprise and excitement should the Republic expand its borders again.”

“You and I both know that they are exploring those systems in search for you-know-what. They may be scouting potential places to set up military outposts if they find what they are looking for. If the subject of that article is indeed out there, the Republic isn’t going to be looking at letting potential colonists settle on worlds that might be in danger of being attacked by them or for that matter any other possible alien races that might have hostile intent. I know you would want to be around to experience a second era of expansion if it happens but that may not be the case under the circumstances.”

Amarria sighed.

“Yeah, I know,” Amarria said. “Even if they did, the excitement, romance, and adventure are gone since those systems are being explored in advance. However, there is always the Southern Region.”

“Are you serious?”

“Well why not? There is a lot of mystery involved with that region since it is currently inaccessible. Who knows who or what calls that region of the cluster ‘home?’ At least that would be exciting.”

“I have to ask but are you bored with your job or something? You keep mentioning about ‘excitement’ and ‘adventure’ that it sounds like you want to change careers or lifestyles.”

“Maybe I do. The most excitement I have had was when Aja met with us.”

“You call that excitement? I thought you were in trouble for what you found!”

“I know, I know. Still, though, it was something that made the day no longer boring.”

“Please tell me you are not looking into finding other such material in the Library just to liven your day up again?”

Amarria sighed again.

“I guess not,” Amarria said. “I may have been lucky last time but the next time I may actually get in trouble and face possible jail time.”

“Yeah, that is not the kind of excitement you need in your life.”

“Let me ask you this, mom. How do you keep yourself from getting bored at your job?”

“When am I bored at my job? Granted there are days when the news is slow and we have to figure something out to fill or stretch the time slot but I am rarely bored at work. The only people that I know are usually bored are our field reporters because, depending on where they are, they may not have much to report. That is especially true in border systems before and after the war.”

“So what do they do in the meantime?”

“Well, they are supposed to be working and generally their tablets and computers are monitored to make sure that they are indeed finding anything to report. This includes getting in touch with local news agencies to see if anything local is worth reporting on the national news. A lot of times, those reporters go to those agencies directly to work with them on their reports.”

“That doesn’t sound like they are bored.”

“It all depends on what is happening and where. One of our reporters named Brenda in the Serenus System near the Northern Region was seriously bored because there was not much going on that she felt needed to be reported on a national level.”

“Brenda? Wasn’t she the one that reported about the clone of father who stole that destroyer?”

“Yes, she is the one. She didn’t say his name directly on-the-air but it was spoken over the speakers in the station she was reporting from.”

“I see, so it wasn’t her fault. It was just the timing.”

“That’s it exactly.”

“So what is she doing now?”

“Brenda? Well, she was assigned to a ship during the war as a war correspondent from the frontlines. After the war, I heard she went back home to Paraíso De La Sol for a vacation.”

“She is from there? I heard that not many people leave that city.”

“She did because the comfortable life didn’t suit her. As far as what she did afterwards, I believe she is serving as a field reporter in the Holy Lykan Republic. Ever since the orbital city

was destroyed, the Lykans had created a new capital called Holy Charity on their home planet. She works from there to report the news.”

“Wait, she is on their home planet? I thought the Lykans had issues with outsiders on their home planet.”

“That was while the nation was still the Royal Lykan Kingdom. Their mindset has completely changed and they allow members of other races from other worlds on their planet, though I believe they are limiting this to reduce any further environmental impact other than the city that was built.”

“I see. Does she like it?”

“Well, she has told me that everyone there is nice and that there is never a dull moment when it comes to her reporting politics from their capital. Otherwise, she tends to go out and enjoy the surrounding scenery. She tells me the natural landscape of the planet is no different from what is found here on Luminaire.”

“She is allowed to venture into the wilderness on that planet? After all the Lykans did to preserve it?”

“The Lykans have come to realize that we have as much respect for the environment as they do and that we would not harm it otherwise. During her spare time, she took pictures while she was exploring and even managed to snap some great shots of the city against the natural landscape. I have a couple of them with me that she sent.”

Laura took out her phone and pulled up her picture gallery. When she selected the photo in question, she turned the phone around to show Amarria who leaned in to look at it. Amarria could tell that the picture was taken high up and that the city of Holy Charity was in the valley among some mountains providing an awe-inspiring horizon. The forests around the city were lush and full of life. The city was full of spires and skyscrapers in the same gold and beige hues as the Lykan ships protected by a wall to keep the wildlife out. It looked like something out of an old fairy tale.

“That’s beautiful,” Amarria said. “It puts it right up there with our own cities. However, I have to ask but why was the city build there in that valley?”

“Actually,” Laura said as she put the phone away, “I heard that it was the valley where the last battle between the Lykans took place before they became unified.”

“It isn’t the location where their prophet made that holy decree?”

“No, there is a temple and a monument at that location to help preserve that site.”

“I see. I wonder, though. Maybe what I need to do is learn the history of each of the races from what they have to help better understand them.”

“What? That may not be a good idea, Amarria.”

“Well why not?”

“All of the races have their own historians and we already have a general idea of their history. If they wanted to share more with us, they would have done so. However, the Lykans history before their unification is lost due to their battles and even after that is filled with shame for their actions against others. Even the State is hard pressed to find any material of their history due to the Lykans wiping any most of their cultural identities. Even the Empire is very secretive of their history for some apparent reason. The point is that it is probably not best for you to journey to any of those nations due to the very tender subject of their histories.”

“I guess so, but I need something to do. I can only read up on so much history before I run out.”

“I might have something for you,” a female voice said behind Amarria.

Amarria turned around to see who that was as the voice sounded a bit familiar to her. To Amarria's surprise and Laura's disappointment, Head Agent Aja stood there with a grin and her arms behind her.

"Miss Aja?" Amarria said. "Why are you here?"

"I would like to know why, too," Laura said with a stern look on her face.

Aja pulled up a chair and sat at the side of the table between them. She put her arms on the table with her fingers crossed. Aja looked over at Amarria.

"I have received a report from one of the stealth ships earlier today," Aja said. "They detected a transmission of artificial origin in the Southwestern Region and are warping there now for a clearer signal. There is a chance that it is them."

"You are talking about that cult?" Laura asked. "If that is the case, why are you here? What do you need Amarria for?"

Aja turned towards Laura.

"If that dark cult is still around, I intend to send a covert team in to gather information about them to see what they have done over the years in terms of culturally, scientifically, and militaristically. They have been on their own for centuries and we need to know what has changed in that time. This also includes their history."

Amarria widened her eyes. Without even saying a word, she quickly realized why Aja was here: it was to recruit her for such a mission. Aja turned to look at Amarria and was quick to realize that Amarria figured it out.

"If you are recruiting me to be a part of that mission," Amarria said, "it may not be best to go in under some form of cloak."

"Oh?" Aja said, curious about Amarria's comment. "What do you suggest?"

"If it is that cult, then we need info on their attire and culture. If we can blend in naturally without having to use such things as an optical cloak, we can hide in plain sight among them and not raise any suspicions."

"I see. That would be better. They are Humans, after all, so it is a lot easier to blend in with them."

"Are you seriously considering this, Amarria?" Laura said. "Your father got involved with their organization and look what happened in the long run!"

"Yes," Aja said, "he got promoted to Admiral and is now in command of the Seventh Fleet. What's wrong with that?"

Laura and Amarria's eyes widened and their jaws dropped. Aja looked between the two of them and quickly realized why they were reacting that way.

"Are you saying he hasn't called either of you and told you this yet?" Aja asked.

"When did this happen?!" Laura whispered, trying not to attract attention.

"This morning," Aja said.

Laura got out her phone and started calling Trent. Amarria raised her right eyebrow.

"Who are you calling?" Amarria asked.

"Your father," Laura said. "All of us are going to have a nice little talk about keeping secrets!"

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