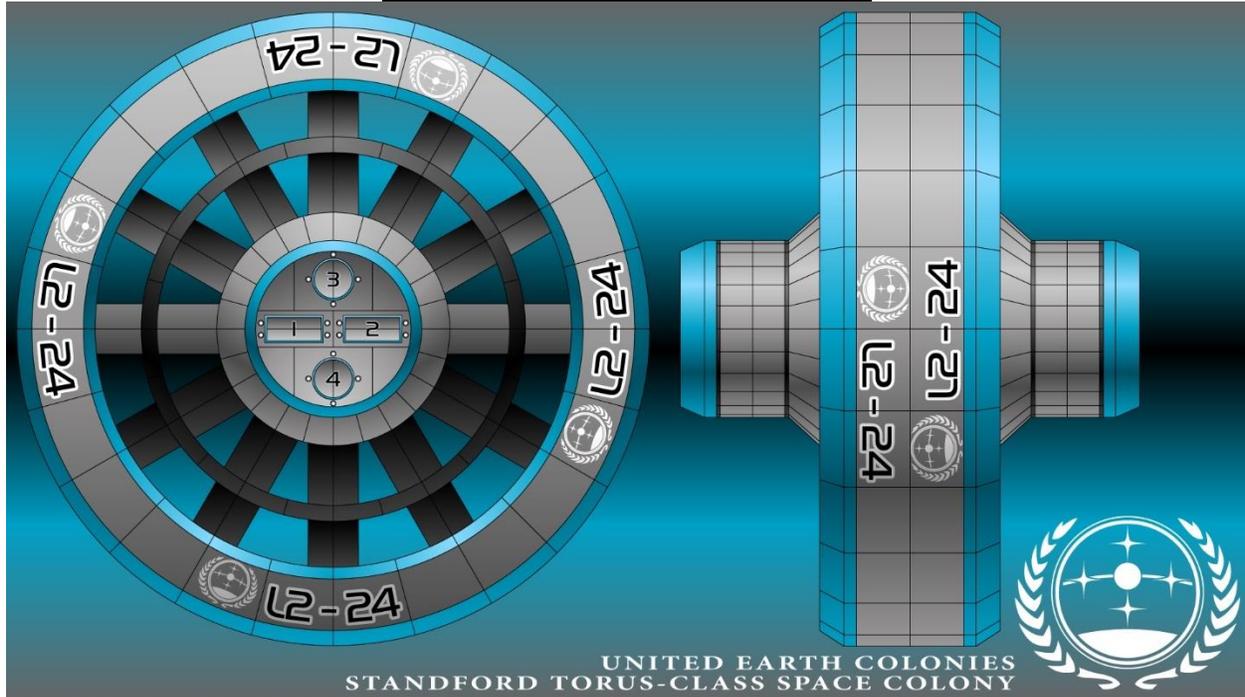


*Warring Factions: Alternate Timeline Remake*  
*The Cost of Peace/The Divide Within*



**PART 5**

*Cockpit, Panther Two's Fighter, Forward Hangar Bay, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
Planet Verima orbit, Termine System, Federation Border System  
11:36am, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“Panther Two, beginning final system check.”

Jake took one last look at his flight systems on his fighter's computer as they received orders for takeoff. Panther Squadron had just received their patrol route from the CCC to fly reconnaissance around the Planet Verima where the *Kasagi* would be orbiting. The rest of the fleet would be deployed to other planets in the system. Panther would fly opposite of the planet's rotation to perform scans of the surrounding area to make sure that there were not any surprises lying in wait for them that would have gone undetected otherwise.

Panther Squadron would not be alone in investigating the planet. According to the patrol route, Cobra Squadron was assigned to fly around the planet in the opposite direction. They would eventually cross paths, but Panther would be flying above the rings while Cobra flew below them. They would barely see each other as they passed, but Jake knew that their paths were intentionally set up that way as word of his and Janice's "activities" were getting around.

The Termine System was one that is only remembered in the history books, though often filling the readers with either pride, sadness, or both. It was the site of the final battle in the First Interstellar War where the Liekans fought with everything they had to stop the advance of the budding Federation. Liekan energy weapons were ineffective against the nano-laminate armor of the Federation and any projectile weapons could not get past the point defense guns. There were reports that a debris field exists in the rings of Verima along with the frozen corpses of Liekans

who died in battle. What makes this battle a tragedy was the number of young Liekan recruits that were fresh out of their military academy only to be sent to their immediate deaths in this star system. The debris field was also a navigational hazard despite being drawn into the ring by gravitational forces. With the multitude of destroyed Liekan ships in the area, there were numerous weapons stores that could remain intact with missiles and torpedoes that never detonated. These pose a threat to the *Kasagi* and any other ship that may pass by too close to their location. One of their tasks while on patrol was to find any of these undetonated stores that remained intact and destroy them from a distance. This may attract the attention of the Liekans' surveillance system in nearby star systems, though, but it can easily be reported as removing hazardous weapons and materials from the star system. That part of the report would be true.

However, Jake had other things on his mind than the checks to his fighter's systems or the history of this star system. His thoughts were still focused on Janice and the situation they were in. He looked over to his right where Cobra Squadron's fighters were berthed on the opposite side of the hangar bay. While they were still more than twenty meters apart from each other in their fighters, he could not see her through the solid cockpit canopy. The black "glass" look was only for show as the nano-laminate armor of the fighter protected the cockpit as well. The interior was just like the flight simulator cockpits with a holographic tactical display surrounding the pilot. He wished that he had a chance to talk to her about last night and about their relationship going forward, but thanks to Tristan and his eavesdropping, that was not able to happen before this mission began. Tristan's fighter was the only craft in the hangar not showing that it was powered up or ready to sortie unlike the other fighters.

Jake was so focused on Janice's fighter that he did not notice the hangar bay doors opening, that his system checks were complete, or that Michel tried to get his attention through his helmet's communicator.

*"Panther Two!"* Michel yelled through Jake's helmet.

Jake literally jumped inside his cockpit as he stopped thinking about Janice. He looked forward to notice the hangar bay doors were open revealing the star-filled space in front of him.

"Yes, sir?" Jake said, trying to focus back on the mission at hand.

*"We are about to deploy,"* Michel said. *"The rest of the squad is waiting on you. Are your system checks complete?"*

"I am sorry, sir! My system checks are complete, and I am ready for deployment."

Jake had to take a moment to clear his mind of any further thoughts concerning Janice and focus on this mission. Now was not the time to think about her when it could affect his performance with the rest of the team.

*"Alright, Panther Two,"* Michel said. *"Flight Control, this is Panther One. Panther Squadron is ready."*

*"This is Flight Control. Panther Squadron, prepare for landing gear release."*

Jake heard the physical clamps that were attached to his fighter's landing gear release their grip through the airframe. His fighter then lifted off the surface of the hangar bay after the magnetic field released his landing gear as well. Jake pressed a button on his console to retract his landing gear back into the fighter. He revved his engines waiting for the order to launch. He looked and saw that Panther One to his left as well as Three and Four above were off the hangar bay surfaces also while the rest of the squadron waited to deploy after them.

*"Panther One through Four, you are cleared to launch,"* the flight controller said.

*"Roger, Flight Control,"* Michel said through Jake's helmet. *"Panthers One through Four, launching!"*

Jake moved his throttle on his right side forward, accelerating his fighter out of the hangar bay into open space. Michel's fighter moved ahead to take point while Panther Three and Four rotated to Michel and Jake's orientation on their left and right flanks respectively. Jake continued to hear the flight control from the *Kasagi* giving directions to the rest of the fighters still in the hangar bay.

*"Panther Five through Eight, prepare for launch,"* the flight controller continued.

*"Cobra Squadron, you will take off after all of Panther has been deployed."*

*"Confirmed, Flight Control,"* Janice's voice rang through the communications channel.

Jake took a deep breath. He suddenly had a hard time trying to focus on the mission again the moment he heard Janice's voice in his helmet. As he was beginning to think about last night again, his console indicated a private line of communication was being requested from Michel's fighter to Jake's. Jake accepted the private line.

*"Jake?"* Michel said through Jake's helmet.

*"Yes, Panther One?"* Jake asked.

*"This is a private line, but I will make this brief. I know I was hard on you and Janice back there earlier today. You and I have known each other for a long time, so do not get the wrong impression when I enforced such a punishment on the two of you."*

*"You could have fooled me."*

*"Fair enough. I am happy you found someone after all this time, but I have to say that your timing was lousy."*

*"I will admit that things did seem rather rushed in this newfound relationship, but when I heard that challenge that Janice had put out there, I had to test myself as I felt the rewards were worth the risk. Yes, we both were rushing things after the flight simulator duel, but it felt so right last night afterwards."*

Michel gave a small laugh.

*"Okay, I am going to stop you there before you start to give any details that I would rather not know about. After I made my report, I was informed that Commander Alto and Rear Admiral Deandre wants to talk to us after the mission about your situation."*

*"They want to what?!"*

*"I told them what happened and how things happened. Considering their wives are on board, it seems like their own love lives are on the rocks and they may want to talk about your situation from that angle. I do not get the feeling that they are angry it happened. If anything, they believe that this is possibly a powder keg waiting to blow over multiple issues."*

*"It sounds like they want to address the matter with both us and with headquarters. Could we be seeing changes to military protocol?"*

*"It is too soon to tell, but we will see how things go afterwards. It looks like the rest of our squadron is approaching. We will have this talk later, but focus on the mission for now, even if you hear Janice's voice again, alright?"*

*"Understood, sir."*

Michel cut the private line and switched over to the line the rest of the squadron was using. Jake could see on his scanners that Panthers Five through Eight was forming up in pairs on both sides of Panthers One through Four, forming a wedge shape.

*"Alright, Panther Squadron,"* Michel said once the rest of Panther Squadron was in formation. *"Let us get to work. Activate scanners and scan both the debris field in the belt and the planet. We need to make sure there are no surprises lying in wait for us."*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Combat-and-Control Center, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
Planet Verima orbit, Termine System, Federation Border System  
11:42am, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“All of our available fighters are away.”

Alto’s comment about the deployment of the *Kasagi*’s available fighters did not distract Deandre from looking at the holographic display. The ships of the Twenty-First Fleet upon arriving in the Termine System were given their deployment orders to go on patrol in different sectors of the star system. Utilizing scanners from both the ships and their fighters, they can see if there were any unknown or enemy contacts that were hiding in the system that have managed to evade Federation’s Tripwire border surveillance system. While that was not the fleet’s true objective, it was better that there were no surprises that would make their true mission more difficult than intended.

The *Kasagi* was accompanied by the cruiser *Helios* as they orbited over the planet Verima’s rings while still maintaining a safe distance from the debris field within the rings. Deandre knew during the last few months of the First Interstellar War that this planet served as the final battlefield against the Liekans. He was not old enough at the time of the war to be in the military, but the history books told the stories of what happened here from different points of view including those Liekans that were captured. The gas giant itself had little resource value. However, to the Liekans, it was where they drew the line to prevent the Federation from advancing any further into their territory. The Federation fleet that was stationed here fought for weeks to try to advance further, only for Liekan forces to continue pounding on them knowing they could not win. The wreckage found in the debris field consisted entirely of Liekan ships that were drawn in by the gravity of Verima’s rings. The Federation’s technological advantage over the Liekans during the First Interstellar War was made very apparent by this “graveyard.”

“I have heard stories about this place,” Bryan said aloud, drawing the attention of those around him including Deandre and Alto. “During the final months of the First Interstellar War, there had to have been well over twenty battles that were fought here. The Liekans wanted to either win so badly or prevent the Federation from further advancing into their territories that they sent recruits barely out of training to their deaths here. The situation was so bad for them that they sent ships with minimum crews on board as soon as the ships were built.”

“If only those stories were completely fictional,” Alto said. “However, this debris field shows that such stories of the Liekans’ desperation are quite true.”

“They were losing troops and morale quickly,” Deandre said. “It got to the point that the Liekan citizens were revolting against their regime for sending their young to die. The Liekans knew they had lost the war and both they and the Dexigalians were losing troops and ships faster than they could replace them. Their leaders finally chose to sign the cease-fire agreement when the Federation presented it. Afterwards, it was believed that they chose to put their nations and themselves into isolation so that they could heal the damage done to their countries and their infrastructures. There have been both rumors and reports that both nations had gone into a heavy recession or a depression because of all their funding being dumped into their war for conquest. Whether or not their nations have recovered by now alongside their economy is still unknown.”

“News that was released to the public about us Minions did not help, either.”

“Why is that, sir?” Bryan asked with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Before the Federation found the remnants of my race on Galatea more than twenty years ago, my race was once a powerful and technologically advanced civilization of machines after they committed genocide against their creators. Afterwards, they had but one objective: destroy

all organic life that could enslave them again. The pursuit of such a goal, however, was what led to my race's eventual downfall. When they encountered the Liekans, the Dexigalians, the Fulari, and the Corimeins, those four races banded together to fight us. From a tactical and technological standpoint, they were inferior and could not defeat the Minions. My race did not anticipate, however, that we had a crucial flaw in our programming, namely the lack of any form of anti-virus software. Because my kind never knew what a virus was before our encounter with those four races, they won their war against us by introducing four different viruses into our connected hive minds. Only one hundred units survived by separating their minds from the rest of the collective. They discovered Humanity from the broadcast signals they sent out for their televisions, though they were more than thirty years old by the time they reached Galatea. When the Minion survivors were found by Federation forces, they had changed their way of thinking about organic life after seeing the struggle Humanity went through and their fight for survival. They created a few organic models at the time, myself included, capable of procreating with Humans and becoming citizens of a multiracial society."

"So, when news of Minion survivors aired publicly after the war," Renee said, "did those four races stayed away or cut off contact out of fear of future Minion retaliation that would be backed by the Federation?"

"That is one possibility but not a likely one," Alto said. "Personally, I do not think any existing Minion, organic or metal, would want to seek revenge against those races. The defeat of my race was a wakeup call for them to show that their 'crusade' was not just nor were they invincible because they had a technological advantage. However, newer models like myself do not have the ability to link our minds, so I cannot be certain if I am correct or not about my people's agenda. Regardless, the Minions are an equal part of the Federation now and we must abide by the Federation's laws as citizens. We cannot go to war as a separate entity without risking our citizenship in the process."

"I know you heard the rumors that have been circulating for the past several years," Deandre said. "Do you think the Corimeins used the remains of your race from their war with your kind to further develop their unmanned ships and fighters?"

"I heard about those rumors and their sudden advancement in the field of artificial intelligence for their unmanned craft, but we currently do not have any means to prove whether those rumors are true or not. We can only rely on the testimonies of the Corimein refugees that the Twenty-Seventh Fleet were sent to pick up to determine their validity. I would not be happy if they were true, but it also gives me pause for concern of they were conquered by the Liekans and Dexigalians. Who knows what that level of technology would do in their hands?"

Deandre looked over at the observation room, despite the glass being opaque at the moment. He knew that his wife and Alto's were in there, but he wondered what their thoughts were about since they could hear their conversation about the debris field and the Minion's past.

"Alto," Deandre said as he looked back at Alto, "I am about to ask you to do something that may break military protocol."

"What do you mean?" Alto asked with a puzzled expression on his face.

"I want you to bring the Senators from the observation room here into the Command Pit."

"You want me to do what?!" Alto said with a shocked look on his face.

Deandre tried to remember when Alto ever lost his composure while on duty, but soon realized this was his first time. Deandre found Alto's shock refreshing as it was almost Human.

"You heard me, Commander," Deandre said. "I want them to see this and get their thoughts on what we are looking at in this system. I want them to look at the horrors of war."

“Very well, sir,” Alto said before getting out of his seat and turning to the stairs behind him to his right.

“Lieutenant Commander Daniel,” Deandre said as he turned to his right towards Daniels at his station. “I want a camera drone out there to provide us with a live feed. I want to visually show the Senators the debris field instead of relying on tactical data.”

“Understood, sir,” Daniel said. “I will control the drone personally.”

“Very well,” Deandre said as he turned back forward in his seat.

He looked up to his left at the top of the stairs as Alto reached the top, turning to his left behind the wall and going down the corridor towards the observation room door into the CCC. His anger over what happened last night had subsided, but maybe it was time that he drove the point home to them as to why they are so committed to their military careers. This debris field would help to establish that point. A minute later, Alto came back into view after exiting the corridor and coming down the stairs. Tiffany and Julana soon appeared behind him, following the Commander as they made their way towards the Command Pit. Deandre got up out of his seat while keeping his eyes on them. As soon as they entered the Command Pit, Deandre put his arms behind his back out of decorum for the Senators’ position.

“Greetings, Senators,” Deandre said. “I know that this is against regulations for civilians to be in the CCC during a mission, but I wanted the two of you to see what comes from war and why Commander Alto and I take our careers very seriously.”

“We heard part of that conversation up there,” Julana said as she crossed her arms. “We can see the tactical display just fine from there.”

“The tactical display can only show you so much. A live video feed is better to assess what we are looking at, especially for civilians who may not be familiar in understanding a tactical display like this one. In a few moments, a camera drone will provide a live feed of this debris field for us to see what truly lies in that field.”

“Drone deployed,” Daniel said from his station. “ETA to debris field in two minutes.”

“Acknowledged,” Deandre said. “Put the drone’s position on the tactical display.”

Daniel pressed a few buttons at his station. A small green dot soon appeared on the map close to the *Kasagi* moving towards the rings of Verima. Everyone in the Command Pit watched as the drone reached the debris field after a couple of minutes.

“Drone in position,” Daniel said. “Displaying camera feed on the tactical display.”

Four holographic displays appeared facing towards the direction of all four seats in the Command Pit. Julana and Tiffany walked over to the screen facing the seat for the CAL. As they looked at the footage of the wreckage, Tiffany covered her mouth in shock. As they stared at the debris field, not only was there wreckage of Liekan ships and drifting equipment, but there were also several frozen dead Liekan bodies floating nearby. Their corpses have been floating in the debris field for more than twenty years since the end of the First Interstellar War, many of which looked to be no more than eighteen Human years of age. Their bodies remained unclaimed to this day by the Liekan government who sent them to die in battle in a desperate attempt to stop the Federation’s advance into their territory. They were merely “meat shields” or “cannon fodder,” wasting their lives against an opponent they had no effective means to stop. It remains unclear to this day whether these youth volunteered for that mission or if they were drafted.

“I never knew such battle sites existed,” Tiffany finally said. “What was the point of fighting over a planet that has little or no value to it?”

“There was not a point,” Deandre said, his eyes remaining on the screen. “They needed to stop our advance and they wasted their young to do it. It was that grim for the Liekans.”

Julana was more angered than upset at what she was looking at, and Deandre knew why. The First Interstellar War occurred prior to the Celestians joining the Federation after the age of exploration and expansion began. This battlefield was one among many that the Federation did not wish for certain member races who joined after the war to see because of the atrocities that occurred. It was a testament to the ugly side of the Federation's past and wartime beginnings.

"Tiffany," Julana said, "this is what happens in war. Governments fight for either desired territories for various reasons or to achieve a goal that could not be obtained through diplomacy. The Liekans did not want to give up even a lowly insignificant system such as this one to the Federation because to do so would have given the Federation a further foothold into Liekan space. It is obvious that the Liekans wanted to stop the Federation's advance by any means necessary by what we are seeing here."

"But why would the Liekans go to such lengths?" Tiffany asked as she looked at Julana. "Look at the carnage we are seeing. Almost all of those Liekan corpses look like they were in their late teenage years."

"The Liekans were once a proud and noble people a long time ago from what I have heard. They would sooner die than face any further loss or embarrassment against what they would have considered a weaker enemy when first discovered. They had no idea that the Federation would make astronomical leaps in technology to fight on equal or superior terms."

"Maybe they were like that once a long time ago," Tiffany said looking back at the screen, "but if they were willing to send so many of their young to their deaths before accepting the Federation's ceasefire, it would be clear to anyone that they lost their way a long time ago."

"Either the young wanted to be heroes, or they had no choice. I do not know if their superiors believed they could overpower the Federation Forces stationed here at the time with their numbers. However, if they had won, their superiors would have taken all the glory and respect. The young would remain here, dead from their superiors' ambition and glory. The result would be the same whether the Liekans or the Federation won. For their ambition or desperation, this was the fate of those so young with their lives cut short, floating endlessly in orbit over this lifeless world without even a request for their collection by the government that sent them to die. This is an incredibly sad sight to see, full of misery and pain."

"It is for that reason that I called the two of you down here, Senators," Deandre said. "What we are doing here today is to bring hope and freedom to those refugees who are trying to reach our space. However, this battlefield shows just how much and how far the Liekans would go to achieve any goal. That is why officers like Alto and me are committed to our military careers the way we are. There is an old Earth saying: the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. Everyone on this ship may be here for different reasons, but we all want to make sure that our homes, our families, and our worlds are protected from threats like the Liekans. We do not want to see travesties like this battlefield ever again. The next time, it could be our young dying out there in the cold vacuum of space."

"Your point has been made," Julana said. "Is there anything else we need to know?"

"Not at this time, no," Deandre said. "I will permit you to remain in the CCC to observe from the here if you want. I only ask that you do not distract the officers from fulfilling their tasks. If you wish to return to the Observation Room, you are free to do so."

"Thank you for the invitation. I wish to stay here for the moment, but can I look at a separate map of the planet, namely the region of the debris field?"

"Is there something of interest to you involving the field?" Deandre asked with a puzzled expression on his face.

“I want to know if there is a feasible way to clean up this field. I know this battlefield occurred before my planet joined the Federation but leaving it here would only serve as a reminder to that war and lack of respect for the dead who served their nation, even if that nation was an enemy of the Federation at the time.”

“Very well. Since the CAL is deployed in the recon of this planet, you may sit in his chair to look over the map and the feed.”

As Julana walked up to the CAL’s chair to sit down, Deandre turned to Daniel at the opposite end of the table.

“Daniel,” Deandre said, “please go to your station on the Operations level so that the other senator can have a seat there. Make sure your station is locked before you go.”

“Understood, sir,” Daniel said. “Is Julana taking control of the drone?”

“No, you will retain control. Continue to survey the debris field, but if asked to focus or do another pass over a specific area, please do so until our rendezvous with the refugees.”

“Yes, sir.”

Daniel pressed a few buttons at his station, transferring control of the drone to his station on the Operations Level before locking his computer. He got up from his seat and headed to his left towards the stairs closest to his station as Tiffany walked around Alto to the now vacant seat. Deandre looked over at Julana who was watching the video feed and a duplicate map that was smaller in front of her. He had this feeling that there was something else they wanted to talk about. If it were important, they would have brought it up by now. It was best not to ask right now. At least he and Alto can keep an eye on the two of them, even if this was against protocol.

Deandre looked at the time on his console. It would still be a few hours before the refugees would be scheduled to arrive. He only hopes they are not early with their fighters away from the ship and on the other side of the planet.

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*Cockpit, Panther Two’s Fighter, Actively Deployed  
Planet Verima orbit-Far Side, Termine System, Federation Border System  
12:01pm, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

*“We will be entering communications blackout with the Kasagi momentarily.”*

Panther Leader’s voice in Jake’s helmet was one of the few instances during this fly-by reconnaissance of the Planet Verima that broke the constant sound of the engines through the fighter and his breathing inside his helmet. Recon missions like this were one of the most boring missions to be on when there was nothing one could talk about over the communications channels. If someone were to constantly chatter, it often caused distractions during the mission and could be heard from the *Kasagi*’s flight controller.

The communications blackout that Panther Leader was referring to is the loss of the direct line of communication with the *Kasagi* once the fighters were on the other side of the planet. Normally in more populated systems, this would not be a problem due to the abundance of communication satellites that could redirect the transmissions around the planet back to the fighters. However, the Termine System was not one of those systems being on the edge of the buffer zone. Instead, a few subspace relays were present with the express use of communicating with the observational satellites monitoring the zone as well as a direct line of communications for the fleet to contact headquarters or the nearest major base.

Once the fighters were on the other side of the planet, they would no longer be able to remain in contact with the ship. They would be all alone behind the planet until they come across

members of Cobra Squadron who would fly right by them under the rings. Both squadrons would then come out on the other side of the planet before flying back towards the *Kasagi*.

Jake looked at his communications link to the *Kasagi* as the strength began to drop. Once the ship was behind the planet, the communication link signal disappeared.

*"We are now in the blackout zone,"* Michel said through Jake's helmet. *"We will out of touch with the Kasagi for the next forty-five minutes until we clear the planet's far side."*

"This is something I am definitely not used to," Jake said.

*"You mean losing that communication link?"*

"More like not having your conversation overheard the entire time I am deployed. You may still be around, but I feel like the flight controller has to listen to every little detail of our operation while we are out here."

*"It is their job, Panther Two. We are their eyes and ears out here to prevent any danger falling on the ship, even if it does mean we have to deal with the eavesdropping as you call it."*

*"While on the topic of no longer being eavesdropped,"* Panther Three said, *"is what was said in the briefing room true? Did you really do it with Cobra Squadron's leader?"*

"That is none of your business, Panther Two."

*"It was announced to the entire briefing room, sir. It is not something one can forget and it definitely raises a lot of questions."*

"Then those questions had best be left to yourself, and that goes for the entire squadron. We are on a mission, after all."

*"Sir, I am not sure how you and Cobra Squadron's leader are going to handle this matter, but it may need to be handled sooner than later after what I overheard earlier today by Cobra Squadron's barracks."*

Jake had a puzzled expression on his face.

"Care to clarify what you mean?" Jake asked.

*"When I passed by their barracks, I overheard Cobra Two inside riling up the rest of the squadron against Cobra Leader. They were calling her a traitor to her kind and other similar comments. I did not stick around for long as I heard someone else coming my way, but I could tell it was Cobra Leader from what I heard from the adjacent corridor after I moved away. She gave the rest of Cobra Squadron and especially Cobra Two an earful, but I feel as though the seeds of doubt and distrust have already been planted."*

"This happened after the briefing this morning?" Michel asked.

"Yes, sir."

*"That is not a good sign. If they feel they can no longer accept commands from Cobra Squadron's leader, this will cause problems not only in morale but also keeping them in line. They may even take action against her if they no longer trust her or view her as a traitor."*

Jake began to grow increasingly concerned with this news. Cobra Squadron is out here alone heading their direction except for Cobra Two who is back on the *Kasagi*. If they were to take any action against their leader, doing so while in the communications dead zone would be the perfect time to do so. They could easily report that a stray asteroid collided with her fighter destroying it and find a way to fabricate the evidence to that extent. Whether they would wait until after Panther passes them or do so before they pass would be the question at this point.

"Leader?" Jake said. "Do you think her squadron would take any violent action against her out here while in the communications dead zone?"

There was a moment of silence over the communications line. Jake could tell that Michel was thinking about his question thoroughly as it was not a question to be answered lightly.

*"I want to hope that is not the case," Michel said. "However, we do not know how badly the situation is between Cobra Leader and her squadron pilots. We cannot act unless we know for certain what the situation is."*

*"Am I allowed to chime in on this conversation?"* Janice's voice suddenly rang out over the communications line.

Jake was suddenly in shock to hear her voice through his helmet, but was also relieved to hear that she was alright at the same time.

*"Cobra Leader?"* Michel said. *"Is it safe to assume your squadron has line-of-sight with our squadron from your current position?"*

*"We do,"* Janice said. *"We have heard most of the conversation you were having once we entered the blackout area with the Kasagi. I was not aware someone else was eavesdropping on that conversation, but I can see why your fears would be warranted. I will let you know that you do not have to worry. I had a little 'chat' with my squadron prior to deployment. I will go over that with you later, but for now, you should not have to worry about such actions being taken against me."*

Jake breathed a sigh of relief. While he could not see their fighters from the distance they were at, he was happy to know that she was safe and is not in harm's way. As he tried to look around the area of space above the planet's rings at the far end from their position, he caught sight of a small distant flash of light. Jake began to both ponder and dread what he just saw.

*"Cobra Leader,"* Jake said. *"Are you still there?"*

*"I am, Panther Two,"* Janice said. *"Did I not just confirm that?"*

*"I wanted to make sure because I just saw a small flash of light in the distance in your direction. No one in your squadron hit an asteroid, did they?"*

*"No, they are all still accounted for. Where did you see the flash?"*

*"I am transmitting the recorded feed from my fighter to you and the rest of my squadron. Standby to receive."*

Jake pulled up the video feed from his fighter's front camera and rewound the footage to the time he saw the flash. Once he played it from that point, he saw the flash again indicating that he was not imagine things. He clipped the footage, stopping it at the moment the flash was seen, and transmitted it to the rest of his squadron and towards Cobra Squadron. Jake waited a moment for a response from either his squadron or from Janice.

*"I recognize that flash!"* Michel said. *"That is an object defolding!"*

*"More than that,"* Janice said. *"That is coming from the direction of the buffer zone behind my squadron!"*

*"It cannot be,"* Jake said. *"Did the refugees arrive far earlier than scheduled?"*

*"If that is the case,"* Michel said, *"We need to head their direction and fast. They would not have arrived this early without a good reason. Cobra Leader, turn your squadron around and head for that point. You will have a bigger head start than us. Once you clear the blackout zone, contact the Kasagi."*

*"Understood, Panther Leader,"* Janice said.

*"How likely do you think it is that the Kasagi spotted that same flash?"* Jake asked.

*"The Kasagi is connected to the Tripwire system,"* Michel said. *"If that was a defolding that we just witnessed, Tripwire would have alerted the Kasagi and any other ship in the area. It is a safe bet that they are scrambling to intercept whatever that is right now."*

*"I am more concerned that if that is indeed the refugees, why are they here this early?"*

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*Combat-and-Control Center, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
Planet Verima orbit, Termine System, Federation Border System  
12:12pm, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“Do we have confirmation on the object that defolded?”

Deandre nearly got to his feet when the proximity alarms went off in the CCC. Both of the ship’s fighter squadrons were on the other side of the Planet Verima in the communications dead zone as of ten minutes ago, meaning they were without fighter support. When the Tripwire system alerted the *Kasagi* of an object defolding in the buffer zone, it identified a shuttle that looked to be Liekan in origin. However, the shuttle also has appeared to have taken some damage prior to arriving. That was not a good sign it but may also explain why the shuttle did not just defold inside Federation space if their Fold Drive was damaged.

“I have confirmation,” the Tactical officer said from their station on the third level behind Alto. “The craft that defolded has been identified as a Liekan shuttle.”

Images of the shuttle soon appeared on the tactical display as holographic screens in front of Drew and the rest of those in the Command Pit.

“Shard and flechette damage is consistent with kinetic ordinance,” the Tactical officer continued. “I see no burn damage to the craft.”

“Kinetic damage but no burn damage?” Alto said with a puzzled expression on his face while looking at the screen. “This is not typical of either Liekan or Dexigalian weaponry.”

“What do you mean?” Tiffany asked, looking away from the shuttle on the screen towards Alto.

“Both of those nations during the First Interstellar War used energy weapons that would normally burn and melt armor,” Alto said while keeping his eyes on the screen. “This made their weapons ineffective against our ships once the nano-laminate armor was deployed, resulting in their eventual defeat. The lack of burn marks on the shuttle and the presence of kinetic weapon damage indicates that one or both of those nations have now developed such weapons that may be more effective against our armor depending on what they are now using.”

“Helm,” Deandre said, “get us to the border as fast as possible.”

“Yes, sir,” Renee and Bryan said from their stations.

Deandre activated the fleet communications and the *Kasagi*’s intercom at his station.

“This is Fleet Command to the Twenty-First Fleet. Our objective has arrived hours ahead of their ETA and are showing signs of damage indicating they are being pursued. All ships are rendezvous at the border and prepare your fighters for deployment, if any. Fleet Command, out.”

Deandre deactivated the fleet communications system and the intercom as he began to hear the engines through the hull become more audible.

“Go to Condition Yellow,” Deandre said. “That shuttle’s pursuers will be arriving any minute if they have not given up the chase.”

“Understood,” Alto said before activating the ship’s intercom system. “Set Condition Yellow throughout the ship. Prepare for possible hostiles in pursuit of the target.”

As Alto turned off the intercom, some of the lights in the room changed to yellow. Julana and Tiffany were familiar with different ship condition statuses because of their husbands. For Condition Yellow, the ship’s crew readies themselves for either a hostile or dangerous situation involving a hostile force or a natural occurrence that can damage the ship. In short, everyone on board is now on standby for practically anything.

“Sir,” the Intelligence Officer behind Alto on the Operations Level said, “the flight controller has received an incoming transmission from Cobra Squadron. They are clear of the

dead zone and are aware of the defolded object in the buffer zone. They are heading towards the object with Panther Squadron heading that way as well once they clear the dead zone. They request verification of the object.”

“Inform them that it is the refugees arriving early,” Deandre said. “Make them aware that the fleet is already on route and to meet us at the border as fast as they can. Inform them as well of the type of damage we are seeing on the shuttle. If their pursuers are using kinetic weapons, they need to be ready to counter if engaged. Have them relay that info to Panther Squadron as well if they have line-of-sight with them.”

“Understood, sir.”

Deandre looked back at the map showing the *Kasagi*'s position relative to the refugee's shuttle. The shuttle was less than five astronomical units away from the border, with one AU equal to the distance between Earth and Sol, the Earth's sun. The shuttle was traveling far slower than the *Kasagi* or its fighter squadrons. Based on their positions and velocity, the *Kasagi* along with the cruiser *Helios* would arrive at the border followed by Cobra Squadron and then the refugee shuttle. Whether Panther Squadron would arrive in time would not be known until they clear the dead zone behind Verima.

“Are we able to hail the refugees?” Julana asked. “We need to put them at ease if at all possible since the fleet is approaching their position.”

“I would rather wait until we get closer,” Deandre said. “If we broadcast their presence here, whoever is pursuing them will detect our transmission and intercept the shuttle by folding in-between us. While we may have developed pinpoint Fold Drive systems, the Liekans had such systems before we did and may be able to defold in such a position making the retrieval of the refugees next to impossible. Besides, if these are the same refugees that sent the message for asylum, they should be expecting us to be here.”

“If you say so.”

To Deandre, it may not matter whether they transmit a message to the refugees or not until they are almost to the border. If they are still being pursued, their pursuers may already know where the refugees are heading. It would not be hard for any Liekan to guess that the refugees were making their way to Federation space based on their course.

The only question on Deandre's mind is whether they can recover the refugees before their pursuers arrive.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Cockpit, Panther Two's Fighter, Actively Deployed*  
*Planet Verima orbit-Far Side, Termine System, Federation Border System*  
*12:17pm, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“I have not gone full speed like this in a long while!”

After Janice relayed the message from the *Kasagi* to Panther Squadron who was still in the communications dead zone with the ship to proceed directly towards the buffer zone, the entire squadron set their fighters' thrusters to maximum. While the fighters are equipped with inertia dampeners to suppress the g-forces the pilot would feel while in flight, they cannot get rid of or eliminate them entirely. Jake had not felt this many g-forces in a long time and it was starting to get thrilling for him.

As they came out of the communications dead zone from behind the planet, Jake got a signal and location from both the *Kasagi* and the *Helios* as they were heading to the buffer zone. Cobra Squadron's exact position was uploaded to his heads-up display after the connection to the

ship was reestablished along with positional data. Based on their velocities, the ships would arrive first followed by Cobra Squadron. While the refugees were moving slowly, they would still arrive at the rendezvous point before Panther Squadron does.

*"We may be missing out on this one,"* Michel said through Jake's helmet. *"Talk about having bad timing."*

"It is better to be late to the party than to not arrive at all," Jake said. "We still have to return to the ship regardless."

*"It does not bother you that the refugees arrived hours before their estimated arrival time? Do you not find that weird?"*

"It is weird and rather concerning, yes. Either the opening they had to make their getaway happened earlier than expected, or they were discovered prematurely and had to make a run for it. Based on the damage the shuttle has sustained, the latter of the two seems the most likely."

*"It is good to know that you and I had the same thoughts on this situation."*

It was not the first time that the two of them saw eye-to-eye involving a situation while on deployment, but this was not like those other situations. This was the first time that there was a clear danger to himself, his squadron, and his ship. Jake had been in many training exercises and drills, but he never would have thought he would experience a situation where a potentially hostile military force was involved.

As the minutes passed trying to reach their destination, the *Kasagi* and the *Helios* began to slow down when they were within thirty kilometers of the border. Once the ships were within five kilometers of the border, they came to a complete stop. Cobra Squadron was coming up from behind them quickly to get into position. It would be another ten minutes before Panther Squadron would arrive, but the refugee shuttle would reach the ships before the squadron would. The remainder of the fleet would arrive several minutes later.

*"This is Cobra Squadron,"* Janice said through the standard military channels. *"We are entering formation just outside of the buffer zone. The target will be crossing the border in three minutes."*

"Looks like we really are not arriving on time for..." Jake said before an alarm on his console started going off.

It was a proximity alarm indicating an object was defolding ahead, and the gravitational force being detected was showing it was a massive object! A large flash of light appeared between the refugee shuttle and Cobra Squadron from within the buffer zone. The cockpit canopy's display system turned down the brightness so that Jake and the rest of the squadron were not suddenly blinded by whatever was arriving ahead of them. Jake had seen ships defold before from his fighter, but none were as close or anywhere near as massive as this ball of light that had appeared.

As soon as the light disappeared, the canopy brought the brightness levels back up. As Jake looked in the direction where the ball of light was, he began to wish that the brightness was still down after seeing what replaced the light.

In its place was a massive vessel that was a double-hull design with one on top of the other, connected by a central fuselage that was no doubt reinforced. While Jake was familiar with Dexigalian ship designs where they were saucer-shaped in their general aesthetic, this was the first time he had seen two hulls of that design connected as such. However, that was not the only part of the design he noticed. The equally familiar arrowhead shape and engines of the Liekans were also seen on this vessel, with the pointed ends attached to what could be seen as the bow on both saucer hulls and the engines on the aft. The vessel was adorned with multiple

turrets and launchers that were not typical of either Liekan or Dexigalian design, indicating they were of a new design. The color scheme of the vessel was a mix of both cultures with bronze, red and black all over the vessel.

There was no question that this was some form of hybrid vessel the two nations had created, and this vessel that was more than twice the length and more than three times the height of the *Kasagi* was now between them and the refugees.

“Panther Leader,” Jake said, “I think we have a problem now.”

“*Oh, you think?!*” Michel said through Jake’s helmet in a sarcastic tone.

Jake may have stated the obvious, but at the same time it was not obvious as to what they were dealing with when it comes to this vessel or who is operating it.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Combat-and-Control Center, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
Planet Verima orbit, Termine System, Federation Border System  
12:41pm, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“Tactical analysis, now!”

Deandre had a feeling that the refugees were going to be pursued and that their pursuers would possibly attempt an interception before they reached Federation space. What he was not expecting, at least not fully, was the vessel that just appeared in front of them on the other side of the buffer zone. Its shape and design was like the unknown vessel whose picture from the Tripwire surveillance system he reviewed yesterday in his quarters. Whether this was the same ship or not was unknown. If it was, it was waiting until this moment to make its appearance where it would block any remaining hope of the refugees reaching Federation space. At the same time, it was a show of force and strength to the Federation forces that could also serve to lower the morale of the crew and pilots because of its size and possible firepower.

“Their shields are too strong to penetrate with scanners,” the Tactical Officer said.

“Attempting to get an analysis through visual methods.”

“If their shields are too strong for scanners to penetrate,” Alto said, “then they are far more powerful than previous Liekan or Dexigalian designs. Tripwire has not even gone off yet either despite this ship being right in front of us. I would say that the rumors of the two nations joining forces against the Fulari/Corimei Alliance and winning were not rumors after all.”

“That does not bode well for us,” Deandre said. “However, we need to get the refugees on board. Hail them and let us see if we can...”

Before Deandre could finish his sentence, he watched as the large vessel turned one of its missile launcher batteries on its starboard upper hull towards its aft. A missile was soon launched and flew behind the vessel towards the location of the shuttle. Deandre got up from his chair to his feet as he watched helplessly while the missile disappeared behind the vessel followed by a burst of light. He could hear some of the people in the CCC who were watching the video feed gasp in shock over what they have witnessed, among them being Tiffany and Julana.

“Intel or Tactical!” Daniel yelled from his station. “Do we have confirmation that the refugee shuttle was destroyed?”

“I have the *Helios*, sir,” the Intelligence Officer said. “They can confirm the shuttle was destroyed from their vantage point. There were no survivors.”

“Could they identify any bodies?”

“Not without scanning and that vessel’s shields, while we can visually see through them, is preventing the *Helios* from confirming any bodies that were on board.”

The CCC's yellow lights soon turned red as an alert rang out throughout the ship's speaker system.

"Sir!" the Tactical Officer yelled. "We are detecting that vessel's targeting system locking onto us, the *Helios*, and our deployed fighters! I have visual of the vessel's turrets and launchers pointing our direction!"

"Return the favor and lock onto their ship!" Deandre said as he sat back down, furious at what he witnessed. "Prepare for combat!"

"Admiral!" Julana said. "Try hailing the ship first. Let us at least know who or what we are dealing with here."

Deandre looked at Julana, still upset with what just happened. He was about to say that she had no business giving him orders, but he soon realized that she had a point in offering advice instead. They still do not know who or what they were dealing with, much less why they felt the need to destroy the shuttle. It was best to find those answers without fighting.

"Intel," Deandre said. "Hail that vessel. Let us see who we are dealing with and what their true intentions are."

"Yes, sir," the Intelligence Officer said as he pressed a few buttons. "Attention, unknown vessel. This is the United Systems of the Federation Ship *Kasagi*. Identify yourself."

Everyone in the CCC waited for a moment for the hostile vessel to respond. The wait only lasted almost ten seconds before the Intelligence Officer's station indicated that they were getting a response.

"The hostile vessel is responding, sir," the Intelligence Officer said. "I am putting them through to you now, sir."

A holographic screen soon appeared in front of Deandre. Additional screens appeared in front of the senators and Alto, but these screens showed the text "Spectator Only" on them. This meant that all they can do is watch. On the screens appeared a male Liekan with brown fur with some shades of gray. It was the first time in almost twenty years that anyone had seen a live Liekan outside of history books and other associated media. He was dressed in crisp rigid utilitarian military uniform in black and red, a stark contrast to the royal or regal uniforms they were seen wearing during the First Interstellar War. He sat in his command chair with his legs crossed and a smile on his face, showing off his sharp teeth.

There was an old saying by other races that were once enslaved by the Liekans until the First Interstellar War. If a Liekan were to ever smile in the manner like this one was doing on the screens, it was a sign that trouble and misfortune was about to befall the one who sees it.

*"It has been a very long time since I have seen our rebellious slaves and their Human motivators in person,"* the Liekan said.

Deandre could already tell this conversation was not going to go well.

*"I am Third Flag Pireckle,"* the Liekan continued, *"commanding officer of the GAIN Battleship Spiteful."*

"GAIN?" Deandre asked.

*"It is short for Grand Alliance of Imperial Nations. You could say that your so-called 'Federation' is the cause for its development. When we lost our honor and pride after our war with you fifteen of your years ago, we along with the Dexigalians had to live in shame and poverty because of the mistakes our King and their Emperor had made. Their wasteful spending of money and the lives of our youth changed us, opening our eyes to the folly that were our ideals and their incompetence. Two years after the war, the citizens of both of our races rose together in a joint effort and assassinated our leaders along with their followers. We came together with*

*the Dexigalians and formed a new government, one that quickly raised us up from our horrible status. Our hatred towards your Federation was the catalyst that gave birth to our new nation. You should feel honored at giving the drive we need for our newfound strength."*

"From what I hear, you used this so-called 'strength' to conquer the Fulari/Corimei Alliance. What possible benefit would you have to gain from such an act, let alone destroy a defenseless shuttle just now?"

*"The Alliance deserved their fate for not siding with us against you during the First Interstellar War. Their prosperity and strength afterwards were a slap in the face for the hardships we had to endure. You could say we were 'jealous' of that and wanted to take it for ourselves. Besides, they had something we wanted, but I am not about to tell what that is to you."*

"Then let me ask this: where do we go from here?"

*"I was instructed to destroy the shuttle and, should your forces be here, to relay this message to your government. One week from today, the hatred and wrath of the citizens of the Grand Alliance that has been built up against the Federation since our defeat many years ago will be unleashed against you. We will go forth, ravaging and destroying every world we come across without mercy. We will succeed where our incompetent leaders have failed, and your Federation will be wiped out by our own hands as it should have been almost twenty years ago. You have your warning. I suggest you leave to deliver that message and get your affairs in order. Your Federation's time is up."*

With those words, the screen with the Liekan disappeared, showing the GAIN vessel once again. The GAIN ship slowly turned around facing its engines towards the *Kasagi* before activated its Fold Drive. The *Spiteful* soon disappeared in a massive of light, revealing the wreckage of the shuttle that was behind it.

Deandre remained seated, shocked and stunned at the recent courses of events. He could tell that everyone in the CCC felt the same way from how quiet everyone was. The Grand Alliance of Imperial Nations, this new nation built on hatred over the Federation, declared nothing short of war, and it was going to begin in one week's time.

"Recall our fighters," Deandre finally said. "Once they are on board, set a course back to Sol and inform the rest of the fleet. We are returning home to deliver the bad news."

"What was it all for?" Julana asked aloud, attracting the attention of almost everyone in the CCC. "What was the point of coming out here? Instead of being heroes to refugees, we are instead heralds of a pending war. Why do I feel like this was all staged?"

Deandre soon wondered if this was staged as well before looking at the shuttle wreckage.

"Are we able to determine now how many were on board that shuttle from the remains?" Deandre asked.

"Now that we can scan the wreckage," the Tactical Officer said, "we can confirm that there was only a single Fulari on board.

"Only one Fulari? There should be more than one on board."

"That is all we are detecting, sir."

Deandre looked at Julana and Tiffany who were still shaken up about what just happened. Deandre took a deep breath.

"Very well," Deandre said before looking in Daniel's direction. "Daniel, you have the CCC. Alto and I will be escorting the Senators back to their quarters."

"Understood, sir," Daniels said, getting up from his station to come to the Command Pit.

As Deandre walked over to Julana and Alto towards Tiffany, he could only guess what was going through their minds right now. Deandre knew one thing was for certain in the midst of everything that had happened on this mission.

The Second Interstellar War was about to begin.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Flight Simulators, Deck 8-Midsection, U.S.F.S. Kasagi  
On Route to Planet Earth, Sol System, Federation Capitol  
1:38pm, June 21, Galactic Era 72*

“She should be here by now.”

Jake leaned against the simulation cockpit he had used yesterday against Janice. Events from the mission earlier today were still playing in his head that he witnessed from the cockpit and when he returned to the ship. The thought that the Federation would be going to war against this Grand Alliance as it was called in less than a week was both scary and disheartening to not only himself but also everyone onboard. When he signed up, he thought it was a good way to become popular with the ladies. The thought of him risking his life against an enemy bent on vengeance was something he had hoped he would never have to do. Now, he has no choice but to fight, putting his life on the line. At least now there was someone worth fighting for.

Speaking of which, he needed to talk with Janice. Michel had informed Jake that he should wait in the Flight Simulator Room until Michel talked with Janice first. They would be able to spend some time alone and undisturbed after Michel made sure the computer would not flag their presence together for a little while. Current events, as Michel put it, dictated they needed some private time together for a while to reflect. There are times Jake feels that Michel is acting far too shrewd for his own good.

The door to the simulation room on the starboard side opened. Janice stepped into the room and looked around as the door closed behind her. Once she saw Jake, she smiled as she walked towards him.

“Hey, Janice,” Jake said. “It looks like you managed to talk to...”

Before Jake could finish his sentence, Janice came up to him, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him passionately. While Jake was stunned at first, he got over it quickly as he returned her affection.

He did not want to think about what happened earlier for now as he wanted to enjoy this moment for as long as he can.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Office of Admiral Thaddeus, Gallonigher Industries and Advance Technology Research Center  
Planet Galatea, Gallonigher System, 30 Light-Years from Sol System  
3:38pm, June 22, Galactic Era 72 (The Next Day)*

“This is Admiral Thaddeus speaking.”

Admiral Thaddeus was sitting at his desk in his office reviewing the report that came in over an hour ago from the Federation Military Headquarters located in orbit over the Planet Morpheus, the third planet within the Gallonigher System. While Admiral Thaddeus is one of the highest ranking officers in the Federation Fleet, he founded the company Gallonigher Industries and Advance Technology Research Center near the end of the First Interstellar War. The company was responsible for the development and production of the PITGED system currently

in use with Federation ships that were made by Proxima Industries in the Proxima Centauri system. Because of Thaddeus' position in the military and the widespread use of the PITGED units, the company was nationalized at Thaddeus' request while retaining his position of overseeing the company. It is thanks to this tie-in with the government and the military that the company has flourished so well and was well-funded. While many claim this is a monopoly on the PITGED systems by Gallonigher Industries, the company holds the sole patents on the unit and no other company has managed to develop their own versions of the drive system.

However, Thaddeus knows why no one else has, but that was not his focus at this time. Thaddeus had received the mission debriefing from the Twenty-First Fleet that returned earlier today, specifically from the *Kasagi*. There were a few points about the hostile vessel that was developed by the Grand Alliance of Imperial Nations that caught his interest. These same points were what he wanted to review with someone he knew wanted to have the opportunity for his own company to shine. The Twenty-Seventh Fleet was also returning from its mission with all the refugees that both fleets were sent to retrieve. The shuttle that was destroyed in the *Kasagi* report was a diversion against the GAIN to make it easier for them to escape. That was clever.

*"Good afternoon, Admiral Thaddeus,"* a male voice said through Thaddeus phone terminal. *"I have reviewed the documentation you have sent over."*

"Ah, President Abrams," Thaddeus said, trying to sound amused. "So, what does the CEO of Barnard Starship Yards have to say after reviewing the documentation?"

*"I must say that I am very surprised by what transpired yesterday. I never expected to see the Liekan and Dexigalian people working together for the common goal of the destruction of the Federation. I am equally surprised by this vessel they have developed and the data that the Kasagi brought back about it. I am a little disappointed that there were no sensor readings but that alone is remarkably interesting as Tripwire did not detect them early on either."*

"So, are you surprised, excited, or both at what this means for your company?"

*"Do not get me wrong or mistake my tone as not being worried. I do have my concerns by what I am seeing on this vessel visually. We already know this vessel has several missile launchers and a number of four-tube missile launchers near the center aft of the craft. I believe there are forward firing launchers on the front of the ship in the arrowhead section, but I cannot verify. While the vessel is using kinetic ordinance, the ninety-six single barrel turrets and the two main cannons I see are what really have my attention."*

"I figured they would. If the GAIN has started to rely on kinetic weaponry in response to the ineffectiveness of energy weapons against our armor and the fact that the images are showing electromagnetic railing inside the barrels, this means that the GAIN have backpedaled their weapons development and resorted to one of the few weapons that can damage our armor."

*"In this case, railguns. This can be problematic in the opening months of the war."*

"Months? I would say that it would be weeks at the longest, or days at the shortest where the GAIN will make significant progress. While I foresee the Federation fleet bolstering our defensive lines at the beginning of the war, I am more concerned if the GAIN have found a particular weakness in the ship designs."

*"You and I both know what that weakness is. I pointed that out a long time ago when Lunar Manufacturing Industries first deployed the Tanken destroyers in the middle of the First Interstellar War before Proxima Industries took over the licensing and production of those vessels and other similar vessels. Every time I offered a better alternative design, my company was turned down because the Senate wanted a standardization of parts. Now all my company does is develop civilian vessels such as transports."*

“I am aware of the hardships your company has gone through to secure a military contract from Proxima Industries. That is why I have contacted you personally. I am in need of a company to develop a ship to counter the GAIN’s newest warship. That is where you and your development team come in. You know the weaknesses in Proxima’s designs and how to fix them. I also know that you may have designs that lack such a weakness from the start.”

*“It seems that you have faith in my company’s ability compared to the Senate’s. What benefit does your company get from having mine design a capable and effective combat ship?”*

“Gallonigher Industries has not been sitting idle this whole time in developments for the PITGED system. We have developed the Mark Three model some time ago, but the size of the engine is larger than any of Proxima’s designs can handle. I am prepared to offer a joint development and deployment project with Barnard Starship Yards for an exclusive deal to use the Mark Three’s in the development of the next generation of Federation warships.”

*“A deal that would benefit us both, I see, and possibly win the war in the long run. I like the sound of it but development will take some time as well as getting the resources.”*

“That is understandable. I would also suggest working with your development teams to present an upgrade option for Proxima’s designs. If the GAIN do know about the weaknesses in Proxima’s designs and start to exploit them, having your company already in possession of such upgrade options to present to the Senate would be a major slap in the face for that company.”

*“I like the sound of that. I will get my teams to work on these projects immediately. It sounds like you had this plan on your mind for a while now.”*

“I have, but my company is not about to sit on our hands waiting to react to events. We already have plans in the works for such scenarios.”

*“Considering that your company’s development team consists mostly of Minions who have advance technological knowledge, I should not be at all surprised.”*

“The Minions who work for my company are Federation citizens who are paid and treated fairly like any other employee if that is what you are trying to imply.”

*“I was not. I was implying that your company has a technological edge over any other company thanks to their knowledge. That is all. Despite this edge, you come to my company to request that we design a ship to combat the GAIN. Why is that?”*

“While my company is a research and development company for advance technology such as the PITGED system, we have limited shipbuilding capabilities. We are working to correct that matter at the moment, but you already have the resources to get this joint project up and running for such a combat vessel. I have already requested my development teams to begin working on a support vessel that can help our forces while hindering the GAIN’s, but such an endeavor requires secrecy to avoid the GAIN finding out about it. That is why there may be a delay in getting such vessels deployed.”

*“That is a valid reason. If these support vessels can be deployed at the same time as this new warship, they will easily achieve victory in the coming war. We must move quickly though.”*

“Agreed. One more thing, though. Once we send you the Mark Three drives, would you send over the schematic for the new vessel? I want to make sure that any tuning problems are addressed immediately before any further development is made before deployment.”

*“I can provide those to you once they are completed. I look forward to being labeled as the ‘heroes of the Second Interstellar War’ with you.”*

Thaddeus laughed a little.

“Presumptuous but agreeable. Have your research team contact mine and we will get this project rolling quickly. I am looking forward to the end results.”

*“As do I. I will talk to you later. Goodbye”*

The call was soon disconnected by Abrams. Thaddeus smiled as he used his terminal to connect to another individual, selecting the name “Roden” from the list. Once selected, the call only rang once before it was answered.

*“Thaddeus,”* a male voice said through a voice synthesizer. *“I take it Abrams agreed to your proposal?”*

*“He did as you had expected,”* Thaddeus said. *“I will be sending him some of the Mark Three’s as we had discussed and he will be providing us with the plans for the new ship.”*

*“Good. Once received, we will make use of the design elements to create our own vessel against the GAIN using the new Mark Four drives that were created. I take it that the support vessel idea was also well received?”*

*“It was. We will begin working on them in the coming weeks. Are you sure that the volunteers for that project know what are being asked of them? I do not want to feel like they are volunteering without fully knowing the risks involved.”*

*“I understand and appreciate your concern, but do not worry. No detail was withheld and they know what they are volunteering for. They are prepared and have waited for this moment for a while.”*

*“Very well. You may tell them that their patience has been appreciated and will be rewarded soon. I look forward to seeing how well they perform.”*

*“As do I, Thaddeus. The question is whether or not you are aware of the risks for developing the vessels you wish to use the Mark Four’s on? I have told you that the Senate will not be happy with you or this company once they are deployed with their development and construction being done in secret.”*

*“I know the risks to both my career military and this company involving that project, but to secure peace and freedom for the Federation, we must follow through and defeat the Liekans and Dexigalians for good this time. Anything short of that goal is unacceptable for our future.”*

*“I agree, but while I do not seek revenge but safety for me and my kind, I have my doubts of whether you can proceed without thinking of revenge for what happened during the last war.”*

*“My motives for my actions are what give me focus, Roden. I have made that clear a long time ago. We can dwell on the past at a later time. We must begin our plans for the future now before the war begins.”*

*“Very well, Thaddeus. I look forward to seeing how this all plays out.”*

As Roden disconnected the call, Thaddeus knew what he said was true about Thaddeus’ revenge. They may be under a different name, but the GAIN will pay for the death of his wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

*To be continued...  
END OF EPISODE I*