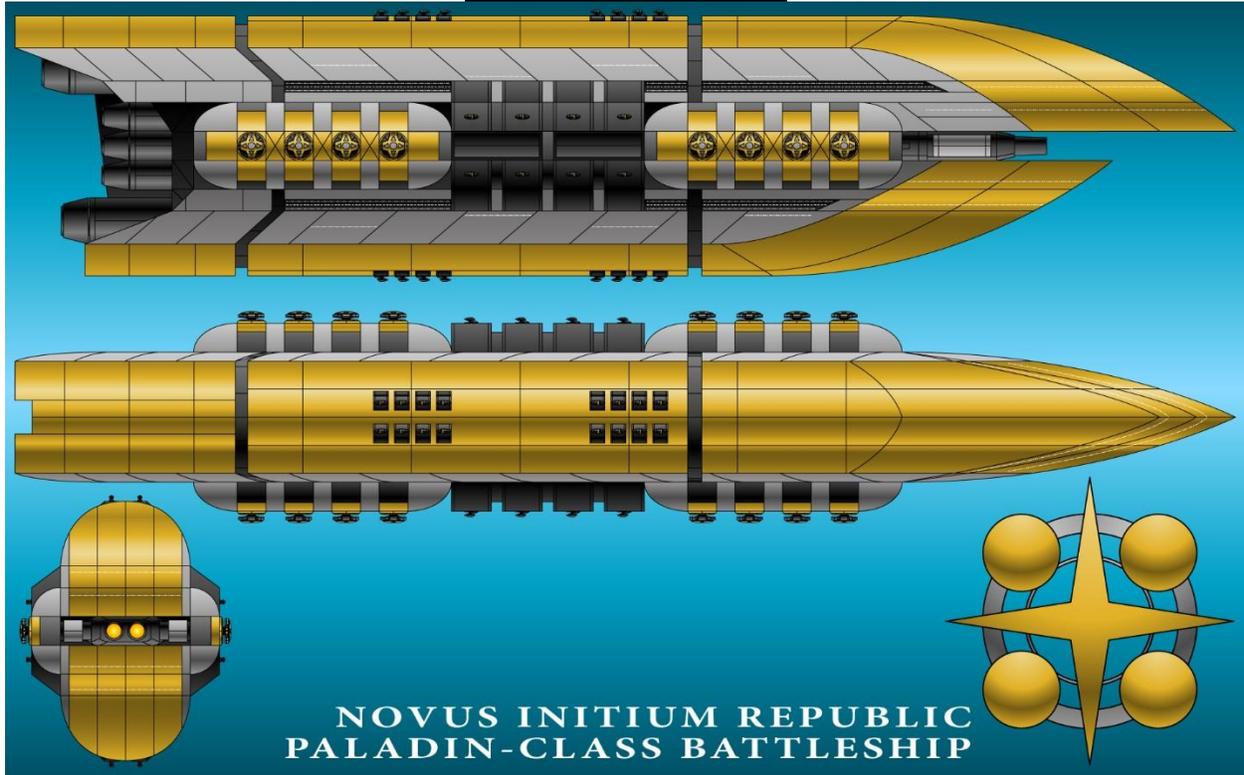


Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode I: Alone Yet Not



PART 1

*Office of Vice Admiral Trent, Novus Initium Navy Fleet Headquarters
Planet Luminaire Orbit, Lumen ("Light") System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
12:43pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

"I guess that answers the age-old question, now doesn't it?"

Vice Admiral Trent sat in his office looking over a report that just came across his desk a few minutes ago. It made him think of how many years have passed since Humankind has asked the question of whether they were alone in the universe or not, especially after how his ancestors found their way to the Novus Initium star cluster over three thousand years ago. A lot of this he recalled from his history classes.

In 2317 A.D., the Earth's moon through advance science was able to be terraformed and made habitable. Luna, the name for Earth's moon, was home to thousands of residents and was a beacon of Humankind's greatest achievement. However, that only lasted for over fifty years. During the terraforming project, strange purple crystals were found all over Luna. These crystals were put through tests and their structure was being analyzed. During this process, a child in a residential area saw one of the crystals in a jar that a homeowner came across while they were gardening. The child played with the crystal along with his toy which was equipped with lights and sound. The child, at some point, put his toy on the crystal, and the power supply in the toy was suddenly drained. While the child was perplexed by what he saw, the crystal was energized, sparking with energy. Once that crystal was charged, it began to draw electricity from surrounding electric devices and appliances, transferring that energy to other surrounding

crystals. Within ten minutes, half of Luna was without power as every crystal that was not secure was charged. Soon a massive cyclone appeared within the clouds, but the tip was pointing up while the wide portion was facing down. The cyclone's wide end grew to the point that it started becoming the size of the moon itself but was not sucking anything into it yet. It was at that point that people who resided under the wide end of the cyclone could see what was inside: a massive wormhole.

Luna was suddenly drawn into the wormhole from its orbit while some of the ships from the orbital fleet were either drawn in themselves or looked on helplessly as they could do nothing to stop what was occurring. Luna went through the wormhole and once it was on the other side, the wormhole closed permanently. Luna was now in some unknown part of space with no means to return home, and more problems arose from there. Luna was now in the middle of space just outside of the closest solar system. The trip through the wormhole had disrupted the artificial ozone layer and both heat and oxygen were starting to escape, causing temperatures to drop quickly. Both the military ships and civilian freighters that had traveled with Luna scanned the nearby system and found a habitable world within the system. Between the massive cargo holds of the freighters and the fact that all the ships possessed an interplanetary warp drive, the evacuation of Luna proceeded at a rather quick pace. After the civilians were evacuated, the crews of the ships began to salvage what technology and living quarters they could find on the once-again barren moon. Luna was effectively abandoned, a rogue moon that is now in a very wide orbit outside of the star system.

Life for the now stranded Humans was rough for a while as they had to make a new home on an alien world. While they did not have specialists in certain careers and jobs, they did have the complete database and information from Earth stored on several computers with the knowledge and instructions on how to rebuild their society. They also discovered that they were transported to a remote star cluster as there was no galactic core to speak of. Without a name for the planet, star system, or star cluster, they decided to use Latin words to name them. They called the star cluster "Novus Initium," which meant "new beginning." They named the star system "Lumen," which meant "light." Finally, they named their new home planet Luminaire. Their first city was called Luminous and would be the capital for their new world.

Many had asked what had happened to cause that whole scenario to happen, and reluctantly the child responsible told people what had happened. The boy wasn't scolded as there was no way for him or anyone including the crystal researchers could know this event would happen under those circumstances. However, it was discovered that after the crystals were energized and created the wormhole, they disappeared or disintegrated. There were a few that still existed on the moon in containment for research and these specimens were examined to see if they could either be used to travel to other systems somehow or find a way back home. Unfortunately, they could not find the means to do the latter to this day and eventually gave up on that prospect. With only a few crystals remaining, they could not simulate a wormhole and decided to suspend any further research until they could come across any further crystals.

Over the course of over two thousand years, society on Luminaire grew as did the population. By now there were over eight billion people on the planet and the entire Lumen system had been charted. Not long after, several moons within the star system possessed the same crystals that were found on Luna that were untouched. The new government, the Novus Initium Republic, ordered their excavation to do research into replicating controlled wormholes to go to neighboring systems. It took more than ten years of research and unmanned probes to finalize two systems that make use of the crystals: the jump drive and the star gate. The jump

drive allowed a ship to use the crystals in small portions to jump to the next star system, but the crystals would be spent or dissolved after the jump due to the wormhole itself dissolving them. The star gate by comparison was a large structure where the crystals' energy focused at the end of the structure and allowed ships to go through. The crystals remain intact as they are not being transported in the process while energized. It was also discovered that if the crystals are not energized, that they can safely be transported through wormholes. This led to the rapid development and deployment of star gates to new systems within the local star cluster. This led to the name of the crystals being Salire Purpura Crystals (or "purple jump" crystals in Latin) due to their color and function. The expansion and terraforming of worlds like Luminaire's began what the Republic deemed the Expansion Era. This lasted from 4603 A.D. to 4930 A.D. before expansion slowed down due to the population increase not keeping up with the colonization of the new systems. While the Republic government would like to see the entire star cluster being explored, it ordered the halt on expansion to allow for the new systems to be settled.

Over five hundred years later, now more than three thousand years since Luna came to the star cluster, the Novus Initium Republic continues to thrive with over five and a quarter trillion people. Many of the "core" systems of the Republic began to specialize in a certain aspect of society. One example is the Sanctus system which serves as the home of all the religions that are in the Republic, much like the Vatican of Rome for Catholic Christianity and the Masjid al-Haram of Mecca for Islam. Many of those religions have been modified or eventually phased out due to the change of no longer being on or near Earth such as the Jews facing Jerusalem or Muslims facing Mecca. The Voluptas system is also specialized in that one can find entertainment of all sorts. This does range from kid-friendly entertainment among the inner planets of that system to more adult entertainment towards the outer planets. For the latter, it is the only system that allows for such pleasures legally as they are illegal outside the system. Earth and the history of Humankind is still taught in school as more of "ancient" history, but those born in the star cluster like Trent continue to view Earth as nothing more than the home of their ancestors, not their current home. They do not feel any emotional or ancestral attachment to their place of origin, which has led to why the attempt to return to Earth has not happened in thousands of years.

The Novus Initium Republic is to this day considered a bit of a "melting pot," like the United States was on Earth but this is due to the different nationalities that were living on Luna before it was brought to the star cluster. Most of the inhabitants were from America as well as Asian and European with a few Middle Eastern, African, Hispanic, and Australian residents. Many of them brought their cultures and religions along with them which led to some issues at first. However, they realized that they had to learn to accept their differences to survive living in their new home. This coexistence continues even today as people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds continue to respect one another, though there are the occasional radicals who try to stir things up either due to what some consider mental instability or some form of traumatic experience. Religious holidays are still observed, though these holidays over the centuries and what they originally stood for had undergone some form and change, though the core aspect remains.

When those from Luna decided to create a government in order to find a means to govern themselves, they chose to form a democratic parliament style of government run by a Supreme Chancellor who is elected every five years and serves as commander-in-chief of the military, a Senate where members are elected every six years with a third of the seats open for voting every two years, and finally a Supreme Court to help enforce the laws created by the Senate. While the

positions of the Supreme Chancellor and the Supreme Court have not changed even after the Expansion Era, the Senate by comparison has grown exponentially to try to encompass the Republic from different worlds or districts depending on the size of the population. While this has led to long Senate sessions, they are usually resolved in less than a few days depending on the severity of the issue that is being addressed. If all else fails, the issue is taken to the public to vote as no one likes to be delayed for more than a few days on an issue.

The Republic military was not very large prior to the Expansion Era but advancements made near the end of that time allowed the ships to go from railguns and particle cannons to beam lasers to reduce the need for ammo rounds. This also led to the development of energy shields and nanobot armor repair systems to strengthen the defenses of the Republic fleet. When the Expansion Era began, the fleet suddenly found itself thinning out as more and more star systems were colonized. Because of this, shipyards became automated and the introduction of modular parts and components as well as the reduction of the number of types of navy ships allowed their numbers to grow. However, it was still not fast enough which was another reason for the Republic to cease any further colonization. The military currently has three different types of ships: destroyers, cruisers, and battleships. These ships currently fulfill roles such as border patrol, customs inspections, and finally planetary and orbital defense. Law enforcement is left up to civilian agencies and units though the military can intervene if law enforcement requests their assistance. The ships classes that are active as of 5433 A.D. are the Paladin-class Battleship, the Guardian-class Cruiser, and the Crusader-class Frigate. Trent currently commands one of the Paladin-class Battleships that is currently in dock right now.

However, in all that time, while alien wildlife has been discovered on several worlds that were eventually inhabited, not once has Humankind come across any intelligent races during their expansion. That may no longer be the case. The report Trent was given shows that for the past several weeks, maybe longer, long range scanners have detected what appear to be several transmissions from the Eastern and Southeastern regions of the star cluster just outside of their borders that are artificial in origin. The part that has worried the Supreme Chancellor as well as the military is the fact that the transmissions are getting stronger indicating that whoever is generating the transmissions is getting closer to Republic space. They were just detected in the closest star system to the Tranquillus System, located over thirty-five jumps via the star gates to the southeast of the Lumen System. It would take them a couple of hours to get there with the Eleventh Fleet that Trent is in command of. The documentation he was given also called for his deployment to that system at thirteen-hundred hours or one o'clock in the afternoon in civilian terms. This did not give him a whole lot of time. The mission was also considered "classified" so he could not talk to his wife about it. He sent her a message to let her know he was going on assignment and could not contact her right now. Hopefully she gets his message before his departure. She works at the local news agency as an anchorwoman along with a good friend of hers.

The scanners not only identified so far two distinct languages in the transmissions but also ships of two distinct characteristics, though exact details of the ships could not be determined without doing an active scan which would alert those parties involved. It can only be assumed that the higher-ups want the alien forces to enter Republic space rather than the other way around to both justify the defense of Republic territory instead of "invading" someone else's even if it is contested. The other reason for not doing an active scan is to not scare them away. These races are the first intelligent alien races Humanity has ever come across in their entire history and the last thing they needed to do was frighten them away. Trent's ship would be given

the entire dictionary of the primary language of the Republic, which is still the English dialect after all this time, so that they would be able to translate each other to make contact.

Apparently, the Joint Chiefs also decided to call in a squad of SAGATs from the Severus System located two jumps west of Lumen to be on board Trent's battleship. The SAGATs which is short for "Starship, Air, and Ground Assault Troopers" is like the United States' Marines over three thousand years ago. However, the SAGATs' roles include deployment in space as boarding, anti-boarding, and security forces. The unit that is on the way is under the command of Colonel Blair, who Trent is friends with from a long time back and would be arriving ten minutes before his ship would depart. However, the one aspect of this mission is that only Trent and his second-in-command as well as the squad leader of the SAGATs are to know about the true nature of the mission. The public are unaware of what this mission is about and will remain that way until otherwise.

Trent looked at the time. His ship was to depart in thirteen minutes. He picked up his tablet, got up from his desk, and turned off the lights before he walked out the door. Part of him knew that he would be making history today. He began to feel nervous as he walked towards the elevators. It was the first time he ever felt this way about a mission since he joined the Navy. While there have been missions involving some dissidents over the history of the Republic Navy since the Expansion Era, nothing ever involved the need for a battleship, much less one of the Main Fleets, to ever be called upon.

As he pressed the elevator call button, he looked over the pad once more. However, he soon heard someone coming down the hall and turned the screen on the pad off. He looked and recognized the person coming down the hall. It was a shorter caucasian woman with brown hair done up in a bun with captain pips on her uniform.

"Admiral Trent," she said. "Perfect timing. I was just coming to see you to let you know we will be departing soon."

"Thank you, Captain Shannon," Trent said. "I did lose track of time for a moment."

At that point, the elevator arrived. The doors opened and no one was in it. Both Trent and Shannon stepped in. Trent put his hand on a palm scanner located above the deck number pad. The scanner read his handprint.

"*Identity confirmed,*" a female computer voice said. "*Destination?*"

"Docking Bay Eighteen," Trent said. "Nonstop."

"*Confirmed.*"

Trent took his hand off the scanner as the elevator began to move downwards.

"Makes me wish I had an office here," Shannon said. "It would make getting to report to your office a lot easier."

"Maybe," Trent said, "but there are too many captains to accommodate which is why only rear admirals and higher currently have offices. So, is the *Renaldo* ready for deployment?"

"It is but this mission to run firing and testing drills out on the edge of Republic space seems rather ludicrous."

Trent figured she had not been told what the real assignment was. Otherwise it would have leaked.

"Maybe so," Trent said, "but it's always best to be prepared. We don't know if we are alone in this star cluster or not, so we must be prepared in case we are not."

"Somehow I doubt we are not alone. Humanity has been in the star cluster for over three thousand years. If there were any other races in the cluster, we would have encountered them by now unless they have not reached a space age, much less an industrial age."

Trent tried not to laugh as that may no longer be the case. His orders did say to bring both his second-in-command and the SAGAT squad leader up to speed about the real objective of this mission once they were on their way. Considering how many jumps there were between Lumen and Tranquillus, he had plenty of time to tell them what the real mission was.

“Regardless,” Trent said, “we might as well get these exercises completed. It has been a while since the last exercise that I think Lieutenant Commander Chrystal is getting bored.”

“Yeah,” Shannon said, “she is one of those with a rather itchy trigger finger. I’ve seen her practice with a laser rifle on a near daily basis until the power clip is dead. She then loads a second one while the first one is going through a quick charge. She can be scary with a gun. Part of me wonders why she is not with the SAGATs instead of the Navy.”

“That all depends on her motives. It could be that she wanted to fire something bigger than a rifle. Either that or she felt safer on a ship. There is also one other possibility, but I don’t know if this is the case or not.”

“What’s that?”

“Bear in mind that the physical requirements for the SAGATs is much higher than that of the Navy due to the nature of their role. Part of me wonders if she could not make the cut. I don’t investigate the backgrounds of my crew unless it is absolutely needed. I generally leave that to Human Resources unless something is affecting that member of the crew.”

“Do I have such authority to request for a crew member’s background?”

“As the commanding officer of a ship, you do as they are also your crew. It is your right to know things about your crew if it is something you feel you need to know that would affect their performance. Bear in mind, though, this privilege should also not be abused or used for the sake of stalking someone. Most of the time, if you have a question about a person, it is usually more appropriate to ask them directly.”

“I understand. I should ask her about it after the mission.”

“By the way, you wouldn’t have gotten the name of the squad leader of the SAGATs that we are supposed to be bringing aboard, would you? My report does not show who it was.”

“My report doesn’t show who it is either, so I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

“Because there is a possibility that it is someone I know from a while back. We keep in touch occasionally. If he is not here, I will tell you about him later.”

“There is one thing I don’t get about the SAGATs. Why are they based in the Severus System two jumps west?”

“Because just as the ancient Latin name implies, the harsh conditions of the planet there make them ideal training grounds for the SAGATs. If they are forged in the harsh environments of those planets, they become some of the toughest troopers Humankind has ever seen.”

“I see. I doubt I would have survived their training either if I applied.”

“Maybe not, but you are where you wanted to be so just take pride in that.”

The elevator began to slow down and soon came to a complete stop. The doors opened to reveal a massive observation deck that shows the ships in the current bay. There were some Crusader Destroyers and a Guardian Cruiser but the ship in front of them was the Paladin Battleship, the *Renaldo*. This was their battleship. Battleships were the only ships with proper names though as the Crusaders and Guardians were too numerous to be given names. The boarding ramp extended to the ship’s docking port. A couple of security guards flanked the ramp. Trent and Shannon got off the elevator and headed for the ramp. They stopped several meters from the ramp.

“We’ll wait right here for the SAGATs to arrive,” Trent said. “I want to make sure they

get on board when they arrive since we are on a tight departure schedule.”

Trent looked at his watch. There was less than a minute before they would arrive. At that moment, a Crusader flew into the same bay as the *Renaldo* and docked at the port some distance to the left of them.

“Right on time,” Trent said. “Leave it to them to be punctual.”

The boarding ramp doors soon opened and after a few seconds, two columns of SAGATs in full armored combat gear began marching down and out of the ramp. They turned towards their direction as they were being led by two high-ranking SAGATs in standard combat attire. There looked to be over a hundred SAGATs coming their way.

Trent recognized the higher ranked of the two officers wearing the insignia of a colonel. It was the person he was referring Shannon to earlier.

“Are either of the two officers the one you know?” Shannon asked.

“Yes,” Trent said. “It’s the colonel that I know. I figured he would be assigned to this exercise.”

The two officers leading the SAGATs came to less than ten feet in front of Trent and Shannon before the colonel leading them yelled out a command.

“Company, halt!” he said as they took one last step and brought their other foot next to the other.

The colonel and the second officer saluted.

“Colonel Blair of the Twenty-Third Company, reporting in, Vice Admiral,” the colonel said.

Trent and Shannon saluted.

“I am Vice Admiral Trent. I welcome you and your company aboard the *Renaldo*.”

Trent put his arm down as did Shannon. Blair and the other officer did the same.

“This is Captain Shannon, my second-in-command,” Trent said, gesturing to Shannon.

“It is good to meet you,” Shannon said.

“It is good to meet you as well,” Blair said. “It has been a long time, Admiral.”

“Likewise,” Trent said. “We will talk more on the way. Who is this officer next to you?”

“I am Lieutenant Colonel Benja, Admiral,” the other SAGAT officer said. “I was assigned to the Colonel’s company three months ago.”

“Well, welcome aboard, Lieutenant Colonel. Colonel, have your men ever been on a Paladin before?”

“No, sir,” Blair said. “This will be the first time for this company excluding myself.”

Before Trent said anything, he noticed a few people walking his way from behind the SAGATs, a gentleman and two women. Trent recognized one of the ladies and knew he would need to talk to them privately when they got close. Blair took notice of Trent’s gaze going behind them and turned to look. He saw those three coming up from behind. He turned back towards Trent.

“Is that Tora with those two coming this way?” Blair asked.

“Yes, it is,” Trent said. “Colonel, I’m going to have Captain Shannon escort you and your men to your accommodations. I’ll be along shortly.”

“Understood. Captain?”

Shannon looked at Trent briefly, pondering what was going on before she directed her attention towards Colonel Blair.

“Right this way, please,” Shannon said as she began walking towards the ramp.

“Forward, march!” Blair said as he and the rest of the SAGATs began to march towards

the boarding ramp. Trent stepped to the side more than ten feet away from them, keeping his gaze on Tora and the other two people as they approached them. More than half of the SAGATs were on the boarding ramp as Tora stopped five feet in front of Trent.

“Greetings, Vice Admiral,” Tora said. “Good to see you again.”

“You realize you need to be a bit more careful,” Trent said. “Blair is the one leading this company and he saw you. He’ll know something is up now that you are here.”

“Maybe so, but he’ll be informed while we are on route. I don’t tend to leave him in the dark.”

“That’s something I would not expect an agent of the Republic CIA to say.”

“Maybe so, but this is a rather delicate situation.”

“So, you know what this mission is all about after all.”

“As you have said it yourself, I am an agent of the RCIA. It is our job to know these things. How else do you think you got the information on this mission?”

“So now the big question is why you are here and who are these two you brought with you?”

“These two are appointed ambassadors should first contact actually be made. Allow me to introduce Wade and Autumn. They are also husband and wife.”

Trent looked at the two of them.

“It is a pleasure to meet you both,” Trent said

“Likewise, Admiral,” Wade said.

“Tora, there is one problem with bringing yourself and these two on board. Right now, the crew thinks this is combat exercise that we are about to do in the Tranquillus System. They will wonder why you three are on board.”

“Do you really think I would run such a risk prematurely? Our identification cards identify us as appointed observers from the Senate. The crew won’t know why we are really here until first contact is made.”

“Aside from myself and now possibly Blair, that is. Hopefully you will inform him about what is going on.”

“I will have you call him and Captain Shannon to your Ready Room at thirteen-fifteen hours. I will speak with you all then.”

“Alright. Let’s hurry up and get on board. The ship will be leaving shortly, and I need to be on the bridge.”

Trent began to head for the boarding ramp. The security guards let him pass but halted Tora and the others to inspect their ID cards. They cleared them, and they proceeded up the ramp as well. It took about a minute or so to reach the docking airlock which was still open. There were two security guards at the airlock as well, but their role was to make sure that the airlock was closed and secure. The guards saluted as Trent walked in. Trent turned towards the one on his left.

“I will have you two escort the three people behind me once they are on board and the airlock is secure. Take them to the VIP quarters as they are observers for the Senate.”

“Understood, sir,” the guard said.

Trent continued down the corridor towards the closest elevator. He could hear the ship’s engines priming and coming to life. The elevator door opened, and Trent walked in.

“Bridge,” Trent verbally commanded.

The elevator began to move upwards as Trent looked at his watch. There were three minutes remaining before the ship’s departure. He was cutting it close for once. After a minute,

the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened to reveal the dual level bridge in front of him with most stations on the lower level. While there looked to be a massive window in the front of the bridge, it was a series of sensors and screens that made it look like such. The screens can easily be changed to tactical views and terrain maps depending on the mission and the circumstances. This screen is used on all Republic ships. The lower level had the Helm, Operations, Communications, and Engineering stations while the Command and Tactical stations were on the upper level. The Flag Officer seat was located between and to the back of the Tactical and Command stations.

Captain Shannon was already in the Command chair. She turned around to see Trent walking onto the bridge.

“I was beginning to wonder if you were going to make it,” she said.

“Thankfully I did,” Trent said. “You got the SAGATs settled in?”

“Yes, sir. They know it will take an hour and a half to get to get to our destination once we are underway.”

“Good. I will be calling both you and Colonel Blair to my Ready Room fifteen minutes after we are underway. I will bring you both up to speed on some things.”

“Understood,” Shannon said as she turned back around and pressed the intercom button on her chair. “All hands, this is the captain. Prepare for departure.”

Shannon pressed the button again to turn the intercom off.

“Lieutenant Commander Ro,” Shannon said, “contact the fleet and dock control so that we can coordinate our departures out of dock. We will be taking the lead.”

“Understood,” Ro said.

“Lieutenant Commander Ryan,” Shannon said, “take us out.”

“Aye-aye, ma’am,” Ryan said. “Releasing docking clamps. Thrusters are now active. Moving away from dock. Main engines are online. Proceeding at one-quarter forward thrust.”

The ship began to move away from the dock and towards the bay exit. The other ships within the bay except for the Crusader that brought the SAGATs began to separate themselves from their docks as well and waited for the battleship to exit the current bay. The battleship soon turned to starboard, or to the right in civilian terms, once it left the bay and proceeded down the central bay corridor towards one of the main exits. After a few minutes, the battleship passed through the atmospheric pressure force field and entered open space.

“Helm,” Trent said, “align us to the Fertilis star gate. Set course for the Tranquillus System and maintain this position until the rest of the fleet has cleared dock.”

“Yes, sir,” Ryan said.

“Lieutenant Commander Chrystal,” Shannon said, “please retract the turrets. They will not be needed until we reach Tranquillus.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Chrystal said.

The beam laser turrets for the longest time have usually retracted into their housings in order to protect them and namely their crystals in the barrels from any damage. When they are retracted on the current line of ships, they look like blisters on various locations of the hull. The beam lasers themselves are quite the piece of work since their introduction in 4761 A.D. due to the Resource Conservation, Preservation, and Recycling Bill. The laser beam weapons come in three different sizes depending on the ships they are usually installed on but are generally dual barrel to offer the maximum amount of damage at a target as well as to consolidate the number of turrets needed. Small beam lasers are only found on destroyers and are also found on cruisers. Medium beam lasers are also found on cruisers alongside the small lasers, but they are also

found on battleships. The large beam lasers are only found on battleships. All beam laser turrets share common traits despite their size. They use standard beam lenses which produce a visible yellow beam when fired. However, the lenses can be switched on the spot within the turrets to range from radio to gamma for different ranges and level of damages applied depending on the mission parameters. There are also white multi-spectrum lenses but they are the shortest range and the most lethal of the lenses. They are only used when lethal destructive force is needed. The lasers also have two different settings: beam laser mode and pulse laser mode. The beam laser mode reduces the tracking speed of the guns in exchange for a powerful focused long-range shot. However, this is also the slower of the two modes when it comes to rate of fire due to the blast being fired. The pulse laser mode increases tracking and rate of fire, but the range is almost cut in half and is designed more for a point defense system against smaller targets. The beam that is fired is also weaker to achieve the higher rate of fire. However, the amount of damage in both modes applied over the same period is generally the same when the guns were first tested against the same target at different ranges in both modes.

This bill was also responsible for the energy shields and nanobot armor repair systems. The energy shield system was designed to work as a defensive field against threats both artificial and natural. It also serves as the first line of defense against such threats. The strength of the shield will normally vary on the size of the ship that is using it. The shields were designed to be able to take impacts from various things such as directed energy and projectile weapons as well as small rocks and debris. While the shields can only take so much damage before they fail, there are shield booster modules on board each ship that divert power from the ship's capacitors to strengthen the shields. However, this has been known divert some power away from other systems including the weapons depending on what all is running at the time. The same can be said for the nanobot armor repair system. As the name states, nanobots are used to repair armor and hull damage to the ship if the shields fail. The armor serves as the second line of defense and thus is crucial for the survivability of those on board should the armor be completely breached. Because of the small size of the nanobots, there are a massive number of them stored on board, but they also require energy via remote wireless transfer in order to function and repair armor and hull damage. While both the shield boosters and nanobots can run at the same time, they take a way a significant amount of power from the capacitors forcing the beam lasers to shut down. Otherwise the capacitors would be completely drained faster than the antimatter reactor can replenish them. Both should only be used if the ship is not in combat and is trying to repair itself.

The last part of the bill involving the recycling of all known materials, ships included. New ships usually have a lifespan of around 100 years before the newest design is introduced. There are two reasons behind this timeframe. The first is the fact that the modules on board are modular and thus can be switched out for the newest systems without much change or refitting. The second is that every part of a recycled ship was at one point a previous ship or more. When a ship is scheduled to be recycled, every component on board is stripped and melted according to what the components are made of. They are cleaned and strengthened before they are made into solid components again for the new ship. Depending on the size and structure of the ship, new parts and components are also added alongside the recycled ones. On average, a "new" ship may be made of up to ninety-five percent recycled materials. The logic behind this was due to Humankind's excessive waste since the Twentieth Century and in order not to repeat the same mistakes the Republic deemed the bill necessary. Thus, there is little strip-mining involved on the planets where excavation and resource gathering is being done. The average turnaround time for ships being recycled through the automated system is one day for destroyers, five days for

cruisers, and ten days for battleships.

Finally, each ship has in storage some Salire Purpura Crystals with enough to achieve a single jump. This was meant solely for emergencies when a ship for whatever reason can no longer move on its own or has an emergency where the use of the onboard interplanetary warp drive and local star gates would be deemed too long to get to its destination. The range of the jumps is limited to twelve Light-years in any direction. Once the jump has been completed, the crystals are disintegrated, and the ship will have to use conventional means of travel to get to their destination.

Ever since Trent was assigned to the *Renaldo*, he was impressed with what the ship was capable of. When the centennial ship upgrade rolled around in 5400 A.D., Horribilis Industries who eventually won the contract at the time wanted to show once again they make the best ships in the Republic compared to their rivals. Their entry into the battleship category has proven thus far to be the most powerful warship in Republic history. This was the Paladin-class battleship, a fifteen-hundred-meter-long vessel equipped with the heaviest firepower and defenses ever seen on a ship of this size. It was also the largest battleship ever made requiring a longer turnaround time and additional resources to make them in the same numbers as their predecessors. Propelled by ten large engines, these ships were still rather slow compared to their cruiser and destroyer counterparts. Designed for anti-cruiser, anti-battleship, and anti-installation combat, the Paladin was more than well equipped for such roles. The ships were equipped with sixteen dual large beam laser cannons for anti-battleship and anti-installation combat. The ship is also equipped with forty-eight medium dual beam laser cannons for use against cruisers. However, for the first time ever on a battleship, a powerful primary weapon was installed: The Dual Giga Beam Laser Cannon. This weapon is by far the most powerful beam laser cannon ever made and was designed as a one-shot ship killer as well as an effective anti-installation weapon. However, the power requirements for the weapon is rather massive and can only be fired once every few minutes. It is believed that this weapon alone was the reason for the ship's massive size to hold the multitude of reactors and capacitors to keep the weapon firing even if the other weapons and shields were active. The cannon though has a limited arc of fire, though, and can only fire forward with up to fifteen degrees either to port (left) or starboard (right). The Paladin also has four large bays, two on each side of the ship, that not only allow for shuttles and small transports to land but also allows for troop transports to be deployed. While sporting impressive offensive capabilities, the Paladin's defensive capabilities are nothing to laugh at either. In a rare manner, the ship sports both a primary and secondary shield systems where the secondary shield will activate once the primary is depleted. Both shields can get stronger with the equipped shield booster modules. Should an enemy survive long enough to get through the Paladin's shields, they must then go through the sixteen-hundred-millimeter-thick layered steel plates to make any significant damage as well as the nanobot armor repair system activated by that point. There were only two roles that the battleship was designed to fulfill: to serve as the flagship of a fleet and to provide heavy firepower when the situation calls for it. It is rarely ever seen alone, usually with Crusaders and Guardians escorting it since the one weakness of the Paladin is the lack of anti-frigate and anti-destroyer weapons. It can, however, take out such targets at a distance with its available guns. The lowest rank to command a Paladin is a flag officer with the rank of Rear Admiral (Lower Half) and higher with no exceptions. There has been some speculation as to whether the Paladin will continue to be in service after the next centennial ship upgrade due to its capabilities. While that is still a long way off, a lot of that will be up to the rival companies who compete for that contract and whether they can show they can do better than what the Paladin is

capable of. For now, Trent could not be any prouder of the *Renaldo* and its capabilities.

“The ships have cleared the dock,” Chrystal said. “The last few ships are moving to join the fleet.”

Trent looked at the tactical part of the display on the main screen. Including the ships moving to join the fleet, there were eight Guardian Cruisers and thirty-two Crusader Destroyers. Including the *Renaldo*, that made forty-one ships that make up the Eleventh Fleet. The First through the Fifth Fleets have hundreds of ships including additional battleships. The Sixth through the Tenth Fleets will have just under a hundred ships but with a few battleships in their fleets. The Eleventh through Twentieth Fleets usually have less than fifty ships like his own but with no additional battleships. All of the other ships and fleets are usually not assigned numbers but rather names depending on their assignments and detached ships are usually on their own for various roles and assignments.

After a couple of minutes, the last of the ships were in formation. Trent pressed the communications button on his chair.

“This is Vice Admiral Trent to the fleet,” he said. “Our target destination is the Tranquillus System on the border of the Southeast Region. Align to the Fertilis star gate and standby for warp speed.”

Because the star cluster had no galactic core, there needed to be a sense of direction when it came to navigating the star cluster. Since the Lumen system was located in the center of the cluster, it was best to use cardinal directions much like when navigating on planets. Therefore, ships when they are in flight will use those directions such as going north or southwest. The areas outside of Republic-controlled space are also listed as regions with the same cardinal directional names such as the Northern Region and the Southwestern Region. The Tranquillus System was located on the edge of Republic space near the Southeast Region. According to the report Trent was given, the transmissions that were being detected were coming from that region of space.

“All ships report ready, Admiral,” Ro said.

“Very well,” Trent said. “All ships, activate warp drive.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” Ryan said. “Warp drive active.”

As the battleship along with the rest of the fleet began to accelerate, Luminaire behind them slowly moved away but then quickly disappeared as the ship reached five AUs per second. The star gate was located near the farthest planet as the battleship sped towards it, surrounded by waves and fluctuations of the warp bubble around them. Within fifteen seconds, the battleship began to slow down as it approached the gate. The bubble began to collapse and disappear once the ship was five kilometers away. Ahead there were a few logistical ships and freighters preparing to enter the gate.

The star gate itself was made of four rings connected by four pylons at equilateral points. The second ring in was larger as the ring provided a “bubble” of sorts to safely “hurl” a ship through an artificial wormhole that is generated by the last ring while the other rings propel the ship into the wormhole. After a ship is on the other end of the gate, the wormhole immediately closes as a safety precaution. The star gates need to be near a planet as that was where their power source was located. While traveling using warp drive within the system and instant transportation to the next system means one could traverse the entire length of the Republic in less than a few hours, the time delay of entering the gates is what slows some things down a little bit.

However, military ships take priority when it comes to star gate usage. Also, thanks to the

size of the star gate being quite massive, several ships can group together and traverse the star gate at the same time. The battleship was too large on its own to be grouped effectively, but the cruisers can go in sets of four and the destroyers in sets of eight at a time. This meant that the star gate would have to open and send the entire fleet seven times at each gate. Thankfully, the rest of the ships of the fleet when traversing in this manner don't have to wait on the others and continue to the rendezvous point.

"Ro," Shannon said, "inform gate control that we are going through the gate and to give us priority."

"Understood, ma'am," Ro said. "Transmitting now."

After a few seconds, Ro's console signaled a response.

"Request received and acknowledged," Ro said. "The logistical ships are moving to the side to make way."

"Good," Shannon said. "Ryan, proceed into the star gate."

"Yes, ma'am."

Trent pushed the button on his chair.

"This is fleet command to all ships. Assume mass star gate jump formations and proceed to the next gates until we hit the rendezvous point. Out."

Trent let go of the button as he saw the ships in the fleet start forming groups to go through the gate in sets. The gate came to life as the battleship entered the star gate. When it reached the second ring, the gate using electromagnetics stopped the battleship from going any further as the process to jump was automated. The battleship was suddenly enveloped in a subspace field to prepare it for transport to the next system. Once the field was stabilized, four purple beams from the front end of the gate fired and converged at a single point. This point quickly formed a wormhole. Trent had to admit that each time he saw that open, it looked like they were being tossed into some sort of abyss. Once the wormhole was stabilized, the star gate's electromagnetic fields "pushed" the battleship through the wormhole. Within seconds, the ship was through the wormhole and appeared within the Fertilis-to-Lumen star gate on the other side. The subspace field disappeared, and the battleship was pushed out by that gate's electromagnetic system.

"We have cleared the gate," Ryan said.

"Good," Shannon said. "Set course for the next gate. Engage warp drive when ready."

"Yes, ma'am."

Shannon turned to Trent.

"You realize that this course will take us through the Voluptas System, right?" Shannon asked. "I know you are friends with a couple of idols there. Did you want us to slow down for you to get in contact with them?"

"That is not needed. Once the assignment is over, I will look into contacting them at that point if needed."

"Understood. I just thought to ask."

Shannon turned back towards the front. Trent looked at the time. It was now thirteen-zero-eight hours and Tora would be coming up shortly. Trent got up and began walking towards his Ready Room which was located behind a door to the left of the bridge. He stopped and turned towards Shannon.

"A representative of the Senate will be coming to the bridge wanting to see me in less than seven minutes as well as Colonel Blair. When they arrive, I want you to join us in my Ready Room."

“Understood, sir,” Shannon said.

Trent turned and pressed a button on the right side of the door frame. The door opened and Trent walked inside, the door closing behind him. His Ready Room was rather spacious with a couch to his right as well as a table with a lamp and a plaque. There was also a built-in mini-fridge for drinks to his left as well as a monitor. Near the far wall from the door was a desk with a terminal with a seat behind and two seats in front. Trent walked around to the other side of the desk and sat down in the seat. He activated his terminal and brought up the intercommunications system. He activated the audio system in the room where the SAGATs were stationed.

“Colonel Blair,” Trent said, “please report to my Ready Room for an important meeting by thirteen-fifteen hours.”

Trent deactivated the intercom system and sent a private text message to Tora for her to also report to his Ready Room since she would also be presenting them with what the real mission was about. She sent a text message back saying she was on her way. Trent turned off the terminal and reclined in his chair. This was going to be an interesting meeting to say the least.

Trent got up and headed to the mini-fridge. He tried to keep the fridge as stocked up with drinks as possible. None of the drinks were alcoholic but then again the only places where such drinks were legal with actual alcohol was in the Voluptas System. Outside of the Voluptas System, the alcoholic drinks were made of a synthetic alcohol, or “synthohol” for short, with the same affects as regular alcohol but without the hangovers. This was developed over three thousand years ago as Luminaire did not have the ingredients to make genuine alcoholic beverages. Instead, a synthetic variant was created to give the same effects as alcohol. It would be over two thousand years later during the Expansion Era when planets with the ingredients to make genuine alcohol were found. Laws were passed concerning the development and sale of genuine alcohol to be allowed in Voluptas only due to its detrimental effects to the body after prolonged consumption. However, neither version of such drinks were allowed on military ships or bases.

He had some sodas and some fruit juice drinks stocked up but there was also a water dispenser within the fridge. Trent grabbed one of the sodas, namely a Crystallis bottle, from the fridge. Crystallis drinks were based on the ancient Japanese ramune drinks that were clear or colorful depending on flavor and were lightly carbonated. This reduced the bad effects on the stomach. The company that makes them has a few competitors, like Flare who also makes a wide variety of sodas that have small amounts of legal medicinal stimulants in them. Trent tried them in the past and they were good so he kept a supply of them on hand. He also kept iced coffee drinks in which coffee beans was one of the several forms of plants that came from the ancient moon of Luna. He tried to keep all of these in stock in the fridge since visitors to his Ready Room may be in the mood for any of these cold beverages.

After grabbing a bottle of Crystallis from the fridge and closing the door, he went back to his desk and sat down, opening the bottle and taking a few sips to help him relax. After a few minutes, the door chime went off.

“Come in,” Trent said.

The door opened and Shannon, Blair, and Tora stood there. Trent could tell that Blair was not very comfortable being near Tora and that Blair knew something was up. The trio walked into the office, unsure who was to take which seat as the door closed behind them.

“Captain,” Trent said. “I’ll have you and Blair take the seats in front of my desk. Miss Tora, please sit on the couch for now.”

“If you don’t mind,” Blair said as he eyed Tora, “I would prefer to stand.”

“Trust me, Colonel, you will want to sit down for this.”

“Very well,” Blair said reluctantly.

He sat down in the seat along with Shannon next to him. Tora sat on the couch.

“Now then,” Trent said. “The reason I called you here was to discuss the true nature of our mission.”

“The true nature?” Shannon asked.

“I knew something was up,” Blair said. “Whenever Tora is around, it’s always something more than what it seems.”

“What do you mean, Colonel?”

“Miss Tora over there is a field agent for the Republic Central Intelligence Agency.”

Shannon turned her head towards Tora with a shocked look on her face while Tora sat there smiling. Shannon turned back towards Blair and then Trent.

“You both knew her and what her job was?” she asked towards Trent. “No wonder you two acted the way you did back at the dock. You both have prior history with her!”

“That is true,” Trent said, “but due to that prior history, we cannot talk about that with you. I hope you understand.”

“At least it explains why you two reacted the way you did. So, now the big question is why she is here and what is the real mission behind going to Tranquillus?”

“If I may, Vice Admiral?” Tora asked.

“Go ahead,” Trent said.

Tora got up from the couch and came around to the side of the desk on Trent’s right. She took out a small device from her right pocket. She pressed a few buttons on the screen and suddenly an audio file played. It sounded like a lot of people giving commands and arguing, but the language or languages could not be identified. She played it for about ten seconds before she stopped playing it. Blair and Shannon looked at Tora with weird expressions.

“What in the cluster did we just listen to?” Blair asked. “It sounded like a couple of animals fighting each other.”

“Funny you should make that comment,” Tora said. “What the two of you just heard were transmissions from the Southeast Region. These transmissions are not coming from our space but just outside of it.”

Blair and Shannon suddenly had shocked expressions on their faces. They could not believe what they were just told.

“Are you serious?” Shannon asked. “Are you telling us these transmissions are actually alien in origin?”

“Aliens, actually,” Tora said. “We have managed to identify at least two languages with in the transmissions.”

“There are two?” Blair asked. “Wait, those transmissions you just played. Those sounded like commands and arguments. Were we listening to two races fighting each other?”

“That is what our agency has determined. These have been monitored for the past few weeks and they have been growing stronger during that time. This transmission was from two days ago and we have determined they are in the closest star system to the Tranquillus. It is believed that one race is trying to outflank their enemies. Their enemies were able to determine where they were jumping to and managed to keep them from accomplishing this. We believe they are about to do this to the Tranquillus System.”

“Then this isn’t a training exercise,” Shannon said. “This is the mounting of our defenses for their eventual arrival!”

“Exactly. We have detected the opening of wormholes in the next system over. Only the RCIA knows of this and shared it with the Supreme Chancellor and the top brass of the military. This means that they know how to use the Salire Purpura Crystals as the wormholes share the exact same properties.”

“So other races know how to use those crystals,” Blair said. “I would never have guessed those crystals being so commonplace. If this is supposed to be a mounting of defenses against a couple of hostile alien fleets, then why are my SAGATs here?”

“The same reason those two other people were accompanying me. We wish to open a dialogue with these races. There is no need for us to get hostile with them and hopefully whatever conflict they have can be settled through third-party deliberations. The two that are with me, Autumn and Wade, are actually ambassadors appointed by the Supreme Chancellor for such talks. The SAGATs are here to provide a security detail.”

“So we are here for the protection of those involved and the crew. Figures. I do have one question, though. How do you plan to talk to them when we don’t understand their languages?”

“We plan to transmit our dictionary to them. Hopefully they will do the same. It looks like they have something to translate already because we could tell they do talk to each other, though it is not a pleasant conversation based on their tones.”

“If they are fighting each other, I would assume not.”

“I do have to apologize to you both,” Trent said. “I was given the details of this assignment before we got underway. However, because of the nature of the assignment...”

“You couldn’t tell anyone because the RCIA was involved,” Blair said as he looked over at Tora. “I know how they work, too.”

“Am I the only one here who feels left out?” Shannon said. “It feels like I’m the ‘odd man out’ as the old saying goes, like not being filled in on an inside joke.”

“Believe me, Captain,” Blair said, “after this mission, you’ll have a better understanding about them.”

“Blair should know this routine,” Trent said, “but I’ll go ahead and tell this to you, Captain. No one is to know of this mission until the aliens make their appearance. Once they do, we will proceed to inform the fleet about the details, but not before.”

“I understand,” Shannon said. “I do have one question, though. Isn’t there a small fleet at Tranquillus made up entirely of destroyers? Wouldn’t they have detected those transmissions under the circumstances?”

“Once the RCIA started detecting the transmissions,” Tora said, “we jammed transmissions coming from that direction but continued to receive those transmissions. The Tranquillus fleet has not received those transmissions nor are they aware of the jamming that is occurring from that direction. They are just as unaware as the rest of the Republic’s general population.”

“I’m beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable of all this secrecy.”

“So were we at first,” Blair said, “and to some affect the same can be said even now. Once this assignment is over and word gets out to the general public, it won’t feel as bad because then everyone will know.”

“As long as it becomes public knowledge in the end, then that’s fine.”

“I had you brought in because of you being the commanding officer of this vessel under Vice Admiral Trent,” Tora said. “As such, you are privileged to this knowledge. Everyone who has had their first encounter with us at the RCIA feels the same as you and in a lot of cases those assignments that they went through were not and to this day still not made public knowledge. In

those cases, the secrets and the details of those assignments tend to affect those involved and we usually recommend psychiatric help from an RCIA-approved psychiatrist to help them cope with what occurred. In this case, you will not need that since that will not happen.”

“Thankfully,” Trent said, “the assignment that myself and Blair were given did not need such help as we were more upset with Miss Tora here than anything. So we kept the RCIA’s dirty little secret but we are still not happy with her. Tora, don’t tell me the RCIA selected you for this assignment because of our past history, did they?”

“No,” Tora said, “I volunteered for it because we worked so well together last time.”

Both Blair and Trent groaned at Tora’s words. Shannon could tell they were definitely not thrilled to be working with her again.

“Anyway,” Tora said, “I am expecting the best out of all three of you. Once the aliens appear, leave the talks to myself and the ambassadors, though I would like Trent to be there as the people we would most likely speak with will be their fleet commanders.”

“I figured as such,” Trent said. “It would seem very unlikely for them to have ambassadors of their own on their ships under the circumstances.”

“Well, that seems to be everything about the mission that I have to report. As I said earlier, this is not to be reported to the crew until these aliens have made their appearance. That is all. I will see myself out.”

Tora turned towards the door and walked out of the Ready Room. As the doors closed behind her, Shannon let out a sigh.

“Sir,” she said, “you wouldn’t happen to have a strong synthoholic beverage in that fridge, would you?”

“I’ll second that request,” Blair said.

“You two should know better,” Trent said. “I don’t stock such beverages in that fridge per regulations. On the other hand, I wish I did as well. Having to deal with her and the RCIA again is definitely a headache.”

“A headache none of us want to deal with,” Shannon said.

Blair and Trent looked over at Shannon with shocked looks on their face. Shannon noticed this and was suddenly nervous.

“Did I say something wrong?” she asked.

“No,” Blair said, “but I did find it amusing that I was about to say the same thing. I guess you know how we both feel about the situation now.”

“More than I wanted to know. How long has it been since you last worked with her?”

“More than four years ago,” Trent said. “After what we put up with last time, I was hoping we would never again have to deal with her or the RCIA again.”

“I don’t blame you, sir. Being told all of this and not being able to inform others what they are getting into at that time would drive anyone insane.”

“So,” Blair said, “I guess we continue to act like this is a training exercise, then, huh?”

“There is not much else to do till then,” Trent said. “I wonder if my wife got my message about the fact I am running exercises, though.”

“Why bring that up, sir?” Shannon asked.

“I’ve got my reasons...”

* * * * *

*Office of Anchorwoman Laura, National Broadcasting System Building, City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen (“Light”) System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
1:34pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

“How did I miss this message?”

Laura just got back to her office a moment ago. She had to report the noon day news and went out to lunch afterwards. She did not have her phone with her on the studio floor per policy but she went out to lunch with friends afterwards and she forgot her phone. When she got back, she noticed her husband Trent had left her a message almost forty minutes ago for her. She just checked the message.

“That figures,” she said.

“What does?” a male voice by the door said.

Laura looked up to see that her fellow co-worker, Anchorman Matt, was standing by the door. He had a puzzled expression on his face.

“Hey, Matt,” Laura said. “It’s my husband. He sent me a message saying he was being deployed to the Tranquillus System for some training exercises and that he was being deployed at one o’clock.”

“So he would be in transit right now,” Matt said. “Where is that star system? I’m not familiar with its name or its location.”

“Let me look because I’m not familiar with it either.”

Laura did a search on her terminal for the Tranquillus System. As soon as it brought up information, she had a look of disgust on her face.

“All the way out there?” Laura said.

“Where is it?” Matt asked.

“It is located on the edge of Republic space near the Southeast Region. That is thirty-five jumps from here!”

“Why in the world is he going all the way out there?” Matt asked as he walked into the office to look at Laura’s terminal. “Is it just his ship or is he taking his entire fleet?”

“He said it was the entire Eleventh Fleet.”

“But don’t they have specialized training areas that are much closer to Lumen like the Severus System? I thought that was where they do firing tests and combat exercises.”

“You’re right. The only fleets that have firing tests out there are usually the patrol fleets and they do their exercises within the system.”

Laura thought about it for a moment. This deployment did not feel right. The last time this occurred was over four years ago. That is when it hit her.

“Something is going on in the Tranquillus System and I’m willing to bet Trent can’t say or tell me directly,” Laura said.

“How can you be sure?” Matt asked.

“Something similar happened four years ago. He was secretive and my guess is he was under orders not to disclose what was really going on. Even now, I don’t know the details but most likely it is a covert mission like back then. The orders for doing these exercises are just covering up the truth.”

“So what do you want to do? Should we talk to the chief?”

“Yes, but before we do that, do we have a field reporter in the area?”

“Let me think...oh, right. We have a field reporter stationed in the Viridis System near the Eastern Region thirty-two jumps from here. That should put her less than twenty or so jumps

away from Tranquillus. She has a company owned shuttle that can get her there quickly, maybe even before Trent gets there!”

“She would need approval first from the company. I’m going to talk to the chief. Go ahead and tell her to get ready to go to Tranquillus to cover a possible story. I’ll let you know what he says.”

“Alright,” Matt said as he walked out of Laura’s office and headed to his own.

Laura punched in the chief’s extension on her phone’s touch screen. After a couple of rings, the chief answered.

“*What is it, Laura?*” the chief asked, rather puzzled. “*Did we miss something in the noon broadcast?*”

“No, sir. I need approval for a field agent in Viridis to go to Tranquillus for a possible news story and cover-up.”

“*A cover-up in Tranquillus? What kind of a cover-up? Did your husband send you something that makes you think something is up?*”

“How about having orders to deploy the Eleventh Fleet for training exercises out there?”

“*I’m not quite following the issue.*”

“Sir, the Main Fleets from the First through the Twentieth usually go to the Severus System for such exercises. None of them have ever had to go as far as Tranquillus in the Southeast Region for the same exercises. I think there is something going on there and they are disguising it as a training exercise.”

“*Hmm. If what you say is true, then deploying one of the Main Fleets to one of the outlying systems does seem out of place. When were they deployed?*”

“At one o’clock.”

“*So it will take a while for them to get out there. I believe we have a field reporter not too far from Tranquillus. Let me check.*”

“I was told by Matt that we did but I did not get a name.”

“*Ah, yes. Here they are. It appears to be Christina. I will approve of her using the company shuttle to get to Tranquillus. I just hope it is more than just an exercise though.*”

“Believe me, sir, I would not be bothering with this if I did not think otherwise.”

* * * * *

*Grand Cathedral of the Great Maker, Holy City of Providence
Sanctus IV (aka High Sanctus), Sanctus (“Holy”) System, 1 Jump Northeast of Lumen
1:45pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

“What is this feeling?”

Grand Pope Lee knelt in front of the massive altar of the Great Maker with other people of the faith praying from their seats right behind him. The Grand Cathedral was a massive church, capable of holding thousands of believers in the faith. It was highly decorative and on the walls, windows, and ceilings showed saints, prophets, patriarchs, and other religious figures of the past. There was always one to three people chanting in the background during times outside worship services.

As Lee knelt and prayed as he does around the same time every day, a sense of dread filled him. It felt like something dark was starting to approach but what it was he did not know.

He got up and looked towards the doors to the back. He started walking that direction with both the worshipers as well as other bishops and priests looking at him puzzled. Some wanted to stop him as it did not make sense for him to walk outside, but they noticed the expression of seriousness in his face.

As he opened the doors, he saw the massive city of Providence before him as the Grand Cathedral of the Great Maker stood taller than most of the surrounding buildings save for the towers at the corners of the Cathedral grounds proper. Many of the buildings had a lot of artistic flair with an ancient yet modern design behind them. Many of the clergymen of the faith as well as those who dedicated their lives to a purpose greater than them resided in the buildings in question. Providence was one of several cities built around the faiths that were brought with them from Luna now found on High Sanctus. Members of the other religions are free to visit the other cities as long as they respect the faiths of those cities and what they stood for.

Normally the city glistened in the afternoon sunlight. However, a dark cloud filled the sky overhead like it was about to rain.

“I see you felt it as well,” a female voice said to Lee’s right.

He turned and noticed a woman dressed in a green with gold accent long sleeved dress wearing a lot of ornate jewelry and a headdress. A couple of men that looked like bodyguards stood behind her but were looking the other way to protect her from behind, though on Sanctus it is usually not needed. He knew this was more of a custom than anything.

“High Priestess Moonschild from the Realm of the Gods faith,” Lee said. “This is the first time we have met face-to-face.”

The Realm of the Gods was under a different name three thousand years ago believing in there being more than one god or spirit in everything around them. Some elements of the faith uses medicinal and herbal elements to achieve certain levels of effects or enlightenments depending on the user. In the past, these could be considered being used in spells or incantations, though this has changed in the past three thousand years. They still have quite a following to be one of the major religions. There are those who believe that those who serve on high, like the High Priestess, are more susceptible to changes around them or afar.

“Grand Pope Lee,” Moonschild said, “the Grand Pope rarely strolls out of the Grand Cathedral unless he is making an announcement of some sorts. You felt something like I did, a dark ominous feeling, and this cloud overhead seems to symbolize it.”

“I did feel something like it,” Lee said as he looked back up towards the dark cloud. “I feel as though there is a storm approaching, one that will envelope the Republic and our way of life.”

“A storm that has not enveloped Humankind since our ancestors traversed the sea of stars on the ancient moon of Luna.”

Lee suddenly had an angry look on his face as he knows what the feeling both he and Moonschild had, something that had not darkened the souls of Humankind for over three thousand years.

“War,” Lee said, “and it is coming to our Republic, sooner than we ever expected.”

* * * * *