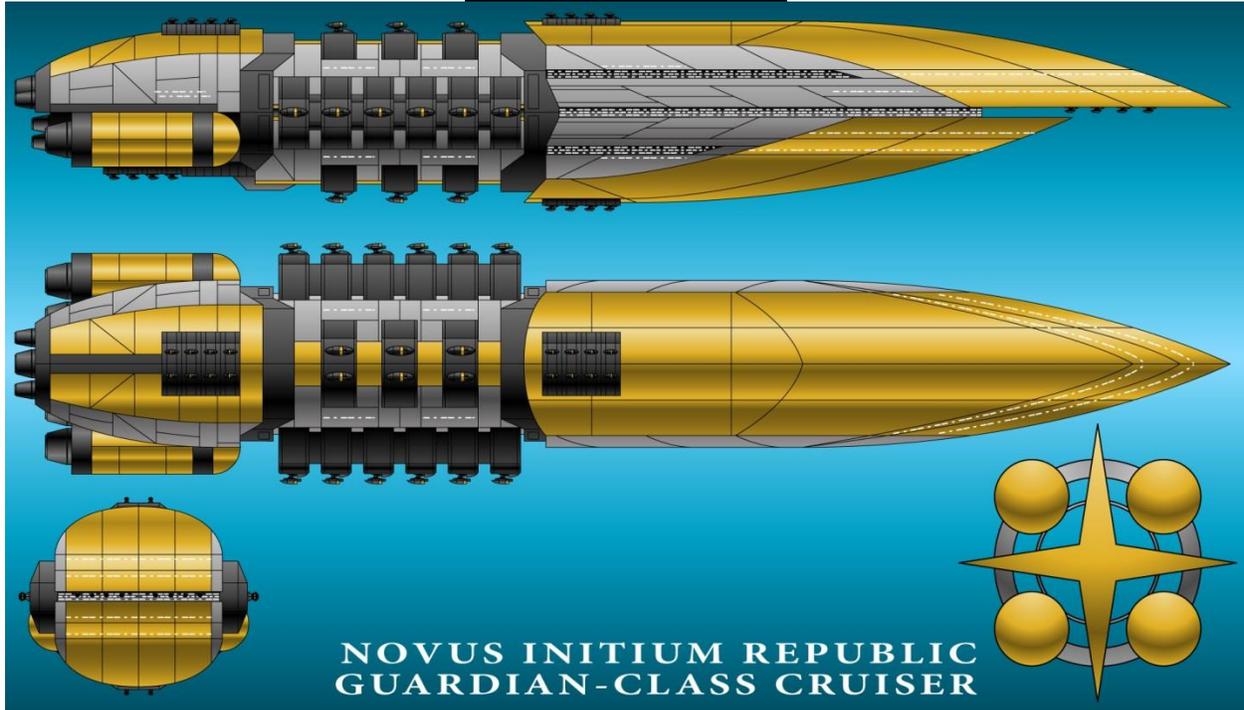


Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode I: Alone Yet Not



PART 2

*Office of Manager Jason, Grapevine Talent Agency, City of Cisco
Voluptas IV, Voluptas (“Pleasure”) System, 6 Jumps Southeast of Lumen
1:58pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

“This is a lot of requests.”

Sheryl sat in front of Jason’s desk looking over dozens of requests laid out across said desk. Jason was the manager of the Grapevine Talent Agency that manages talents such as performers, idols, actors, and models that come from all corners of the Republic, though they were not the only talent agency in the Republic. They were, however, the agency with the most popular talents currently in the nation. Along with the Sheryl who was a popular idol, there was another popular idol named Maxine as well as two popular models named Hannah and Natalie to Sheryl’s left. To her right were a couple of industry-leading fashion designers and seamstresses named Alyson and Charli. Those two are often requested due to their outstanding craftsmanship and designs. Today, they were looking over all of the recent requests and these six talents were the ones who were highly requested among the talents available.

Sheryl overall had over fifty requests for appearances, most of which were on conflicting days as others. She was tired just looking over them all. Everyone else was getting almost as many requests and appeared to have the same reaction to them as Sheryl did.

“I’m not sure why there are so many requests as of late,” Jason said. “Usually there is roughly half this many and we generally tend to work through them all, but for some reason this month, there are more requests for appearances for all of you than we have ever had. It could have something to do with the approaching summer season and they are looking for people with the talents you all have for events.”

“I know there are national holidays,” Hannah said, “but could these requests coincide with any holidays at the star system, planetary, or city level?”

“We are checking into that possibility right now to see if that is the reason,” Jason said. “Not to state the obvious, but because of the popularity you all have, it will depend on what these venues can afford whether we accept and deny these requests. Of course, it is up to you all if you all feel the need to accept a request based on whether you all feel like you can or want to do. We can work something out between you and that venue.”

“My usual concern is security,” Alyson said. “You know what I am referring to.”

“Yes, I’m very well aware of what you are referring to. I don’t think any of you are going to forget what happened a couple of years ago.”

Sheryl along with the rest of them would never forget what happened two years ago. The six of them were requested by the same venue in Lumen for a fashion show with a live musical performance by both Sheryl and Maxine. The costumes would be designed by Alyson and Charli while Hannah and Natalie would model them on the runway. Up until that point, they always took a detour from the usual routes that possible fans of theirs would try to take and meet with them. Unfortunately, two years ago, some fans became obsessed with them, and managed to track them down on one of those detour routes. How those fans had discovered the route they were taking remains unknown. When Sheryl and the others’ shuttle stopped at a station on the way, one of those fans managed to disguise themselves as a maintenance technician and planned a remote cutoff switch in the shuttle’s warp drive and the communications system. When the shuttle was three jumps away from Lumen in midflight, those fans triggered the remote cutoff, causing the shuttle to come out of warp in between star gates. The pilots tried everything they could to bring the warp drive back online, not knowing what caused them to drop out of warp to begin with. At that moment, the obsessed fans appeared in their own shuttle and attempted to board the shuttle Sheryl and the others were using. The pilots tried sending out an S.O.S. but the communications system was also offline due to the remote cutoff.

Unfortunately for those obsessed fans, the pilots logged their estimated time of arrival with the local star gate air traffic control. When the shuttle did not arrive nor respond to any communications, they alerted the local law enforcement and any military ships in the system of the situation. A Paladin-class battleship near the gate scanned the route for between the gates and detected them not only the missing shuttle but a second unauthorized shuttle in close proximity. The battleship warped to their location and appeared right as the fans were trying to board the celebrities’ shuttle. Noticing the battleship suddenly appearing, the fans tried to flee from the scene but the battleship managed to take out their shuttle’s engines with a low powered laser beam, shorting out the engines. Unable to flee, the fans could only watch as the battleship used its tractor beams to bring aboard both shuttles in opposite bays. The fans were apprehended and given over to local law enforcement for attempted kidnapping and unauthorized tampering of private property. The battleship transported Sheryl and the others to Lumen personally while the battleship’s maintenance crew looked for the remote cutoff switches the fans installed. Upon their removal and the battleship reaching Luminaire, the celebrities personally thanked the flag officer who assisted them before they departed. They still remember the flag officer and his ship.

That flag officer was Vice Admiral Trent of the battleship *Renaldo*.

Sheryl and the others try to keep in touch with Trent and his ship whenever they can. For that matter, his ship was always requested to personally transport them to other systems when they needed and he was been more than happy to oblige as long as his ship was not currently on assignment. Thankfully, the Grapevine Talent Agency was always able to work around the

Renaldo's deployment schedule and the ship has become known by the military as the stars' battleship. Some of the fellow flag officers joked with Trent about giving the ship a more "glamorous" paintjob, much to Trent's frustration. The celebrities, to make up for this and feeling like they were inconveniencing him and his crew, held a private concert for the crew as a token of their appreciation. Trent and his crew were happy for them doing that, but he did state that a destroyer from his fleet will be assigned to them for their requests from now on as such assignment were starting to look bad when the flagship of the Eleventh Fleet is being used for such tasks. They understood and thanked him for all of his help. This was a few months ago and they still talk with Trent along with his wife whenever they have any downtime.

"That being said," Jason continued, "I will get in contact with Vice Admiral Trent to request the assistance of one of his destroyers once we have a schedule in place."

"Just making sure," Alyson said.

Jason's phone started going off which surprised everyone in the room.

"*Mister Jason?*" a female voice said at the other end, namely his secretary. "*I have a video call for you, sir.*"

"Who is it?" Jason asked. "I told you to hold my calls while I was in a meeting."

"*I know, sir, but this one is important. It's Governor Michelle.*"

"The Governor is calling for me?!"

"*Yes, and she wanted to speak with you as well as Miss Sheryl, Maxine, Hannah, Natalie, Charli, and Alyson.*"

Everyone in the room looked at each other with odd expressions of their faces wondering why the Governor wanted to talk to all of them.

"Give me a moment," Jason said.

He rotated the terminal located to his left to where they could all see it. Jason pressed a couple of buttons and the screen came to life with a live feed of the Governor in her office.

"Greetings, Governor," Jason said. "To what do we owe the pleasure of this call?"

"*Actually,*" Michelle said, "*I wanted to inform you all of an interesting occurrence that just came to my attention only moments ago.*"

"An 'occurrence,' you say?"

"*I've just received word that the Renaldo appeared in the system.*"

"It's here?" Natalie said.

"What a moment," Charli said. "Governor, you said it 'appeared,' not that it has 'arrived.' What do you mean by that?"

"*The ship was spotted in the Voluptas System but it did not stop at any of the planets. It was coming from Lumen and according to air traffic control, the ship's route has it heading for the Tranquillus System.*"

"The Tranquillus System?" Maxine asked. "Where is that?"

"*To my knowledge, it's on the edge of Republic space near the Southeast Region.*"

"Why would the *Renaldo* or Trent for that matter go there?" Hannah asked.

"*It's more than the Renaldo heading that way. We detected the entire Eleventh Fleet following right behind it going to the same destination.*"

"Something is not right," Sheryl said. "I read up on fleet deployments during my downtime and one of the Main Fleets being deployed towards the edge of Republic space is not something that normally occurs without a very good reason."

"*I had the same thoughts. I inquired about it through political channels and the only thing they are telling me is that the fleet is going there for military exercises.*"

“Now I know there is something up. Military exercises are usually done in the Severus System whenever the Main Fleets are involved. They are up to something out there.”

“Can you contact Laura?” Charli asked. “I wonder if she knows anything about what is going on.”

“Give me a moment,” Sheryl said as she got out her phone.

She pulled up Laura’s number among her contacts and called her. After a few rings, she got an answer. She put her on speaker.

“*Sheryl?*” Laura said on the other end, “*I’m sorry, but I’m a bit busy. Can I call you back in a moment?*”

“You’re investigating the *Renaldo*’s deployment, right?”

There was a slight pause from Laura.

“*Do you know what is going on with Trent and his fleet?*”

“I have the Governor of Voluptas on a video call along with Maxine, Charli, Alyson, Hannah, and Natalie. I also have Manager Jason here as well. The Governor just told us that they spotted the Eleventh Fleet passing through here. I know that is not normal and neither is the fact that they were heading for the Tranquillus System. Do you know anything about that?”

“*No, but we’re getting to the bottom of this. We have an NBS field reporter in the Viridis System who will be heading for Tranquillus System and hopefully will get more information about their deployment. Part of me wonders if it has something to do with the RCIA.*”

“*The RCIA?*” Michelle said. “*Now even I am suspicious.*”

“*What in the...am I on speaker?*”

“Yes,” Sheryl said. “That was the Governor on the video call. We all can hear you. How do you know the RCIA is involved?”

“*I remembered covering some of their activities in the past and this sounds very much like what they would be involved with. They were involved in an operation four years ago that even today Trent cannot talk about it with me.*”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Alyson asked.

“*If the RCIA is involved, I would recommend letting our field reporter handle this and find out the truth. If too many people get involved, we may never know what the RCIA or Trent’s fleet are doing in that system.*”

“*I have to agree with her,*” Michelle said. “*Leave it to their field reporter for now. The RCIA have been known to be very ‘unhappy’ when more people know about operations than they want them to know.*”

“Alright then,” Sheryl said. “We’ll leave it to you, Laura. Hopefully whatever the reporter finds out will be live. Otherwise, we may never see what she finds out if the RCIA gets a hold of the footage ahead of time.”

“*I’ll make sure of it,*” Laura said. “*I will talk to you all later.*”

“Bye, Laura. Talk to you later.”

Sheryl hung up and put her phone back in her pocket.

“*I’d better let you go, as well,*” Michelle said. “*I just wanted to inform you all about the Eleventh Fleet. If the RCIA is involved with their deployment, it is best to leave it to the NBC field reporter. I’ll let you all know if I hear anything more.*”

The video call disconnected, leaving everyone in the room to ponder what was really going on. Jason saw this and knew they could not focus on the task they were doing beforehand involving the requests from the venues.

“Tell you what,” he finally said. “We will talk about these requests later. You all go ahead

and take some time to clear your heads of this matter.”

“Yes, sir,” they all said in unison.

They got up and walked out of the office. They all needed to get something to drink.

* * * * *

*Office of the Supreme Chancellor, Republic Parliament Building, Capital City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
2:00pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

“I’m hoping this is the right course of action when historians look upon this day.”

Supreme Chancellor Drew leaned forward against his desk, his elbows on the desk and his head supported by his hands crossed at the fingers. Earlier that morning, he was informed by the Republic Central Intelligence Agency what they had been monitoring for the past couple of weeks in the Tranquillus System. Upon receiving the information about two possible aliens races in conflict with each near Republic space, the Supreme Chancellor chose to deploy the Eleventh Fleet, a choice he made at random, and relayed those orders through Grand Admiral Mikey, Joint Chief of the Republic Navy. Apparently, the RCIA also selected a couple of senators to serve as ambassadors should the Eleventh Fleet make contact with those alien forces.

This was a monumental moment whether they make contact or not. Humankind has been studying and exploring the stars after the ancient moon of Luna brought them to the Novus Initium star cluster for over thirty-five hundred years. However, they have never made contact with any intelligent alien race before. They have discovered alien wildlife on several planets, but none of them were on the same level of intelligence as Humans were. When Humankind came to the star cluster, the possibility of meeting intelligent alien races was high on everyone’s minds, but that was more out of fear in the early years of the Republic as they were afraid that they would easily be conquered due to their small numbers and small number of combat-capable ships. That fear over time went away as the centuries progressed, though it returned during the Expansion Era as the Republic explored new stars and colonized planets. Thankfully at the time, they still did not run into any foreign alien power, but the fear of an ever-thinning Navy caused the Republic back then put a stop to further exploration and colonization. Now they are in a much better position to defend their borders but the fact that they are having to do so under these circumstances is still unbelievable.

At the same time, he was concerned about what might happen. Would the Republic make peace with the two alien races, or would they end up going to war with one or both races?

This was a crucial time for him and the Republic and it started to weigh heavily on his mind. He looked at the time. The Eleventh Fleet would arrive in less than an hour at its destination. He needed to talk to someone to help ease his mind and there was only one person he could talk to right now: his wife.

He dialed her number on his phone and switched it to video call. It took a few rings before she answered, though she looked to be in fitness clothing in a gym working up a sweat.

“Oh!” Drew said. “Kotori, I’m so sorry! I forgot this was your workout time.”

“It’s okay,” Kotori said. “I’m in cooldown right now. I’m here with my trainer Erk, though he is still lifting weights now.”

“I see. I need to go workout later. So how has your day been so far?”

“It’s been good. Went out to lunch with some of the girls to a nice Italian café located on Main Street, which is another good reason to come to the gym. I asked Erk to help spar with me in my mixed martial arts class and he is pretty good. I plan to go shopping for a swimsuit as they are now in stock. Will you be available for dinner or do you have plans?”

“I have a matter that has come up and I may be needed at a moment’s notice. If you want to, you can bring dinner to my office and we can eat together.”

“That is doable. Do have anything in mind you want for dinner?”

“Hmm. Just surprise me. I can’t decide on what I’m in the mood for right now this early in the day.”

“Alright. I’ll ask you closer to dinnertime. Was there anything else? I still need to get showered and cleaned up before I go.”

“I actually need your opinion on something. I’ll make it brief but I also have to be vague due to the sensitive nature of the topic. I’ve made a decision to do something based on possible facts but this decision could lead to something good or something terrible. It is a decision that will become historic either way. I have been bothered with the consequences of this choice since this morning and I don’t know if I made the right one or not.”

“If you are worried about whether you made the right choice, then here is what I think. It does not matter if the decision you made is either right or wrong. It is based on the facts you were given and the options you had available to you. It is only right or wrong once the consequences of that decision are brought to light. Don’t worry about what you decided already. Focus on seeing that decision through and work with the consequences that come after.”

“Those are some very wise words. That was one of the reasons I married you.”

“I hope there were several reasons for you wanting to marry me including the fact that you love me. Hopefully that made you feel better.”

“It did, actually. I guess I should not worry about what I decided earlier. I just need to see it through and go from there.”

“Alright. Can I go get cleaned up now?”

“Oh, right! Sorry about that. You go ahead and I will see you later tonight.”

“See you tonight. Love you, dear.”

“Love you, too. Bye-bye.”

“Bye-bye.”

As Kotori hung up, Drew leaned back in his chair. Talking with his wife definitely helped his frame of mind. She did have a point. He will have to see this scenario through. He knew of Vice Admiral Trent, the flag officer of the Eleventh Fleet. He had not met him personally but knew he is a model officer who should be able to make the best decision based on the situation. Yes, Drew picked his fleet at random, but it was the best choice. Now the question is whether or not they will actually make contact with those aliens.

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*Bridge, R.N.S. Renaldo, Paladin-Class Battleship
Tranquillus-to-Acies Star Gate, Planet Tranquillus IX Orbit, Tranquillus System
3:12pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

“We have arrived in the Tranquillus System,” Ryan said.

Trent leaned back in his chair. It has been a long time since he has been through so many jumps. Thankfully it may be a while before the fleet has to jump back. The one thing Trent was not used to was the fact that the further away from Lumen one gets, the fewer stars there were ahead of them. This was definitely the case when they arrived in the Tranquillus System which was located halfway between Lumen and the edge of the star cluster. Ahead of them there was less stars and more black. However, the same can be said if one looks either “up or down” from the star cluster’s “horizon” as fewer stars were present in those directions.

Trent was only in that frame of mind for a couple of seconds before he snapped out of it.

“Take us out of the gate,” Shannon said. “Move to the rendezvous location ten kilometers from the gate.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ryan said.

“Ma’am,” Chrystal said, “a Crusader Destroyer is heading our way. Their registry number is CRD-1289 under the command of Commander Trevor. He appears to be the fleet commander for the Tranquillus fleet.”

Because of the number of Crusader Destroyers in the Republic, the ships were never given proper names, nor Guardian Cruisers for that matter. Destroyers fulfilled more roles than fleet support. They also function as defense and patrol fleets for the outlying systems such as Tranquillus. Because they were numerous, the lowest rank to command Crusaders is the rank of Commander. In fleets such as the one in this system where Crusaders are the only vessels, the military will normally select one Commander to be the fleet commander for the entire group. There were under one billion people living in this system alone but only twelve Crusaders are stationed here with two serving as customs inspectors.

The fact that the fleet commander’s ship is approaching them right now though was rather odd.

“Vice Admiral,” Ro said, “I have Commander Trevor on the line. He’s asking for you specifically.”

“For me?” Trent said, puzzled. “Put him through.”

Trent could not determine why the fleet commander would want to speak with him personally. Even though it was short notice, Commander Trevor should have been informed that the Eleventh Fleet was coming here for what they knew were training exercises.

A screen soon appeared on the main screen, and the bearded face of a rather large man appeared.

“Commander Trevor, I presume?” Trent asked.

“Yes, sir,” Trevor said.

“I was told you wanted to speak with me?”

“Yes, sir. I had two questions I wanted to ask. Is that is alright with you, sir?”

“Go ahead, Commander.”

“First, I have citizens who heard about the Eleventh Fleet coming here for training and military exercises and they were concerned about their safety. This is the first time any of us have heard of one of the Main Fleets coming all the way out to one of the outlying systems for such exercises. The Governor along with myself have to ask this question: why did your fleet came all the way out here for such exercises?”

Trent knew this question was going to be asked. Thankfully, Tora expected this and told him how to answer.

“Right now, we are looking at providing a different layout and terrain for these exercises as trainees as well as seasoned veterans have already become used to the conditions in the Severus System. What we are wanting to accomplish is to train in an area that they are not used to for them to overcome and adapt to new surroundings. This is the first time we are using this method as a test to see if such a method will work. We already have areas we wish to use in the system and on planets that are far from any populated areas so the effect on the populace should be kept to a minimum.”

“I understand. It just seemed out of place but hopefully this will work out and no one will have any problems.”

“Now you said there was another question?”

“Yes, actually. Thirty minutes before you arrived, a field reporter from NBS arrived here and was given the assignment by the network to record and report the training exercises that are taking place. Governor Terry, the local governor, approved of the network’s request in order to calm and inform the populace of what was taking place. She is aboard this ship right now and is awaiting transfer to your vessel.”

Shannon looked back at Trent with a shocked look on her face. Trent shared the same expression. No one, not even the RCIA, had expected this. Laura must have read Trent’s message and knew something was up. She knew him rather well. Most likely she pulled some strings with the station’s chief to get the reporter here. If the local governor of a system or the Supreme Chancellor approve of a reporter being on board a military ship for such exercises, then the military under their jurisdiction usually oblige the request.

However, Trent and Shannon knew that this assignment was not about training exercises. If a reporter is on board, that reporter may report the real reason why they are out there. If those alien races show up while the reporter is on board, the public is going to immediately know what is going on. However, Trent cannot deny the request for her to come on board as it would look suspicious.

If anything, while it may look like this has put him in a spot, this throws a wrench in Tora’s plans. Trent suddenly found perverse amusement in that fact to the point he was showing a slight smile.

“Very well,” Trent said amusingly. “Go ahead and have her come on board. We are waiting for the rest of the fleet to arrive, so we have some time before we go to our first training point.”

“Understood.”

With that, the screen with Trevor on it disappeared, while Shannon looked at Trent with still a shocked expression on her face, as if she wanted to say “what are you thinking?”

“Captain,” Trent said as he got up. “Could I speak to you briefly in my Ready Room?”

“Very well,” Shannon said as she got up. “Chrystal, you have the bridge.”

“Aye-aye, ma’am,” Chrystal said.

Trent and Shannon walked towards the Ready Room. Trent pressed the button on the door frame and entered. After the door was closed, Trent turned around to face Shannon.

“I know what you about to say,” Trent said with a smile.

“Then I assume you have an answer as to why you are letting that reporter on board?” Shannon asked.

“Blair and I are still upset about how Tora used us that one time. Having a reporter on board actually puts a wrench in her plans to where the public will know, hopefully live, about what we are really out here for.”

“So that is why you are smiling. You are taking some form of sick amusement in the fact that you are putting said wrench in her plans.”

“I am. I’m not sure if she is aware of this or not, but I want to see the look on her face when she finds out about the reporter.”

“What if the RCIA already know and managed to inform her?”

“If they did, she would have brought it to our attention by this point. I’m going to send her a message to let her know about the...”

Before he could finish that sentence, the door chime went off. Trent looked at Shannon.

“I’m willing to bet that would be her right now,” Trent said.

“How would she know so fast?” Shannon said.

“She works for the RCIA. I’m sure she has her ways of monitoring communications. Come in.”

The door of the Ready Room opened and Tora stood there, a look of anger on her face. She entered the room and waited for the door to close behind her.

“What in the star cluster did you do?!” she yelled. “Why is there an NBS field reporter coming aboard?!”

“Apparently, NBS knew we were heading out here and decided they wanted to cover the exercises,” Trent said

“Cut the garbage, Trent! What did you tell your wife before you were deployed?”

“I sent her a message letting her know I was going to Tranquillus for military exercises. Nothing more, nothing less. I guess she knew me long enough to know that this was not a normal location for such exercises and managed to get a field reporter to see why I was out here.”

“You sent a message about your whereabouts but you knew she would act in such a manner to know something wasn’t right! You realize you have just jeopardized this mission and your career!”

“If you are arguing about me allowing that reporter on board, Governor Terry approved of her being on board for...”

“I KNOW why Governor Terry allowed her to be on board! I have the means to monitor your communications! That is how I knew about this and came here so quickly!”

“Then you also know why I could not deny the request. Doing so would have raised suspicions and caused a lot more problems. Now, then...”

Trent moved closer to Tora and looked at her with a very serious expression on his face.

“I am going to put this as plainly and as bluntly as I can. I don’t like you or the RCIA after what we went through last time. We are in this situation and we are going to play this out as if we really are here for training exercises. The fact that the reporter is here allows the public to eventually know the truth if and when those aliens appear. There is not going to be any secrets this time. If I so much as hear that this reporter’s transmissions are blocked by the RCIA, I will make sure to transmit what is occurring by other means. Believe me, I know what those other

means are. The people of the Republic have a right to know and doing this behind a veil of secrecy will look bad in the history books. Such tactics and top-secret closed-door moves can bring down the best administrations and make the public lose faith and trust in the government. This happened in the past with some of the nations of Earth and it is not about to happen here.”

“You realize we could get the Supreme Chancellor to override Governor Terry’s request, right?”

“I doubt it. If he overrides the Governor Terry’s request, the people in this system will no longer trust the Republic government or the military because they will know something is going on that they don’t know about. I highly doubt the Supreme Chancellor will risk such a political mistake as this would make the residents here no longer trust him or the government. History shows that when such things happen, people no longer want to be ruled by such a government and this sparks the flames of rebellions and independence. This is ABSOLUTELY the last thing anyone wants to deal with at a time like this.”

Tora had no rebuttal. This was the first time she did not have anything to come back with.

“Now, we are going to proceed as plan and if the aliens show up, the public will know and come to trust the government in keeping them in the know. History will show that when the aliens appeared, all of the Republic saw it. No cover-ups, no lies, and no secrecy. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

“Crystal,” Tora said, “but make no mistake, Vice Admiral. This act of defiance against the RCIA will not go unanswered and there will come a time when you will face the consequences of your actions.”

“If you are making a threat here and now, then I would suggest you walk away before I have you arrested and thrown in the brig for threatening a flag officer on his own ship. Believe me, both Blair and I will like nothing more than to see you in there right now. Now, I suggest you change that attitude of yours, learn to adapt to the situation, and make the most of the situation that we are in. Now, get out of my Ready Room.”

Tora, even more upset than before, proceeded out of the Ready Room. As soon as the door closed, Shannon looked at Trent.

“That speech of yours sent shivers down my spine,” she said. “I think you enjoyed putting her in her place.”

“I did, but at the same time, I know that the threat she just gave was real. The RCIA have been known to pull off methods of punishment that cannot be easily tracked to them.”

“Sir, your record of service is practically spotless. Anything that they do to you would look suspicious no matter what they come up with.”

“I’m not worried. While I know Tora’s threat is genuine, I doubt the RCIA will do anything. I’m pretty sure they will keep from doing anything once they are given the recording.”

“Recording? What recording?”

Trent pulled out a small recording device from his right pants pocket. He turned it off.

“That conversation was recorded and a duplicate of the recording will be sent to the Supreme Chancellor and the RCIA shortly. Not only will the RCIA not move against me for my actions if the Supreme Chancellor supports my position, but they will be rather embarrassed that one of their agents was recorded without first verifying that I didn’t have such a device on hand. Her emotions are about to get the better of her.”

“Vice Admiral, remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“So noted. Now, once the rest of the fleet arrives, proceed to the designated coordinates we were given. We need to get these ‘exercises’ underway. I have a few calls to make.”

“Understood, sir,” Shannon said as she saluted and headed out the door.

Trent laughed as he walked to his desk. Shannon was right. Trent did enjoy that.

* * * * *

*Office of Anchorwoman Laura, National Broadcasting System Building, City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen (“Light”) System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
3:31pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

“So you managed to make it on board?”

Laura was sitting in her office when she got the call from Christina, the NBS field reporter that was in Viridis and travelled to Tranquillus. Laura had been waiting for her call for a little bit.

“Yes, I am aboard the Renaldo, Miss Laura,” Christina said. “Sorry it took a moment for me to get in touch with you. I had to be escorted to my quarters on board along with my gear, not to mention get things set up.”

“That’s perfectly fine. So what is the word? Do you know why the Eleventh Fleet is there?”

“According to the local governor, he was told that the fleet is here for military exercises that involved new locations and terrains that are different than those in the Severus System.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. However, the governor did want me to record and show live feeds of the exercises as the general populace here in Tranquillus were nervous to hear about these exercises being in their space, especially being done by one of the Main Fleets.”

“That is understandable.”

“If this is all there is to this, it does seem a bit of a wasted trip, though. I was under the impression that there was something major going on based on the info I was provided.”

“And there still is.”

“What do you mean? These exercises sound pretty routine to me.”

“There is something you must understand, Christina. The flag officer of that fleet is my husband.”

“What?! Don’t tell me I’m reporting based on some sort of personal interest?!”

“No, at least not entirely. Vice Admiral Trent who commands that fleet normally tells me long in advance what is deployment schedule is unless there is an emergency.”

“I’m not quite following.”

“The fact is that Trent has gone through military exercises in the past and knew about them weeks in advance in order to prepare for them. These exercises that are supposed to happen in the Tranquillus System are too sudden and last-minute for it to have been scheduled in advance. The only time I’ve known him to deploy on such short notice is if something major is happening. This is why I think there is more going on there that we are led to believe.”

“So you believe there is some ulterior motive behind this fleet’s deployment? This might explain what I saw after I boarded.”

“What did you see?”

“More like ‘who.’ When I came on board, I noticed at one point two people in civilian clothes. You and I both know that civilian attire is not permitted aboard a military ship unless they are on shore leave. Considering this ship is supposed to be doing military exercises shortly, either they were off-duty, though unlikely, or they were civilians like myself.”

“Were you able to identify them?”

“Not at first, but they were familiar. I did a little checking as to where I saw them before and I found out who they are. Their names are Wade and Autumn, and they are diplomatic attachés to the Supreme Chancellor.”

“What are diplomatic representatives doing on board a battleship that is about to commence military exercises?”

“I don’t know but I do know they did not get off when I came on board. That means they are still here on this ship.”

“Did they see you?”

“I don’t think so. They looked like they were talking with one other person, but I could not see the third person very clearly from a distance. I could tell though that the third person looked to be highly upset based on how she was acting.”

“I’m beginning to wonder who that is and if she is the one behind these exercises. Something is definitely going on. For now, go ahead and report the exercises. If you spot them again, try to get them in the picture and maybe someone can shed some light on this situation.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Alright. Be careful.”

“Bye-bye.”

“Bye-bye.”

As Christina disconnected the call, Laura leaned back in her chair. She suddenly noticed that Matt was in her doorway again and she nearly jumped out of her seat.

“Matt!” she yelled. “How long have you been there?!”

“For most of that call,” Matt said. “So, two diplomatic representatives of the Chancellor are on board the *Renaldo*. This is definitely some interesting news.”

“What are your thoughts on it?”

“If there are two diplomats on a battleship that is supposedly going on military exercises, it means that either they got stuck on the wrong ship or the real mission of that fleet is more diplomatic than militaristic.”

“But if it is the latter, who are they needed diplomats for and why all the secrecy?”

“I have a hunch.”

Matt came in and closed the door so that no one could hear him. He then sat in the chair in front of Laura’s desk.

“Humor me on what I am about to suggest,” he said. “I believe there is the possibility that the government and the military may have recently been made aware of an alien foreign power.”

“Seriously?” Laura said, not believing what Matt was saying.

“Hear me out. We have encountered alien wildlife before on multiple worlds but not once did we come across highly intelligent alien life on par or better than Humankind. Well, what if they have or are about to? Can you surely dismiss the possibility? This would make sense why

Trent's fleet was deployed at the last minute and why there are diplomats on board. There may be an alien race near the edge of Republic space close to Tranquillus and that is the reason his fleet was deployed there."

Laura realized that what Matt said fit all the facts, but was he right? Were there indeed intelligent aliens that are capable of interstellar flight close to Republic space? She could only hope that Christina would get to the bottom of this matter.

* * * * *

*Ready Room, R.N.S. Renaldo, Paladin-Class Battleship
Asteroid Belt, Planet Tranquillus V Orbit, Tranquillus System
5:42pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

"There's less than twenty minutes left to go."

Trent looked at his watch while he was looking over some of the reports from ship and squad commanders that were beginning their training and military exercises. As far as the Navy and SAGAT personnel were concerned, these training exercises were genuine. If it was just training exercises, Trent would be okay with it. The fact that only six people in the fleet including himself know the true reason why they're in this system was what was bothering him.

Since the vast majority of the fleet has no knowledge about the aliens that are approaching the system, the reporter who is on board interviewing select crew members should not get anything different in terms of information. However, the reporter did ask for an interview with Trent, which he had to oblige her request. That was over an hour ago. He said the same thing for the most part that he was instructed to say about why they were there to her. With her report going on the air live at six o'clock when NBS News normally does their news broadcast, it would give the reporter enough time to be able to finalize her report. She also had a few remote camera droids on hand to take video of both the ships and the troops during the early part of their exercises. That footage will no doubt be shown in her report as well.

Aside from that matter, what has him a little bothered is the fact that after his "talk" with Tora concerning the reporter earlier, as well as his talk with both Supreme Chancellor Drew and Head Agent Aja of the RCIA, Tora has not shown herself or said anything about the transmissions that were coming from beyond the border. Thankfully, Head Agent Aja at the request of Supreme Chancellor Drew gave Trent limited access to the satellites that were both jamming the alien transmissions as well as them receiving them. This way Trent can respond accordingly and quickly because they knew after that "talk" that Tora may not be so cooperative to work with Trent for the duration of this mission. The transmissions themselves have died down for the moment so whatever fighting that was occurring in the next star system beyond their border has either reduced or stopped altogether. This may mean that either they may not be dealing with the aliens for a while or one if not both sets of aliens have detected the Republic's presence in this system. However, the latter was not very likely due to the jammers the RCIA had deployed as it also blocked Republic transmissions with the exception of a certain control frequency that Trent and the RCIA use to access the jammers.

If those races can detect the jammers, however, then they KNOW someone is in this system.

As Trent pondered these thoughts, he suddenly received a call on his phone. Trent looked at the caller identification and saw that it was Laura. Trent told her at one point that while he was on assignment that he could not receive calls but in this case he was willing to make an exception.

“Hello?” Trent said as he answered the phone.

“Hi, sweetie,” Laura said at the other end. “How are you doing?”

“I’m doing alright. Shouldn’t you be getting ready for your six o’clock news broadcast?”

“I’m on the broadcast floor right now getting some things finalized.”

“I see. Thankfully I’m in my Ready Room as the current exercises do not require my presence or attention.”

“That’s good to hear. I got word that Christina did an interview with you, correct?”

“Yes, she did. The interview went well and hopefully it will help calm the populace.”

Until the aliens show up, he thought.

“I’m looking forward to her report. How are things going so far?”

“I guess you can say that they are a bit stressful. There are a few representatives from the Senate who are here that are overseeing the exercises. Needless to say, one of them was not too thrilled to hear about Christina being on board. I don’t know if she is just camera shy or something else, but we got into an argument and now there is some tension because of it.”

“That’s something I was not expecting to hear. Who is she?”

“Unfortunately, I am not at liberty to say. I was ordered not to divulge names.”

“I see. I’m sorry to hear things are that stressful, sweetie.”

“It’s fine. I informed her superior about what had occurred so that there would not be any further issues or misunderstandings.”

“That’s good. Well, I need to finish getting ready for the broadcast. You take it easy.”

“I’ll try. Knowing I’m going to be on the news makes me a bit nervous, though. I’m hoping nothing gets altered or taken out of context.”

“Christina is an NBS reporter and employee. She would not make anything up. She knows she could get in trouble otherwise.”

“Alright, then. Well, I’ll go ahead and let you go. I’ll talk to you later tonight.”

“Talk to you later tonight, dear. Bye-bye.”

“Bye-bye.”

Trent hung up the phone and reclined in his chair. He still felt a little nervous. He was on the news once before after the attempted kidnapping of the Sheryl and her friends a few years ago, but he was nervous even then. NBS, like any other station, reaches trillions of people throughout the Republic. The thought of that many people seeing him on a broadcast made him far more nervous about being on the news.

Trent looked at the time. There were ten minutes left until the broadcast. He figured it would be best to pass the time by looking at the reports from some of the exercises that were still going on and see where things could be improved. He set his alarm to notify him when the news would start. As he looked through the reports, the time passed faster for him and his nervousness disappeared as he was no longer focused on the news. When his alarm suddenly went off, however, that nervous feeling came right back.

“Better turn the news on and get it over with,” Trent said as he activated the terminal and changed it to NBS News.

As the station on the terminal was changed to NBS News, two people appeared sitting behind a desk that was in front of a holographic backdrop of the capital city of Luminous. Trent recognized the two people who were wearing business casual attire sitting behind the desk.

“*Good evening, everyone,*” the man who sat on the left side of the screen said. “*This is NBS News. I’m News Anchorman Matt.*”

“*And I’m News Anchorwoman Laura. Tonight, we have a few top headlines to report. Our first headline: the deployment of one of the Main Fleets to the edge of Republic space. Earlier today, the Eleventh Fleet, one of the Main Fleets of the Republic, was deployed to the Tranquillus System located southeast of Lumen, approximately thirty-five jumps away, on the edge of the Southeast Region. Field Reporter Christina has more on this story. Christina?*”

As Laura was announcing Christina, the screen split between her and Christina. Christina looked to be in one of the corridors that lined one of the decks on board the *Renaldo* that had windows outside. There were not a lot of windows on the ships due to the fact that too many would compromise the armor repair system. However, there were a sufficient number of windows for those that still want a view of space.

“*Thank you, Laura. Earlier today, the Eleventh Fleet, one of the Main Fleets of the Republic, was deployed to the Tranquillus System to run military exercises. Those who have served in the military in the past know that usual exercises are conducted in the Severus System located two jumps west of Lumen. The deployment of such a fleet to the Tranquillus System was seen by many along the fleet’s route, and those that saw it raised a few questions as to why they were seeing such a fleet heading towards the edge of Republic space. I went on an interview with the flag officer of the Eleventh Fleet, Vice Admiral Trent...*”

At that point, Trent’s image from the interview appeared in a small window on the screen next to Christina.

“Here we go,” Trent said.

“*...who was able to answer some of those questions for us.*”

“What does she mean by ‘some’ of the questions? There were more?”

The screen soon changed to a conference room located within the ship with Trent and Christina sitting across from each other across the narrow side of the table. Trent remembered a couple of the camera drones being in the room, which did not help him to feel any more comfortable in front of them. One of the drones focused on both of them before it focused on Trent when Christina started asking the questions.

“*Vice Admiral,*” Christina said, “*there are many who want to know why the Eleventh Fleet was deployed to the Tranquillus System for exercises instead of the Severus System?*”

Trent was nervous as his reply to Christina was about to be broadcasted.

“*The reason why the fleet was deployed here and not Severus was to allow the crew and the SAGATs onboard to adapt to different scenarios and surroundings. Severus has become too ‘predictable’ for a lot of those who are onboard. It was decided to have the exercises in another star system. However it had to be a system that would not affect the local traffic such as in heavily populated systems with multiple star gates. After looking over candidate systems, it was decided that Tranquillus would be the system the Eleventh Fleet would use in our exercises.*”

Trent felt a bit relieved. It did not sound as bad as he thought.

“According to Governor Terry of the Tranquillus System,” Christina continued in the interview, *“he was not informed of your arrival until earlier today. Is there a reason that the military gave him and the residents of Tranquillus such short notice?”*

“If word about where we were being deployed to had reached the crew and SAGATs onboard, they would research and figure out the layout of the system and the planets before we even got there. We wanted to keep our destination as short noticed as possible to prevent them from doing research and having an upper hand in the exercises as much as possible.”

“The residents of Tranquillus are genuinely concerned for their safety during the exercises that being carried out in their system. What assurance does the military have that there won’t be civilian injuries or casualties during exercises that involve live fire situations?”

“The areas that we are doing our exercises in have been purposely selected where there is no civilian presence, namely the outer planets. For the SAGATs, most of their training will be involving EVA combat suits rather than on either of the two habitable worlds that are located in this system. If a civilian vessel does approach our location, we will issue a warning to not approach for their safety.”

“And what happens if they fail to heed the warning?”

“The exercises will be put on hold and the vessel along with its crew will be detained. That is in accordance with military protocol.”

“Do you foresee anyone who may disapprove of these exercises attempting to do just that?”

“Personally, I hope not. I know that this was last minute for a lot of people but we are taking the civilian population into account during these exercises and anything that delays these exercises would cause us to prolong our being here doing them.”

“How long do you expect the Eleventh Fleet to be in the Tranquillus System?”

“Our estimated departure will be four days from now at noon. As long as there are no complications or delays, we should be out of this system by then.”

The scene on the screen changed back to Christina in the corridor, the windows behind her looking out into the stars. Trent relaxed a bit. It was not as bad as he thought it was.

“According to other military officials,” Christina continued, *“the fleet was deployed by the request of Grand Admiral Mikey through the Supreme Chancellor. While such requests are not normally heard of, it shows that this move to change where the exercises are being held was endorsed by the Supreme Chancellor himself. Reporting live from Tranquillus, this is...”*

Before Christina could finish her report, the red alert klaxon started sounding throughout the ship, even in Trent’s Ready Room. Trent looked around, a bit bewildered about the alarm itself. Then the intercom came on in the room.

“Vice Admiral Trent to the bridge,” Shannon’s voice said over the intercom.

Trent turned off the terminal which had Christina still on the air looking bewildered. He got up and walked around his desk towards the door. As soon as he got on the bridge, red elongated lights lined parts of the bridge indicated that the ship was indeed at “red alert.”

“What is the situation?” Trent asked as he walked towards his seat.

“Sir,” Chrystal said, “long range sensors have detected multiple wormhole signatures near the orbit of Tranquillus VIII.”

This had to be happening while there was a live news report being given on board, Trent thought.

“Do we have identification on those signatures?” Trent asked as he sat down.

“No, sir. The signatures are unknown.”

It had to be them, Trent thought. Then he realized that if the news is still being broadcasted, the RCIA would not be able to block the transmission without it looking suspicious. This may have been perfect timing after all.

“Can we at least identify the size of the ships based on those signatures?” Trent asked.

It was best to know what his fleet was getting into before warping to their location.

“Based on the signatures,” Chrystal continued, “there are two groups. Both groups appear to have thirty destroyer-type vessels, twelve cruiser-type vessels, and one battleship each.”

Those are good size fleets, Trent thought.

“Wait,” Chrystal paused for a couple of seconds. “Sir! Sensors are detecting weapons fire between the two!”

“Are they beam lasers?” Trent asked.

“No, I’m detecting projectile weapons fire from one group and missiles from the other! These can’t be Republic ships, can they?!”

Trent tried not to show that he already knew something about what they were dealing with. Shannon turned around to face Trent but she could tell he was about to drop the bomb on the bridge crew.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Trent said, “I think we are about to have our first encounter with not one but two intelligent alien races.”

All of the bridge crew looked at Trent with shocked expressions on their faces.

“Sir,” Chrystal said, “you cannot be serious. There has to be a more logical explanation for all of this.”

“Then let’s try this,” Trent said. “Communications, are you getting any communication traffic among those ships?”

“Let me check,” Ro said as she pressed a few buttons. “I’m getting traffic on open frequencies, but...I can’t identify what they are saying at all. I’m getting what sounds like words, but also some growling. I can’t identify any of it...no way.”

Ro looked back at Trent knowing this just confirmed what he said. Trent did not need any further confirmation. Trent pressed a switch on his seat.

“This is fleet command to all ships of the Eleventh Fleet...,” Trent said.

* * * * *

*Main Broadcasting Stage, National Broadcasting System Building, City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen (“Light”) System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
6:09pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

“Christina?”

Laura along with Matt and the rest of the news crew looked on at the screen in front of them that showed what was being broadcasted all over the Republic. As Christina was wrapping up the news report, the red alert klaxon of the *Renaldo* went off throughout the ship. Christina

looked around the corridor as military personnel started running out of other corridors and rooms going to their assigned stations.

“Laura and Matt,” Christina said, “for some reason, red alert has been called on board the fleet’s flagship, the Renaldo. I don’t know if this is a drill or not but military personnel are frantically entering the corridor and reporting to their stations.”

At that point, the intercom on the *Renaldo* came to life.

“This is fleet command to all ships of the Eleventh Fleet,” Trent said over the intercom, “We have detected several wormhole signatures near the orbit of Tranquillus VIII. These signatures are of unknown origin and the communications are not human. We are dealing with not one but two possible alien races that have appeared and engaged in combat in our system. This is NOT a drill! I say again, it is NOT a drill! All hands, report to your stations. All ships are to warp to the following coordinates immediately.”

Christina looked at the camera drone with a surprised look on her face. The view switched to Matt and Laura who also looked just as shocked. They looked at each other before Laura said something.

“Did...did he just say ‘aliens?’” Laura asked.

“Is this some kind of hoax?” Matt asked.

“Laura? Matt?” Christina said as the view switched to her. “The ship is now turning and I can hear the warp engines powering up. I can see other ships from the fleet near the battleship turning towards the same direction. I’m beginning to think this might not be a hoax.”

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Republic,” Matt said attempting to regain some composure as the view went back to him and Laura, “if what we are hearing is true, we may be broadcasting for the first time in human history an encounter with intelligent alien lifeforms. We will try to get a view of the situation as it unfolds and we will continue to broadcast as long as we can on this breaking story.”

* * * * *

*Bridge, R.N.S. Renaldo, Paladin-Class Battleship
Warping to Planet Tranquillus VIII Orbit, Tranquillus System
6:11pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

“ETA?”

Trent could still not believe the situation that was unfolding before him. He did not know whether to be excited or nervous. Maybe it was both? Either way, he knew that the news was still broadcasting live as the exterior camera drones used by NBS were following Christina’s beacon at warp speed. Trent knew that the RCIA did not want this broadcasted live but that could not be helped. They could blame it on the aliens’ bad timing.

“We will be out of warp in ten seconds,” Ryan said.

Trent was about to be on the edge of his seat with anticipation. He did not know if the rest of the crew or for that matter the whole Republic felt the same way as he did. But those were the longest ten seconds he had ever felt. When the battleship began to slow down, his heart started to beat faster due to a multitude of emotions. After a few seconds, the alien fleets started to come into view. While Trent was excited at first, that feeling started to become fear as he could see the two fleets exchanging weapons fire between them.

The ships to port were a bit “dated” looking and bulky with a brownish-red hull with silver accents. They were angular and had what looked like large “shield” plates on both sides of their cruisers and destroyers on “blocky” wings. The battleship was especially bulky with what looked like some components from some of the smaller ships adorning the top and bottom of the ship. All of the ships to port had one thing in common: their weaponry. The guns looked to be the projectile weapons that were being used against the opposing fleet and came in various sizes depending on what they were being used against. However, Trent noticed that only half of their guns were firing. The guns that looked to be firing were long range artillery cannons while the guns that were not looked like autocannons based on their rotating multi-barrels. This surprised Trent as the design of the ships and guns were almost like they were designed by Humans. However, it could be that the race who designed those ships had similar design concepts to those Human designs from centuries ago. Whatever the reason for the designs, the ships did show one thing: they were powerful ships with powerful guns.

On the opposite side, the opposing fleet’s design was quite different in contrast. Painted blue with gold accents, the ships were more streamlined and advanced looking but also had a rather unique characteristic. The ships looked to be of modular design as the destroyers looked to be the base design, the cruisers added larger components between the sides and central section of the hulls on each side, and the battleship had its own central hull with the larger side components of two cruisers flanking each side. Just like the ships to port, the ships to starboard were using familiar weapons as well. They were equipped with missile launchers and had a multitude of them on each ship of different sizes. While missiles were slower moving projectile weapons, they were self-guiding and did not have to be pointing towards the enemy to fire. Trent also noticed something odd when it came to the missiles being fired: they were quite fast after being launched and that the fleet to port did not use its autocannons to shoot down the missiles. He did not know whether the autocannons were not firing because the missiles were too fast or if they were designed for more close range ship-to-ship combat much like the Republic’s lasers being put on pulse cannon mode. For whatever reason, the ships to port were taking quite a pounding from the missiles much like the ships to starboard were taking the hits from the projectile guns.

Once the Republic fleet fully came out of warp, the amount of firepower between the two fleets began to diminish. Obviously the alien fleets noticed their presence.

“Communications,” Trent said, “I want you to transmit the dictionary of our entire language and the following message.”

“Understood,” Ro said. “Ready, sir.”

“This is Vice Admiral Trent, flag officer and fleet commander of the Eleventh Fleet of the Novus Initium Republic. You have entered a system under the sovereignty of the Novus Initium Republic and proceeded to commence open warfare within our borders. You are the first foreign powers we have encountered since the formation of the Republic. If you can understand this message after it is translated, please send a copy of your languages as we have so that we can also translate and hope to open a dialogue with you both. We will wait for your response. End transmission.”

Ro confirmed that the message along with a dictionary of the English language, the predominant language of the Republic, was successfully transmitted. Trent looked at both sets of ships in front of the Republic fleet. So far, neither of their ships had pointed their weapons

towards the fleet. Now all they had to do was watch and wait for them to respond.

* * * * *

*Main Broadcasting Stage, National Broadcasting System Building, City of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen (“Light”) System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
6:15pm, May 11, 5433 A.D.*

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Republic...”

Laura tried to keep her composure along with Matt as they were shown footage from the camera drones that were close to the *Renaldo*. Everyone in the Republic could now see the two fleets that were completely foreign to their own, though the designs did not look as alien as many holoreels they were shown would have thought. Many of the other stations in the Republic were also interrupting their broadcasts to show the same feed from NBS News. While Christina was still on the *Renaldo*, she was just as speechless as the trillions of viewers who were now watching the broadcast.

“...you are witnessing history in the making,” Laura continued. “At 6:15 PM. Republic Standard Time, on the Eleventh of May, 5433 A.D., the Eleventh Fleet of the Novus Initium Republic has made contact with not one but two foreign alien fleets that have appeared near the orbit of Tranquillus VIII. The flag officer of the fleet, Vice Admiral Trent, has sent a message along with a dictionary of the English language. Right now, he along with the rest of the fleet is currently waiting for a response. From what we know based on what we just witnessed, these two races appear to be a war with each other. Their ships and their weapons also appear to be more contemporary in design and function. It is safe to say that those thoughts and ideas of fiction will remain just that, a work of fiction. We at NBS News will continue to follow this story for as long as we can and field reporter Christina will keep us informed of any developments. What we ask of you, the citizens of the Republic, is to remain calm for the time being until we are able to communicate with these foreign alien fleets. We will take a brief commercial break before we continue the news.”

With that, the production crew signaled that they were off-the-air. Laura took that time to get her phone out and start sending a message to Trent. Matt could see her typing frantically on the phone and chose not to bother her. She typed:

You KNEW about this somehow! THIS is why the fleet is there, isn't it?! There is no other explanation about how your fleet could be there in that system! “Military exercises,” my butt! I'm on a commercial break right now so I HOPE you get this message and explain to me how or who knew about this!

Laura completed her message and sent it. However, she did not know that Trent left his phone in his Ready Room. He knew that she would be fuming right now about what had occurred and knew the exercises were just a cover-up of the real reason.

At this point, she was not the only person in the Republic with those same thoughts.

* * * * *