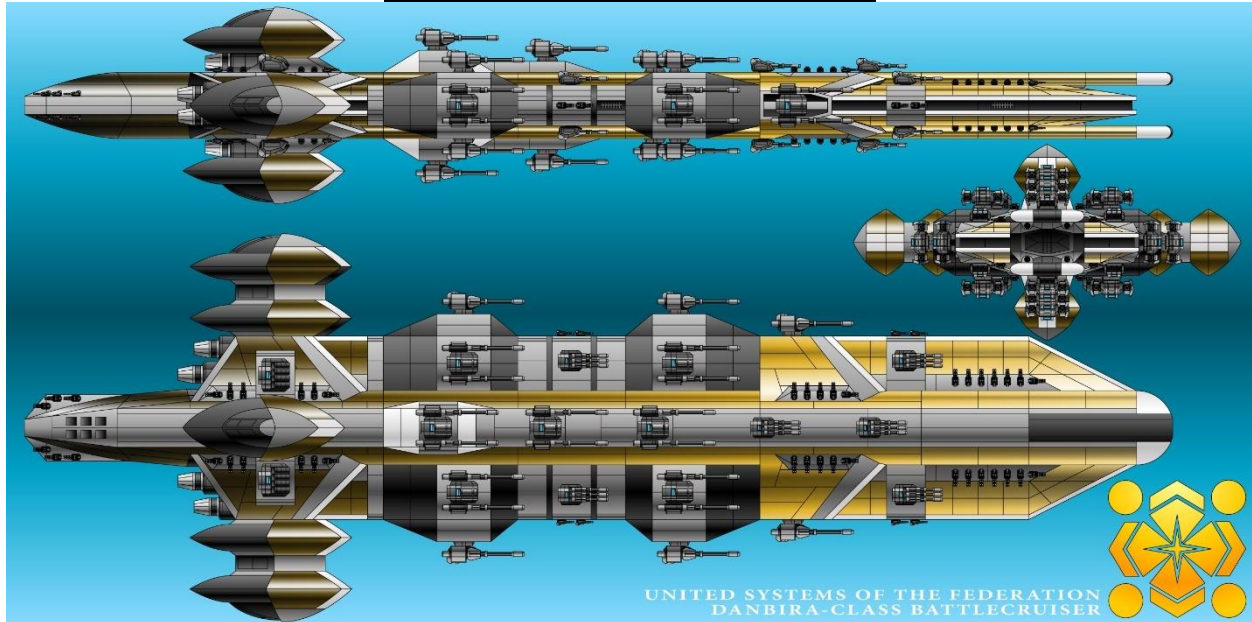


Warring Factions: Alternate Timeline Remake
The Cost of Peace/The Divide Within



PART 1

*Senate Building, New York City, North American Continent
Planet Earth, Sol System, United Systems of the Federation
7:25am, June 20, Year 72 of the Galactic Era calendar*

“I wonder what this emergency meeting is about this time?”

Tiffany, one of the three senators elected to represent the Sol System within the United Systems of the Federation, could not restrain the lack of enthusiasm in her statement as she walked towards the main Senate Chambers. She was tired from the lack of sleep last night after finding out that her husband was being deployed this later morning. She knows that he is the Executive Officer of the ship he was assigned to and is required to go if the ship is deployed, but while she knew that was going to be the case upon marrying him, she never knew that the lonely nights would tally so many in the years since their marriage.

As Tiffany continued down the hall towards the Senate Chamber, she glanced outside at some of the ruins of New York City and the continued rebuilding efforts that were happening despite how long ago the Second Ice Age, as short as it was, had ended. While she was not born on Earth itself, she could lay the blame on the Second Ice Age squarely on the wars that were waged by the planetary nations more than seventy years ago. It made her reflect how “lucky” Humanity was to have survived its own foolishness to this day, and how they were the ones who first founded the Federation more than twenty years ago.

The origins of the United Systems of the Federation started on Earth in the Sol System more than seventy years ago. Humanity had fought their third “World War,” but used highly destructive devices called nuclear warheads, or “nukes” as the slang term goes. The multiple detonations of these warheads across the planet had not only killed a third of the entire Human population, but also resulted in the nuclear fallout generating thick clouds over the entire planet causing temperatures to drop rapidly. As the planet began to plunge into what it would call its

“Second Ice Age,” Humanity had quickly built domes over existing cities and began construction of underground cities as well. This was not enough to allow everyone on the planet to take shelter from the pending sub-zero temperatures, and those that could not find shelter froze to death three months after the war. A few brave entrepreneurs had begun construction of small space habitats to get away from the planet, initially in the design of small rings that rotated to produce gravity. These individuals created a new calendar to commemorate the start of a new age of space habitation known as the Galactic Era. Those who still lived on Earth did not take too kindly to those in space creating a new calendar for the “elite” who were able to escape into space and refused to accept the new calendar until many years later.

While those who lived on the planet were forced to establish laws limiting the population growth due to limited space and resources available, those in the space colonies continued to grow, building more colonies as needed. While the space colonies were originally in orbit over the Earth, larger colonies were built later in locations of stable gravity based on the pull of Earth and Luna’s gravity called Lagrange points. The first set of large colonies were at the Lagrange point between the Earth and moon known historically as “L1,” using metals mined and constructed from the moon due to the ease of lunar mining and its proximity to the moon. A second set of colonies were constructed in Galactic Era 22 at the Lagrange point ahead of the moon’s orbit known as “L4.” Once those colonies were constructed, all but one of the colonies in Earth’s orbit were moved to the Lagrange point trailing the moon’s orbit called “L5.” The remaining colony in Earth’s orbit was meant as a go-between should any of the Earth’s population made it into space. This did not happen however for many years.

The United Earth Colonies, the new government that was established to govern the space colonies, began to flourish and prosper better than their terrestrial counterparts. Around Galactic Era 23, a plan was proposed to provide genetic alterations to Human DNA to allow for better adaptability to living in the harsh conditions of space. The research fielded its first child two years later who showed greater resiliency and intelligence than the average Human. Codenaming them “Enhanced,” more than ten percent of Human babies born in the following year were Enhanced with the percentage increasing over the years. The Enhanced were able to use their high intellect to help find solutions to existing problems, including producing colonies through automated methods and ways to either bring Humanity from the planet into space or to quickly end the Second Ice Age. The first colonies build by their method were of a different design and housed Enhanced Humans only, located at the Lagrange point on the opposite side of the moon from Earth known as “L3.” Once of age to be considered an adult, all the Enhanced moved to their colonies to be with their own kind. Many in the UEC viewed the Enhanced colonies like a “think tank” where the most brilliant minds come up with solutions to their current problems.

However, this way of thinking concerning the Enhanced was not universal when those Humans from Earth eventually made it to the space colonies using an orbital elevator the Enhanced had originally designed. Viewing the Enhanced as abominations, the Humans who recently came from Earth began to spread their way of thinking throughout the colonies over the next five years, forming what was known as the “Naturalist” group. Only the colonies in the L5 region were unaffected by this group due to the amount of support those colonies gave for the Enhanced project. However, this group’s movement had decreased the number of Enhanced born by natural Humans to only five percent and those were only coming from the L5 colonies. By this time, the oldest Enhanced began to give birth to their own children, beginning a second generation of Enhanced Humans in their own colonies. Seeing the potential of hostilities between the colonies, the Enhanced tried through diplomacy in the UEC Senate in Galactic Era 47 to

defuse the situation and show the benefits the Enhanced have to offer the rest of Humanity. However, the representative for the Enhanced was shot during his speech by a member of the Naturalist Party, the formal party and later listed as the fanatical group from Earth that opposed genetic manipulation. This act enraged the Enhanced and they began to create weapons of war to use against most of the colonies where the Naturalist Party had influence or control, except for the colonies at L5 who still supported the Enhanced. At the same time, those same colonies that are under the influence or control of the Naturalist Party who opposed the Enhanced began to develop their own combat craft to destroy the colonies of Enhanced. The two sides ended up in open warfare at the Enhanced colonies' defensive line with the Enhanced automated combat units winning over the Naturalists' forces.

The conflict between the Naturalists and the Enhanced lasted over a year with the Naturalists forces losing ground due to the Enhanced automated combat units' capabilities. The Enhanced also resorted to cyber hacking of the Naturalists' computer systems that resulted in ship-wide disruptions and loss of combat capabilities and functions. When the Naturalists forces resorted to isolating key ship systems, the tide began to turn in their favor, pushing the Enhanced forces frontlines back due to their numbers and adaptability in combat compared to unmanned automated intelligence units. The war ended abruptly when the Enhanced forces' defensive lines were breached, forcing the Enhanced to use a weapon that literally brought both fleets to a halt: an electromagnetic pulse bomb. Both sides' forces were hit, frying their electronics. That bomb brought the war to a standstill while recovery teams were deployed to recover the crews of the disabled ships, primarily those among the Naturalist fleet.

Realizing the situation was getting out of hand, the colonists located at L5 who had been neutral during the war offered to serve as mediators for any possible negotiations. While the Enhanced were willing to negotiate as they have respect for the L5 colonists that supported them, the Naturalists were not inclined to negotiate. However, the loss of life from the war had caused the Naturalist Party to lose their influence within the UEC Senate and among most of the space colonies. They were forcefully removed from their positions by members of the Senate who were seeking peace. Two months later, the war came to an end and the more peace-oriented UEC Senate passed laws that made it illegal for Enhanced Humans to be discriminated against with any violent action being met with severe punishment.

Over the course of the next six months after the war ended, peace had returned to Humanity in the colonies and on Earth, but this peace would not last very long. On the morning of June 10, Galactic Era 49, Humans were visited by aliens from another world for the first time in their history. The aliens called themselves the Liekans, a race of bipedal wolf-like beings who carried with them an air of nobility and regality. They arrived in the Sol System to establish a base for which to deploy their forces against their enemies, the amphibious Dexigalians, who they have been at war with for several years. Neither race was aware of the Humans who lived in the Sol System, however. Instead, the Liekans chose to befriend Humanity and offered a few of their technological advances such as artificial gravity and sublight engines that were easily mountable on current ships. However, they did not give Humanity their faster-than-light drive system, the Fold Drive. Humanity believed at the time that the reason behind this decision was due to the Liekans and Dexigalians fighting outside the Sol System and the Liekans were trying to protect Humanity from getting too involved. Also, no Human ship could use such a drive due to how Human ships were built and the power needed to use that drive system.

Humanity got involved in the Liekans' war when Dexigalian forces invaded the Sol System in the following month of July. Human forces fought alongside Liekan forces against an

outnumbered and unprepared Dexigalian fleet, though Human ships had to fight at long range due to not having any shields like the Liekan forces. After a few months and several battles across the Sol System, the two alien forces both left the Sol System to fight in nearby star systems. By the start of Galactic Era 50, there had been no signs of either race returning to the Sol System.

It was discovered during that time that while the Liekans had given Humanity enhanced sublight engines, artificial gravity, and inertia dampeners before the war came to the Sol System, the Liekans had embedded a “backdoor” computer code into those pieces of technology that were provided that could effectively disable Human ships. The system was reworked from the ground up excluding the backdoor, but this raised several questions at the time about whether this backdoor was accidentally added or intentionally.

Afterwards, unbeknownst to the Liekans, a Human salvage team retrieved a working Fold Drive from both a destroyed Liekan ship and a Dexigalian ship in October of Galactic Era 49. The addition of a Fold Drive to a new ship of Human design that utilizes the systems they were given would not be a problem from an engineering standpoint. However, powering the drive was a problem due to the amount of energy needed to activate and maintain energy to the Fold Drive. There were also concerns raised about ship defenses should enemy vessels come into mid to close-range combat based on the combat experiences of Human commanding officers. Liekan and Dexigalian ships had shield systems but none were salvageable from their wreckage as their shield systems would be fried long before the target vessel was destroyed. Without a resolution to either the energy problem for the Fold Drive problem or ship defensive systems outside of point defense cannons, any initial designs that were created remained on the drawing board.

Then, in late January of Galactic Era 50, engineers had created a sudden technological breakthrough. A drive system was developed that could power both the Fold Drive and used that same energy to empower the armor on ships to the same level of strength and resiliency as an energy shield system. This new drive unit was called the Phase-Induction Transition Graviton Engine Drive, or PITGED for short. The drive unit generated graviton particles that both powered the Fold Drive and were infused in the armor, the latter being later called nano-laminate armor. This armor was capable of deflecting energy-based weapons that would impact the hull, which meant that the energy-based weapons used by both the Liekan and Dexigalian ships would be worthless against Human ships. However, while the new drive unit was powerful, it would not be able to provide enough energy to power an energy-based weapons system without equipping more drive units in the process, causing the potential of a lethal overload of power. Therefore, engineers chose to keep with its artillery cannons and missile weapons which were still effective against the energy shields the two alien races use. Projectile and ballistic weaponry are also more effective against the nano-laminate armor, but the armor can take several hits before the rounds can break through depending on the thickness of the armor and the velocity of the rounds.

While this technological development was quite an achievement for Humanity, Tiffany had her doubts about its development. While she was quite young when Humanity made first contact, she was skeptical when she first heard about it in history class. That sort of technological leap would normally take years to develop and there was no indication that such a development was taking place prior to even the war between the Naturalists and the Enhanced. Neither of the alien races were in possession of such a drive system, but Tiffany had long believed that it was a technological shortcut, as in someone else developed the technology and Humanity managed to either find and reverse-engineer it or they managed to acquire it from a third-party “vendor.”

Regardless, Tiffany had kept her skepticisms to herself, knowing that no one would be either alive or be enslaved right now if that development had not occurred back then.

The first ten ships that rolled out of assembly with the new technology were known as the Tanken-Class Destroyers. Equipped with this new “revolutionary” technology, these ships made their first journey out of the Sol System to the nearest star systems of Proxima Centauri and Alpha Centauri with five ships going to each system. When the ships that went to Alpha Centauri arrived at their destination, they found in orbit over the third planet which was a habitable world a three-way battle in space between the forces of the Liekans, the Dexigalians, and the Centauri. The Centauri were later identified as resembling a feline/Human hybrid like those from old Japanese animation shows. The Centauri were losing the fight as their forces were completely outmatched in both numbers and technology against both the Dexigalians but also the Liekans. The Humans who were present now saw the Liekans who they thought were an honorable race were just as ruthless as their Dexigalian enemies against anyone but themselves. Seeing that the Liekans were attacking without remorse against an inferior force, it raised a lot of questions as to why the Liekans did not pull the same move with Humanity. It soon became apparent to the fleet commander that the answer lies in the “backdoor code” that was discovered in the technology the Liekans had given Humanity. They also looked at their lack of providing Humanity with anything more than a speed boost short of a faster-than-light drive. By not providing Humanity with advance weapons and defenses, Humans would still be effective in repelling the Dexigalians, but that trust would make it easy for the Liekans to conquer Humanity. All the Liekans had to do was “flip a switch” using the backdoor code and every Human ship would be disabled, making invasion and conquest easy for the Liekans. Unfortunately for the Liekans, they were not aware that Humans had found their trap with the backdoor code and closed it.

While the Human forces that were present at Alpha Centauri were outnumbered, the fleet commander, after realizing the elaborate ruse the Liekans had pulled, chose to initiate a surprise attack on both the Liekan and Dexigalian forces. That move forced the stunned alien invaders to withdraw and regroup as the Human ships were not recognizable to either force. Upon the news of the battle reaching the UEC and what the Liekans had planned for Humanity, it was decided that both alien nations were hostile and to mass produce the Tanken destroyers with other designs to follow soon. The Centauri after diplomatic talks were initiated with the UEC volunteered to join the Humans in a coalition against the Liekans and Dexigalians. Despite their superior numbers, the Liekan and Dexigalian forces were pushed back due to the defensive capabilities of the Human ships and inability to use the backdoor code. They were forced to withdraw from surrounding star systems including the Vega System, the home system of the bipedal lizard race known as the Zaurions who later joined the coalition. The campaign against the Liekan and Dexigalian forces continued for two years as more systems were liberated from their oppressors. The war ended when the King of the Monarchy of Lieka and the Emperor of the Dexigalian Empire announced their surrender and call for an armistice after their forces were pushed back almost three hundred Light-years from the Sol System. The coalition agreed to the armistice and wanted to see about maintaining diplomatic relations, but soon afterward the Liekan and Dexigalian nations went into self-isolation and had not been heard from since.

In a grand ceremony, the races that were liberated thanks to the coalition’s efforts that were started by Humanity agreed to form a new interstellar nation in the interests of mutual defense and protection of their worlds. This new nation is the United Systems of the Federation. Thanks to the formation of this new nation and the sharing of advance science and technology among some of the races, Earth’s Second Ice Age ended allowing those who were on the planet

to join those among the stars and colonize other systems. Humans both “Natural” and Enhanced can be found on more than two dozen worlds along with other races. Efforts were also made to rebuild and enhance the cities of Earth, with New York City being among the first cities to undergo renovation. In the twenty years since the formation of the Federation and the following peace, the city was still going through renovations. It was not hard to figure out that the reason for the renovations taking that long was due to both the size of the city and the lack of drive to rebuild when it was easier to move elsewhere and start over. The Federation Senate building was built first after clearing the ruins of the old United Nations building where it once stood.

As she continued towards the Senate Chamber, she saw a familiar person in front of her walking towards the Senate Chamber as well. It was Senator Julana from Celestia. Celestians are from a biological standpoint the same as Humans, but with one exception: They have wings on their backs. They looked a lot like angels from stories and religious texts. Many Humans had assumed that those figures in those stories were Celestians visiting their world, but the Celestians made it clear that they had no means to visit other worlds as they were not developed enough to travel to other planets.

There are other races that appear Human at first, but they generally had some physical traits about them that distinguishes them from Humans such as the Celestians’ wings or the Centauri ears and tails. The possibility that there are any races that look Human to begin with elsewhere in the galaxy should be scientifically and statistically slim, but the fact that there are so many that not only look Human but are more than ninety percent biologically compatible with Humans has raised many questions among the scientific community as to how this is possible. The only exception to this matter is the organic versions of the mechanical Minions, who made Human versions of themselves to integrate better with Human society including their first contact many years ago.

She even married one of the organic Minions, much to the surprise of her peers.

“Good morning, Julana,” Tiffany said aloud.

The Celestian woman looked back at Tiffany with a look of surprise and worry on her face, her flowing regal-looking gown twirling a little along with her blonde hair.

“Good morning, Tiffany,” Julana said. “Is something wrong? You look quite tired.”

“I am tired,” Tiffany said. “I found out my husband, Alto, is being deployed today. That means that your husband is as well, right?”

Tiffany knew Julana’s husband. He was Rear Admiral Deandre, a Human commanding officer of the battlecruiser *Kasagi*. Tiffany’s husband is Commander Alto who serves as the executive officer aboard the same vessel. If Alto was being deployed, it was a sure bet that Deandre was as well. The look of worry on Julana’s face was evidence that Tiffany’s suspicions were correct.

“That is correct, Tiffany,” Julana said. “It bothers me greatly that Deandre was ordered yesterday to be deployed later this morning. When you consider that we were told the same day about this emergency meeting that would be in session prior to their deployment, it means that whatever is being discussed in this meeting may have a connection to the purpose of their deployment, possibly political in nature.”

“You have a point,” Tiffany said. “Unless it was a coincidence that they are being deployed the same day as our meeting, they may be involved with a political mission. Do you think it would have something to do with the Cantarians?”

“I would be surprised if it did. As reclusive and secretive as their society is, reaching out to us would be a paradigm shift in their way of thinking.”

Tiffany could not argue that fact with Julana. The Cantarians were discovered by accident during an expedition into the star systems in the opposite direction from the Liekan and Dexigalian borders. Few races were found in that direction including the pre-industrial Dulians, a canine/Human hybrid race. While many Dulians remain on their planet and adhere to their simple way of life, some have chosen to venture forth into space when the Federation arrived. The Cantarians, however, were very secretive and highly territorial. When a Federation ship entered their territory unknowingly, the Cantarians offered no warnings. Instead, they resorted to firing on the Federation vessel from a stealth cruiser of their design. While the Federation ship was able to defend itself, it managed to finally contact the Cantarians. The Cantarians kept the conversation simple, explaining who they were, what was their space, and warned that there were no more trespassing into their space. That was after the initial shock that they too looked Human. However, the Federation vessel detected artificial gravity on the Cantarian vessel rated at twice the gravity of Earth. It was not known physically how different the Cantarians were from Humans, but the Federation has made every effort to attempt a dialogue and keep out of their space, despite any communication being sent going unanswered.

“You do not think it is the Liekans and the Dexigalians, do you?” Julana asked as they approached the open Senate Chamber doors.

“With them, it is always a possibility,” Tiffany said. “I hope it is not and this is a first contact encounter with a new race, instead. Maybe we will get lucky and it will be diplomatic ties to the Fulari/Corimei Alliance. It would be nice to have allies with other nations that once had ties to the Liekans and the Dexigalians. We may be able to find out what is going on with those two nations.”

“Maybe, but they are on the other side of the Monarchy of Lieka and the Dexigalia Empire. Any ties or communication would have to traverse those nations’ space meaning they would be aware of the Alliance’s intent.”

“I guess so. I am just trying to narrow down the possibilities since I want to feel okay about Alto’s deployment. I know you want to feel the same for Deandre’s deployment as well.”

“I do, but I need to remain a realist. Guessing hypothetically will get us nowhere until we hear from the Vice President on this matter.”

“You are right. I guess we might as well hear what she has to say about the matter.”

Julana and Tiffany had just entered the Senate Chambers at this point. Other senators were still walking into the room. The room reminded Tiffany of the layout of the old United Nations meeting room, but with gray and yellow accents as well as multiple wall screens and holographic displays throughout the room.

Before they went to their respective seats, Tiffany put her hand on Julana’s shoulder.

“Do not worry, Julana,” Tiffany said, trying to smile despite how tired she was. “I am sure both of our husbands will be just fine. Tell you what we can do. After this meeting, let us go get a bite to eat and check out a few stores in the city. Does that sound good to you?”

“Alright, I think I can manage that,” Julana said with a grin. “That is, of course, we are not provided with some sort of bad news.”

“Do not go jinxing it, but there is a chance you are right. Let us get to our seats and see what the order of the day is.”

“Alright. We will talk after the meeting.”

Tiffany nodded in agreement before they walked away from each other. Tiffany proceeded to the front center row where her two fellow senators representing the Sol System were seated, while Julana went two rows back and to the chamber’s right to join her fellow

senators from Celestia. When the Senate Chamber was designed, it was made where the oldest of the Federation worlds and systems represented sat in the front while any world or system that joins later would be seated further back until all six rows of half-circles were filled. At that point, it would be necessary to rearrange the seating for any star systems joining in the years to come.

However, as Tiffany looked out among her fellow senators in the room, she was not surprised that, despite other races joining the Federation, there were at least four other star systems represented that had Humans among them not including Sol. While Earth was habitable again, there were many in the past twenty years that moved to other habitable planets or ones that were terraformed rather than deal with the process of rebuilding their home planet. One of those planets was Novam Domum or New Home in Latin. It is the fourth planet and one of two habitable worlds in the Vega System, the Zaurions being native to the other habitable planet that is the third planet in the system. Its orbit and rotation were close to that of Earth and made it a prime candidate for Human colonization, despite the Zaurions wanting to claim it after the Federation was founded. Many who moved there feel Earth was a lost cause and reconstruction was a futile effort. However, Novam Domum is also the home of the Federation Forces Academy which admits everyone from every Federation world. The city the Academy is in is the only one that is that cosmopolitan compared to the rest of the planet.

Other planets being represented in the Senate by Humans are Planet Sakura in the Epsilon Eridani system that was first inhabited by those of Japanese descent. Later, those of other East Asian descents made their way to that planet due to the landscape resembling that of East Asia. There were also Humans who represent the Draco System, the Diomedes System, and the Gallonigher System. Gallonigher is home to both the military headquarters of the Federation and the Minion race. While Gallonigher was not their original place of origin, the Minions settled there and were discovered by Humans near the end of the First Interstellar War. Her husband came from one of those planets, namely Acheron which is the only true habitable world in the system and where the Federation Navy headquarters was. There was another planet that could be habitable called Morpheus, but the planet's surface is covered in a biomass with glowing phosphorus lakes. Some scientists anticipate that the planet is alive, but that has been a debate since the planet was discovered. Two other star systems were represented that had Humans, but their populations were only starting to grow as more people from other races started to move to them, making them more cosmopolitan as they grow.

Aside from the Minions and the Zaurions, there were other races of Human variations aside from the Centauri, the Dulians, and the Celestians. Another race discovered around the same time as the Celestians were the Euphorians, who had rabbit-like ears on the sides of their heads. Their hearing is exceptional, but they need audio damping devices in their ears as normal Human conversation levels are too loud for them. Another known Human variation were the Cronusians. Their planet is considered habitable but the radiation from their star is hazardous to everyone but them. The only safe zone for interstellar travel is near the edge of their system where a station was built as a transit point. However, they cannot go too long without the radiation or it will have sickly effects on their health. Special accommodations have been made for them to be exposed to the radiation they need in isolated areas such as their residence, but this requirement means that if anyone wants to engage in a relationship with them, they would be exposed to those same levels of radiation that is on their skin and clothing. Many people try to keep their distance as much as possible when interacting with them. They are easy to identify by their red or bluish hues of skin and hair tones. There was also the fact that some of the Humans present were Organic Minions, but they were so hard to distinguish from any Human.

After Tiffany had surveyed the room looking to see if anyone might have known what the meeting was about, Vice President and Senate Leader Cassandra came into the Chamber. The doors to the chamber closed as she proceeded to the podium with her data tablet tucked under her arm. Everyone took notice of her and headed to their seats to begin the emergency session. As Tiffany sat down, she noticed that Cassandra had a look of worry on her face. This in turn began to worry Tiffany that something bad was either about to happen or is happening. This did not make her feel well about Alto's deployment later this morning.

"Good morning," she said once she laid the tablet down on the podium. "This emergency meeting is now called to order. I apologize for calling this meeting this early in the morning and on short notice, but there is a matter of utmost urgency to address today to you all that may affect the peace the Federation has had for the past twenty years."

The last part of Cassandra's statement filled Tiffany with even more dread. If this were a matter that affected the peace, the response would be the use of military action to either prevent it or defend against whatever threatened the peace. No one stopped Cassandra from continuing to speak as either they were too scared to ask or too curious. Tiffany would not be surprised if it were both of those.

"Approximately twelve hours ago, we received a coded communication from two parties that were believed to each originate from Liekan and Dexigalian space. However, those two messages have been determined to not be coded by either of those races. The languages used in both messages have been discovered as being Fulari and Corimein."

An audible mumble occurred among the senators as Tiffany and Julana looked at each other briefly. Both felt a little uneasy about the fact they had this discussion only moments ago about those four races. If the Fulari and Corimein are sending a transmission to the Federation knowing it would be detected by the Liekan and Dexigalian nations, it had to be serious enough for the Federation to act.

"Quiet down, please," the Vice President continued, waiting for the senators to quiet down before continuing. "We have managed to decode both of the messages, and they are saying the same thing. Members of the former Fulari Imperial Family and relatives of the former Corimein Government, both parties that were responsible for the governing of the Fulari/Corimein Alliance, are coordinating with each other to make a run to Federation space and seeking asylum. According to their messages, their Alliance was invaded and conquered by a joint Liekan and Dexigalian force more than ten years ago. They have only managed to get the message out now due to the strict occupation they were under."

Tiffany along with other senators were in shock. The only reports the Federation had about the Alliance was that the Fulari were exceptional ground warriors and the Corimein were experts in the use of artificial intelligence to create unmanned combat vessels. After what happened at the end of the First Interstellar War, why would the Liekan and Dexigalian nations be interested in the Alliance to conquer them more than ten years ago?

"They expect to hit the border in less than thirty-six hours from now," Cassandra continued. "President Natalia has been made aware of the situation and she has ordered two fleets to go to the rendezvous points at both the Liekan and Dexigalian borders where the Alliance refugees are expected to exit those nations' space."

Tiffany began to feel a level of fear. The *Kasagi* was the flagship of the Federation's Twenty-First Fleet that is often sent on patrol around the Federation for a two-week duration. Unlike most fleets that are deployed to a single star system that are assigned to those locations, the Twenty-First Fleet would be available to be deployed to an assignment such as this one.

“I know that the deployment of a military force outside wartime is a matter that should be left to the President who is the Commander-and-Chief,” Cassandra continued. “However, the reason this matter is being brought before the Senate is that the President feels that there needs to be representation present from the government for asylum to be granted upon retrieval of the two refugee parties. For that purpose, the President is requesting for there to be two senators in each fleet to represent the Federation government when asylum is granted to the refugees once they board the vessels. We are anticipating Liekan and Dexigalian ships pursuing those refugees, and there is a lot of territory for them to cover before those refugees reach Federation space. We are also anticipating that the Liekan and Dexigalian pursuit ships may not listen to our forces unless representatives from our government are present to offer asylum.”

“What happens if neither the Liekans or the Dexigalians pursuit ships refuse to listen to our forces or the senators and cross our borders?” a male voice asked among the senators.

Tiffany did not see who asked the question, and she was not concerned in finding out. That person asked a valid question as the answer would make the difference between continuing the peace or starting another war. The fact that the Vice President took a long breath before answering the question was not a good sign to see.

“In the worst-case scenario,” Cassandra continued, “if they cross our borders in their pursuit of the refugees, both fleets have the authority to open fire in defense of our borders.”

Nearly the entire Senate Chamber was in an uproar and on their feet, and Tiffany was not surprised by the reaction of everyone in the room as she remained seated. She heard many Senators asking why the Federation would be risking a war over refugees from the Alliance. Vice President Cassandra tried to bring the Senate back into order. While the senators were trying to settle down, Tiffany looked over at Julana, who returned her glance. If Tiffany was right and the *Kasagi* along with the Twenty-First Fleet were being deployed on this mission, they needed to know. Tiffany nodded at Julana who looked to understand what Tiffany was thinking. Tiffany looked back at Vice President Cassandra and raised her hand after the remaining senators had settled down. Cassandra noticed Tiffany’s hand and pointed her out.

“The chair recognizes Tiffany of Sol,” Cassandra said, almost out of breath from all the yelling she did.

Tiffany stood up from her seat with a serious look on her face as she looked at the Vice President. It was time for Tiffany to know if her fear was realized.

“Vice President,” Tiffany said. “I have two questions for you that I would like to address, if I may?”

“Are they the same questions that everyone here has been yelling?” Cassandra asked.

“No, they are not. My first question is this: Has the President selected which fleets are being sent to the borders to retrieve the refugees?”

Cassandra gave Tiffany a stern look. Tiffany had her confirmation about one of the fleets being sent based on Cassandra’s reaction.

“I know why you are asking that question, Senator,” Cassandra said. “Yes, the President has chosen the fleets to send to the borders. The Twenty-Seventh Fleet will be going to the Dexigalian border, but the fleet you are interested in, the Twenty-First Fleet, will be heading to the Liekan border.”

Cassandra’s reaction earlier was enough to confirm Tiffany’s suspicions but her verbally saying it was enough to solidify Tiffany’s concerns. Cassandra looked up to Tiffany’s right and a few rows back, no doubt staring at Julana. Cassandra knew Tiffany and Julana’s husbands were on the *Kasagi*. She must have hoped Tiffany would not have asked which fleets were being sent.

“Then I need to ask this second question,” Tiffany said. “Are you accepting volunteers for this mission?”

“Senator,” Cassandra said as she looked back at Tiffany, “I know you are the wife of the executive officer aboard the *Kasagi*, the flagship of the Twenty-First Fleet. I know Senator Julana of Celestia...”

Cassandra pointed in Julana’s direction.

“...is the wife of that ship’s commanding officer. The President had concerns about me bringing this up before the two of you and told me not to bring it up unless asked.”

“Well,” Tiffany said, “we have asked. I appreciate the President’s concern, but if she were really concerned, she would not have sent that fleet. Instead, she chose to do so, and now I need to know the answer to the second question.”

“If I say ‘yes,’ am I to assume that you and Julana want to go with the Twenty-First Fleet to the Liekan border?”

“That is correct. Our husbands are going out to that border, and possibly risking their lives. If you are asking senators to go with those fleets, then Julana and I are more than willing to risk our lives alongside our husbands.”

Tiffany looked back at Julana who stood up. She looked at Cassandra with a stern but determined look on her face. Cassandra looked between the two and sighed.

“Very well,” Cassandra said. “You two may go to the *Kasagi*. I will leave it up to you on how to break the news with your husbands, but you will need to leave immediately to pack along with two other senators that wishes to volunteer to go with the Twenty-Seventh fleet. However, in the case of you two and the fact that this is a mission, I must ask that you two keep this matter professional. Your husbands need to be focused on the mission and your safety first, not on your relationships or anything else you do at home. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Vice President,” Tiffany said.

It took every ounce of willpower for Tiffany not to smile in joy. However, she doubts heavily that her husband nor Julana’s will feel the same way when they arrive on board.

* * * * *

*Access Corridor to Combat-and-Control Center, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
Docking Bay #1, Space Colony L2-24, Lagrange Point 2 between Earth and Luna, Sol System
11:08am, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“How are the preparations for departure?”

Rear Admiral Deandre had been in his quarters for most of the morning going over the latest reports and information on the Liekan border. When he received orders yesterday for deployment to the Liekan border to retrieve refugees from the Fulari/Corimei Alliance, he did his best not to let his wife Julana know where his destination was. He only told her he was being deployed for a few days for a “milk run,” a term most often used for the retrieval of an important item or items that the military felt required a ship or fleet to run. He did not give her any more information than that, knowing she would be concerned about the mission’s real objective.

While he was to be deployed by eleven-hundred hours, he was informed that diplomatic ambassadors would be coming on board shortly. They were only informed this morning of their deployment and needed time to pack. The trip to the border and back would take more than forty-eight hours alone meaning that the ambassadors would need accommodations for a couple of nights. Thankfully, the *Kasagi* has a couple of VIP quarters available that were quickly made ready for his “guests.”

As Deandre made his way to the Combat-and-Control Center, the command center of the entire ship, his executive officer Commander Alto joined him in the corridor. Deandre was still looking at his tablet at the information provided on the border that was as up-to-date as those in Intelligence could get, but he glanced up every once in a while to see where he was going, noticing the commander come up beside him on his right before asking his question.

“We were ready to depart more than twenty minutes ago,” Alto said. “Our guests only arrived five minutes ago and are putting their belongings in their rooms. They will be in the observation room momentarily.”

“That is the one thing about some politicians,” Deandre said. “You can make a ship and its crew ready for deployment in a matter of minutes, but you cannot get a lazy politician to get their butt in gear when they need to be punctual.”

“Careful, sir. You and I are married to a couple of said politicians. I do not think either of our wives would be too happy to hear us say such things.”

“That is why it stays on this ship. I am also not too thrilled that those same VIPs can look over our shoulders any time they wish.”

“You will hear no argument from me on that matter, sir.”

“It is good to know we agree on that matter,” Deandre said as he tucked his tablet under his right arm as they approached the door to the Combat-and Control Center, also known as the “CCC” for short.

Two armed guards known as SAGNATs stood by the door at attention. Deandre nodded at them and they nodded in return acknowledging them. The one on the right punched in the access code and opened the door for the two officers. Once the heavy armored door opened, Deandre and Alto entered the CCC.

The room was a large octagon-shaped room, though it was elongated towards the port and starboard. There were three levels inside the room with the two of them entering from the top level on the port side from the front. The other levels were a meter down from each other, descending into what is called the Command Pit where Deandre and Alto would be sitting. The level in between is known as the Operations Level where many of the ship’s main functions would be placed such as Helm, Fire Control, and the heads of the different departments including the Operations Chief who operates the vessel when Deandre and Alto are not present. The top level is known as the Oversight Level with stations such as Fire Control Support, Sensors, Subsystems, and Damage Control are located. The Damage Control screen was on the starboard side of the room showing where there is damage to the ship both internally and externally. On the port side was the Observation Room where VIP’s would sit and watch the operations of the CCC. On some vessels, trainers would watch from there to grade new cadets and officer hopefuls in the operations of the ship. While there was a door with access from the outside for the VIP’s to enter, there was a hallway directly to Deandre’s right with a door to access the CCC directly. Only those with authorized access may enter and leave that room directly. The window they use for viewing is a one-way window unless the observers wish to be seen. Otherwise, it looks like part of the wall in the CCC.

While there was an access door to their left on the starboard side of the room, there were two more doors towards the aft of the room on the same top level. The door to port leads to the communications room. Due to the amount of chatter and chaos that would come from having several communications officers in the CCC, they were separated into their own room. Communications that were important to the CCC would be routed through the Intelligence Officer. The Intelligence officer also coordinates with information gathering and analysis with

those in the intelligence room behind the door that is to the starboard aft side of the CCC. Deandre's report involving the current state of the Liekan border was generated by the individuals inside that room.

As Deandre and Alto made their way into the room down the steps towards the Command Pit with the door closing behind them and locking, the two of them could see the Operations Officer looking over reports from his chair located to the starboard side of holographic display unit. That chair was normally dedicated for the use by the Operations Officer during meetings, but they can use it when they are the senior officer in the CCC. The Executive Officer sits in the seat on the bow side of the holographic display table and the Commanding Officer in the seat on the aft side. One more seat was available to the port, but that is reserved for the Combat Air Leader or CAL for short. The holographic display was showing the position of the *Kasagi* within the Stanford Torus-type space colony's docking bay.

"Lieutenant Commander Daniel," Deandre said as he and Alto entered the Command Pit heading for their seats. "Are we finally ready to depart?"

Daniel looked up from his reports and got up from his seat, surprised only briefly with Deandre and Alto's arrival.

"Now that the VIPs are on board, yes," Daniel said. "However, I do want to let you know that we received a notification that they have just entered the observation room."

Deandre and Alto stopped short of sitting down in their seats when Daniel mentioned where the VIPs were. Deandre took a deep breath and looked up at the observation room, though it looked like part of the wall of the CCC currently. Deandre looked back at Daniel as he took a seat in his chair while Alto sat in his seat.

"Do we know who these VIPs are, by chance?" Deandre asked.

Daniel looked over at Alto before looking back at Deandre.

"I was made aware of their identities after they came aboard, sir," Daniel said. "However, I was requested to inform you to meet with them once the fleet is underway."

Deandre sighed.

"We are already late for departure because of them," Deandre said. "While I do not like the idea of indulging the requests of our unknown VIPs, we need to go ahead and depart. Inform the fleet that we are departing now."

"Yes, sir," Daniel said as he moved away from his seat.

He headed for the stairs to the starboard aft of the Command Pit, went up to the second level and sat at the station to his left. The station is labeled as the auxiliary navigation station, but an Operations Officer can use that station to manage and coordinate the various stations in the operation of the ship.

"Attention, all hands!" Daniel said. "We are now departing from dock. Intel Officer, inform dock control and the fleet we are now departing. Subsystems Chief, have engineering standby on the Fold Drive and damage control activate the nano-laminate armor once all access hatches are locked down. Helm, standby to move the ship once dock control gives us the green to depart the bay."

Deandre knows that when the Operations Officer starts to call the shots, VIPs in the observation room would normally ask what the purpose of the Commanding and Executive Officers would be at that point. The answer is simple: Deandre is the Commanding Officer and the Flag Officer. He makes the calls and issues the orders for the ship and the fleet. The Executive Officer functions as a second-in-command of the ship only unless the Commanding Officer is not available to command the fleet. During combat, the two issue orders to each half of

the room they sit on while coordinating their actions in the center of the room. Deandre's orders, however, supersede those of Alto's if he feels an order made by Alto is not the right order to give depending on the situation. Thankfully, while they have only been in combat maneuvers instead of real combat, Alto's decisions are generally in line with Deandre's allowing them to work well with each other in command of the vessel and the fleet.

When it comes to undocking a ship and the rest of the fleet, the Operations Officer is more than capable of handling a routine undocking and departure without the assistance of Deandre and Alto. Deandre saw the Intel Officer located on the second level behind Alto give a thumbs-up towards Daniel. This signified that dock control had given them clearance to depart.

"Subsystems Chief," Daniel said looking towards the opposite side towards his right from his station, "are all systems ready and hatches sealed?"

"Aye-aye, sir," the Subsystems Chief said as the female Centauri looked over her display. "All systems are ready. Hatches are closed, docking clamps are released, and the nano-laminate armor is now active."

"Helm," Daniel said, turning towards the two stations behind Deandre where the primary and secondary helmsman were located, "activate bow thrusters. Take us out of dock."

The helmsman, a female human who is known to be an Enhanced sat in the seat to port while a normal male Human sat in the seat to starboard. The Enhanced served as the main helmsman while the male Human was her co-pilot. It was their task to operate the vessel as a ship such as the *Kasagi* could not be piloted by just one person under normal conditions.

"Yes, sir," the two helmsmen said as they pressed a few buttons.

Deandre focused on the three-dimensional holographic display in front of him. He could hear the bow-mounted thrusters firing through the hull, pushing the battlecruiser out of dock going backwards towards the open bay doors. As the ship made its way out of the bay, the hologram began to display other vessels coming out of the other ports, both from bays near them and bays found on the other side of the colony. These ships belonged to Deandre's fleet, the Twenty-First Fleet. Aside from the *Kasagi*, the fleet consisted of four Naifu-Class Cruisers, eight Tanken-Class Destroyers, and sixteen Datsu-Class Frigates. That was twenty-nine ships in total.

Once all the ships cleared their respective ports, Deandre pressed a button at his station. This was the fleet communications system which he uses to give orders to the fleet.

"This is fleet command to all Twenty-First Fleet ships," Deandre said. "Proceed into formation for fleet Fold Drive operations at coordinates Alpha-729-Mark-852. Prepare to fold to Planet Verima airspace in the Termine System. Destination exit point is November-Whiskey-Seven. We will be folding in five minutes on my mark..."

A timer appeared on the holographic screen with five minutes displayed.

"...Mark!"

Deandre deactivated the fleet communications and the timer began to run down.

"Helm," Daniel said, "come to starboard and best speed to the rendezvous point."

"Aye-aye, sir!" the two helmsmen said as they pressed a few buttons at their stations.

The familiar sound of the engines' hum was heard as the ship began to move starboard towards the rendezvous point. Deandre had set the rendezvous thirty kilometers away from the space colony, taking it out of its local airspace to avoid running into any civilian traffic. It would take less than three minutes to arrive, but the remaining time would be used to begin powering the Fold Drive. It would take twenty-four hours to arrive and the drive needed to be continuously active for that entire time, requiring a great deal of power from the PITGED drives. Thankfully, it would not take power away from the nano-laminate armor that would protect them in transit.

As the ship made its way to the rendezvous point along with the rest of the fleet, Deandre looked back up at the observation room. He knew there were two people being sent to the ship to serve as ambassadors representing the Federation government to provide asylum to the Alliance refugees, but they did not specify who it was or what their normal job titles were. The fact that Daniel was told not to say who they were raised Deandre's suspicions, but also that they want to meet Deandra and Alto after they were underway indicated to him that if their identities were known, Deandre would possibly put a stop to the mission.

Deandre's eyes suddenly widened. While there were a few people he could think of that he would stop the mission for if they were involved, two people came to mind. Those two would have the power and authority to speak on behalf of the government to grant asylum. Those same two people would also know that Deandre and Alto were being deployed today. If the President assigned two people as representatives and had to choose who or where they would be picked from, there was a good chance that it would be those two he was thinking about.

However, it was too late for them to head back to dock and they were already running late to get to the border. While there would be several hours before the scheduled meetup upon their arrival, there was always the chance that the refugees could arrive early.

Deandre looked back at the holographic display. The fleet was arranging itself in a pyramid formation with the *Kasagi* as the "tip" but behind the rest of the fleet. The Naifu Cruisers formed the corners while the Tanken Destroyers were between each of the cruisers and *Kasagi*. The Datsu Frigates filled in the spaces between the ships. The ships were spread apart evenly to allow the Fold Drive to activate without overlapping the path of the other ships.

The timer on the display soon reached two minutes remaining.

"Subsystems Chief," Daniel said, "tell engineering to divert power to the Fold Drive. Prepare for long-distance fold operation."

"Aye-aye, sir," the Subsystems Chief said.

"Helm, lay in the destination course: Termine System, Planet Verima airspace, exit point November-Whiskey-Seven."

"Course laid in, sir," the male Helmsman said.

The secondary helmsman generally functions as not only the backup but the primary navigator. The primary helmsman is responsible for activating the Fold Drive once it is charged. That was why neither Daniel nor Deandre were surprised that the Enhanced helmsman said nothing after Daniel's order.

Deandre could hear the Fold Drive powering up. It was not far from the CCC's location. Once it was activated, the sound dies down into a low hum. Deandre had never taken the ship on a long-distance fold before. He knows that other vessels have done so and had no problems but the *Kasagi* was not one of them. It will be a first for the crew, but he also knew that the ones who will be bored the most will be the helmsmen. Once the drive is active, the ship will follow the course that is laid out and will remain on autopilot until it reaches its destination. Deandre knows that during this time, both helmsmen find something to do to pass the time, but this will be the first time they will have to find something to do for a full day's flight. He will have to ask Daniel and Alto if there is anything they can do. They were not the only stations that will be bored, but it was best to start with the obvious stations first.

"Fold Drive activation in thirty seconds," Daniel said, knocking Deandre out of his train of thought.

"I never thought we would ever have to perform a long-distance fold," Alto said. "Of course, I never thought we would have to go to the Liekan border, either."

“Neither did I,” Deandre said, keeping his eyes on the timer. “Let us hope this will not become a common scenario.”

The timer on the display soon reached zero.

“Activating Fold Drive,” the Enhanced pilot said.

While they could not visually see outside without the aid of a camera drone, the display showed disks in front of each ship. To the observer, these would be disks of light with visible distortions in the middle. Once the disks appeared, they quickly move over the ships from bow to aft, transferring the ships into folded subspace before disappearing. Once the fleet was in folded subspace, the display changed from showing the fleet’s position to the projected route from the beginning to the destination. The Sol System appeared to the port side of the display and the Termine System to the starboard. The path in between was not straight but that was to be expected as gravity wells can affect the path of the drive. A timer soon appeared on the display again, but this time it was showing just under twenty-four hours indicating the time remaining before the ship and the fleet would reach its destination.

“Fold Drive activation completed, Admiral,” Daniel said.

“Very good, Mister Daniel,” Deandre said, turning to his right to look over at Daniel. “Please join us in the Command Pit. I wish to speak with you.”

“Yes, sir.”

Daniel got up from his station and proceeded down the steps into the Command Pit towards his seat at the display. Deandre raised his right hand to stop him.

“Approach me,” Deandre said as he lowered his hand.

Daniel was a bit confused and Deandre could see that Alto shared that feeling as well. Daniel walked up to Deandre’s right with only the right-side console separating the two. Deandre looked up at Daniel who still looked puzzled.

“Can I ask you something?” Deandre said. “Are the two VIPs in that room both women, both Senators, but one is Human and the other is Celestian?”

Daniel had a look of shock on his face at Deandre’s question.

“How did you know?” Daniel asked.

Deandre looked over at Alto who was initially just as puzzled before he realized who Deandre thought was in the observation room.

“No,” Alto said. “You are not telling me that they are up there right now, are you?”

“Mister Daniel,” Deandre said as he got up from his seat with a stern look on his face but not looking at Daniel, “you have the CCC. The XO and I are going to have a little chat with our ‘guests’ in the observation room.”

“Yes, sir,” Daniel said, realizing that Deandre was only guessing as to who was in the observation room.

Deandre looked up at the observation room, wondering if the “guests” realized that they were found out. Deandre moved away from his seat and headed for the stairs he and Alto used to enter, heading up to the third level. Alto followed behind him. As they reached the third level, they proceeded down the short hallway to the left that led to the observation room. When they reached the armored door, Deandre punched in his code on the left side of the door, unlocking it. He pulled the handle to open the heavy door.

Once it was opened, he and Alto looked inside. Looking right back at both officers were a Human female and a Celestian female with slight grins on their faces. Deandre was right as to who the VIPs were, and this was one time he wished he was not right.

In the observation room was Senators Julana and Tiffany, their wives.

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*Conference Room, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
11:36am, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“Do you know how furious I am that you two are here?!”

Deandre stood behind the middle of the bracket-shaped conference table. Alto stood by the door while Julana and Tiffany stood in the middle of the bracket on the opposite side from Deandre. The room is generally used by the ship’s department heads ship when the vessel is either docked or stationed at a location to go over internal affairs of the vessel. Normally, Alto runs such meetings, but occasionally, Deandre would also attend if his presence merits it.

Because of the confidential use of the conference room, it is soundproof both inside and outside unless one of the guards chimes in on the panel next to the door. The guards were outside now, but the guards were there to make sure Deandre was not disturbed as he was having his “meeting” with the VIPs. Deandre knew that Daniel had seen their names when they came on board and knew who they were. It was possible that Daniel knew how Deandre would react if he was told while in the CCC, and it was probably a good thing Daniel tried to be as discrete as possible on the matter in front of all of the CCC officers.

Deandre was not mad at Daniel, but rather at Alto’s and his’ wives for pulling this stunt.

“I know you are upset with us,” Julana said, “but you must have known that we were going to find out once the President wanted senators to volunteer for this assignment.”

“I was not aware that the President was going to ask senators to volunteer,” Deandre said. “That is not what is upsetting me. What I am upset about is that the two of you volunteered! Do you know how dangerous this mission really is?”

“How about you spell it out for us,” Julana said with her arms crossed.

Deandre sat down in his chair and leaning forward, elbows on the table and his head in his finger-crossed hands that covered half his face. Despite this, Deandre could tell that Julana and Tiffany could still see the anger in his eyes, though Julana was beginning to share in that expression. It was obvious to them that their little “surprise” backfired and now Deandre had to tell them why coming on board was a bad idea for the two senators.

“Do the two of you have any idea of the situation we are about to get into or what might happen once we arrive?” Deandre asked. “It has been twenty years since anyone or any race within the Federation has seen either a Liekan or a Dexigalian, much less any object larger than their border observation satellites. Believe me, I have looked at the up-to-date reports prior to our departure. Because of their silence and failure to initiate any form of diplomatic ties, we have no information on how either nation has progressed in either a political or military sense after the First Interstellar War. Both of those races have isolated themselves since then until we had received word from these refugees about their attack on the Fulari/Corimei Alliance. However, we do not know at this point whether the refugees themselves are real or fake. If they are real, the Liekan and Dexigalian forces may be letting the refugees’ transmissions get through to setup a trap for us or worse. That is why this sort of mission is dangerous due to a lack of proper information involved. There are too many unknowns in this mission. Do you understand?”

“We understand that much,” Tiffany said. “However, did the two of you really think that we would let any other senator join you on this mission while Julana and I just wait at home after hearing about your mission from the Vice President? We chose to come on this mission on our own volition. We want to be here on this mission knowing what may or may not happen. We want to be able to support you both as your wives and official dignitaries of the Federation. We knew you were going to be upset with us once you found out, but we felt it was worth the risk.”

“The last thing we need for the two of you to do is to put yourselves in a dangerous situation such as this.”

“The last thing we want is to sit at home and wait for the two of you to return without knowing whether your mission had no casualties or wait for the news from the military to tell us that we are widows,” Julana said. “I am sure that everyone in this room hopes that this mission will not involve any military action, but I also know that you two must always plan for the worse to happen if it does.”

“That is why we are concerned about the two of you being here,” Alto said from behind the ladies by the door. “Knowing you two are at home puts you two out of harm’s way. By being here, we are now concerned for your safety as you are about both myself and the Rear Admiral.”

The girls looked at Alto, but Tiffany raised her right eyebrow.

“Why did you call Deandre ‘Rear Admiral’ instead of by name?” Tiffany asked.

“It is military decorum,” Deandre said. “While we are on this ship and on duty, we must address each other by rank and position, saving names unless necessary.”

The ladies looked back at Deandre.

“Then why are you addressing your Operations Officer by his name?” Julana asked.

“It is quicker to say his name than his title, but that is besides the point. We could argue about this matter until we are blue in the face, but the fact of the matter is that you are already here and there is nothing we can do about the situation since we are already in transit.”

“Well,” Julana said, looking like she was victorious in the argument, “glad you finally see things our way. Now, we need to move our stuff into your quarters instead of those VIP quarters we were put in. I would rather not have a lonely night in bed while on board.”

“Not so fast,” Deandre said as he stood up from his seat. “I am afraid that I cannot allow that to happen.”

“Yes, you can. You are in command of this vessel.”

“I do have command of this vessel, and as such I must uphold protocol and military policy on board this ship.”

“What does that mean?” Tiffany asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Paragraph Seven, Section Thirteen-A under the military code of conduct,” Alto said. “Because of your status as VIPs and as those selected to represent our government on a mission such as this, you are not allowed to stay in the quarters of any military personnel, even if you are married to them, while on an active mission. Those are the rules and neither me nor the Rear Admiral can change them or overlook them.”

Julana and Tiffany looked back and forth between Alto and Deandre with looks of disbelief on their faces. Julana stopped her gaze on Deandre.

“Are you telling me that even if we are your wives, we cannot share our quarters with you?” Julana asked.

“You are not here as our wives,” Deandre said. “You are here as government officials of your own choosing. Protocol takes precedence in this matter.”

Both Tiffany and Julana looked upset and angry. Deandre could tell that they would not find this fair but military laws and rules cannot be bent to satisfy their desires to be with their husbands on board the *Kasagi*.

“So,” Tiffany asked, “where does that leave us during this mission?”

Deandre took a deep breath.

“As you are civilian VIPs aboard this ship,” Deandre said, “your access to specific areas of this ship is limited. You were provided key cards when you came on board, correct?”

Tiffany and Julana reached into their pockets and pulled out credit card-like pieces of plastic. Their picture and an ID number was on one side of the card.

“Those cards will provide you access to select areas of the ship,” Deandre continued. “The most important areas of the ship such as the CCC proper, engineering, the cargo hold, and the ammo stores are off limits. This also includes crew and officer quarters as well as the barracks for the SAGNATs.”

Julana looked at Deandre with a puzzled expression on her face.

“SAGNATs?” she asked.

“Space, Air, Ground, and Naval Armored Troopers,” Alto said. “They are a military division of the United Earth Colonies first created by Humans prior to the First Interstellar War. They have since been integrated into the Federation military force as their own branch of the armed forces. They are common among Federation vessels as the guards you see on board. They can both board a target vessel and prevent the ship from being boarded.”

“The point is that this is not a cruise vessel,” Deandre said. “There are things you can do on board, but they will be limited.”

“I do not suppose there is someone who you can assign to be our escort around the vessel, is there?” Julana asked. “Someone who can show us around the ship perhaps?”

“The SAGNATs can only protect you and areas that are off-limits. However, this is a long flight and there are a few officers in the CCC with nothing to do until we reach Termine.”

“Then may I make a recommendation?” Tiffany asked. “What about assigning us Lieutenant Commander Renee?”

Deandre looked at Tiffany with a puzzled expression on his face. Renee who Tiffany was asking about is the Enhanced female helmsman in the CCC. It is true that once the ship is using its Fold Drive, the vessel is on autopilot for the entire course that was laid out by the secondary helmsman. However, why did Tiffany know her by name?

“How do you know Renee?” Deandre asked.

“I meet her in a Japanese animation-themed store over a year ago in one of the colonies during this ship’s routine downtimes,” Tiffany said. “We started chatting from there and hanging out when her ship was docked. She never told me the name of her ship that she was assigned to nor did I tell her specifically my profession or who I was married to.”

Deandre raised his right eyebrow and looked over at Alto. If Renee did not know who she was socializing with per se, then she was going to be in for a big surprise soon.

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*Combat-and-Control Center, Deck 8, U.S.F.S. Kasagi
On Route to the Federation/Kingdom of Lieka Border
11:58am, June 20, Galactic Era 72*

“Is that the newest issue of *The Victorian Vampire*?”

Once the *Kasagi* was using its Fold Drive, Lieutenant Commander Renee got bored easily as the ship flies itself along the course laid out by Lieutenant Bryan, the secondary helmsman who was also her co-pilot. The only thing she can do on her shift during this time was to keep an eye on the course and deactivate the Fold Drive once they reached their destination. Once deactivated, she along with Bryan would have full control again. Until that time, there was nothing for her to do, but read her Japanese manga book she stored under her control panel. She was caught reading it once during an eight-hour flight, but Commander Alto was lenient with her as he stated that long flights with nothing to do would cause boredom in anyone. He only asked

that she keep her reading out of sight of others during those times. Only Bryan who sits next to her is aware of her reading, but he has not said anything as he finds other ways to occupy himself. She has not focused on what those are, though.

Printed media is rare in an age of digital information. Descendants of the Japanese who moved to space still make anime and manga with the later available in both digital and printed formats. Every time she is at one of the space colonies on shore-leave, she always visits those kinds of novelty stores for the latest in anime and manga as well as their ethnic snacks and drinks if possible. She even goes to their themed conventions if she can get time off.

Renee was reading her manga when Rear Admiral Deandre addressed her after he and Commander Alto came up behind her. She was startled and tried to hide the book, but she was surprised that Deandre recognized the book she was reading. She did not know how to respond.

“Do not worry,” Alto said. “The Admiral knows about your manga reading. Apparently, he reads them as well.”

Renee was surprised and brought the book into view.

“It is the latest volume, sir,” Renee said. “I got it a couple of days before departure.”

“It is a good manga,” Deandre said. “I will need to purchase the next issue next time we are back at dock. In the meantime, I have an assignment for you other than to sit here and read.”

“Yes, sir,” Renee said, putting the book in its hiding spot. “What is the assignment?”

Deandre looked around the CCC. The room was full of people, so whatever he had to say must have been concerning to him.

“Lieutenant Commander Renee,” Deandre said, “you have my permission to leave the bridge for four hours including lunch to provide a tour for the VIPs that are on board. They are senators who volunteered for this mission, but there are two things I need you to be aware of.”

“Okay?” Renee said, curious as to why she was escorting the senators.

Deandre took a deep breath.

“The two senators,” Deandre said, “are the wives of both me and of the Commander.”

Renee’s eyes suddenly widened as she looked at both Deandre and Alto.

“Please excuse me for asking this, sir,” Renee said, “but am I being punished for an act that I have committed?”

Alto suddenly chuckled, trying to hide his laughter. Deandre did not fare any better in hiding his laughter.

“No,” Deandre said, trying to be serious again, “but I can see why you would be asking that question. Because of their status as VIPs, they only have access to select areas of the ship. I would like for you to show them around.”

“Understood, sir,” Renee said. “You said there were two things I needed to be made aware of? What was the second one?”

“Oh, yes. You were asked for by name.”

“By name? Who asked for me by name?”

“My wife,” Alto said. “Have you met a woman named Tiffany at these anime stores you visit during the ship’s downtime?”

“Yes, I...,” Renee had a look of shock on her face as the realization of the question began to sink in. “Is Tiffany your wife?”

“That is correct.”

Renee shook her head in disbelief. She never expected to be friends with Alto’s wife not knowing who she really was. Renee was right. This was some form of punishment for her.

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