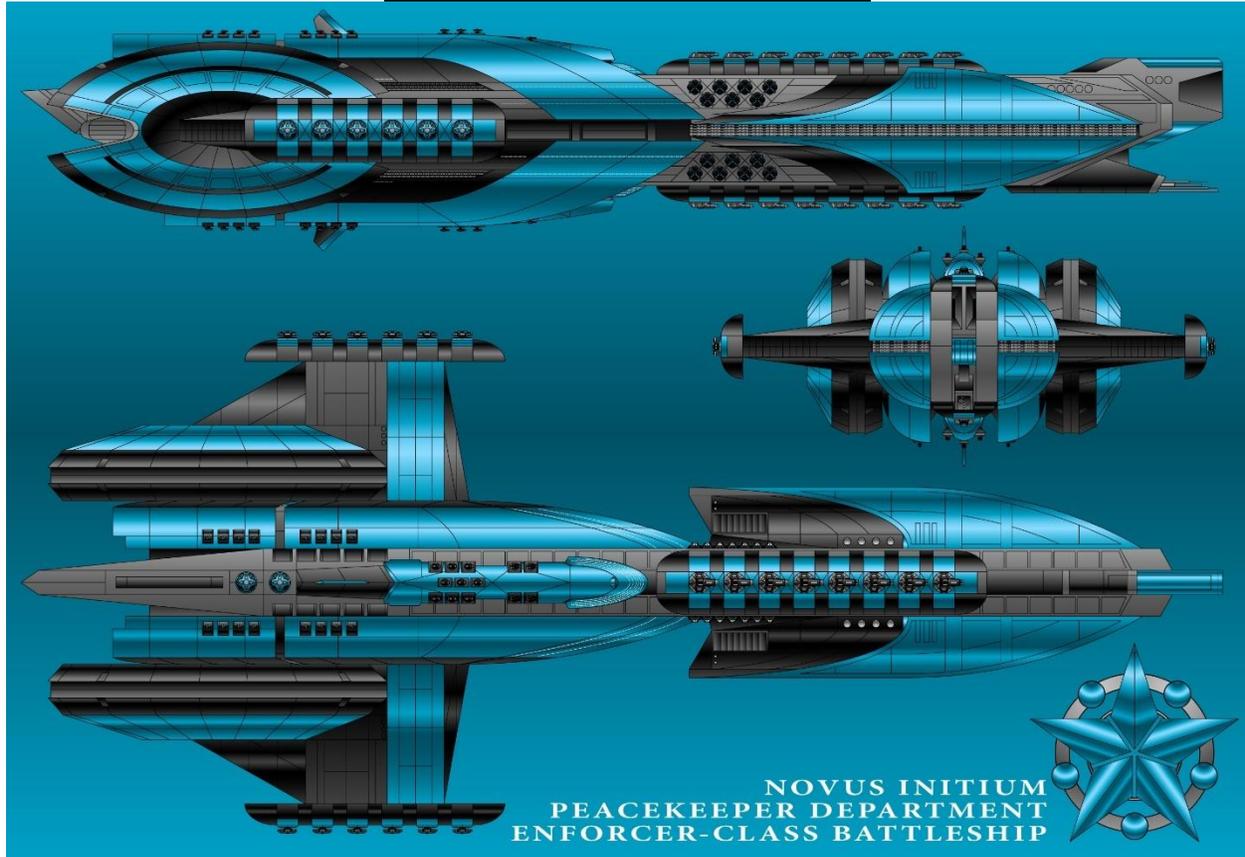


***Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga***  
***Episode VIII: What Was Left Behind***



**PART 1**

*Private Residence of Trent, Tacoma Suburb District, North of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic  
12:27pm, November 13, 5434 A.D. (One Week Later)*

“Now who could this be at my door?”

Trent was in the middle of eating his lunch at the kitchen table while watching the midday news on the monitor in the den when his doorbell rang. Trent, puzzled as to who it would be at his door unannounced, put his half-eaten turkey sandwich down on the plate. He brushed his hands over the sandwich to remove the excess crumbs from his hands before getting out of the chair and started walking towards the front door.

The doorbell rang again.

“I’m coming!” Trent yelled at the door as he passed the stairs.

Trent reached the door and looked out the peep hole. Standing there in casual clothing was Captain Dani, the commanding officer of the *Marshal*, Trent’s ship that was still undergoing a refit the last time he heard. Puzzled, Trent moved away from the peep hole, unlocked the door, and opened it.

“Captain?” Trent said, still puzzled as he looked at Dani. “What brings you all the way out here to my house at this time?”

“Can I come in, sir?” Dani asked. “I’d like to speak with you inside without attracting the attention of your neighbors.”

“Very well,” Trent said, knowing the captain was right about attracting his neighbor’s attention considering his recent divorce. “Come on in.”

Trent stepped out of the way to let Dani enter his home. Once she was inside, Trent closed the door and locked it. He proceeded to head back towards the kitchen table where his lunch was waiting for him.

“You caught me in the middle of lunch,” he said as he walked that direction. “Do you want anything?”

“No, thank you, sir,” Dani said as she walked behind him. “I ate before coming here. You have a burger joint at the base of the mountain I decided to try before arriving.”

“Oh, yes,” Trent said as he grabbed the remote for the monitor on the kitchen table, muting the broadcast. “They have some good burgers there. I had one on the day I came back here. So, why are you here?”

Dani took a deep breath.

“The *Marshal* is nearing the completion of its refit,” she said. “I was wondering when you think you will be returning to the ship?”

If Trent was not puzzled before, he certainly was now.

“I was told to take all the time I needed to get my affairs in order,” Trent said. “Is the Admiralty wanting me back already, or is the crew worried about me including yourself?”

“More of the latter actually, considering...”

Dani looked at the monitor and saw that Trent was watching the news. On the screen was Laura, NBS anchorwoman and Trent’s ex-wife. Dani looked back at Trent, and Trent knew what Dani was talking about.

“I see where you are going with this,” Trent said. “I take it the whole crew knows about my personal affairs by this point?”

“It didn’t take long for them to realize why our ship is taking so long to go through the refit,” Dani said. “Word gets around fast.”

“That it does,” Trent said, followed by a deep breath. “I’m still getting a few things settled here before I look at redeployment. The Admiralty isn’t pushing the matter, but I’m beginning to wonder if the entire Seventh Fleet is getting antsy about why their shore leave is so long compared to the other fleets?”

“They know it usually isn’t this long unless there is a good reason, but they haven’t been provided one yet.”

“So, that is their concern. They don’t know why it is as long as it is, huh?”

“That’s right, though now that word has managed to spread, they want to know so that if you suddenly decided to come back, they won’t be incapacitated or in another system when the time comes for them to report back in.”

Trent laughed, knowing that Dani was serious, but she was trying to be humorous at the same time.

“I can see their concern,” Trent said. “I was almost in that predicament myself in my early years in the military.”

Trent thought about it for a moment.

“I will give the Admiralty a call,” he said. “I will tell them that I will have my affairs in order in one week’s time due to the concerns the members of my fleet are having about being able to report to their posts on time once shore leave ends. Sound good?”

“Yes, sir,” Dani said. “I’m sorry for pressuring you on the matter.”

“It’s fine. I probably need to get back out there for a while. I’m assuming the fleets are back on their two-week tour rotation?”

“Most of them are doing so after their refits are done on their battleships, yes. However, there is one fleet I know aside from our own that hasn’t yet.”

“Let me guess: The Eleventh Fleet?”

Dani was surprised with Trent’s answer.

“Yes,” Dani said, shocked. “How did you know?”

“Rear Admiral Shannon came to see me one week ago,” Trent said. “Her fleet will be going on a special assignment.”

“I’m going to throw this out there as ‘special assignments’ seem to mostly involve you lately, but is her fleet going to explore the Northwest Region for those who manipulated Armani and others like him?”

Trent raised his right eyebrow at Dani’s guess.

“Possibly,” Trent said. “The Draco Federation explored a few systems in the Northwest Region, but they came across transmissions coming from deep within the region. Unfortunately, the transmissions were severely disrupted due to distance, but there were a few words that came through. Those words were in English.”

“In English?” Dani asked, puzzled. “I thought all of the wayward colony vessels and groups were accounted for by your daughter.”

“I did, too, and so did she. She has been combing through the records at the Central Library for anything she has missed, but so far, she has not found anything. Either they managed to cover up their trails more effectively than the Tenebris did, or there are no logs whatsoever of this group departing from wherever they came from. This is a complete mystery this time.”

“I’m surprised that the Admiralty didn’t ask you to go, considering your record.”

“They wanted to, but after I had put in my request for an extended leave due to handling my divorce, they elected to have Shannon go instead.”

“I see. I guess they are hoping that she learned enough from you to carry out this mission.”

“She’s hoping she learned enough from me as well. However, they will not be hiding like the stealth ships were doing. That is why the whole fleet is going. The new portal drives the battleships are being outfitted with will allow for that to happen.”

“I have to ask, but why didn’t the Federation explore the matter further?”

“This was when they were still at war and the portal drive ships were still new. President Shea also thought it was best for the Republic to make contact as this faction out there may not be aware of Federation or its origins.”

“I see. Still, how or why would colonists go to the least dense area of the cluster? Better yet, how did they get out there? The only way to navigate there around the gravimetric disturbance that separates that region from the Republic is either through the Western Region or the Northern Region, so why go through the trouble?”

“I don’t have answers to those questions. If I did, we would know who was out there at this point. Actually…”

Trent looked at his watch, specifically at the date.

“Shannon’s fleet is jumping out there today if it hasn’t done so already,” Trent said.

“I see. I hope that she can find out who is out there and bring them back into the fold. We don’t need a repeat of the Tenebris surprise attack.”

“I can agree with you on that one.”

“Speaking of the Tenebris, I have some very interesting news for you.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

“Well, there is currently a hold on making any more Enforcer Battleships at the moment.”

“There is a hold? Why?”

“The Oversight Committee’s Peacekeeper Department as it is called does not have enough people to crew any additional ships at this time.”

“I see. How many Enforcers were made?”

“Last I heard, there were twenty vessels.”

“Only twenty?! It takes roughly one of the Dominion’s dreadnoughts to make two Enforcers or six drive units for the refits to our battleships. Even after all the refits, that still leaves hundreds of dreadnoughts to process! Twenty Enforcers are also not enough to patrol and defend the entire Nature Restoration Zone without continuing to rely on the Federation forces already present in the area!”

“I’m not the one who you should be mad about, sir.”

Trent took a deep breath.

“You’re right. I just thought that there would be more volunteers to command the Enforcers, but I guess there must still be some skepticism about a joint-operation vessel. That is still a lot of dreadnoughts to go through, though.”

“I know. I’ve heard rumors that other plans are being drawn up concerning what to do with those vessels, but no announcement has been had made official yet.”

“I understand. Very well. If you hear anything else before I return, let me know.”

“I will. By the way, I have one more question. It’s a personal one, actually.”

“Okay? Go ahead.”

“Why do you live all the way out here? It’s rather far from the city and the spaceport.”

“Ah. Well, there are two reasons. The first reason is that it is noticeably quiet out here, provided children are not outside playing. You’ll notice that there is no engine hum, though there is still the sound of heating or air conditioning running through the house.”

“I can understand that.”

“Secondly, there is this.”

Trent walked around the kitchen table over to the window near the back door. The window blinds were down and closed. Trent pulled the blinds up, revealing the view of downtown Luminous under the early afternoon sun.

Trent looked over at Dani who was wide-eyed upon seeing that view.

“Wow,” she managed to say. “That is quite the view.”

“It is,” Trent said. “I never get tired of seeing it. I toyed with the idea at times of making a painting of this view, but then I remind myself that I am not a painter.”

“Even a picture would be just as good, but I’m guessing that if you saw a picture of this on a daily basis, it dilutes the effect when you see it with your own two eyes.”

“Precisely. However, knowing my ex-wife lives and works there now kind of depreciates the view somewhat.”

“In other words, whenever you look out there, you’re being reminded of your ex-wife, am I right?”

“I am.”

“Well, even though my ex lives in the city, it is a big city. You can’t let one person out of millions be the cause of ruining this view.”

“I see. I was not aware you had an ex in the city. Ex-husband? Ex-boyfriend?”

“Ex-wife, actually.”

Trent looked at Dani with wide eyes. He was not prepared for that response from her.

“I know that look,” Dani said. “Yes, I am one of ‘those,’ as some people call people like me. You never had one under your command?”

“I don’t usually ask about my crew’s personal matters on that topic,” Trent said. “That is generally their business unless it affects their duty which makes it my business.”

“I see. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“With that being said, I was wondering why you were concerned about my neighbors seeing you here if that was your preference?”

“It’s because your neighbors don’t know me, and the last thing you need are rumors about a younger lady showing up at your house a few days after your divorce.”

“An exceptionally good point. Was there anything else that needed to be discussed?”

Dani thought for a moment.

“No,” she said. “I think I covered everything. I’ll let the crew and the fleet know you’ll be back in a week.”

“Very well. Let me walk you out to your car. When we say our goodbyes, I recommend saluting. If any neighbors are watching, they will know it was business. It wouldn’t be the first time they would see that happen.”

“Understood,” Dani said.

Trent walked around the kitchen table heading towards the front door. Dani followed behind him. Trent opened the door, allowing Dani to exit first. Trent followed behind her outside down the walkway towards her parked car next to the curb. Dani took out her remote key and unlocked the car. After the car was unlocked, Dani turned to Trent and saluted to him. Trent returned the salute.

“I will see you in a week, Admiral,” Dani said.

“I will see you then, Captain,” Trent said.

Dani put her arm down with Trent doing the same a second later. Dani turned and walked around to the driver side of her car. She opened the door, got in, closed the door, and started her vehicle. She proceeded to drive off afterwards with Trent watching her leave. As soon as she turned right at the corner, Trent turned and headed back inside his house. After he closed and locked the front door, he headed back towards the kitchen table to finish his lunch. Before he sat down at the table, he looked back out at the view through the window towards downtown Luminous again, then back at the monitor. The news was already over and now another program had started relating to the stock market. Trent grabbed the remote and turned off the monitor as he had no interest in the market. He turned back towards the view again.

“Maybe I do need to get away again for a while,” Trent said aloud. “At least then I can get my head back on work again. It will also be good to get back to some level of normalcy, if such a thing exists anymore nowadays.”

Trent sat back down in his seat and reached for his sandwich when the doorbell rang again. Trent groaned as he leaned back in his seat.

“Who could that be now?” Trent asked as he got out of his seat, deprived again of enjoying his meal.

He quickly walked back towards the front door, wondering at first if Dani had forgotten something. He reached the peep hole on the front door, looked outside, and was almost taken back by who he saw on the other side of the door. He quickly unlocked the door and opened it.

“Colonel Blair?” Trent asked as he stared at the familiar man in uniform at the door.

“Greetings, Admiral,” Blair said with a smile. “I noticed that you didn’t waste any time, now did you?”

“What are you talking about?” Trent asked.

“I saw the lady who drove off just now. A little young for you, isn’t she? Not only that, but she is in the military as well, presumably lower in rank than you.”

“That was Captain Dani, the commanding officer of the *Marshal*, and my second-in-command.”

Blair’s grin quickly faded after Trent said that.

“Oh,” Blair said. “My apologies. I jumped to conclusions a little too easily, didn’t I? May I come in, Admiral?”

“Fine,” Trent said as he opened the door to let Blair in. “Is this business or a social call?”

Blair stepped inside, followed by Trent closing the door.

“Maybe a little bit of both, actually,” Blair said as he looked around the house. “It’s been a while since I have been here.”

Blair looked at Trent.

“I wanted to thank you for the years of service we had together,” Blair said as he extended his right hand towards Trent.

Trent looked down at Blair’s hand with a puzzled expression on his face before looking into Blair’s eyes.

“Are you retiring, Blair?” Trent asked.

Blair cracked a smile while withdrawing his hand.

“In a manner of speaking,” Blair said. “I requested to be put on reserve status. I think it’s about time I started looking into having a family.”

Trent felt a bit of relief at Blair’s words.

“I see,” Trent said. “Am I to assume it was approved?”

“It was as of today. I wanted to come over here and tell you the good news in person.”

“I see, and that’s when you happen upon my meeting with Captain Dani.”

“Yes, though I must say she is quite the looker. However, I already have someone that I am dating at present.”

“I heard. Are you looking at settling down with her?”

“It’s a possibility, but I need to find a civilian job before then.”

“Of course. I’m curious to know what you had in mind of a civilian job.”

“I’ve got a couple of options open that I need to put in my resume for. I will let you know what I end up with. I must ask, though. How are you holding up?”

“You mean since my divorce?”

“That’s right.”

“It’s still a bit surreal, going to bed without her there. On the other hand, I have slept alone on the ships I have commanded for years. I guess I wanted the company when I get home, to feel like a normal Human being.”

“That’s why I am going on reserve duty. I want that feeling as well, but I want it full time rather than every couple of weeks.”

“I can understand that. If I want to find someone, it will take me a while.”

“Give it time, and don’t rush things so soon. Take some time for yourself.”

“I intend to, although I am concerned with what Amarria will think if I do start dating again. I know it will affect her if I do.”

“She should be old enough to understand. I’m surprised she hasn’t found someone for herself already by this point.”

“I don’t ask about her personal life or her prospects unless she brings it up.”

“Very well. So, when do you think you’ll be heading back to your ship?”

“In one week. It seems the crew of my fleet are feeling a bit antsy without me around.”

“Can’t say that I blame them. You’ve been gone a while and without much word from their flag officer to know when they need to report back to their ships.”

“That’s why Dani was here. She wanted to know when to expect me back and I told her before she left.”

“She had to come in person for that?”

“She wanted to talk about a couple of other things that she felt more comfortable talking about in person than calling me.”

“I see. I won’t ask about that considering you may want it between the two of you, then.”

“Considering you’re going to be in reserve status, it may be best not to discuss anything more about the military with you until absolutely needed. Was there anything else you wanted to discuss with me?”

“That’s it, other than to wish you good luck and good fortune going forward.”

Blair extended his right hand again. Trent reach out with his right hand and took Blair’s in a firm handshake.

“Same to you, Colonel,” Trent said. “Best of luck to you and your future family.”

Blair nodded in agreement before releasing Trent’s hand.

“See you around, Admiral,” Blair said before turning towards the front door.

Blair opened it and waived back at Trent as he closed the door behind him. Trent waived back before the door was closed. Trent took a deep breath. He had a lot to do in the next week before he was to return to the *Marshal*. He only hopes that a pending war was not awaiting him.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Bridge, R.N.S. Renaldo, Paladin II-Class Battleship (refit)*

*Planet NW-012-5, NW-012 System, Northwest Region*

*1:00pm, November 13, 5434 A.D.*

“We have reached our destination, Admiral.”

The words of Lieutenant Commander Ryan at the helm gave a sense of both ease and anxiety in Rear Admiral Shannon. The newly refitted Paladin II-Class was longer, had more weapons, and the new Portal Drive powered by two particle reactors. This was the first use of the Portal Drive by the *Renaldo* after its refit. Shannon was concerned that the drive might suffer some malfunction while the ship and the fleet passed through the portal. When the entire fleet was able to make the trip through the portal to arrive at their destination, Shannon was relieved.

However, at the same time, she now had a new concern. Her mission was to find the source of the transmissions in the Northwest Region that were detected by a Draco Federation ship a few months ago. Suddenly finding her and her crew far from home in the least dense region of the star cluster was not exactly compelling or comforting, but it was the mission she was given, and she needed to fulfill it. The only difference between her situation and those on the stealth vessels that were used prior is that they can jump back to Republic space almost instantly instead of taking weeks. Thankfully, the fleet was fully supplied prior to jumping to the Northwest Region, so there was no need to resupply for several weeks. Hopefully, it would not

take that long for the Eleventh Fleet to find the source of those transmissions and report back to the Republic concerning them. She was given orders by the Supreme Chancellor before she left, though. If they find the source of the transmissions and are discovered, they are to contact the local inhabitants. There was no need to hide their presence through technological means or hide in plain sight like the fiasco that occurred with the Dominion and the Federation, respectively. It was best to be direct as these inhabitants are practically neighbors if not some wayward Human colony since English was identified in the transmissions.

Through the proper connections, Shannon asked if the Federation jammers in the system can be deactivated for her fleet to start the investigation. She was informed an hour before the jump to contact the jammers on a specific frequency and access code which would disable the jammers for thirty minutes before they are reactivated. It was time to put that code to work.

“Lieutenant Commander Ro,” Shannon said as she looked in Ro’s direction. “Please transmit the code we were provided on the target frequency and prepare to locate the transmissions we are here to track.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Ro said.

“Lieutenant Commander Ryan,” Shannon said as she looked in Ryan’s direction in front of her. “How long until the Portal Drive is recharged?”

“It will take ten minutes to recharge the drive, Admiral,” Ryan said.

“Ro, do you think you can track a signal in ten minutes?”

“That will depend on the quality of the signal,” Ro said. “If it is still garbled, I may be able to give you a general direction at least. If we know the direction, we can jump closer and get a clearer signal allowing me to get a fixed location.”

“Very well. Proceed.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

Shannon looked back at the main screen, but not before she looked at the commanding officer to the front left of her. Instead of allowing her to promote one of her bridge crew to the position, headquarters had transferred one from another ship that was due for a promotion. Her new commanding officer is recently promoted Captain Maeve. Shannon thought she was rather young to be a Captain, but in the time that followed the First Interstellar War, many officers were on the fast track for promotions to fill roles that were vacant due to those that died during the war and those that retired afterwards. Captain Maeve looked to have been one of those that was fast tracked. However, she has been able to command the ship quite well in the past two months. The question becomes whether she will be able to hold her own in combat if it ever came to that.

She started to notice Maeve was breathing a little heavier than usual. Shannon began to wonder why Maeve was breathing that way.

“Captain?” Shannon asked. “Are you alright?”

Captain Maeve turned her chair to look at Shannon. Maeve looked a little distressed.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Maeve said. “I guess I am a bit more nervous being this far away from familiar space than I thought I would be. As you can see on the screen, there are so few stars out there before you enter the void beyond the star cluster. I was starting to feel like I’m staring into the abyss and I couldn’t look away from it.”

“Keep calm, Captain. This is my first time out this far, too, and in this region. We are still within the boundaries of the star cluster. There is just a lot less stars out here. Someone is living out here and they don’t seem to have this same problem as far as we know.”

“Yes, ma’am. I am sorry. I will try to steady my nerves as we continue. Ro, have you got a general direction for us on those transmissions?”

“Almost, Captain,” Ro said while looking at her instruments. “Just need one more minute. The transmissions are quite weak.”

“Portal Drive status, Ryan?”

“We still have eight minutes, Captain.”

“Understood.”

Shannon was surprised with how Maeve was trying to compose herself. It was easy to see that if her mind is on something else, she would not be staring into the “abyss” as she was calling it. While Shannon still had her doubts about Maeve being able to handle herself under pressure, she can only hope that she will be this composed if she focuses on her duty instead of her fears.

“Captain,” Shannon said as she got up, “can I speak to you in the Ready Room?”

Maeve looked back at Shannon.

“Yes, ma’am,” Maeve said as she got up from her seat.

“Ro, please provide Ryan with the coordinates once you found the general direction of the transmissions. Ryan, call us when there are two minutes remaining before we can go.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ryan and Ro said in unison.

Shannon reached the doors to the Ready Room on the left side of the bridge and pressed a button on the right side of the door frame. The doors opened, and Shannon walked through along with Maeve. The doors closed behind Maeve. Shannon walked halfway to the desk before stopping and turning towards Maeve who had a look of concern on her face.

“Captain,” Shannon said as she crossed her arms, “I looked over your record prior to your position as captain of this vessel. I am going to be honest with you. I believe you are still a little too ‘green’ for this position. I know that the military is trying to fill vacant positions, but being a captain is a lot more responsibility for someone who has not commanded a ship before much less was in the position of executive officer for very long.”

“Permission to speak freely, Admiral?” Maeve asked.

“Go ahead.”

“How long have you been in your position, ma’am?”

Shannon wondered why Maeve asked that question until she realized that Shannon has not been a flag officer for more than a few months.

“A few months,” Shannon said. “I was promoted to this position by this ship’s previous flag officer, but I served under him for many years as Captain.”

“Do you find yourself scared of making decisions for this ship or the fleet at times?”

“I do, because there are moments that I find myself asking what he would have done in my place if he was still here. Even now, I still ask that question. You must realize though that he believed that I was ready for this position when he was promoted to another ship. He was as confident in my ability to run this fleet as he was about me commanding this ship while he was around. Right now, I do not feel the same level of confidence of your abilities as he did for me.”

“Ma’am, with all due respect, I’m not sure you read my file completely.”

“Then tell me, Captain, what did I miss?”

“The part where I requested for this position.”

Shannon was puzzled. Normally something like a request for transfer would not be overlooked by her, but she did not remember seeing that this was a request. She thought that the military ordered her into this position to fill the Captain seat.

“Maybe I did,” Shannon said. “When I was presented with your file, I didn’t see that it was a request by you. I thought headquarters sent you here to fill my old role. I had someone else in mind to do that, but you showed up instead. I guess I assumed that they dumped you on me.”

So, I must ask a rather important question if that is the case. Why would you request to be transferred to this ship as the Captain when you have little experience in commanding a vessel of any size?"

"I heard the stories of this ship, namely the events at Tranquillus and Yintaka. You may be surprised but this ship has started to earn a reputation in the fleet as being the ship that gets things done. Add to the fact that we are here for this mission at the request of the Supreme Chancellor, and its reputation is only being reinforced."

"So, what you are telling me is that you wanted to become this ship's commanding officer only to be part of its reputation or as part of such events like we are doing now?"

"No, I came here to learn from those that manage to get the job done even when things don't go as expected. While Admiral Trent may not be here, you are and have been for a long time. I'm hoping to learn from your example and experience."

Shannon did not know whether to be flattered or bothered by Maeve's words. She figured it would be best to view it as a compliment for now.

"I'm wondering if you would have ever guessed we would be going on a mission like this," Shannon asked.

"I'll be honest. While I was hoping something might happen that would be considered 'out there,' I figured it would be a lot later than this."

"I was hoping for something similar as well, but life doesn't always go the way we want it to at times. Admiral Trent told me that once and I have learned to accept that when you consider the events from the past couple of years. What you need to do is go back onto that bridge and show that you are confident to be this ship's Captain. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Admiral."

"Good. Now, let us get back out there and see if we can find this lost Human colony we were ordered to find."

Maeve nodded in agreement before turning to face the door. The doors opened as they headed back onto the bridge, closing behind them after they exited the Ready Room. As they walked towards their seats, Ro turned to face them.

"Ma'ams," Ro said, "we have a general direction where the broadcasts are coming from."

"Are they in English like what was reported?" Maeve asked as she sat down.

"I'm hearing pieces that are in English, but nothing consistent like complete sentences."

"Then we are dealing with another Human colony after all."

"There is only one problem, Captain. The accent is not like anything I have heard before. It may be the signal degradation, but I won't know what this accent is until we get closer to the source or the relay that's broadcasting it."

"Understood. Have you provided the coordinates to Ryan?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Ryan, how are we doing on the Portal Drive recharge?"

"We are at two minutes remaining, Captain," Ryan said while looking at his console.

"Very well," Maeve said as she turned towards Shannon. "Looks like we will be jumping the fleet in two minutes."

"Thank you, Captain," Shannon said, relieved by Maeve's sudden confidence.

Shannon figured she needed the pep talk as she pressed the fleet communications button.

"This is Rear Admiral Shannon. We will be making another portal in two minutes. All ships prepare to depart this system. We will be moving closer in the general direction towards the source of the transmissions we were ordered to find. Fleet command, out."

Shannon pressed the fleet communications button, turning off the broadcast.

“Ryan,” Shannon said, “display the time remaining before Portal Drive is fully charged on the main screen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ryan said as he pressed a few buttons.

A clock was soon displayed in the middle of the main screen displaying less than a minute and fifteen seconds remaining, counting down. Maeve took a deep breath before turning towards Shannon again.

“I’m feeling a little nervous, now,” Maeve said. “I wonder what these people must be like who managed to make it all the way out here after all this time.”

“I’m nervous, too,” Shannon said. “I don’t want us to appear to be invaders, but we don’t need another Human-based faction out here like what happened with the Federation or the former Dominion. We will approach them, calmly, and see who they are and why they are all the way out here. Afterwards, we will return to the Republic to let the Supreme Chancellor and the Senate know what we found out here. It will be a political matter at that point.”

The clock on the main screen started to beep when there was five seconds remaining on the clock. Maeve turned back around as both she and Shannon looked at the final seconds counting down. When they reached zero, Ryan pressed a button on his console. A portal appeared in front of the *Renaldo* and grew large enough for other ships to pass.

Shannon could see the rest of the Seventh Fleet approach the portal. They all had to go through before the *Renaldo* could pass or the portal would close right behind the battleship. After almost a minute, the last of the fleet passed through the portal. The *Renaldo* began to fly into the portal, passing through it to the other side. The view screen showed far less stars around them than before as they proceeded deeper into the sparse Northwest Region.

“How far away are we from our previous location?” Shannon asked.

“Checking,” Ryan said. “According to the coordinates provided by Ro, we are forty-one Light-years ‘north’ of our previous location.”

“Ro, are the transmissions coming in clearer now?”

“They are coming in very clearly,” Ro said. “I’m getting complete sentences now and I’m tracking the source right now. However, those accents I mentioned a moment ago are still present. I don’t recognize them at all.”

“Can you put them up on the speakers?” Maeve asked.

“One moment while I isolate one of the signals,” Ro said as she pressed a few buttons, activating the bridge speakers.

*“...and in other news,”* a male snarly voice said over the speakers, *“Congress have passed a bill allowing for the construction of underwater habitats on the water planet Aquarius to ease population growth over the coming years until exploration vessels find another planet that can be terraformed into a new habitable world. Construction will begin in two years.”*

Ro cut off the speakers after that much was spoken. Everyone on the bridge had a puzzled look on their face.

“What kind of accent was that?” Maeve asked. “It sounded like someone was speaking through their nose while they are sick.”

“You got me,” Shannon said. “I’ve never heard English spoken like that before. I am wondering if it involves their current environmental state that we don’t know about yet.”

“Whatever it is,” Ro said, “the source is not far from here. I’m reading it coming from a relay station only five Light-years from our current location bearing zero-two-four mark three-five-eight.”

“Ryan,” Maeve said.

“Portal Drive is recharging, and the coordinates are locked in,” Ryan said. “We can depart in nine minutes.”

“Understood,” Maeve said as she turned towards Shannon. “So, Admiral, how do we want to proceed when we reach our destination?”

“Depends on what we find there,” Shannon said. “If anyone from that nation is in the system, then we announce ourselves and greet them. If not, then we follow the transmissions to their point of origin.”

“Understood, Admiral. You may want to announce that to the whole fleet.”

“I’ll send an encrypted mass text-only message. I don’t want to risk our communications being detected when we are close to a relay.”

Shannon pressed a button on her chair. A holographic screen appeared in front of her with a keyboard and a text box. While the screen had no physical form or feel, the text began to appear in the text box as Shannon began to “type” on the keyboard. Once she completed the message, she pressed the “send” button and the message showed it was sent out. The screen disappeared soon afterwards.

Shannon turned back to Ro.

“I forgot to ask this, Ro,” Shannon said, “but is there any video feed from those communications?”

“Not that I can see, Admiral,” Ro said. “The audio is on an open channel, but the video feed may be transmitted directly to a receiver for better quality. We will have to get to the relay to get the video feed from the transmissions.”

“Understood. Ryan, how long until we are ready to jump?”

“Less than five minutes, Admiral,” Ryan said. “I’ll display the timer on the main screen.”

Ryan pressed a button on his console and a timer appeared on the main screen again, this time with four minutes and forty-two seconds remaining. As the timer counted down, Shannon leaned back in her chair.

She was still pondering how Humans could be out here in the Northwest Region. The stars are too far apart to effectively jump with Salire Purpura crystals and Republic warp drives are not efficient enough to make the journey continuously at the time. She had considered that this was a group from the Federation instead, but the Federation confirmed that there were no unaccounted colony missions in their records. Trent’s daughter Amarria had already confirmed this after spending a week reviewing the Federation’s records. The Dominion was not an option as to their origins either as their culture does not align with the religion that Armani Draco had pushed on the Dominion’s population, not to mention having a viable reason to jump that far.

They needed answers and hopefully they will get them once they reach the relay.

The sound of the beeping on the timer as it counted down was suddenly accompanied by the sound of drumming fingers. Shannon looked in Maeve’s direction and saw her drumming the right arm of her chair with her fingers on her right hand. Shannon began to wonder why Maeve was doing that suddenly. Shannon intentionally cleared her throat, causing Maeve to stop and look at her. Maeve looked at her right hand and realized what she was doing with that hand.

“Sorry, Admiral,” Maeve said. “I’m just anxious to get to our next destination and the wait was starting to make me drum my fingers.”

“I can understand that,” Shannon said. “I’m used to us using our warp drive and jump gates to get to our destination, but we were in motion, only having to wait to enter the star gates. Waiting like this is completely different from being in motion like that.”

“I’ll try not to drum my fingers, but sometimes I start doing it without realizing I’m doing it just like a moment ago.”

“Try the best you can. Waiting is the tough part, but we don’t need to be fidgety about it.”

“Understood, Admiral. Part of me wonders if I am also excited about meeting this rogue Human nation. I guess I just want to know what this society is like away from the Republic.”

Shannon smiled.

“Let’s just hope that they are such as friendly as the Federation,” Shannon said. “We don’t need another possible conflict like we had with the Dominion.”

“I’ll agree to that much, though I have not personally seen combat,” Maeve said.

“Pray that you never do. Combat isn’t pretty no matter what the reasons are.”

Shannon looked up at the timer and saw that there was less than two minutes remaining.

“You know,” Shannon said, “now that you mention it, I’m now feeling anxious myself since we don’t know what these people are like. I don’t know if I am scared, excited, or both.”

“You didn’t feel this way when you encountered the former Kingdom and the State in Tranquillus some time ago?”

“That was different. Those two nations entered our territory. We’re entering someone else’s this time, and we are far from Republic space this time.”

“I see your point, and we are also not on a stealth vessel either, unlike the *Templar* and the *Cavalier*. This will be a first for us.”

“Let’s hope it won’t be our last.”

Shannon looked at the timer which only had thirty-three seconds remaining. As it reached closer to zero, Shannon became more nervous than she had anticipated. Despite being in tougher situations than this, she never expected to be this nervous about entering the domain of another nation. When the timer reached zero, her heart felt like it skipped a beat when Ryan spoke out.

“Activating Portal Drive,” Ryan said.

The portal appeared in front of the *Renaldo* once more. Once it was fully formed, the rest of the fleet proceeded into the portal. After the last ship was through, the *Renaldo* proceeded through. Once on the other side of portal, the portal closed behind them. There were even fewer stars compared to the last system they were in. However, an artificial construct was in front of them about a few miles away. It looked to be a communications satellite, a light gray vertical cylinder with several antenna and communications dishes embedded within the frame.

“Ro,” Maeve said, “is this the source of the broadcasts we were receiving?”

“It’s where it was coming from, yes,” Ro said. “The technology used by the satellite, however, seems different than what is used by the Republic despite using similar frequencies.”

“What do you mean by different?”

“I don’t think its construction conforms to Republic standards at all.”

Maeve looked directly at her right at the tactical station.

“Lieutenant Commander Chrystal,” Maeve said, “can you scan the relay?”

“I can,” Chrystal said, “however, I must advise you that doing so will either set off alarms on the relay if not the entire system or cause disruptions in the broadcast which will alert local forces of our presence.”

Shannon noticed that Maeve pondered whether to scan the relay or not. Shannon was also curious about the relay’s construction if it was not like any in the Republic. Even Federation and Dominion communication relays according to the stealth ship weeks ago found that their relays shared similar components despite the six-hundred-fifty-year separation from the Republic. Why was this relay different from those by comparison?

“Chrystal,” Shannon said, “please proceed with the scan, but keep an eye out for local forces. I am surprised they have not already detected us by now at this point, but they will know for sure that we are here once we scan the relay. Keep an eye on the scanners for any approaching vessels once you scan the relay.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Chrystal said.

“Ro,” Maeve said, “keep an eye out on the communications from the relay. If you detect sudden alarms or signals such as distress calls coming from the relay, inform us immediately.”

“Yes, Captain,” Ro said.

Maeve looked in Shannon’s direction.

“Sorry if you were going to say the same thing,” Maeve said. “I had a feeling that it might send out some sort of signal if the communications are interrupted.”

“I had the same thought,” Chrystal said. “I’m just wondering why you delayed in your orders to scan the relay?”

“I was weighing the risk of whether scanning the relay is worth our detection for the sake of curiosity. I wanted to make sure the decision I make is the right one.”

“That’s fine. In a non-combat situation, it is always best to weigh the risk in such decisions, but I also did not want to risk our detection waiting right here before we had a chance to scan the relay. Since I made that decision, I will be responsible if something goes wrong. Think of it as a learning experience.”

“Understood, Admiral.”

“What in the world?” Chrystal said aloud.

Maeve and Shannon looked at Chrystal with puzzled expressions on their faces.

“What’s wrong?” Maeve asked.

“I’m scanning the internals of the relay, but the manner and method of its construction is confirmed to not match those made in the Republic.”

“Can you please be specific as to what you mean by that?”

“When you compare the construction and connection methods to those of the Federation and former Dominion, or more bluntly during the Expansion Era of the Republic, this doesn’t match at all to anything built around that time.”

“Could it be using methods that predate the Expansion Era by chance?”

“I can’t tell. Whatever method used to create this relay wasn’t something developed by Republic methods.”

Maeve looked back at Shannon.

“I’m beginning to wonder how long these Humans have been out here,” Maeve asked.

“So am I,” Shannon said. “Ro, can you identify the relay’s operating system and version? We might be able to get a clearer picture as to how long they have been out here.”

“Let me check,” Ro said. “Huh? This can’t be right.”

“What is it?” Shannon asked.

“The operating system doesn’t appear to be one used by the Republic at all. None of the usual commands for access are being accepted or identified.”

“A completely different operating system?” Maeve asked with a puzzled expression on her face. “What does that mean?”

“I can only think of a couple of possibilities,” Shannon said. “Either this nation created a completely different operating system when they moved here, or they are using a system not taught or used in the Republic for a very long time.”

“Uh oh,” Ro said. “I think we got a problem now.”

“What is it?” Maeve asked as she looked at Ro.

“My attempted access has set off a distress beacon in the relay. We may be having company any minute.”

“Chrystal,” Shannon said. “Are you detecting any ships inbound?”

“Not yet,” Chrystal said. “I’m keeping an eye out, though. I’ll let you know if I’m detecting anything approaching.”

“Hopefully, they won’t just appear like the Dominion did.”

“What’s our next course of action, Admiral?” Maeve asked. “Do we wait for them to show up to open a dialogue or do we leave to avoid detection?”

Shannon thought for a moment about what to do next. The attempted unauthorized access of the relay could be considered an aggressive act by the “locals” and could make them hostile and aggressive. However, there were questions that needed to be answered and running away would make the Republic fleet look guilty later.

“We’re staying here,” Shannon said. “We can only hope they will understand our curiosity about how and why they are out here, separate of the Republic they came from. I know they may look at us with possible hostile intent because we tried to access their satellite but hopefully, they will see reason for our actions.”

Shannon pressed the fleet communications button.

“This is fleet command,” Shannon said. “Our attempted access of the communications relay has resulted in the relay transmitting a distress signal to the local faction in this region. We are expecting company to arrive at any moment. We will remain to address them accordingly. In the meantime, I want all ships to go to condition yellow and raise shields. Do not power up your weapons until ordered to do so. Await further orders for the time being. Fleet command, out.”

Shannon deactivated the fleet communications system and took a deep breath.

“Attentional all hands,” Maeve said after she pushed the internal ship communications button on her chair. “Per the Rear Admiral’s orders, we are now at condition yellow. All hands to your posts and standby for further orders.”

Maeve deactivated her intercom as some of the bridge lights turned yellow.

“Chrystal,” Maeve said, “raise the shields and keep an eye out for any incoming bogeys.”

“Yes, Captain,” Shannon said as she activated the shields.

“Well, we are committed now,” Shannon said. “Now all we can do is wait for them to show up and get to the bottom of this matter.”

Maeve turned to look at Shannon once more.

“Admiral,” Maeve said, “won’t you think that if they see a fleet like ours that we would look to be the aggressive party or rather that we are invaders?”

“I can see that as a possibility,” Shannon said. “However, there is nowhere for our fleet to run off to when this system is uncharted. I would rather the fleet not attempt to jump when this whole region has not been explored. The last thing they need is to wind up in the middle of a planet or sun by accident. Do not get me wrong. I understand your concern and it may be best for the fleet to be elsewhere, but it is not a viable option right now.”

“What about using the Portal Drive to transport the rest of the fleet back to our starting point? They would be safe, and we can go back for them.”

“They would, but the starting point would leave them stranded. There are no star gates in the system we started from and they would have to rely on Federation ships to get them back home if something happened to us. No, it is best for them to be here in case those responding are sending their own fleet and things go badly for some reason.”

“Very well, Admiral,” Maeve said as she turned back towards the viewscreen.

“We may not have long to wait,” Chrystal said. “I’m detecting a single warp signature approaching from the fourth planet in this system. Its speed is comparable to our warp drive.”

“When is it arriving?” Maeve asked.

“It will arrive in twenty seconds.”

Maeve took a deep breath, then turned slightly to look at Shannon.

“I take it you want to talk to them immediately when they arrive?” Maeve asked.

“It would be better if I do in this case,” Shannon said. “Ro, be prepared to hail the vessel when it arrives, provided they don’t hail us or shoot at us first.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Ro said.

“Incoming in five seconds,” Chrystal said.

Shannon took a deep breath. This would be her first time establishing a dialogue with an unknown party, but at least this time they are Human. After the five seconds elapsed, a flash appeared on the right side of the screen as a ship dropped out of warp in front of the relay. The design of the vessel was not what Shannon had expected.

The ship was small but just larger than destroyer. The vessel’s design looked like a fat bladed weapon. The front of the vessel had two elongated wide struts that extended from the center of the vessel above and below with what appeared a closed landing bay. Flanking the bay on each side was a semi-saucer section that went from the front towards what one could consider the “cross guard” or the wings of the vessel. Attached to those was some pointed oval shaped parts inside rounded but pointed cones. They looked like they housed the vessels sublight drives based on the red glow coming from the sides pointing back. The “handle” was a rounded cone-like part with multiple windows. Windows also were on the saucer parts.

The ship was not as heavily armed as a Republic destroyer, but what those weapons lacked in number they made up for in size. The vessel was armed with eight triple-barrel turrets with four on top and four below along the central axis. What these fired was unknown or not made clear just by looking at them. Flanking the turret mounted the highest and lowest were what looked like a pair of missile launchers with their missiles concealed under armor plating. There were four of these on the ship. If there were any other weapons, they were not apparent from what she could see.

The most striking aspect of the vessel was the paint scheme. Most of the vessel was covered in what appeared to be a water camouflage paint scheme. Why the vessel was painted in this fashion since such a paint scheme would be ineffective to visually hide the vessel in space was unclear. It is also ineffective when sensors and scanners can easily detect vessels before they even come into visual range unless they were equipped with stealth technology.

Shannon could just image what the captain of that vessel must be thinking right now seeing this fleet at the communications relay.

“Admiral,” Chrystal said, “that vessel has raised its shields and powered its weapons.”

“I’m detecting a signal from the ship,” Ro said. “Looks like it is calling for available reinforcements to our location.”

“Was that in English as well?” Shannon asked.

“It was, but that accent was present, too.”

“Then it is confirmed we are dealing with Humans. Hail that ship before it decides it can take us on by itself or before its ‘friends’ arrive.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

Ro pressed a button on her console. A tone was heard indicating she was hailing them.

“Attention, unidentified vessel,” Ro said. “This is the R.N.S. *Renaldo*, flagship of the Novus Initium Republic’s Seven Fleet. Please respond.”

Shannon felt like she was holding her breath waiting for the unknown vessel to respond. After what felt like a long time but was only a few seconds, Ro’s console indicated a response.

“Admiral,” Ro said, “the unknown ship is responding, by text only.”

“Text only?” Shannon said, surprised. “What is it saying?”

“It says ‘I am Captain Kara of the Destroyer Tachi in service to the nation of the New Unity Government. I am not authorized to speak to you per first contact protocol. Please stand by as the flag officer of my fleet is on his way to speak with you.’ End of message.”

Shannon and Maeve looked at each other with puzzled expressions on their faces.

“First contact protocol?” Maeve asked. “Do they think we are aliens?”

“I don’t see why they would think that since we contacted them in English,” Shannon said before looking at Ro. “Ro, send them a text reply saying we have acknowledged their message and we will wait for their flag officer to arrive.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Ro said.

Shannon looked back at Maeve.

“Something seems rather off about this encounter,” Shannon said. “That captain should have noticed that we sent our message verbally in English, so why would they think that we are aliens is something I don’t understand.”

“It could be that they think we have studied their language after trying to access the relay,” Maeve said. “A verbal message translated into English is already possible.

“I can see them thinking that somehow. However, these Humans should have some record of the Novus Initium Republic in their records and know that we are fellow Humans.”

“Don’t forget what happened with the Tenebris Dominion. From what I had heard, they never taught their population much about the Republic at all for more than six hundred years. People were born, lived their lives, and died without ever knowing about the Republic.”

“You think that this ‘New Unity Government’ that this captain says he serves is like the Dominion in that respect?”

“You have Humans living out here in the least dense part of the star cluster for who knows how many years. They left the Republic for some reason and created a new nation without our knowledge. One would think that they knew about the gravitational forces that exist in the void that separates the Northwest Region from the Republic, and they used that to avoid detection for all of this time.”

“A good theory, except that the resources in this region would not be as numerous and neither would the number of habitable worlds present in this region as far as we know. If they wanted to seclude themselves, that is one thing, but if they came out here to create a full-blown nation, they didn’t pick the best region to do so.”

“I guess we won’t know until we get some answers from this flag officer.”

“Indeed. Chrystal, without using active scanners, can you determine the tactical abilities of that destroyer? I would like to know what we are dealing with in case talks for any reason start to go bad.”

“I’ll try, Admiral, but passive sensors can only do so much.”

“Just give me what you can.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Maeve raised her right eyebrow.

“You think talks will go bad once the flag officer arrives?” Maeve asked.

“There is always a possibility,” Shannon said. “If these Humans left the Republic under bad terms, then we may be waiting for the rest of their fleet to arrive for them to attack us.”

Maeve had a surprised look on her face.

“You’re thinking that the line the captain gave us about waiting for the flag officer to arrive who has first contact authority was a ploy to lower our guard?” Maeve asked.

“That is always a possibility,” Shannon said. “I am hoping that if this a farce that things will be in our favor. However, I still want to give that captain the benefit of the doubt that her words are true and that we are not about to get ambushed.”

“Considering our guns are still retracted, I doubt they would be so stupid as to even consider attacking us without knowing our combat capabilities.”

“If I were that captain, I would take notice of the weapon blisters on our hull and assume that they are our guns. Captain Kara may not be able to determine what kind of weapons we have, but she can tell we have a lot of guns at our disposal. That does not even include the number of combat drones we have aboard either that she won’t be aware of.”

“Admiral,” Chrystal said, “I think I may have something on that ship.”

Shannon and Maeve turned towards Chrystal.

“What do you have, Chrystal?” Shannon asked.

“I detected a lot of power coming from that ship when it powered its weapons. Using data from known ships we have encountered thus far, the amount of power for a ship that size would mean that its guns are not projectile or even railguns due to the design of those guns.”

“So, we are dealing with energy weapons?”

“Yes, but considering the amount of energy, I don’t think we are dealing with particle weapons either as I visually do not see any form of carbon scoring on those barrels.”

“No carbon scoring?” Maeve asked puzzled.

“It can’t be,” Shannon said. “That means their energy weapons don’t fire particles which leaves only one type of weapon remaining.”

“They are using laser-based weaponry,” Chrystal said, “same as our own ships.”

Shannon looked at the destroyer on the screen again, this time at the gun turrets the ship was still pointing towards them.

“No wonder there are so few turrets on that ship,” she said. “The amount of power to fire laser turrets that are triple-barrel and that size would be on par with the number of smaller dual laser turrets our own destroyers have.”

Maeve looked at the destroyer as well.

“If I remember our history,” Maeve said, “laser turrets were developed near the end of the Expansion Era a few centuries ago. That may give us a better time reference as to when they came out here.”

“Maybe,” Shannon said, “but there is something that doesn’t add up. Chrystal, can you tell what is powering that ship?”

“I’ll take a look,” Chrystal said.

Maeve looked back at Shannon again.

“What are you thinking about?” Maeve asked.

“There is a reason that Republic ship designers never developed such guns for ships of that size,” Shannon said. “The amount of power from capacitors to fire such weapons would drain them for several seconds if not a minute. The rate of fire would be so dismal that they would be inefficient as a weapons platform. That is why our laser turrets are smaller so that they can fire without draining the capacitors dry because our fusion reactors can replenish their power

faster than they can be drained. The only reason for a destroyer like that one to be able to field such weapons is due to the power source producing more power than our own reactors. Last I checked, our research team hasn't been able to create reactors that produce more power without either burning out quickly or resulting in a complete meltdown from thermal overload."

"Um, Admiral," Chrystal said, "I'm getting a reading from the passive sensors that may answer that question for you."

"What is it?" Shannon asked.

"I'm detecting energy that is equivalent to the power generated when an event such as a matter-antimatter extinction occurs."

Shannon and Maeve were both wide-eyed when Chrystal said that. The rest of the bridge crew looked in Chrystal's direction, equally as shocked as the Captain and Rear Admiral were.

"Are you telling me," Shannon finally said, "that the destroyer that is currently off our bow is using a matter-antimatter reactor as its power source?!"

"It's the only explanation for this reading, Admiral," Chrystal said.

"Great Maker help us. A matter-antimatter reactor of all things. It explains the reason why they can power their weapons. However, there is a reason the Republic never developed such reactors for use on our ships."

"You're talking about the amount of energy that is released once a reactor's containment field is compromised, correct?" Maeve asked.

"Exactly. As a failsafe, our fusion reactors shut down unless compromised to prevent a massive detonation that could devastate other ships in a fleet. A reactor such as what that destroyer is using once it goes could annihilate unprotected vessels or severely damage any surrounding vessels that are protected. All such projects were scrapped more than a thousand years ago due to the hazards in their use. Why would this faction develop such a dangerous piece of tech much less use it as their power source?"

Maeve was about to say something when she began to ponder those words. Shannon noticed this and was puzzled what Maeve was thinking about.

"Is there something on your mind, Captain?" Shannon asked.

"I'm trying to put together what we are dealing with here, Admiral. Things are not adding up as you have mentioned. Let us run down what we know."

Maeve stood up from her seat and began to pace between her seat and the Tactical station where Chrystal was as she proceeded with her analysis.

"This destroyer captain is acting like we are aliens," she said. "We transmitted in perfect English. So, why is that the case? Why is she wanting her flag officer present due to what they call their 'first contact protocol'? Based on our passive scans, we can tell that the destroyer is using a form of laser weaponry, but gun turrets such as those on that ship are larger and require more power than our own. Because of this, they are using a power source that has not been in any form on production outside the testing phase more than a thousand years ago. However, laser turrets were only developed in the Republic over a few hundred years ago."

"I'm detecting four warp signatures heading our way," Chrystal said. "They will be here in twenty seconds."

Maeve stopped in front of her chair when it looked like some revelation had dawn on her.

"Is it possible?" she said. "Could we be dealing with such a scenario?"

"What is it?" Shannon asked. "I'm curious to know what you have on your mind."

Maeve turned towards Shannon. She looked like her skin was going pale.

"Admiral," Maeve said, "these could be Humans that are not from the Republic."

Shannon stood up from her seat. Shannon could not tell whether to be in shock of Maeve's words or at the audacity that Maeve would believe that these Humans would originally not be from the Republic. Before she could say anything, four flashes of light from ships coming out of warp appeared on the main screen, grabbing the attention of everyone on the bridge. Three of the ships were the same class of destroyer as the one that arrived here.

The last ship was larger than the destroyers, with a bow whose struts were extended further out than its smaller brethren. The semi-saucer sections remained but between them and the wings of the ships were extensions of the saucer bridging the gap. The engines on the sides were now mounted in pairs on wings that were enlarged for reinforcement of the additional engine mass. Another semi-saucer section was located on the wings connecting the aft section to them. The ship possessed the same triple-barrel energy turrets as the destroyers but had a total of fourteen guns. Four of the guns were mounted on the struts near the front, two above and two below. Two more were mounted on the aft section. The last eight were mounted in pairs above and below the saucer extensions. The missile launchers remained in the same location and in the same numbers.

What got Shannon's attention were the eight larger guns this new arrival had possessed. They were more than fifty percent larger and were dual-barrel turrets with the barrels mounted on the sides of the turret body instead of in front like the smaller guns. They were mounted four above and below along the central axis with six facing forward and two facing aft. It was clear based on the size and strength of the armaments that this vessel was a cruiser, and an incredibly armed cruiser at that.

"Admiral," Ro said, "I'm receiving a transmission the larger vessel. They are identifying themselves as Commodore Sutherland of the Cruiser Mogami."

"It is a visual feed?" Shannon asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Ro said.

"Put them through," Shannon said as she sat down in her chair along with Maeve.

A holographic screen appeared in front of the main screen. At first there was static, but this quickly disappeared as an image appeared on the screen.

What Shannon saw made her stand back up from her seat in complete and utter shock.

The being that was staring back at her through the screen was not a Human being, far from it. It was an anthropomorphic animal in a uniform, and it was a type of animal that Shannon was more than familiar with as the being on the screen stared back at her with an equally shocked expression on his face. This creature that she was staring at on the screen had the awfully familiar head of a wolf.

"A Lykan?!" Shannon yelled out loud.

Maeve was right about one thing. The beings here were not from the Republic, but Lykans that can speak proper English was the last thing Shannon had ever thought to encounter in the Northwest Region.

The question to ask now was why were there were Lykans here in the Northwest Region?

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