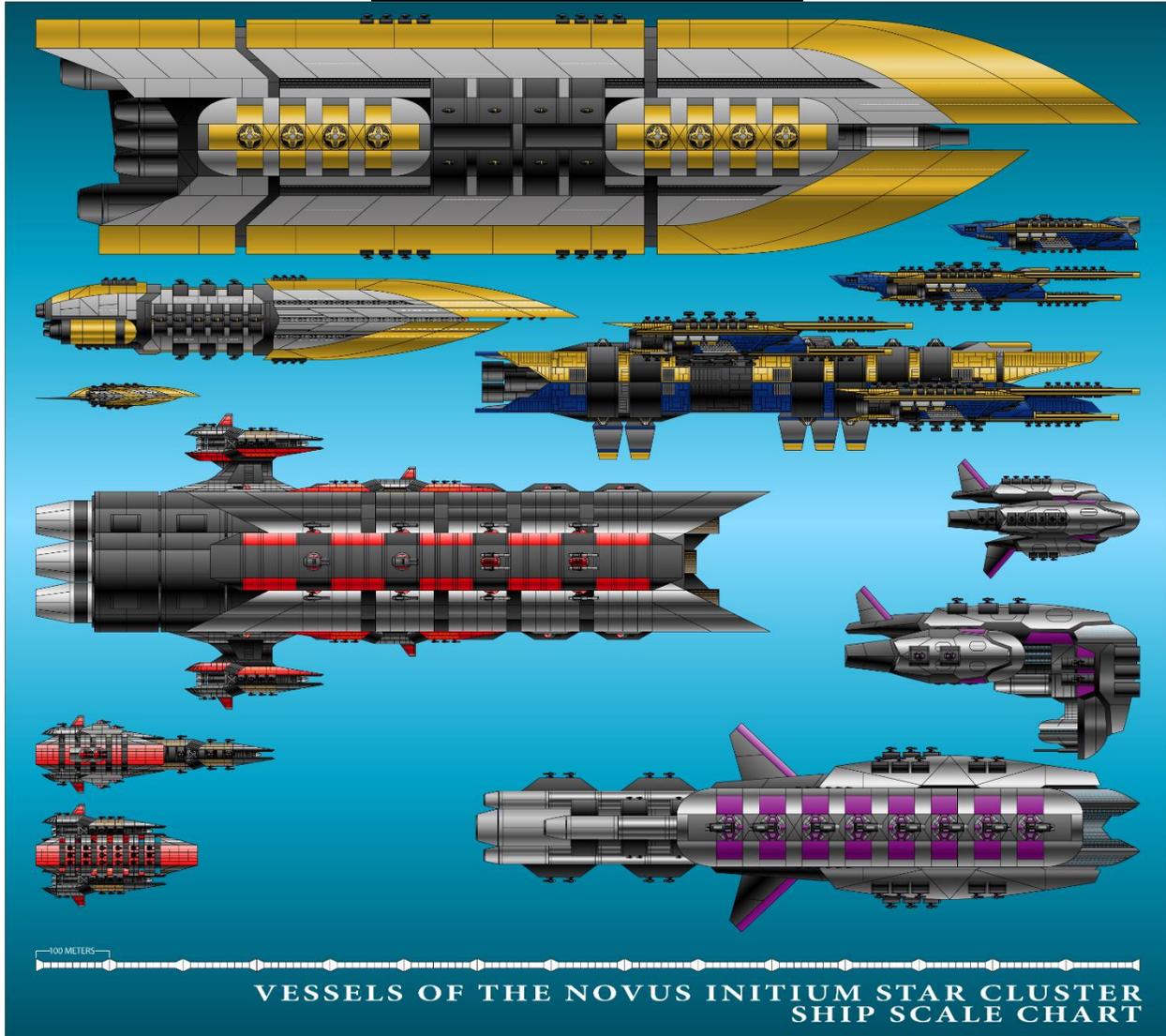


Warring Factions: The Novus Initium Saga
Episode III: The Siege of the Light



PART 5

*Presidential Conference Room, Republic Military Headquarters Station
Planet Luminaire Orbit, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
1:30pm, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“Tell me this is some sort of cruel joke?!”

After the invasion of the Dellino System by Republic forces less than an hour ago and the securing of the star gates at both ends, Supreme Chancellor Drew ordered the *Templar* back to the Lumen system using the same gates to report on what had transpired in Dellino. Trent wanted to present the report on his own and requested for State Ambassador Drino and Imperial Ambassador Orbinai to be present. Trent knew that Drino would want to hear the report about the five home planets of the State’s races after they thought they had liberated them. Everyone in

the room was in shock about the drug and the pseudo-antidote used on those worlds. They were appalled at what the consequences were if the pseudo-antidote was not applied, with Drino unable to find the words at the death of so many after those stations were destroyed. Everyone knew by this point that the operation of the pseudo-antidote deployment was not logged in the databases of any of the stations and the *Templar* acted in accordance with the information that it found, so blame cannot be put on the ship or crew for acting on the information on hand.

Drino was livid all of a sudden with his sudden outburst as he got out of his chair and started pacing. Everyone else except for Trent remained seated.

“I’m sorry for what has transpired, Ambassador,” Trent said. “I’m not sure why there was a lack of information for the local Lykans as to the purpose of the stations, but my guess is that the deployment of the drug was considered classified within their ranks.”

Drino stopped pacing and took a deep breath.

“I do not blame you or your crew for your actions, Trent,” Drino said. “You believed, as we all did, that you were saving those worlds from oppression and slavery. You did a noble act and cannot be blamed for it as those people died free from the Kingdom’s and the drug’s control. The only one I can blame is this Vistorio you managed to rescue for the development of the drug. He should have killed himself than attempt to develop the drug for those slavers!”

“He did manage to destroy a top research station that the Lykans were using to develop both the clones used for infiltration as well as the virus that was being deployed against our capital.”

“From what I heard, your team was led to believe he was giving his life to destroy the facility but he knew about the escape pods that were used to eject to safety. I think he only volunteered because he knew he would be able to escape the blast. I will have to forward all of this to my government but they will not be happy with what has happened. We will make sure to note that his actions did save your people and your government from their virus and any further cloning. Whether saving billions of Republic lives in exchange for the loss of millions of our brethren’s lives is enough to atone for his actions will be up to them. Where is he right now?”

“He is in a holding area in this station. He knows that the State will want him to return to answer for his actions.”

“At least he isn’t a coward. I may want to speak to him but I will need to contact my government first.”

“We will arrange for it,” Drew said. “Now then, here is what else we know. According to Admiral Trista, the boarding party sent aboard the enemy Thrasher reported that the shuttle, according to the crew, was flown by Head Director Jyinuro. He was the one in charge of all the projects in the system used by the Lykans, including both the drug that was developed and the virus, under the direction of Head Advisor Forneido. His shuttle fled to Dellino IV which there is a large civilian population on the planet. It means that he can easily hide there if he wanted. We were also informed that the governor of the system is also there and may have the means to contact the capital of the Kingdom if needed. The gates leading into the system are now seized by our forces so the only way they will enter the system is by jumping in. However, this may not be possible for their forces right now.”

“What do you mean?” Orbinai asked.

“According to the logs from the enemy battleship and the records left behind by Jyinuro, the Lykans used the crystals found on their battleships in the region along with their reserves in order to allow the mobile gate that is in our system now to jump this far as part of what they call ‘Project Beta.’ Apparently, ‘Alpha’ was the project codename for trying to force the Empire into

a war with the Republic.”

“Well, we see how that went,” Orbinai said, smiling. “So are you saying that the Lykans don’t have any crystals at all?”

“It would appear not as far as we know. Most of their reserves were used in their initial war with the State and they had to resort to mining other systems among their outer holdings. Those holdings were seized once our forces managed to push the Lykans back to their current defensive lines. They cannot jump at all into Dellino to attempt to reclaim it.”

“Do you think their king is aware of the situation?” Drino said as he sat back down.

“If that governor managed to contact their capital, then most likely yes. I’ve ordered the Second Fleet into the system in order to establish a blockade including communication jamming. The squadron of ships sent from the First Fleet will return to Lumen and I’ll be sending in one of our other fleets instead to supplement the Second Fleet. We would like to see this become a joint operation and forward command location between our three nations as we look at heading for the Lykan capital.”

“Heading for the capital?” Orbinai asked. “Wait a moment. Are you saying that we have the location of their capital?!”

Both of the ambassadors looked over at Trent as he smiled a little.

“That is correct, ambassadors,” Trent said. “Apparently Jyinuro contacted Forneido after sending in their second invasion fleet to report about their operation. This was a direct communication and we traced it right to the system where Forneido was. It is located two jumps from the Dellino System, meaning that our forces are very close to their capital.”

“Have their forces withdrawn from the front lines yet in response to our presence that close to their capital?” Drino asked.

“Not yet,” Grand Admiral Mikey said. “Considering how recently this has happened, they may be conferring as to their next move.”

“I see. I will speak to my government about your request for a fleet. Now that we know where their capital is and that it is two jumps from the Dellino System, they may be more inclined to send one.”

“I will ask my government as well,” Orbinai said. “Being that close to their capital is a very favorable position to be in. It might put pressure on them to end the war with our forces being so close.”

“I don’t know about that,” Drew said. “Some of the information we got from the enemy battleship is that there are other battleships in the two systems that we would need to go through, especially in their capital system where their elite Royal Guard is located. We don’t know the numbers, but we do know they have a lot. The Ciscio System that is between the Dellino and the capital system of Hedonia is the only way in or out of Hedonia. Therefore, you can bet that the Lykans will be protecting both ends of that gate with their battleships.”

“Are we able to jump there directly if went that route?”

“Heronia is not too far for a jump but I would advise against it as we would need a secure escape route should we be outgunned in Heronia, and our ships won’t have the crystals needed to jump there and back to Dellino if needed due to resource rationing of the crystals right now. We need to secure the gates in Ciscio before proceeding into Heronia.”

“I concur as ours won’t be able to jump there and back either,” Drino said.

“Better make that three of us,” Orbinai said. “We will have quite a fight on our hands to secure the Ciscio gates, though. Part of me is wishing the sustainable warp drive was an option for our ships. However, even if we all agreed to have them made available to our ships, it would

take too long to deploy such a drive to every ship we could send.”

“The Republic Senate would never agree to disclose the drive for public use after the fiasco we had just to get them to approve of it in the first place,” Drew said. “No, we need to assault and seize the gates at Ciscio if we want to make it to Heronia.”

“There is something else to consider,” Trent said. “The enemy is no doubt aware of the *Templar* and its capabilities. This will make any action we try to take with the ship that much harder if we have to infiltrate Ciscio and their capital.”

“You’re right. They will be fortifying their positions even more so than before now that they know we have such a ship in our position. Trent, as soon as the ship is resupplied and repaired, I need you all to head to Ciscio and Heronia for reconnaissance of the Lykans’ defenses as soon as possible. How soon will the ship be ready?”

“According to the logistical and repair teams, the ship will be ready to go in two hours.”

“It will take longer for our forces to arrive here if we contact them now,” Drino said. “Supreme Chancellor, I would suggest we firmly establish our foothold in the Dellino System before we attempt anything further. We still have two populated planets that could cause problems for our forces.”

“I concur with Ambassador Drino,” Orbinai said. “If you want this to be a joint operation, we need to have our forces present in the system to cement our position before any further aggression is made.”

“Very well,” Drew said. “Trent, I will give you three days for you and your crew to rest after such a long mission. That should be more than enough time for Imperial and State forces to get here and go to the Dellino system. However, while the military here is aware of your mission, the rest of the military and the civilians at large do not know. I recommend that your bridge crew stay at your place while you all are here. People believe that you and your bridge crew are taking time off and vacations elsewhere in the Republic. It may be troubling if you all are seen together on the same planet, but I figured it was better than staying on the ship or on this station.”

“I understand,” Trent said. “Is it alright if I call my wife and have her meet us somewhere where it is best to slip onto the planet without detection?”

“You can call her but let us work out the details of how to get you there. Let your bridge crew know about the details. Blair’s group will have to go elsewhere for a while, but we will work that out with him shortly.”

“Understood, sir.”

“One last bit of business before we move on,” Drino said, “Orbinai, I’m also going to see about having the ships that you and I discussed about deployed for this mission as well.”

“I understand,” Orbinai said. “I will confer with my government about their deployment as well.”

“What are you two talking about?” Drew asked.

“Despite the efforts we made in trying to incorporate Republic laser weapon technology onto our ships,” Drino said, “the result was that they used too much power under the current design configurations. We are still working on making laser weaponry work, but we ended up making an arms deal with the Empire as a stop-gap in the meantime.”

“An arms deal? Wait a minute. Let me guess. The State requested the purchase the Empire’s railguns and blasters in exchange for your missile launchers”

“That is correct. Railguns and blasters don’t need anywhere near as much power as laser turrets and the ammo for those weapons takes up far less space compared to missiles. By reducing the number of missile launchers on our ships and replacing them with those railguns

and blasters, the extra space from the ammo storage meant that we have more room to add the shield booster systems that your Republic uses. We had to remove the extra shield generators for some additional capacitors but the shield boosters are more than adequate for sustained battlefield staying power. We have destroyers and cruisers with those weapons already installed along with the shield boosters and they have been tested in simulated battles to be fierce ships.”

“The Empire by comparison needed the flexibility and hard-hitting ferocity of the missiles that the State uses,” Orbinai said. “This includes the EM warheads that the Republic helped develop against the Kingdom’s shields. Railguns, blasters, and missiles have given the ships of both nations added versatility in combat that we’ve been lacking for a while. From what I hear, the Republic had similar weapons systems once. Why did the Republic abandon them?”

“We passed a law to use renewable sources that don’t add or create additional waste,” Drew said. “Missiles and ammo for projectile cannons or for railguns were considered waste that we could not renew. That was why we developed laser weapons to replace them. The only reason the *Templar* has railguns was due to the nature of its mission. Our lasers are powerful as you two have seen and I doubt we will change them anytime soon.”

“Don’t get us wrong,” Drino said. “We see the use and value of those weapons and we are still trying to make them work, but our ships’ power supplies just can’t handle it yet. In all honesty, I admire the fact your nation does not generate weapon waste and that is why we want to make those weapons work. The less ammo we have to make, the more we can be conservative and mindful of our resources.”

“I concur with Drino,” Orbinai said. “However, unlike the State that has an agreement with the Republic concerning laser weapon development, the Empire does not yet. We will consider such matters after this war is over if we have a vested interest in the technology. However, let us focus back on current matters at hand.”

“Agreed,” Drew said. “We will deploy our forces accordingly, but we will need information on the enemy fleet deployments in both star systems to know what to expect. Thankfully, I’ve just thought of a way we can get that information without sending the *Templar* to get it for us.”

“What do you mean, sir?” Trent asked.

“Are you talking about the captured Thrasher battleship?” Mikey asked.

“Correct,” Drew said.

“But wouldn’t their computers be wiped by the time boarding parties took control of the ship?” Trent asked.

“This may surprise you, but the crew did not wipe them and for good reason.”

Trent had this stunned expression on his face. This expression was shared by the ambassadors as well. Mikey, on the other hand, looked like he knew what Drew was talking about.

“Apparently,” Drew continued, “the crew was made up of recent graduates one month out of the military academy. There were some higher-level functions they did not have access to but the military or maybe even Forneido himself thought they did not need access to those functions due to the project they were working on. Some of those functions included the self-destruct system and wiping the computer core.”

“We were dealing with recent graduates?” Trent asked. “They seemed to handle themselves rather well for graduates, but didn’t Jyinuuro have access to those functions?”

“Jyinuuro may have been in charge of the project but he was a civilian and did not have access to those functions either. The crew has been transported to Detention Center One at

Severus IV as prisoners-of-war for now. I think this is the first time for us to even have Lykans as prisoners.”

“I would say it would be a first for all of us,” Drino said. “Ever since they deployed ships that are operated only by living cores, the only ships with Lykans on them are the battleships and they seem more inclined to die in battle than be captured.”

“If it is alright with you, Supreme Chancellor,” Orbinai said, “I would like a chance to talk with some of the prisoners.”

“I would as well,” Drino said.

“We all do,” Drew said, “but right now, we have our own investigators and interrogators talking with them right now about a few things including their choice to surrender and what the current state of the Kingdom is from the standpoint of their civilians.”

Drino and Orbinai looked at Drew with a shocked look on their faces.

“Why do you want to know the condition of their civilian populations?” Drino asked.

“Because if there is one thing that can change the ways of a government, no matter how powerful they may appear to be, their power is based on the people’s will to accept that government and how it is run. Right now, Dellino is under our control in terms of logistics and communications. There is, however, a very large population of Lykans as well as some slaves on both Dellino III and IV together with their local government on the latter of the two. Despite how the State feels about Lykans, the Republic is against the use of force on civilians unless absolutely needed. We are looking at bringing in relief supplies to those planets. If we can win them over with hospitality rather than with threats or guns, this might show some of them that we are not as bad as their government makes us out to be.”

“How do you know they won’t be armed and treat your people like ‘vermin,’ like what they have no doubt been told?”

“Leave that to us. We know how they would treat anyone from the State so it is best for none of your people to go down to the planets. We still have the matter of their slave population but that is something we will have to address once the current conflict is over. I’m not sure how they would treat those from the Empire, though.”

“I don’t see our people going down to those planets unless requested,” Orbinai said. “I wouldn’t worry about that until the situation calls for it. I’m surprised that you are so willing to help their civilian populous, though.”

“There is a term we use called being ‘Humanitarian.’ I’ll let you two look that up so that you can get a proper definition of the word, but you will understand afterwards. For now, let us dismiss and work on our own agendas while we get the needed information before proceeding further.”

With that, Drew stood up from his chair. Everyone else stood up at the same time.

“Ambassadors,” Drew said, “we will meet back here in two days. Trent, we will contact you with the information as soon as we can and when to come back to the *Templar*. Dismissed.”

“Yes, sir,” Trent said as he saluted.

The Joint Chiefs saluted as well while the ambassadors bowed. Everyone proceeded out of the room.

“Oh, Trent,” Drew said.

Trent stopped and turned around as everyone passed right by him out the door.

“There is one more matter I wished to discuss with you in private,” Drew said. “This won’t take long.”

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Hallway to Throne Room, Lykan Royal Palace, City of High Charity (translated)
Lykana Orbit, Heronia System, Capital of Royal Lykan Kingdom
4:26pm, September 2, 5433 A.D.

“I know this cannot be good.”

It had been more than five hours since Head Advisor Forneido had last spoken with Head Researcher Jyinuuro about Project Beta. Since then, he has attempted to get in contact with him at least three times but there has been no word. He even tried to get in contact with the research facility on Dellino III or any of the orbital stations over that planet and Dellino IV but there was still no response. Forneido attempted to have an investigation team sent from one of the battleships in the Ciscio System to investigate what has happened but was told that by order of the King that they were not to take orders from Forneido due to an investigation.

That alone gave Forneido cause for concern as he was now walking towards the Throne Room by order of King Ronimier the Fourth. It also did not help his nerves that two armed escorts were walking right behind him. Something went terribly wrong in Dellino and he felt like he was being escorted to an execution, namely his own.

As he reached the doors, he took a deep breath to regain his composure. The doors opened on their own to the massive throne room to a sight he was not hoping to see. The ENTIRE Royal Court was present and everyone was staring at him with looks from anger to disgust. If he thought he was in trouble before, the looks on their faces confirmed it.

Nevertheless, he walked into the room with a look of dignity as befitting a Lykan of his position. Come what may, he was still in a position of power walking in and a member of nobility. He should not be cowering with his tail between his legs.

As he approached the throne that was at the top of the staircase, the escorts put their hands on his shoulders, indicating to stop where he was. By this point, he was more than halfway across the room. This was unusual as normally he would be at the base of the stairs, not this far back from them. He could see King Ronimier sitting on the throne with a displeased look on his face.

When the King looks at you like that, it is similar to him saying “guilty” for whatever crime you may have committed.

“Forneido,” the King said.

If the King did not even bother to use Forneido’s title, he KNOWS he is in trouble. The dignified look Forneido was giving mostly went away just from the King addressing him like that.

“Yes, my King?” Forneido asked, trying to hide the sudden shakiness in his voice.

“Do you know WHY you have been summoned here in front of the entire Royal Court right now?”

This must have something to do with Project Beta. That was the only thing he could think of at this point.

“I am to assume it has something to do with the results of Project Beta, would that be correct?” Forneido asked.

“That is PART of the reason you were summoned,” the King said.

It was *part* of the problem? Forneido was beginning to wonder what the rest of the issue was. Quietly clearing his throat, Forneido continued.

“Part of it, my King? I’ve been trying to get a hold of the head researcher of the project for some time now for a progress report but to no avail.”

“Then it is probably a good thing that he managed to find another avenue in order to communicate with us before we lost communications with the ENTIRE Dellino System.”

Now Forneido was starting to feel scared. If communications with an entire star system have been cut off, it means that someone was jamming the transmissions. If it was the stealth vessel, its capabilities were far greater than anticipated.

“What avenue of communication are you referring to before we lost transmissions, my King?” Forneido asked.

“Your head scientist managed to get in touch with us through the governor’s office.”

The GOVERNOR’S office?! Forneido was baffled by this news. Why was he there and not at the Lumen jump gate on the battleship he was assigned to?

“Did you say the governor’s office?” Forneido asked. “That doesn’t make any sense for him to be there.”

“It does when you consider the events that unfolded today. Allow me to ask you a question, Forneido. How long did you know about the Republic stealth vessel that was capable of traversing our space undetected?”

The King now knew about the vessel and most likely Jyinuuro encountered it. This may explain a few things, but he figured it was best to explain what he knew based on what has happened over the past few months.

“I’ve had my speculations of a craft capable of traversing space between star systems without the need of a jump gate or drive after some events could not be explained otherwise. These include reports of gates that our forces have locked that suddenly became unlocked and allowed enemy forces through. We never detected an artificial wormhole being created by a jump drive at all. The speculations started to show reality when assets of the Kingdom were being destroyed far within our borders after the reinforcement of our defensive lines.”

At that moment, Forneido realized that he had let slip the fact that the “assets” he was referring to were the ship production facilities that were destroyed. No doubt the King would ask about that now that he let it slip.

“By assets,” the King said, “are you referring to our ship production facilities as well as the orbital stations of five certain slave worlds including Vita?”

Forneido was suddenly shocked. How did the King know about the assets he was referring to?

“I see you are shocked,” the King continued. “Let me fill you in on some things which you knew about but failed to inform me or the Royal Court. Apparently, this stealth vessel has destroyed enough of our ship production facilities that we are no longer able to supply enough ships to our current defensive lines. However, instead of building or repairing the facilities, or for that matter withdrawing our forces to positions where fewer systems need defending and thus allow for more ships to strengthen our defenses, you INSTEAD ordered ships from other systems to the frontlines which weaken our defenses should the enemy break through! You care to explain that?”

Forneido did not know how to react to the King finding out that information, but he knew who had to have told him this.

“I take it Jyinuuro was the one that informed you of this information?” Forneido asked.

“And I’ve confirmed this with the Fleet Admiral. He said you relayed those orders when I asked him about their deployment.”

“I attempted to strengthen our current defenses without losing more territory to the enemy. While we have been able to evacuate our citizens from contested systems, we were losing

planetary assets in the process. Any further loss of assets would start to affect our productivity and our economy. We have already lost quite a bit in the opening months of the war and I would rather not see us lose any more to the likes of escaped slaves, potential slaves, and vermin.”

“So that there is no confusion among the Royal Court, you are referring to the State, the Empire, and the Republic, respectively. The problem with that decision is the fact that if we are not able to hold them off and they managed to break through, there will be little in the way to slow them down or stop them! That is why I have ordered our forces a moment ago to withdraw from the frontlines to better defensive positions.”

“What about the citizens on the worlds that would be undefended? Are they being evacuated?”

“No, they are not.”

Forneido was suddenly in shock at the King’s response. For some reason the guards reacted a little as well.

“Millions of citizens and slaves are on those worlds and you’re abandoning them?!”

“I told them that YOU were responsible for this by not evacuating them first before withdrawing our forces from the frontlines like you should have done. Do not lecture me of my actions when they are in response to your own!”

Forneido was almost livid. He was being held responsible for this fiasco but he knew he really could not blame anyone but himself. He tried his best to hide his anger.

“Before you go off on how I am abandoning lives, how about we talk about what else you had going on that has severely affected our way of life,” the King said. “Jyinuro had inquired with you at one point about the stations that orbit the slave worlds of the escaped slaves including Vita, is that right?”

“He was trying to bring it up at one point but there were more important matters at hand at that time.”

“So you did not discuss with him about what would happen if we lost those stations, did you? Did you forget the experiment you signed off on concerning those worlds?”

“Experiments?”

Forneido pondered what the King meant by that and started to think about it for a moment. He started to remember something about those worlds but it wasn’t coming to him as easily as he rarely had a need to think about them.

“I see your memory is a little foggy on the topic,” the King said. “Let me clear it up for you, then. Do you remember a project that involved the creation of a drug that was designed to have the user be submissive to suggestions and orders?”

Forneido remembered what the King was talking about.

“Oh, yes! The drug was meant to reduce certain emotions including aggression and have the slaves be able to take orders without question. It has been a while since I thought about that project as I left others to attend to it.”

“Do you also remember the side effects and what was used to curb those effects?”

“Now it is all coming back to me. The scientist that developed the drug was ordered to create a pseudo-antidote to be used to lessen the side effects. Apparently, the scientist was a Vitam our forces captured a few years ago from a State colony world.”

“And what are the effects if the pseudo-antidote doesn’t get administered?”

“The effects without the pseudo-antidote are quite ugly. If not administered after one day, the effects are a bit similar to an aneurism including evacuation of the bowels if I am not mistaken. If the pseudo-antidote is not administered after three days, the slave will die from

paralysis after their nervous system shuts down.”

“And HOW is the pseudo-antidote delivered or administered to the population at large?”

“Obviously the drug cannot be administered individually as that would take too long so the pseudo-antidote is delivered as an airborne chemical that the slaves would have to inhale in the morning. It is delivered by drones that are dispatched from the orbiting station over the planet...”

Forneido suddenly stopped when the realization set in as to what he said and what Jyinuro had tried to tell him earlier today. Those stations were reported destroyed and it has been three days at the earliest. All of those slaves would be...

“It appears you are now realizing the problem,” the King said. “This was another project you signed off on but that I was not made aware of. There are a lot of people that have wondered why they could not get more slaves off of those planets for a while. We were told that there was a possible epidemic for a while. I was also surprised to hear that the local Lykans who were aboard the stations the drones were coming from were not aware of the project either. If the enemy stealth ship sent infiltrators on board to get information and did not see such a project in effect, then it is no surprise they destroyed the station thinking it would later free the slaves. Instead, we LOST millions of slaves to the drug you approved to be administered!”

Forneido did not have anything to say in his defense. He completely forgot about the project not realizing the ramifications if the slaves stopped receiving their daily dose of the pseudo-antidote. How could he have forgotten something THAT important? The Kingdom has already lost a lot of slaves who fled to the State decades ago as well as those who were subject to become living computer cores for their ships. The slaves that were spread across the Kingdom were subject to have their reproductive organs removed to control their populations after the Slave Revolt leaving only those on their home planet with the means to continue to reproduce their kind as future slaves. Their deaths meant that no new slaves will be born.

Forneido almost collapsed to the floor from this grand mistake but his escorts kept him on his feet.

“These actions,” the King continued, “have cost us future generations of slaves for our workforce, Forneido. This is a grave mistake indeed.”

“Wait!” Forneido said as a thought came to mind. “We still have the means to replenish and renew our slave supply!”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“We still have the cloning facilities that are located on Dellino III. We can use those to create clones of existing slaves that will help breed new slaves to renew our supply.”

Forneido thought for sure this would cheer everyone up, but instead, their looks of disgust and disappointment were even stronger, including the King’s. Forneido then remembered that he had not established contact in a while with Jyinuro and that the King himself had mentioned they lost communications with the Dellino star system.

Before anyone would say anything to make him look more the fool, Forneido spoke up first.

“However, as you just mentioned earlier, we have lost communications with that system.”

“Correct, Forneido,” the King said. “The situation has gone from bad to worse. Jyinuro’s fleet had come in contact with the enemy stealth ship personally. Not only that, the ship had dispatched two infiltration teams. The first one managed to sneak by and infiltrate the jump gate, stopping any further ships from going to the Lumen System. The other team infiltrated the facility you were talking about and destroyed the compound with everyone inside! We just lost

our best and brightest scientists today whose knowledge would have made the Kingdom even better!”

Forneido felt the blood draining from his face. This was too much to bear.

“The Republic forces have managed to come through the same gate after the stealth vessel destroyed the remaining ships with the virus that was being deployed against the Humans. I was told that the two fleets that were sent were stopped by a field capable of stopping warp drives. It was also used by one of their battleships that came through the gate into Dellino and managed to keep the battleship *Gorulia* from escaping. Jyinuuro managed to flee in a shuttle that cleared the field quickly and warped to Dellino IV in order to get in contact with us about what had occurred since the Republic also used jamming along with ECMs to keep our own ships from targeting them. The Republic is apparently far more resourceful than anyone would have guessed. However...”

The King stood up from his throne. This was not a good sign.

“...we have another problem. Apparently, Jyinuuro had communicated with you after the second invasion force went to Lumen. This line of communication was a direct line to your office. It is believed that the stealth vessel was already in the facility of the *Gorulia* and traced the communication all the way back here. The Republic now knows where our capital is and they have forces two jumps from here.”

“That is possible,” Forneido said, his voice starting to become shaky.

“What I want to know is why Jyinuuro did not follow protocol and route the message through the jump gates rather than a direct line? He told me that due to the sensitivity of the mission that he was to report directly to you with a single line of communication. Is this true?”

Forneido was beginning to feel like he was digging his own grave. Any sense of dignity he tried to show was almost gone. This whole affair felt like a trial and he was the one standing accused! He swallowed as he responded.

“It is true, Your Majesty. I told him to directly contact me.”

“There is one last matter I wanted to point out. The *Gorulia* was not destroyed. It appeared as though they ended up surrendering. According to the reports we had, the ship was crewed with recent graduates from the Academy, none of which had access to the higher-level functions of the ship. This included the ability of wiping the computer core. Were you the one that assigned them to that ship?”

“On that matter, I did not request for those that recently graduated. I had requested for any available crew for the *Gorulia* from our military, but I was given those graduates instead of experienced officers.”

“Very well. I will verify that with the Fleet Admiral as there should be a log for that request. However, it has been proven that you have made a few critical mistakes in your role of trying to protect the Kingdom. Our forces are dwindling in number, our slave supply is cut off without a means to replenish, our enemy has control of a system two jumps from here, they also have access to one of our battleships whose database is intact, and they know where this star system is located. The enemy has a ship that can bypass our gates without using a jump drive system that could attack at any time. Our forces’ supply of jump crystals is exhausted after jumping that mobile gate all the way to Lumen. However, the worst offense of it all was that you kept the Royal Court and me in the dark of how dire our situation is!”

Forneido did not know how much more of this public interrogation he could take. His actions were starting to spell the end of the Kingdom and no doubt history would label him as the cause! Forget his dignity, his very life may be on the line here!

Shrugging off the two guards that were keeping him on his feet, he got on his knees and bowed before the king as he started to cry. He had to swallow his pride and beg for mercy.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty!” he said with his head to the ground. “I did what I thought was best for the Kingdom! I did not know things would have turned out this way!”

The escorts were trying to pick him up but the King gestured with his hand to leave Forneido alone.

“Please forgive me, Your Majesty!” Forneido continued to bellow.

The King took a deep breath.

“Forneido Grandid Viranic,” the King said with a loud voice that echoed throughout the room, “some of the results of these actions that have occurred are not entirely your fault, such as the loss of the slaves due to the attack by the Republic stealth ship. However, the crime I find most unforgivable is keeping the knowledge of current events from us and not discussing them with myself or the Royal Court. This offense is the gravest of all and has costed the Kingdom greatly in its attempt to claim the cluster in the name of our god. This cannot be overlooked. Therefore, I have reached a decision on your punishment.”

Forneido braced himself while his head was still pointing towards the ground.

“As of this day,” the King continued, “you, Forneido Grandid Viranic, will be stripped of your title and status as a member of the Royal Court. Your assets will be seized, your land and property will be stripped from your ownership, and any royal garments short of the basic attire so that you are not indecent will be confiscated. Your status will be that of a simple commoner with no hope for you or the next three generations to ever rise from that status. You will have to work to make a living including your wife and two offspring. Let it be so.”

Forneido stopped graveling. He was in shock. Death would have been swifter than this punishment. His family for generations had been a member of the Royal Court for centuries and he would be the reason that proud tradition would come to an end. His family would be reduced to being poor and the life of luxury would no longer be theirs. How would he explain this to his wife? What was all of his hard work to try to win the war all for?!

Forneido’s shock went away quickly, replaced with pure anger and rage. All of his devotion and dedication to a god that he had followed this entire time meant what? To him, this “god” they served has either forsaken him or doesn’t exist. His rage and temper started to get the better of him but at that point he didn’t care. His breathing was getting heavy and noticeable that the escorts who were behind him could tell how he was feeling. They quickly got between him and the staircase to the King.

The King himself could hear Forneido’s heavy breathing that was filled with anger. He expected Forneido to be upset and begging for forgiveness but this response was also expected in some aspects.

What no one expected was a slight laughter in Forneido’s voice which suddenly grew louder. Forneido got to his feet, reared his head up, and laughed almost maniacally. No one knew why he was laughing like this unless he had suddenly lost his mind.

The King, while perturbed, figured that Forneido was no longer in control of his senses.

“Guards,” he said, “take him away.”

Before the escorts approached Forneido, he stopped laughing and looked at the King, his eyes filled with rage. He unbuttoned his collar around his neck, revealing a broach on his undershirt. Everyone in the Royal Court hoped that the collar was cutting off circulation to his head but could quickly see that a lack of blood circulation was not the case.

“Let me ask you something, Ronimier!” Forneido said.

Everyone in the Royal Court suddenly gasped. To address the King by name without using “King” or “Your Majesty” was considered an insult and a crime but here stood a Lykan who had the guts to call the King by name only right in front of him!

“How much of the public outside of this Royal Court knows about the events that are happening outside of this system or in any of the core worlds for that matter?” Forneido asked. “I’m willing to bet no one knows about the fact that you have ordered our forces from the frontlines, abandoning those people and their loved ones to be captured by former slaves who may not show them any mercy or vermin who infest their planets with their filth? How about the fact that there is now a Republic fleet two jumps from this system and that they finally know where our capital is located? I’m wondering what our former slaves will think when they find out that their families on those worlds are all dead and that there won’t be any future generations of slaves to pull from? Fellow Lykans will have to start doing manual labor in order to make up for the loss of those slaves. Even the slaves of everyone in the Royal Court will eventually go away after they die and who will help them with their manual labor? Fellow Lykans, that’s who it will be. How do you think everyone will react to that news?”

The King had almost had enough of Forneido’s crazy-driven antics, but he was also curious as to what Forneido was getting at and decided to indulge him. He could see that the Royal Court was also looking a bit upset at the eventual reality that Forneido had brought up about the lack of slaves once the current stock has died out.

“Allow me to answer those questions,” Ronimier said, “if it will ease that trouble mind of yours. The public outside of this room do not need to know nor is it their place to question my decision about the military withdrawal. Those who cannot evacuate will only have you to blame for this.”

“At least I’m not the one who ordered our forces’ withdrawal. They could have had time to evacuate while the frontlines continued to hold.”

“A futile effort. Only the core worlds of the Kingdom matter and should be defended. As for the Republic forces that are in Dellino, our people will be told that there are some complications with the communications systems in that space. I’m not about to tell them that the enemy is that close and that their families in that system are now under Republic occupation. Besides, it was your project that failed and made that happen.”

“And yet you approved of that project knowing the consequences.”

“Is there a reason you are bring all of this up now?”

“As you said, it might ease my troubled mind.”

“Very well, then I will humor your last question. Yes, the slave stock will eventually dry out and we will have to look at alternatives to a workforce. It may even affect our economy to start paying workers in the same fields that slaves normally do but as far as the slaves’ feelings about the fact that their families are dead, I really do not care. Slaves are slaves, their feelings matter to me as much as the dirt. Now, are you satisfied?”

Forneido reached up with his right hand and unclipped his broach from his collar, brushing the back of it with his index finger. He looked to be at ease, smiling for that matter.

“Very much so,” he finally said. “Now I know that my punishment won’t be as bad as what you will have to deal with.”

“And just what do you mean by that?” the King asked.

“How much of the Kingdom will take your authority seriously now that they know what has been happening?”

“What are you talking about? I just told you that the public at large does not know.”

Forneido presented the broach towards the King.

“They do now,” Forneido said with a smile. “This isn’t just a broach. This is an audio and video device designed to transmit a live feed over all civilian channels. I had it made in case of emergency but I had a feeling this would come in handy in this situation. The moment I unbuttoned my collar, I activated the device up until this point. The entirety of the Kingdom now knows what is going on and the actions you have taken. So I ask again: how much of the Kingdom will take your authority seriously now that they know what has been happening?”

The King this time, as well as the whole Royal Court, was wide-eyed as to the actions Forneido had taken. The King knew that if the public knew of the events that have transpired, there would be panic. Worst yet, another Slave Revolt would occur among the slaves that are still in the Kingdom if they were within earshot of such a transmission and no amount of restraints or bonds could hold back their rage.

Forneido had just lit a bomb from within the Kingdom by Lykans and slaves and the King played right into his hands lighting the fuse to that bomb. As the King and the Court stood there dumbfounded, Forneido put the broach in his coat pocket and proceeded to head for the door. As he got halfway there, he stopped and turned to face the King.

“I wonder,” he said, “how much longer you, or for that matter this entire Royal Court, will remain in a position of power after this? Will it be the citizens that throw you out or will it be our enemies? I guess I can thank you for letting me go of my responsibility. It just means that it won’t be my head they are after.”

The King, in a sudden fit of rage, threw off his crown and his robe onto the chair behind him, ran down the steps to one of the escorts, grabbing one of their holstered guns from their belt. He pointed the handgun at Forneido who continued to smile.

“Well, Ronimier,” Forneido said smiling. “This is rather undignified of you to act in such a fashion. Do you intend to pull that trigger and make me into a martyr?”

The King was breathing rather heavily as he tried to regain his composure. This behavior was indeed not how a king should act. After a minute, he lowered the gun and handed it back to the escort whose holster he drew it from. He turned back towards the throne as he walked up the stairs.

“Take this fool to prison,” he said without turning around. “For the charge of undermining the authority and position of the Crown, you will be serving a life sentence. I will make sure your family is blacklisted for the rest of their lives and for future generations.”

“An order from a king whose authority may not last very long will mean that decree won’t last long either,” Forneido said.

“I will make this clear right now,” the King said as he put his crown and robe back on after reaching the chair. “My authority is not going away anytime soon. I will see to that myself and either quell or suppress any revolt you may have started. Your actions are responsible for weakening the Kingdom and this act of defiance of yours weakens us even further.”

Without even turning around to face him, the King addressed the escorts.

“I said to take this fool away,” the King said. “Make sure he has no other surprises up his sleeve.”

The escorts took Forneido by the arms forcibly and proceeded to take him out of the room. Forneido was still smiling as they walked through the doors. After they left the throne room and the doors closed behind them, the guards continued down the hallway a few steps before stopping. They looked around before letting go of Forneido. Forneido was surprised that they let him go all of a sudden. The escort on his left turned to him.

“What you all said in there just now?” the escort said. “Was all of that true?”

Forneido was wondering if this Lykan was affected by something or someone involving the frontlines, Dellino, or the slave issue. He decided to answer to find out.

“Yes,” Forneido said. “It is all true.”

The guards looked at each other before looking back at Forneido. The guard that asked the question addressed him further.

“We have families on one of the planets near the frontlines. Would you have ordered the evacuation of those worlds if our forces were incapable of holding back the enemy?”

“Of course! I’ve been ordering the evacuation of worlds since the beginning of the war. It was even documented with the military as such. I got fed up with retreating to the point that I stabilized the frontlines in key systems. I just did not expect the Republic to be resourceful.”

“We know you were trying to better the Kingdom and that those actions may have backfired but that should not be the reason that others such as our families have to be left defenseless against the Republic and their allies.”

“You are right. Others are going to suffer for my actions. I would rather take the punishment for my actions than let others suffer for it.”

“And yet you lost it in there and decided to let the entire Kingdom know about what had transpired in there. At least the public knows about it including those worlds on the frontlines.”

“At least they know what is coming. The King and the Royal Court are fools.”

“I know this is treachery for asking this, but what would it take to bring the King and the Royal Court out of power?”

“I have to ask this first, but aside from the fact that you have families on the worlds the King is abandoning, what other motives do you have for taking them out of power?”

“I’ve been wondering for a while based on how the war has been going if we really are destined to rule the cluster in the name of our god. Look how things have turned out. Our enemies are more resourceful and organized than we are. In the case of the Republic, they have been in space longer with a larger population and better standard of living. All I’ve seen while being in the service of the King and the Royal Court is them lounging about without a care in the world while the rest of us including those in the military perform services for a living. There are Lykans who have to flee their homes or have come under the occupation of the Republic recently while they live a life of comfort feeling protected. We will be losing all of our slaves within the next hundred years. This will force more families to do remedial jobs, some of which are in harsh conditions. Our culture, our society, is about to crumble and the King is only focused on his position of power. How can he be so conceited about his position of power without worrying about his own people?”

Forneido grinned, but this time for the foolishness that had transpired in that room and the gamble of the lives of the Lykans that this whole affair involved.

“I must apologize to you all,” Forneido said. “I was in that position like the rest of the Royal Court where I lived a very comfortable life, but now after talking with you I can see that this matter is bigger than I had anticipated. I need to correct this matter somehow. If anything, what you call treachery, I call patriotism.”

“So what can be done about this matter?”

Forneido looked at the doors towards the throne room.

“Let’s discuss this matter in a more private setting,” Forneido said. “There is a way to change things, but I would rather not discuss such matters here.”

* * * * *

*Bridge, R.N.S. Grange, Paladin-Class Battleship
Planet Poni IV, Poni System (Contested), Eastern Region
5:12pm, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“They are withdrawing?”

Nora could not believe what she was hearing much less seeing. The Lykan fleet that they were engaged in combat with was suddenly turning around and leaving the battlefield. There was no reason for them to withdraw but here they were, turning tail and running.

“Should we try to take a few more ships out before they go to warp?” Dennise asked. “They have fewer guns among their aft quarter.”

“No,” Nora said. “We have suffered losses today as well and we don’t need to provoke them any further.”

“Ma’am,” the communications officer said, “I’m getting reports from Republic fleets located on other frontlines. The enemy fleets are withdrawing from the systems through the star gates!”

“They are abandoning the frontlines?” Nora asked. “Can you confirm that this is happening with Imperial and State fleets as well?”

“I’ll send a message to verify.”

“Do you think it is a trap?” Dennise asked.

“I don’t think so,” Nora said. “It may be that they are performing a tactical retreat in order to strengthen their defenses in fewer systems.”

“Should we seize the star gate in the system that they have been holding to make sure they don’t come back?”

“Send a team to the star gate once we have confirmed that they have withdrawn from the system. I don’t want to provoke them any further right now.”

“Understood.”

“Ma’am,” the communications officer said, “I have confirmation that the Kingdom’s fleets are withdrawing from combat against State and Imperial fleets as well. It looks like they are in full retreat.”

“We need to contact headquarters about this development and for orders. I also want to know what has happened in Lumen after the Lykans attempted to invade.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Should we tell Brenda that she can come out of the escape pod now?” Dennise asked.

“Go ahead and let her know,” Nora said. “Those things are not very spacious in the section that she is in.”

“I’ll send her the message.”

As the last of the Lykans ships went to warp towards the Lykan-controlled star gate, Nora was still pondering why the Lykans had a sudden change in tactics to retreat. What caused them to fallback from this position?

“Ma’am!” the communications officer said with a smile. “The invasion was repelled after the enemy sent two fleets!”

“That is good news but there is no need to yell,” Nora said.

“That’s because there is more! Our forces have seized control of the gate and have invaded deep in Lykan space! They are two jumps away from the Kingdom’s capital!”

“Are you serious?! So that’s it! That is why they retreated!”

“However,” the communications officer said, “we are to hold our positions for the time being while we resupply and rest. It sounds like they want us to fortify our current positions so

that we are not caught off-guard again.”

“Are they not concerned about the enemy forces retreating further back into their territory? They could overrun our forces near their capital and launch a full invasion of the Republic capital again!”

“Apparently, they have found out that the Lykans have exhausted their current supply of crystals. They can no longer jump to other systems without a star gate!”

“They’ve EXHAUSTED them? You’re telling me they used up all their crystals? No wonder we saw crystal mining operations in the systems we’ve seized so far. They must have gone through their whole local supply in their quest for expansion, slaves, and the war with the State before we got involved.”

“This is good news, though,” Dennise said. “It means that cannot bypass any gates we lock on our end.”

“True, but for now, we will follow our orders and hold our position here. At least we will be getting a break from the fighting for a while.”

* * * * *

*Private Residence of Laura and Trent, Tacoma Suburb District, North of Luminous Planet Luminaire, Lumen System, Capital of Novus Initium Republic
6:17pm, September 2, 5433 A.D.*

“Honey, I’m home!”

Trent could not resist using such an old phrase, but the phrase still works thousands of years later. Laura could not pick up Trent and the rest of the bridge crew as there was simply no room in her car for eight people including herself. Trent ended up having to get a van driven by an RCIA agent to have him and his bridge officers transport them to his place. The moment they arrived, the other officers aside from Sheryl were awe-struck by the scenery. Trent knew that the moment they looked out the windows facing the city that they would be even more so.

The moment he opened the door, he could smell food being made from the kitchen as the aroma filled the house. The other officers could smell it too, hungry for food outside from what was served in the *Templar’s* galley. Not to say that the chef on the *Templar* couldn’t cook good food, far from it, but there was something about smelling food from the kitchen of a house that makes the food even better.

As soon as Trent said that phrase, we could hear steps from around the corner from the kitchen. Laura came around the corner and the moment she saw Trent, she ran towards him.

“Hi, sweetie!” She said as she wrapped her arms around him and gave him a big kiss. “Welcome home!”

“It’s good to be home,” Trent said. “You may want to back up so that the rest of us can come in.”

“Oh, sure! Come on in!” Laura said as she backed up away from the door.

Everyone came in with their luggage with Haley being the last one in. She closed the door behind her. Laura raised an eyebrow when she noticed the all-female crew, but Trent told her about them while they were on their mission in messages relayed to her by the RCIA. This was the first time for her to meet most of them, though. Trent figured it was time for introductions.

“Laura,” Trent said. “Allow me to introduce my bridge officers. You already know about Sheryl. She serves as my communications officer. Next is Natalie. She serves as my tactical officer and second-in-command.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Miss Laura,” Natalie said as she bowed.

“So this was the undercover agent for the RCIA while on Voluptas?” Laura said with a slight grin. “Very sneaky of you.”

“Yes, she was,” Trent said. “Next we have Usatame, my operations officer.”

Usatame bowed as she was introduced.

“Thank you for allowing us to stay here,” she said. “I’m usually reserved and keep to myself, but I will try to be more social while I am here.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you as well,” Laura said.

“Next we have Rei,” Trent said. “She is my helmsman and a very good pilot at that.”

“I’ve heard about those skills,” Laura said. “Having to navigate between systems at warp speed and making sure you don’t hit anything on the way. There is also your amazing ability to move the ship with precision for your operations. You have some good skills, my dear.”

Rei blushed and looked down, a bit embarrassed of the unexpected praise.

“Thank you, ma’am” Rei said. “Anyone could do the same with enough training and experience.”

“Next is Haley, our drone control operator,” Trent said. “It is thanks her and her drones that we have been able to execute missions with a single shot where needed.”

“I am honored to meet you, ma’am,” Haley said.

“And lastly,” Trent said, “we have...”

“Tora,” Laura said with a not-so-thrilled expression on her face.

Trent knew this was coming and that was why he saved Tora for last. Laura knew of Tora’s actions involving Trent in the past in terms of military operations and this last assignment was not much different. He could also see that Tora was not too thrilled to be here either but Aja insisted she stay at Trent’s place while they were on *Luminaire*.

“Miss Laura,” Tora said. “This is the first time for you and me to meet.”

“And yet,” Laura said, “your reputation precedes you. Trent, may I ask why she is here?”

“Head Agent Aja, her boss, wanted her here,” Trent said. “She is part of the bridge crew of the *Templar* and both Aja and Drew wanted her to remain here as such.”

“I see,” Laura said. “Alright, then. I may not like it but...”

“I’m sorry,” Tora said, interrupting Laura. “I know I put your husband through a lot of troubles in the duty of the RCIA. I’m sorry he has to go through all of this and that missions such as the one we were on is by order of the Chancellor because the RCIA requested him.”

“I know he took the mission due to its nature,” Laura said. “For that, I do not blame you. However, the two missions prior that you put him through were hard on both of us because I did not know what he was doing and he usually shares things with me. Those were the only times he could not share them with me and that bothered me.”

“I understand and I’m sorry that you all went through that. I have been told that after this war is over, he will no longer be asked to do any further missions involving the RCIA, both him and Blair, unless they volunteer to do so. We have already put them through enough as it is.”

“I’m going to hold you to that. Considering you are here and have been told to remain here for the next few days, I’ll try to be a good hostess while I’m at home.”

“You know,” Usatame said, “you look familiar, Miss Laura. Have you been on a broadcast at one point?”

Laura and Trent were both wide-eyed with that question. Sheryl, Tora, and Natalie looked back at Usatame as well, though Rei and Haley had no idea what the big deal was about involving that question.

“I guess you don’t watch the news much,” Trent said. “Laura here is the anchorwoman

for Republic NBC. She appears on both the noon and evening broadcasts.”

Usatame, Rei, and Haley looked at Laura with shocked expressions on their faces.

“You’re the anchorwoman for NBC?!” Rei said. “I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you but I haven’t seen the news in a while! I didn’t know Trent was married to a celebrity!”

Laura was starting to become embarrassed.

“Yes, it’s true,” Laura said. “Now then, let me tell you all where you can put your things while you are here, but first, there is something I want you all to see that I am sure you haven’t seen in a while.”

Laura walked towards the direction of the kitchen and dining room. Trent knew what she wanted to show them. The back side of the house faced the direction of downtown Luminous in the distance and with the house being on the side of a mountain, they could see it clearly.

Laura opened the window shade in the dining area to show the scenery of the downtown area. By this time, the sun was starting to set to the west and the light of the setting sun reflected off of the glistening buildings. Thankfully they were not being blinded by the light. It was a sight to behold and Trent missed it after being gone for so long.

Trent could see that everyone else was either awe-struck or admiring the sunset off of the buildings. It was unknown to him if any of them have really been on Luminaire or have seen the city of Luminous itself.

“It has been so long since I have seen a sunset,” Haley said as she started to cry.

Some of the other officers were having to hold back their tears.

“I figured it was better for you all to see this before you missed it,” Laura said.

“Whenever Trent comes back from his missions, he generally tries to see the sunrise or sunset depending on when he arrives back home.”

“Well, there is a reason for that,” Trent said. “When you are out in space, there is no concept of a day or night out there. Watching a sunrise or sunset kind of ‘resets’ that concept to make it easier to adjust back to normal. The sounds of the city and of the surrounding nature also makes you feel more alive and calm at the same time. That was why I had this house out here. It was for the view and for the sounds.”

“Now then,” Laura said, “I have to finish getting dinner ready. Honey, could you show them around the house and where their accommodations will be while they are here?”

“Not a problem. What are you cooking tonight if I may ask?”

“I’ll leave that as a surprise for you all. Now, go on and get situated. I’ll let you know when dinner is ready.”

“Alright, everyone. Please grab your luggage and follow me, please.”

All of the bridge officers walked back to the living room where the front door was and grabbed their bags. Trent stood by the staircase that lead both upstairs and downstairs. Once they all grabbed their bags, they came back to Trent.

“So here is how the sleeping arrangements will be,” Trent said. “Sheryl and Haley, you two will take the room upstairs and to the left all the way back. It’s an exercise room but a bed is in there you two. Usatame and Rei, you two will take the room upstairs and to the right all the way to the back. That was our daughter Amarria’s room, but it is a guest bedroom now. Just to clarify, the first room on the right is the master bedroom. The three rooms to the left are my office, the laundry room and the bathroom, in that order, before you reach the bedrooms.”

“What about Natalie and me?” Tora asked.

“You two will be in the downstairs room. It is the entertainment room but there is a fold-out couch and it is the only room left with a bed for you two. There is a bathroom down there as

well so you don't have to worry about the use of the facilities when you need to use them.”

“And here I thought that we were not good enough to go upstairs with everyone else,” Natalie said jokingly.

Tora shook her head at Natalie's statement.

“I think you want us down there in case we have to contact the RCIA for matters that don't concern everyone else, isn't it?” Tora asked.

“Correct,” Trent said. “I figured this would give you two some privacy in those matters.”

“Then for that we thank you. Let's go, everyone. We need to get our stuff situated and relax for a moment before dinner.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. Sheryl, Haley, Usatame, and Rei went upstairs while Tora and Natalie headed downstairs. Trent turned back towards the kitchen after they headed for their rooms to go back to Laura. Laura ended up surprising him around the corner by throwing her arms around his neck and planting a big kiss on his lips. Trent, while surprised, did not mind. After about ten seconds, Laura pulled away.

“That is my ‘private’ means of saying ‘hello,’” she said.

“I'm sorry to have given you such short notice about them all coming,” Trent said.

“It's alright. I'm just glad that the fleet was able to repel the invasion. I was genuinely scared when the Supreme Chancellor made his announcement.”

“I'm sure everyone was. Now we have to deal with the fallout of this situation. We are close to the Kingdom's capital and based on what I have been told, the Lykans have pulled their forces back from the frontlines. We may be close to seeing the end of this war and the sooner it is over, the sooner we can return to peace.”

“I would say more along the lines of being able to return to our normal lives.”

“We are closer to that goal than we were a few days ago. The cloning facility and DNA database are destroyed so I will be able to go back to the military after the war. It will be nice to get back to the *Renaldo* after these past few months.”

“You know, I have been hearing a lot of rumors of military personnel who want to leave the military after the war because of the experience it put them through.”

“I should not be surprised. It has been millennia since Humankind had to deal with war and the experience has never been good. However, in my opinion, now that we have to maintain and defend our borders for our security, the military will be even more important in the future. He now have more of a reason to protect our citizens from outside threats.”

“I know you mean the Kingdom, but are you talking about the Empire and the State?”

“Not necessarily, but you have to realize that we have met races that come from the Northern, Eastern, and Southeastern Regions. We still have the Southern Region around to the Northwestern Regions and who knows what races we would eventually come across in those areas. I heard that the *Templar* and her sister ship will eventually be sent out to explore the cluster and find strange new worlds with new life and civilizations. There is more to this star cluster that is unknown and I for one am a bit excited as to what we will find out there.”

Trent's stomach started to grumble. Trent was a bit embarrassed.

“But first,” he said, “we need to eat.”

* * * * *

To be continued...

END OF EPISODE III