

The Black Tigers
Book 2
Of Sorrow And Regrets

Chapter 1: Looking for George.

Hell is knowing people around you need you and not being able to do anything about it.

**Fort Hamilton,
North American Administrative District
Terra
Terran Hegemony
14 December 2779**

Welcome to my private hell, you all know the players. That's Alex and his girl CJ over by the hospital bed. They've gotten closer lately, they're good for each other, so hopefully some good will come out of all this.

In the doorway, Dido Moran looks pissed. There's always a pair of SAS on guard at the door, really makes a guy feel special. Nicole Osis and her partner Leo Devalis talk to her a lot, updates on the hunt for the asshole behind all this. Leo looks nervous whenever he comes here, I think he knows I'm peeking in.

Justine Sinclair sits in the big chair, Sinthya on her lap. Big Sin, Little Sin. I'm pretty sure Justine knows Sinthya's pedigree. I'm also sure she doesn't give a shit. Good, Tigers take care of their own.

A sad scene, the worst is the knot of pain sitting by the bed. Sarah, her right shoulder and arm in a cast, she's recovering well, Samantha Wynndham does great work. She hadn't left the room taking over the other bed.

As you might have guessed, that's me in the bed. The Almighty Gunslinger, Hero of New York, Major Bruce Gilmour. Blissfully unaware apparently, in reality, I can hear and see everything.

Weird huh?

"Hey, Leo, why the hell you so spooked?" Justine called out. The Detective started, looking around sheepishly.

"Sorry", he said, "just going on pure caffeine for too many hours." His emerald green eyes flicked back to the same corner of the room, he'd been staring off into for the past hour.

"Look", Justine said in the same tone she would have taken with any overworked officer in her Hungry Tigers, "You two have been hell on wheels since this happened," Dido, in the background nodded, "Get some rest before you run yourselves into the ground."

Nicole Osis grinned wearily, "That an order Major?"

"Damned straight", piped in Sinthya.

Sarah looked up from Bruce's bedside a wry smile on her face.

"Nice language you're teaching her guys."

Justine just shrugged.

As the detectives left, Isokoru Sato slipped in looking a question at Alex. Touching CJ on the shoulder, Alex went to stand by the Swift's commander.

"Any change?" Isokoru asked.

"No the Doc has him in a medically induced coma to aid in healing the damage. They grew new lung tissue from his SLDF genetic registry and grafted it in, so it's just a matter of if he can fight hard enough."

"His *Ki* is strong, he'll be up when he is ready."

"You sound like Don Roberto."

Chuckling, Isokoru went over and rested a hand on Sarah's shoulder. As she smiled up at him he glanced over at Alex.

"Wish I'd known him, he sounds...interesting."

"He certainly was that."

"Word on Donner?"

Justine fielded the question.

“NYPD and CIB lost his trail at JFK, Georgie had a good escape plan, probably had somebody watching the whole thing go down.”

“This Elias Bruenig fellow?”

“Looks like.”

Didi interjected then.

“Spoke to Sergei Cherenkov at CIB, they think he was using Amaris caches of money and id papers to evade our sweeps.”

“Cash and carry, huh?” Alex grumbled.

“Yeah, CIB’s got Sonny Cobb on it.”

“Hideki’s boy?”

“Agent Cobb now, cut himself a sweet deal, but he cleared the background checks, and psych profile says he’s apolitical, in it for the rush.”

“Okaay.”

“Tommy vouched for him, that’s good enough for me.”

Tommy Lindon, perhaps the best slicer or computer hacker in the Special Armed Services, had sealed the defection of Cobb, his counterpart on the strength of professional respect some months before, bringing reams of intelligence to the Star League forces liberating Terra. His vouching for the younger man said a lot. In the post occupation climate of Earth, it could mean the difference between life and death.

Didi went on;

“Based on what Sonny figured our boy’s in Asia, Hong Kong or maybe Taiwan, as soon as we know.....”

“Yeah, we’ll take him down.”

“CIB will want a piece of him after what Kelly and Marissa told them.”

“If they’re nice maybe we’ll give them a pinkie.” Justine interjected.

“I’m flying out to Hong Kong tomorrow to meet our guys.” Didi finished.

“How are the girls?” CJ asked having met them here at the hospital.

“Marissa’s fine, Kelly’s still on the critical list but she’s stable.” Alex answered.

Didi growled her head angrily, something about letting those ratzenfratzen RimJobs through.

CJ shook her head, her artfully cropped chestnut curls bouncing, she looked over at Alex and raised an eyebrow. Alex smiled and nodded.

“Sinthya, C’mon Alex and I’ll take you to get some ice cream, and you can stay with us for a couple of days.”

“No, I wanna stay with Daddy.” She said firmly. “And Sarah needs me.”

“But...” Alex began trailing off when he realized Sinthya was staring at the corner of the room. The same corner that had had Leo’s attention. He and CJ exchanged glances and even Sarah, who generally only paid attention with half an ear.

Sinthya’s eyes seemed to glow, of course it was probably a trick of the light. She giggled then, nodded and slipped off Justine’s lap to touch Bruce’s face. She turned to CJ with a smile.

“Daddy says never pass up ice cream.”

Reaching out she led CJ out the door after kissing Sarah on the cheek. With a last glance at the offending corner Alex followed. The Tigers and Sarah exchanged looks, and Sarah shrugged and smiled.

Grand Hilton Hotel

Hong Kong, South China Administrative District

Terra, Terran Hegemony

15 December 2779

‘Rat stowed his gear, then slipped out of his room in the suite the Tiger team had rented. Christian Traumintieri looked up from the couch where he was watching an Indonesian news feed. Tommy Lindon had the one of the other rooms while the last was reserved for Dido Moran.

“Major, looks like we’re all stowed, you want we should look around town?”

“First ‘Rat, ax the Major, it’s Chris, everybody’s gonna know we’re SLDF but there’s no need to give ‘em anything else for free.”

He flipped the butterfly knife in his hands open and closed. Grinning, he looked around the plush suite. “Were not gonna find this bugger tonight, so we relax and let Tommy do his magic.”

‘Rat nodded fixing a glass of iced tea and collapsed in a large overstuffed armchair. He sighed with pleasure and closed his eyes for a moment. Cocking his head he looked at the big blonde major.

“Okay, Chris, I get why Tommy and Didi are here, you know the turf, but why me?”

“Now you ask?”

“Well, yeah, just thought about it.”

“You’re solid in a fight, plus you’re slick when you want to be.”

Chris punctuated his points with flicks of his knife.

“Plus you’re one of Major Gilmour’s people.”

Flick

“Gracie Liu’s about as American as apple pie, despite her heritage.”

Snick

“Nerva and her lance don’t have the skills.”

Flick

“And the Terrible Two are great pilots but, well subtle?”

‘Rat couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of the two ex-Kuritans on a stealth run. The first lead they got, the pair would go in guns blazing. If they didn’t get killed, the two would probably lay waste to half of Hong Kong.

“Gotcha.”

Looking out the big picture window over the ancient trading city, Chris felt alive for the first time since the night with Justine. A night that hadn’t been repeated. Just as well he was here, doing what he did best, hunting. If they got caught, well Kerensky and Cameron wouldn’t kick the Tiger teams too hard.

Just enough of it to have us walking funny and tasting shoe leather for a month or so.

Still, we can’t let this go, Nobody hits us and gets away with it, that’s the Tiger way.

‘Rat had tuned in on the BBC news feed as they covered Amanda Cameron’s tour of Terra and it had struck a thought in the back of his head.

Girl’s a shoe in for Director General, she’s a natural, question is will the House Lords support her for First Lord or will we be going to war by the New Year?

Chris thought about running it past ‘Rat, but then pushed the thought aside.

Time enough for that later.

Nearby

Elias Bruenig checked and rechecked the battery on his Corning snub laser. He found himself doing this more and more lately. Word from the few contacts he had that were still trustworthy said the CIB was closing down the steady supply of cash and supplies that had enabled them to escape North America. Fortunately they had enough to last for a few months and by combining the contacts both he and George had developed there was a chance for the pair to get off world.

Ngov Industries, a shell company owned by Elias through a convoluted series of holding companies and legal loopholes had a corporate office in Hong Kong. The staff was minimal and well paid. The complex computer systems enabled Elias to keep ahead of the CIB investigation.

Sipping on an ice cold Tsingtao he thought, *And at least the amenities are plenty.*

There was of course the chance of betrayal. George saw shadows everywhere for the first couple of days. Elias however figured he couldn’t do anything about it. He preferred to sleep at night.

The man himself was staring out the window. Plotting, scheming, Donner was never at rest. It was part of the reason Elias hadn’t disposed of him yet. The Star League had liberated the Hegemony, but they still were not in control. Gaps in the chain of command, the diminished power of any central authority, and the sheer damage to Earth’s infrastructure made for plenty of holes to slip through.

Donner voiced the one concern they both shared.

“Any word on the Tigers?”

Elias grimaced.

“They’re still at their base in New York, most of my contacts are gone, the SAS was brutally efficient.”

George grunted.

“Several of our favorite people have disappeared though.”

“Who?”

“Some SAS, a couple of the ‘MechWarriors.”

“Gilmour?”

“Still out of it, in a coma.”

“The little Princess is all over the news.”

“Tragedy sells better than heroism, always has.”

Donner nodded, they both were dirty as hell to the SLDF, Donner for planning to assassinate one of their precious heroes, not to mention catching a member, however minor, of Inner Sphere royalty in the crossfire. Elias for hiring the men who did the job. Both of them for collaborating with the most hated man since Hitler.

If it had worked they’d have been scot-free. It hadn’t, now they had the baddest, craziest, bunch in the whole damned SLDF on their ass. Would the Tigers disobey orders and come after them? Of course. Would the most feared butchers in the Periphery Uprising be merciful when they found them? Not bloody likely.

The bitch of it was that compared to the CIB, the Tigers were amateurs. They were however not likely to care about due process. Nor would they care about any information either George or Elias could give them. That might just give the 90th the edge.

George turned away from the window then.

“If we can hold out for a few more weeks a ship captain I know can get us out.”

Elias looked up, interested, good news maybe.

“Guy I used during the occupation, he’s heading out for the Free Worlds League.”

Elias nodded, with the massive waves of relief coming in the Terran Port Authority couldn’t inspect every ship.

And Kenyon Marik isn’t winning any friends here on Terra.

The Free Worlds League was also known as a place where a smart and driven individual could do well.

“Sounds like a plan.”

Avalon City

New Avalon

Federated Suns

16 December 2779

New Avalon was pleasantly warm, a beautiful night as John Davion looked over his city. Thoughts of the past had plagued him of late. One thing in particular stood out.

“John, got a minute?”, Richard Cameron had asked on that fateful day.

“Of course, My lord.”, John Davion had smiled at the young ruler..

He’d always been thankful he’d found a certain respect from the often temperamental Cameron, besides the benefits of having the First Lord of the Star League regard you as an ally, It sheltered the Federated Suns from that same ruler’s somewhat impetuous policies .

They’d retired to Cameron’s day office a spartan but comfortable room the Terran leader used for informal meetings. Sitting in the rooms plush chairs sipping Terran brandy John hadn’t been prepared for the bombshell Richard had laid on him. The younger lord had been pensive for the past few days of the Economic summit, and John found out why.

“I’ve been...worried lately, the other Lords...” Richard had started.

John had kept quiet. He’d learned that just listening to the young man and being patient, got better results than trying to push him. It was something the First Lord’s other advisors, from General Kerensky to that buffoon Stefan Amaris never seemed to understand.

“If anything were to happen to me”, Richard had looked up his eyes haunted, “it is my wish that you become regent of my daughter Amanda and serve as First Lord...”

“My Lord!?” John had been shocked, “If there is any concrete threat...”

Richard had smiled warmly then at John’s earnestness.

“No John, nothing like that, but if it some tragedy does strike, well you’d do this for me... Wouldn’t you?”

Looking at the leader of all humanity, John Davion had felt an overwhelming sense of empathy for the man. Richard could be stubborn, spoiled and arrogant, but at his core, he was a good man who loved his family. And well, after all who else could he turn too, Kerensky? A good man, but aging, and Amanda

Cameron was only two. Amaris, inwardly John snorted, not bloody likely, the man was probably a pedophile. The other House lords? Another snort, oh Steiner was alright.

But in the end John was a Davion after all.

Who else could you choose?

Richard had been happy that day after the documents had been signed, not the malicious glee he'd had on his Birthday Proclamation, nor the childlike giddiness, Stefan Amaris often inspired. This was the quiet happiness of a father who has provided a future for his daughter.

It had been the last time John had seen the young Cameron.

Now, what will the future bring, for the Star League and my beloved Suns?

Richard trusted me, but not enough, I couldn't stop what came after. Last time I didn't act.

Turning from the warmth of his bed and the comfort of his wife, the First Prince of the Federated Suns made a decision.

I stood by once before, not this time.

Not again.

Opening his comlink John Davion spoke to his bleary eyed steward.

"Have my personal squadron readied, I want to leave for Terra within the week."

Not Again.

**Fort Hamilton,
North American Administrative District
Terra
Terran Hegemony
21 December 2779**

"So Colonel, four of your people are missing right around the time leads surface as to the whereabouts of Mr. Donner and Mr. Bruenig, are we supposed to believe this is a coincidence?"

"I might remind you, misleading us in this matter might be construed as obstruction of justice and a violation of your oath as a Star League officer."

Aleksandr Kerensky winced inwardly, thinking; *Not good, whoever gave you a passing grade in interrogation should be shot.* Before he could bring an end to this line of questioning, Colonel Samuel Winter rose angrily. The two CIB investigators shrank back from the fury in the Tiger Officers face.

Samuel Winter leaned over the table separating him from the agents. At six two, body hardened by ten years of almost constant warfare, even at fifty five years of age, Sam looked fully capable of tearing the two younger men in two. Under his class A uniform, his muscles rippled with tension.

"Do not, under any circumstances, think that you can lecture me on the meaning of *my* oath, gentlemen."

The bigger agent, Jack O'Bannon rose to face Sam, his face darkening.

"Colonel, we are well within our rights to pursue this line of questioning."

"As my Tigers are well within theirs to take leave when time and duty permit."

"And where did they go, Colonel?"

"You've seen their travel plans in the unit database so you know better than I."

"Those files were corrupted."

"I fail to see how that is my problem, in case you hadn't noticed, I am a 'MechWarrior, not a database administrator."

The younger man clenched his fists and opened his mouth to reply but Aleksandr had had enough.

"Enough gentlemen, this interview is at an end."

"General we have a writ from the Hegemony Judicial to ..."

"Agent O'Bannon, who do you think runs the Hegemony government at the moment?"

The CIB agent's look was blank for a moment.

The shorter agent stood, smoothing back his short black hair. He laid a hand on his partners arm, and jerked his head at the door.

"This is pointless Jack, let's go."

As his partner stormed out, Sergei turned back to the Star League officers.

"You'll accept my apologies for Jack, he was trapped on Carver V during the occupation, collaborators got his family sent to a work camp, to steal their holdings."

"From your tone, I gather this wasn't a happy ending", Sam observed.

"No, no it wasn't, and he's looking for someone to blame."

Aleksandr regarded the young man, *God, when did they all get so young, grimly.*

“While I would never fault any of my soldiers’ discipline, your partner would do well not to be so blunt with his accusations.”

Rubbing the bridge of his nose wearily, the General continued.

“Some of my men and women might not be as polite as Colonel Winter.”

“Point taken, General, again sirs, my apologies.”

After Agent Cherenkov exited, Sam collapsed back in his chair letting out an exasperated breath.

“I’m sorry you had to go through this Samuel, but the Judiciary demanded that all the forms be followed in this case.”

“I know sir, It’s no fault of yours, you understand, after all we went through, to have three of our own almost buying it, then to have the CIB take us to task...”

“Three, ah you mean Lady Sarah?”

“She’s definitely one of ours,” Sam smiled at his ultimate commander, “You know she took one of the Makos down with an offhand shot.”

Kerensky nodded, letting Sam talk.

“And Bruce, Major Gilmour... Malcolm, his father, Ezra Bradley and I were all in the same class at West Point. Malcolm’s wife Janet was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia and had left New Avalon, but he wanted Bruce to finish school, they’d been separated, Janet and him for several years, I don’t think Bruce ever forgave his mother for leaving...”

Samuel paused, eyes light years and eons away.

“Malcolm asked me to look out for his son, he was apprenticing as an astech when we shipped out to take New Vandenburg in ’67, he joined up just after we dropped, qualified as an infantry scout. John Zazula was his platoon leader back then, said he was sloppy on base but a natural in the field.

Don Roberto, our CSM pegged him as a “MechJock though and when West Point in exile opened up”, Sam referred to one of the mobile academies set up by Army Group Davion before the Rim Worlds campaign. Alex and his classmate Rachel Miller were in the same class.

The three of them were so bright and full of fire, I watched them all grow up, Rachel died on Acamar, to lose Bruce now...”

He shook his head.

“Thank God Alex is joining TerraGov.”

Aleksandr smiled sadly knowing exactly what Tiger Colonel was feeling, and said as much. For a time they talked about their sons, hopes for the future and fears as well. Once things settled down, Aleksandr admitted he hoped his sons wouldn’t have to join the military, having survived living in a resistance cell during the occupation. Nicolas though seemed determined to follow in his father’s footsteps, while his youngest Andery was quiet and withdrawn.

They also discussed the impending arrival of the First Prince of the Federated Suns, who the General confided in Sam had some revelation about the Star League’s future to reveal. While General Kerensky knew the man professionally, he had little congress with the Prince personally. He’d hoped to pick Bruce’s brain about John Davion before the assassination attempt.

“I don’t think the Major will have a problem talking to you, sir, when he wakes.”

“Any idea when that’ll be?”

“Doc Wynndham thinks maybe a week, she’s getting a lot of brainwave activity, if he survives he’ll still be able to pilot a BattleMech. But he’s still fighting uphill, the injuries he took before the final battle had little chance to heal, and piloting a ‘Mech in a full scale fight...”

“...Is about the worst thing in the world you can do wounded.”

Sam nodded.

Imperial Palace

Luthien

Draconis Combine

21 December 2779

Jinjiro sat fuming in a corner. Francine suppressed a smile at that. The last set of war games had ended badly for him. As his glare fell on her she bowed to him.

When she looked up, he was gone. Turning away she must have had some trace of her thoughts on her face. Minoru had come up beside her, waiting patiently as her game with Jinjiro played out.

It was intrinsic to his character, he enjoyed watching people. Nothing creepy mind you, he'd talked about it once. He could lose himself in what he thought other peoples' lives were like.

Once when she was young, he'd told her about a trip to Geneva for some League function or another. He'd slipped out evading both his own guards and those of the Camerons. For two blissful hours he'd sat in a café sipping coffee watching, chatting with locals. Not being the Coordinator.

It was a scandal when his guards had finally shown up, but his smile at the memory a rare one of true pleasure was one of her fondest memories. Not that he would ever want to change any of it, he was the Dragon.

"My son seems disturbed, Francine-kun."

"Indeed it is so *Tono*."

"I gather the last round of simulations went poorly for him."

Schooling her expression to one of indifference, she felt the strength of Minoru's *Ki* probing her defenses. Not a serious assault, just a test of her resolve.

"His losses exceeded seventy percent."

"Jinjiro seems to think your force mix was...*unrealistic*."

Francine shook her head, deliberately dropping her mental defenses. She met her cousin directly in eyes. As he took her measure she answered his unasked question.

"The force mixes were accurate, I shattered his Sword of Light paradigm with the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment."

"They didn't fight like the Terrans I knew."

"Those Terrans were secure in their power, complacent."

"And now?"

"Now they are tempered steel." She paused for a moment. "Remember they were good, before the Amaris crisis."

She looked back at her liege.

"And now Isokoru is with them, and forty six others."

As he digested the significance of the number she went on.

"The whole lot of them have seen more heavy combat in the past decade than our forces have seen in fifty years."

She shrugged then.

"The point is moot, *Tono*, it is only a matter of time till the League..."

"The League will not be restored."

She looked up at him sharply.

"You have to know the players to fully understand the game."

He paused, disgust playing over his face.

"Richard, that stupid fop, had wanted John Davion to succeed him as *First Lord*."

"He told you so?" Disbelief ran over her face, as Minoru nodded.

"*Davion*," Minoru spat the name like a curse.

"How long Francine, how long before the SLDF landed on Luthien, to destroy all we have built?"

The thought chilled her to the core.

"How long before their mindless freedoms, their so called *Human* rights robbed us of all dignity, all strength."

"As long as the Camerons held power we could be certain of a rough parity with our enemies, that however is no longer the case."

"Terra is weakened, none of the other Lords will stand for a Davion as First Lord."

"But, there is a Cameron heir?"

Minoru nodded.

"If she takes power, then concessions will have to be made to secure her power. There is much dissent in the Hegemony, between those whose loyalties lie with the Terran state and those who are loyal to the League above all. We must be in a position of strength or war will follow."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Again, war, can you imagine Kenyon Marik and Barbara Liao *ever* agreeing on anything?"

Frankie snorted, *No, not in this lifetime*.

"Francine I want you to take charge of the 3rd Proserpina Hussars and their attendant regiments."

What? She thought in shock.

“Train them in what you learned on Terra, we will use them to form a core of units trained with the knowledge earned by the Terrans.”

He gazed at her with the Dragon’s eyes.

“Thus the Dragon learns the lessons of the *teki*.”

After she left Jinjiro returned.

“The *teki* have infected her father.”

“She values her friends, Jinjiro, a luxury the Coordinator cannot afford.”

“You gave her nine regiments of force.... A woman”

The Coordinator of the Draconis Combine turned to his son and heir. The feel of his son’s *Ki* was wrong somehow. It had been that way for a long time. Minoru blamed himself, too much time away, and then the matter of his mother’s death.

But his son was a fine strategist, and an excellent field commander. As to the rest, well there was enough time to fix what needed fixing. If not there was always *Zabu*.

The Dragon must be strong.

As Jinjiro began to fidget at his father’s scrutiny, Minoru answered him.

“Yes, my son, I believe I did.”

Hong Kong

South China Administrative District

Terra

Terran Hegemony

21 December 2779

‘Rat shivered in the dark of the rented warehouse. Casting his eyes about the rows of shipping containers helped him avoid what was going on in the centermost clearing. Strapped to a chair in the middle of a pool of light from a portable lantern was a young Chinese man.

The man’s head hung down and he appeared to be asleep. He did however answer questions asked by Didi Moran. They had taken the man, a boy really in his own apartment just a few miles outside of the city.

Didi had driven her cohorts and their prisoner to a warehouse she’d rented using an alternate identity. When pressed, she’d reluctantly revealed the ID and credit cards were part of something she called her “Go-Bag.”

Tommy Lindon brushed his unruly mop of sandy hair back from his forehead. Coming up by ‘Rat he glanced at the ‘MechWarrior.

“Relax ‘Rat, we’ll have him back in his bed in a couple of hours, with the cocktail we gave him, he won’t remember a thing.”

“Sorry Tommy, this ... This just seems wrong.”

“It is wrong.”

‘Rat turned to face the slicer in surprise.

“We just kidnapped a Hegemony citizen, were using the same techniques we’d use on any enemy agent during the war.”

“You’re not making me feel any better.”

“Look at this way, this kid’s gonna be fine, a little tired, but he’ll go on with his life, as part of our training we all go through one of these to show how effective chemical interrogation is.”

“What do they ask you?”

Tommy chuckled, “Something embarrassing, but what happens in the SAS, stays in the SAS.”

“Seriously, ‘Rat if by doing this we can bag Donner, it’ll mean the next son of a bitch who wants to take shots at our people will have this to think about.”

Tommy smiled grimly.

“And that means I’ll sleep like a baby.’

Meanwhile in Unity City

In the bright December sunshine, a break from the seemingly endless cloudy gray hitting the northwest, Unity City looked like a fairy castle to Amanda Cameron. Yet it was full of ghosts. Every where she turned the memories of her family of her friends haunted her here.

“What’s wrong?”

Smiling at the strong, pleasant voice with its hint of Scots brogue, Amanda turned to face her visitor.

“It’s nothing Ian, just...”

Ian Sinclair smiled and ducked his head to look in her downcast eyes. Reaching out gently he tilted her head up to meet his honest, clear gaze. Ian was, without a doubt both her strongest supporter and her best friend. *We all need someone with whom we have no illusions*, she thought.

“It’s nae nothing, Amanda, not with that look on your face.”

“Memories”, she shrugged, “Ghosts of the past.”

She grinned sheepishly.

“And not just bad ones either, Mom and Dad, my teachers, Cas and Pol Carter, you’ve heard me talk about them before.”

“Your childhood friends, Senator Jon Carter’s children.”

She nodded.

“That’s the problem, Ian, all the good memories lead to bad ones.”

Ian put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder, thinking of his own losses, tempered by the joy of finding his family alive on New Home.

“The fact that those memories start off good, trust me Amanda, they’ll outweigh the bad ones in time.”

Wrapping her arms around herself she turned to look out again over the city. It was too soon for too many of those who’d been able to get out of Amaris’ fell shadow to return, indeed many wouldn’t. But others would come, the city was too beautiful even now to fall into shadow permanently. Even so, a hard decision became clear in that moment.

“Maybe, Ian, but not here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Barring a cosmic catastrophe, I *will* be Director-General, Geneva’s infrastructure will be a mess for years to come.”

“And Unity City?”

“It’s time to let go, Unity’s the Star League, if it is to be reborn, then Unity will shine as its jewel.”

She turned back to Ian, resolve showing in her voice and her eyes.

“Terra needs a new capitol for a new era.”

Ian was quiet for several moments, Amanda knew he was milling things over.

“My father one took me to a city where, he said, James McKenna and several of his officers sat in an ancient tavern where centuries ago men plotted the beginnings of a new nation. It was there, Dad said, the Hegemony was born.”

“You can’t mean....?”

Amanda winked at Ian and sang softly;

“If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.....”

Ian thought for a bit longer, *The old UN complex had been considered for the original Hegemony capitol, the whole complex was even redone for the BSLA but whole sections were barely used, and then there is Governor’s Island....*

“You can see it can’t you?” Amanda grinned knowingly.

“‘Tis no Edinburgh but I guess it’ll do.”

They adjourned to her kitchen, to have tea and talk about the upcoming meeting of the Hegemony Congress, the first such since the Liberation. Even that was taking too long. The surviving members were scattered, several had hidden so deeply that news of the Amaris surrender had only just reached them.

And of course getting politicians to do anything in a time of crisis is kind of like herding cats, Ian thought irritably.

Amanda found herself thinking other thoughts. When she’d stayed with Sarah, they’d been talking about plans for the future, and the subject of Ian came up. She wasn’t sure how it had, but Sarah had said something that General Kerensky’s wife had mentioned off handedly a little over a year ago.

“*He’s a good man, he’ll make a good husband for some lucky woman.*”

Katyusha Kerensky had been far more circumspect, Sarah Davion while more teasing than serious had given her that look she’d seen on others when they looked Ian and her together.

“*Like you’ve never considered it*”, Sarah teased her.

“*Well, he’s been my best friend for years*, she’d sighed then, “*I don’t even think he thinks of me that way...*”

She looked up and caught Ian looking at her. He actually blushed, so she smiled at him and turned the conversation to something neutral. As he talked about his failure to get the famed 3rd RCT's commander Ezra Bradley to stay within Hegemony bounds she had a thought;

I guess he does think of me that way, maybe I was just afraid to ruin a perfectly good thing.

Sarah was picking at her food, the tension of the past two weeks showed in the pale complexion of her skin. Her wounds were healing nicely, Samantha Wynndham had said their wouldn't even be an scars. Gladys Maribeth Davion knew there would be, they just wouldn't be visible ones.

You poor girl, you just weren't made to be a killer, she thought.

You rationalize it but it still bothers you. The face to face nature of her niece's bleeding didn't help either. *Plus your gallant young man isn't here to help you through it.*

Gladys' remembered the first time she'd killed a man, so many years ago. It had been as a twenty two year old Lieutenant in the AFFS. Her *Warhammer* had taken severe damage at Royal during the war of Davion Succession. As part of the rear guard covering the Davion retreat after Prince Joseph was killed in battle, her battalion of the 3rd Davion Guards had shattered. The Kurita *BattleMaster* had appeared out of nowhere, savaging her 'Mech with laser and missile fire. Her -6D model *'Hammer* was riding high on the heat curve and she was about to bolt when she caught sight of a column of Medevac vehicles on her rear screens.

Instead of running, Sarah's aunt had alpha struck the Combine 'Mech. The raw power of the *Warhammer's* laser battery and particle cannons had found a flaw in the enemy 'Mech's massive chest plating. The *BattleMaster's* short range missile loads had detonated.

Gladys' could still see in her mind the Combine warrior pounding at his cockpit, his ejection systems must have malfunctioned. Even at a hundred meters her HUD had magnified the *BattleMaster's* fate. The Kurita samurai's must have done the same and their eyes met in the instance before the man's cockpit exploded.

She'd had nightmares for years after. Gladys' had scored victories in BattleMech combat before, but this had been the first time she'd actually killed another human being. Sarah had avoided talking about it, confining the conversation to talk about Joshua's young son, who had been named Paul in honor of her father.

With the same deliberation as she had planned the invasion of Redfield in 2762 Gladys decided it was time to act.

"That was a fine shot you took, dear, Dido Moran must be proud." Gladys remarked in an offhand voice, not looking at her niece.

The clatter of silverware against the floor brought her head up. Sarah sat stiffly, eyes wide in shock.

"WHAT!!!"

Oh, so there is some life in you isn't there.

"From inside your purse no less."

Tears began to form in Sarah's disbelieving eyes. Gladys reached over and patted her hand. She smiled gently at her niece.

"You should be proud of that shot, you probably saved your young man's life."

Before Sarah could speak, Gladys forged ahead, her voice as implacable as the tread of her *Warhammer* yet as soft as a feather.

"That man was a Mako, the Rim Worlds equivalent of our Rabid Foxes, he would have killed you and Bruce and not had a thought after the fact."

"It's not that Aunt Gladys', I don't, I can't.."

Reading the change in Sarah's voice, Gladys knew in a flash what the problem was.

"You seriously can't think you're anything like them, can you?"

Sarah looked up anger and horror playing over her face.

"Aunt Gladys, I'm not sorry I killed that man, I just wish I could have got all of those sons of bitches, for Bruce, for Talia, for everyone they'd killed."

She closed her eyes and turned away, her thick mane of red hair covering her face.

"And for what they put me through, I hated them, I wanted them to *suffer*."

As Sarah broke down sobbing, Gladys came around the table to kneel beside the daughter she never had and wrap her arms around her. Brushing Sarah's hair away from her face, she said only;

"That doesn't make you like them, dear, it just makes you human."

Chapter 2 Waking Tigers

Drifting somewhere else..

If I let my mind wander, I can leave the confines of the hospital room. Not to travel in space but my memories and thoughts. In the deep of the night as electrodes exercise my muscles, I found myself in one of my favorite places. There are taller buildings in New York, but the Empire State Building is iconic. Concrete, steel and marble built at a time when architects cared about showing the city's grandeur.

Wandering around the observation deck that rings the spire of broadcast antenna, and if you believe it an airship dock, although it was never used. The night was cold and crisp and the phalanx of skyscrapers around me reached for the sky like jeweled scepters.

New York is never silent, it is after all the city that never sleeps and the horrors of the occupation couldn't change this. Times Square in the north with its theaters and, restaurants all glitz and glamour, surrounded by the ring of more, shall we say, adult establishments is a blaze of color and sound, Madison Square Garden and Penn Station to the west always a constant hive of activity.

Down by the east river the massive structure of the Bureau of Star League Affairs cup the original United Nations Building like massive fingers rising from the river. To the south the Flatiron, Chelsea and the Village with bustled with nightlife.

"So this is your city?"

Startled I turned and found Rachel Miller standing there. Doe eyed with fine blonde hair falling to her shoulders with an impish grin she that hit me with full force. She was dressed for the weather, jeans, boots and a stylish fur rimmed leather parka. There was an ethereal quality about her and when she stepped over to the railing, I realized I could see right through her.

"Yes honey, I'm dead, it makes you kinda transparent."

"Don't worry about it, I always could see right through you." Sorry, couldn't resist.

"Anybody tell you to respect the dead."

"I think it's don't speak ill of the dead and I don't think it counts when they're right in front of you."

"Semantics, but that's not why I'm here."

"I assumed you were my mind's way of dealing with me having the shit shot out of me."

She shrugged then.

"No, you've got to deal with that yourself; I'm supposed to get you to embrace your destiny."

I snorted at that.

"Destiny, now I know this is my imagination, that and too many fantasy novels."

Rachel laughed and shook her head.

"Bozo, don't go getting any delusions of grandeur, it's the same destiny every one of us have, you have a life waiting for you, friends, family, that Davion I knew you'd end up with."

She crossed her arms and shook her head.

"And you just languish here."

Puzzled I shook my head.

"I'm not tracking you, Rae, it's not like I can just get up."

Coming from everywhere at once, a brilliant blue light filled my eyes, Rachel, the city everything fading and I began to fall. Memories of the past few days began to fade and I was desperate to hold on to them. I realized it was a losing battle. From the distance, I heard Rachel's voice.

"Why not?"

Fort Hamilton

North American Administrative District

Terra

Terran Hegemony

22 December 2779

August Martine heard the change in the low hums and beeps from the medical systems in Major Gilmour's room. Nodding at Mike Kelso who sat on the other side of the door. As she rose to enter the room, Mike spoke up.

"Almost forgot, August, here."

He handed her a small black jewelry box. Thanking him she went inside recognizing the pitch and tone of the monitors, August wasn't surprised to find the Major already awake. Waving as he looked up at her. The combination of the best traditional and holistic medical training in human space coupled with the

highest technology meant SLDF hospitals had a phenomenal ability to heal not just the wounds, injuries and illnesses it's soldiers suffered but to promote a whole body state of health. This meant once he got in their care, Major Gilmour's recovery would be quick.

"How're you doing Major?"

"Okay", his voice was faint but gathering in strength, "what's the word August."

As she filled Major Gilmour in her practiced eye noted he was fully aware, even reaching without a glance for the water pitcher on the night stand to pour himself a glass. Knowing what she would want in his position she let him know Sarah was alive and already discharged, her aunt taking her back to Bruce's house outside Fort Hamilton.

The Major's relief was overwhelming and she gave him a minute to catch up. His next words took her by surprise.

"So Donner's in Asia?"

"How did you..."

He looked just as puzzled as August was, but he shrugged saying he must have heard it while he was out. As they talked she thought; *The whereabouts of the guy who ordered the shooting of me and my honey, not to mention one of your mates from the regiment, well that'd be on the top of my priority list, even in a coma.*

"Before I forget this is yours." August handed him the box.

"What is this?"

She smiled and rose saying;

"Something special, I'll get the doctor."

As August left I opened the box. A small card lay on top and I opened it. In an elegant handwritten script it read;

Major Bruce Gilmour;

During of your support of the members of Special Armed Service Teams 177,204 and 722 both as BattleMech support, and as a field commander during the actions on Epsilon Eridani, Bryant, New Home, and Terra proved your skill and devotion to Hegemony and League.

The rescue of Major Justine Sinclair showed your devotion to your fellow soldiers.

And finally the restraint shown during the securing of the Court of the Star League showed you possess compassion despite the horrors of the past few years.

By the nomination of Oathmaster Dido Moran and the vote of the SAS council we here by induct you into the Order of the Blackheart. Your duties, to render aid to your fellow Blackhearts, and to comport yourself with the Skill, Devotion and Compassion you have so ably shown.

Heard and witnessed this the 20th day of December 2779 by;

Major General Henry Nelson Armstrong (ret.) Grandmaster, Order of the Blackheart

Sergeant Major Dido Birgitte Moran Oathmaster, Order of the Blackheart

My eyes misted as I read, I had medals including the Medal of Valor that I'd received just after the battle for the Court of the Star League that had made my promotion to Major official. This was different. The small gray Cameron Star with its ebon heart in the center was a vote by your fellow soldiers. It was not an official award, kind of an open secret, but those who wore the heart and star on their collar included both Aaron DeChevalier and the late Don Roberto.

Another member interrupted my reverie. Dr. Samantha Wynndham paused at the doorway a small smile on her face. I set the box aside. Neither of us would mention the small pin, it would appear in my service history I knew, but it was never discussed.

"How are you feeling Major?"

"Pretty good, Doc, considering I thought I was dead."

Checking over the diagnostic readouts above my bed, Samantha gave me a pat on the shoulder.

"Well y'know I couldn't let that girl of yours hang around here depressing my patients."

"How's she doing?"

"Better than you, she's back at your house with her aunt."

"And Kelly?"

"Two doors down, healing nicely, she could use a visit though, tomorrow."

I nodded as Samantha went on;

"I'll be keeping you for two or three more days, just to be sure you're strong enough to go home. You had a nasty infection from the graft we did on your lungs so you'll be on antibiotics for two more weeks. Follow the usual regimen; no alcohol, no strenuous activities and if you even so much as think of returning to duty before February, I'll put you back in the coma.

I smiled at the Doc, and promised to be a good little boy. She turned serious at my little joke and gave me such a look.

"I'm not kidding; I don't need another Justine Sinclair."

I sat up so sharply Samantha took a worried step forward.

"What happened to Justine?"

The Doctor crossed her arms. Her cornrow braids waving as she shook her head.

"The hell do you think happened? A month in the tender mercies of the RimJobs, then she goes charging off to battle. Now I understand those linear frames you Tinmen use to control your machines work better than the older control systems, but you need to be in top shape, Justine wasn't."

A look of disgust passed over her face.

"After all was said and done did Miss Voice of Reason come to see me?"

I started to open my mouth, but Samantha plowed right over anything I might have said.

"No, she did not; instead she goes on a drunken bender and plays bouncy, bouncy with..."

She caught herself and eyed me for a second, but I gave her a knowing grimace and motioned to her to get past it and go on.

"So Superwoman here goes back to duty like nothing happened and in the middle of a briefing, this morning she collapses."

Samantha looked over at the nightstand and the little box, and then back to me.

"Yeah, I'll talk to her too, if she gives you any trouble just guilt trip her with how upset Little Sin'll be if anything happens to her aunt."

"Hell, B it was the first thing I did," she laughed, "Why do you think I haven't had to sedate her?"

The scene her words conjured up in my head, had me joining her, the laughter felt good, despite the soreness in my ribs and the ache in my chest. Sarah came in then, her hair tousled from sleep and dark rings around her eyes. She was the most beautiful woman in the world.

As we got reacquainted, I barely noticed Samantha leaving and August closing the door behind her.

Anchorage, North American Administrative District

Terra

Terran Hegemony

Christmas Day, 2779

The smell of bacon frying in the kitchen made Hank's stomach grumble. Kailey's brothers Martin and Kevin were fussing over the coffee, as he set the table. He was constantly amazed at how quickly he'd assimilated into the Derry family. Part of it was the sheer amount of work. The Derry's owned a small repair yard and two mid size fishing boats.

Heir to the Amaris Empire, MechWarrior, General, Boat Mechanic, some resume I've got.

Solomon Derry came in with a pot of potatoes which he set up in the center of the table. Looking up at Hank the head of the Derry clan asked about Hank's progress on the *Derry Star's* fuel cells. Falling into shop talk as easily with Sol as he had with his tech going over the *General Lee* the BattleMech he had once piloted.

"No way are you two are talkin' shop on Christmas!"

Whirling past Hank with two heaping plates of bacon and eggs she layed them down on the table and pecked both men on the cheek.

"You may have noticed, Hank that Kailey actually runs this house." Solomon said with a grin.

"As it should be." Kailey said with a firm nod.

Kevin rolled his eyes.

Solomon sat down to say grace.

"Thank you Lord for this fine meal on this fine Christmas, and we pray for your wisdom in restoring our Hegemony and our Star League."

No nonsense and to the point Solomon's prayer summed up the man himself. Solomon looked up and at this family and at Hank and closed the prayer;

"Amen."

“Amen.” Hank answered.

As Kailey rolled her eyes at her father’s brevity she looked over at Hank, shrugged and said simply.

“Dig in, and let’s eat.”

I could get used to this, Hank thought.

In Moscow...

“Welcome my dear, welcome home.” Katyusha Kerensky was positively gushing as she hugged Amanda Cameron.

She has good reason, Amanda Cameron thought, *the first free Christmas, even Aleksandr looks truly happy.*

The only thing that set the warmly decorated house apart from any other in the neighborhood was the presence of a Sinclair Fusiliers security team. *Some things never change.* Nicolas gave her a quick hug, he’d come through the ordeal they’d shared better than his brother Andery, who waved shyly from the doorway.

The house she’d spent the occupation in seemed an odd place to spend the holidays in but Katyusha was right. It was as much a home as any she’d known, and the people in it were what drew her here. Speaking of which....

Ian came in carrying a batch of presents. He smiled warmly at her and put the wrapped boxes by the tree. Accepting a glass of tea from Nicolas he came over to stand next to Amanda. As the group made small talk, no politics, no war, just family, Amanda thought;

Home is where the heart is after all.

Hong Kong....

Thanks so much George, ‘Rat thought, *I could be at a perfectly good party, with a particularly great lady.* He looked around the hotel room. *But nooo, I’ve got to be half a world away.* He looked at the green bar of the lieutenant’s insignia in his hands. *Oh well, not the present I wanted to be unwrapping but...* The promotion had arrived with Dido Moran; he glanced over at the SAS trooper. *Shit Di, you should have known no good deed goes unpunished.* In the same package had come Didi’s own promotion.

Upon opening the package and reading the letter, which she’d been under orders to open only once she’d arrived in Hong Kong, Dido had sat down like she’d been sucker punched. “Rat didn’t get her distress, but he guessed everybody had their quirks. Chris had retired to his room earlier, ‘Rat was worried about the senior officer, he seemed to be riding an almost manic high.

‘Rat’s disposable pocketcomp (Tommy had supplied each member of the team with one.) buzzed quietly. When he answered, Elizabeth Hazen grinned that lopsided grin back at him.

“*Merry Christmas, Scott*”, she said.

Ok maybe it’s not perfect, but I can deal, he thought.

“Merry Christmas, Liz.”

New York....

“Oh for Zeus’ sake Sarah, get that off the screen.” I growled half seriously. That damn picture from the Star League Court had made the cover of Time magazine. The caption read “What happens now?”

“It’s a good picture, Bruce.”

“Yeah and half the Hegemony wants my head for sitting on the throne.”

Sarah shook her head, smiling.

“No they don’t, Konrad Toyama, is not half the Hegemony, he’s just creepy.”

She flicked the ‘net connection off leaving the muted news feed on the screen. As she passed the living room table Sarah grinned down at the boarding passes to Tahiti that were his gift to her. Sinthya was on the couch with Justine. Justine looked up from the game they were playing on the media player Bruce had gotten her, along with an oversized Teddy Bear. The dark haired woman who had become one part big sister, one part best friend raised an eyebrow.

Yeah, I thought, it’s time.

“Honey”, I said, “C’mere.”

Hearing the slightly uneasy note in my voice, Sarah turned and touched my arm looking at me with concern.

“What’s wrong, Honey.....oh.”
I went down on one knee and held out a small box, yeah that kind.
“Sarah Elizabeth Davion, I really should have asked this sooner but....” My voice caught.
“.....will you marry me?”
Her mouth moved but no sound came out.
“Bruce, I think you broke her,” Justine quipped.
I couldn’t resist; “Crap, I don’t think there’s any more where this one came from.”
Sarah grabbed my ears and pulled me into a kiss.
“First, shut up Bruce Gilmour, and second.”
Her eyes welled up.
“Of course I’ll marry you, you silly, silly man, and the next time you keep me waiting this long not even *Hussy* will keep you safe.”
I slipped the ring on her finger. The second kiss was even better than the first and Sinthya giggled.
“Oh God you two, get a room.” Justine groused.
“Hey”, I said, “My house.”
“And?”
As I held Sarah my gaze fell on the screen it was displaying of all things Kenyon Marik. The Captain General of the Free Worlds League looked like he had just eaten a cowpie, in other words normal for him. Since there was no way I wanted to be looking that dickhead today, or ever for that matter, I shut the holoscreen down. As Marik’s image froze and faded out through the colors of the rainbow, ending on green, Sinthya chimed out;
“Aunt ‘Tine that man looks like the Grinch”, she giggled.
Justine busted out laughing. I looked at Sarah and we both lost it.
The bitch of it was, she was right.

West Point Military Academy
North America Administrative District, Terra
Terran Hegemony
10 January, 2780

Ian Sinclair watched the battle play out on the holographic map table. The cadet regiment had a combat command of simulated opponents by the throat. A single battalion of assault machines pinned the opposing unit down. Along the flanks fast mediums and heavy hover tanks curled around to strike at the enemy rear.

Across the room the opposition was in disarray. The battle playing out was only the last evolution in the exercise. Over the past three days Ian had watched Major Bruce Gilmour’s handpicked cadets disassemble Colonel Pete Callahan’s carefully planned defense.

The entire campaign had been one of deception as the cadets drew their faculty opponents out of position. Callahan’s supply depots had been hit on the second day, followed up by an infiltration strike that had crippled his command and control.

The fevered pitch of the cadet’s assault had seen some of the most insane tactics Ian had ever seen. At one point a battalion of BattleMechs had vented coolant in the water supply Callahan’s troops were using as a primary water supply. In effect the cadet’s had crapped in his water.

Although not fatal, forty ‘Mech’s worth of coolant in a small lake could lead to stomach and intestinal problems. *That was nasty, Major Gilmour; if Commandant Malin hadn’t used the same tactic against the Taurians you might have lost some points.* Colonel Callahan had protested vehemently when the judges had awarded points for the techniques.

Pete’s a good officer and teacher, but he was staff through the Liberation. Plus he’s old school, all theory. Peter Callahan had been badly wounded during the early strikes into the Hegemony. He would never pilot a BattleMech again but his keen mind and superb teaching skills had gotten him a position training new recruits. A job he had honed to a fine art.

A light flashed on the top of Ian’s holographic display. Colonel Callahan was throwing in the towel. A weary Major Gilmour stood up binding his hair back into a pony tail with a rubber band. Straightening his dress uniform’s jacket, black with blood red claw marks on the shoulder, the West Point school rag wrapped around his waist, a cross draw holster containing an ivory handled Colt hung next to a service cavalry saber, he crossed the room to shake hands with Colonel Callahan.

As Ian walked over, Callahan laughed at something Major Gilmour said. The cadet group milled around the two officers, as they went over a replay of the final battle.

"...almost didn't work, if your cavalry squadrons had gotten in place, I think things would have turned out differently."

"Maybe", the older man said, "but your raids against our supply depots meant half my armor was out of commission."

"That was Cadet Soldano's baby."

The cadet in question looked a bit uncomfortable in the sudden spotlight, and even more so when Ian showed up. Returning the group's salutes he motioned them to continue. The dark haired, athletic cadet explained her plan and its execution.

"Careful Eleanor, I think the Major has his sights set on you."

"She'd be a fine addition to the regiment." Major Gilmour admitted.

Pete Callahan laughed at that.

"So major, you came here with the sole purpose of corrupting our young cadets for the gain of your regiment."

"I wouldn't put it that way, sir but, yeah I'm headhunting."

Ian winked at Cadet Soldano, who was torn between pride and the sense that her career was being discussed here rather cavalierly. Samuel Winter had requested and received permission of the training command to recruit from West Point directly. They'd been the first to do so with the 35th Royal CAAN and 349th Royal BattleMech (The King Henry Division) doing the same for Sandhurst, while the 146th Royals (The George S. Patton Division) competed with the Tigers at the Point.

Other academies that had survived the coup and began to come online were likewise beset by units that had relationships with them in the past. That Sam Winter had sent Bruce and not his son who had taken over the executive officer's position with the solely organizational rank of Lieutenant Colonel, said something about the recruits he was looking for.

All were unconventional, Cadet Soldano was near the top of the class with a strong analytical mind, while Cadet Arthur Kowalski was somewhere close to being kicked out on the sheer number of demerits he had. The others ranged in between, but all had high marks for teamwork and a willingness to look at even the absurd.

Everything about Major Gilmour's presentation at the Point seemed designed to speak to that. From the unique dress uniform to the eye patch and pistol at his hip had attracted attention. The Gunslinger and Blackstar pins on his collar had along with the series of lectures he'd given had sealed the deal. *A slick bit of advertising, Sam.* Ian thought.

After the review of the exercise came to a close and Colonel Callahan and his Cadets left for the day, Ian sat in one of the chairs ringing the holographic table and motioned for Bruce to stay behind.

"I heard you turned down a position on General DeChevalier's staff, why?" Ian had been surprised, both by the Major's refusal and Aaron's easy acceptance.

"With all that's going on General, I didn't think I could give the job my best effort."

"You've done well here at the Point; a staff position with DeChevalier shouldn't be much different."

Bruce nodded, "I get where your coming from, sir, but by July I may not be in the military any longer."

"Ahh your impending nuptials."

"Yes sir, Sarah will eventually have to take her Ducal seat at Chesterton, the current administrator is too tied to the Green family and in a couple of years Lady Green would be within her rights to press her claim."

"So it's off to the Federated Suns then?"

Looking a little like a lost child playing at being a soldier, Bruce looked up at Ian.

"Yeah, umm yes sir, it's not a bad thing, but being a soldier is all I know, so running off to play country baron, well, honestly it's scarier than assaulting the Unity Line alone in a *Stinger*.

"If it's any consolation, Chesterton is a hot spot between Liao and Davion, I doubt it'll be a cake walk."

Bruce chuckled wryly.

"Thanks sir, that really puts my mind at ease."

Having put Major Gilmour at ease, Ian pushed on with the question Jerome Blake had been pressuring DeChevalier on for the past couple of weeks.

“What I really came to ask you about, is how much do you know about the hunt for that Donner *sassanach*.”

The other man shrugged, anger warring with duty on his face.

“I’m not in the loop sir; I wouldn’t be here if I was.”

Well, you want honesty, Ian thought.

“You’d be hunting him with, Major Traumintieri and crew?”

Like a trap door a wall dropped in Bruce’s eyes.

“Sir, Major Traumintieri and the rest are on extended Leave....”

Waving his hands in mock surrender, Ian shook his head.

“I know, I know, just let them know they need to nail this bastard quick.”

Barking a laugh at the younger man’s shock he went on.

“If this drags out much longer the public eye will start asking questions and Jerome Blake is beginning to be a pain.”

“Sir?”

“Nothing, Donner has the codes for some DEPCOM funds and technical files that has them going nuts over there, Bruenig set off a virus that pretty much crippled anything those two idiots had a hand in. Blake isn’t happy with the BSLA’s taking over of the SEP either.”

Putting a hand on Bruce’s shoulder, Ian looked him directly in the eye and went on.

“Don’t worry Major, I told his lackey Toyama, that if you had known Donner’s whereabouts then the man would be dead already.”

“The world’s a bit of a mess, isn’t it General.”

“Aye”, Ian snorted that it is.

They sat contemplating that for a minute then Ian reminded Bruce that General Kerensky would be reviewing West Point at the end of the month and wanted to pick his brain about his prospective in-laws. John Davion would be arriving at the beginning of February and the other lords would be following as the Star League council convened in September or October.

“Good, things will finally start to get back to normal, sir”

“You think so?”

“Of course, despite everything that’s happened, once the high and mighty get together and rubber stamp their documents, and make their pretty speeches, Lady Amanda can get about being First Lord and life will go on.”

“You make it sound like the Council Lords don’t matter” Ian commented somewhat bemused.

“They don’t, sir, not now, I mean they’re not going to have a choice, the Last Cameron will be confirmed as First Lord and barring anything really stupid the League will prevail.”

“And if they choose to do something stupid?”

In a cold calm voice Bruce answered.

“Then we will just have to teach them of the error of their ways, sir do you honestly think the Council will vote any way but how the Defense Force will tell them to, now after all that has happened.”

Shaking his head, Bruce brought up a local news feed on the holo projector, showing reconstruction efforts on Carver V, scenes of people striving to recover their lives after years of chaos. The nobility on the faces here, and those Ian had seen during the campaign always reminded him what he was fighting for.

“We owe it to them, General, to let them have a shot at a good life, and if the House Lords get in the way...” He paused then looking over at Ian.

“General, the guns of the Tigers brought down tyranny once, I assure you sir, we wouldn’t have any compunction about doing it again.”

The conviction in Bruce’s voice sent a chill down Ian’s spine and as their duties parted them, he realized that he’d be hearing those words in his mind for a very long time to come.

I just hope the House Lords see it Major Gilmour’s way, but...

The image of Kenyon Marik rose in his mind.

Sam, you may be right about showmanship.

Linking to his aide, he set in motion an idea he’d been debating for the past couple of days.

“Julia, on that list of to-do’s for discussion with the General, add this...”

When Julia Collins, nodded she was ready.

“Have Major Gilmour and the 13th Assault Company of the 90th Heavy Assault handle the meet and greet for both Kenyon Marik’s arrival on September 18th and Minoru Kurita’s on the 21st”

League Central Coordination and Command
Malkent, Marik
Free Worlds League
16 January, 2780

One thing about life with the Eagle, reflected Force Commander Anton Bucilu, you *certainly got your exercise*. Walking at his usual pace, which the stocky Bucilu had to half jog to keep up, Kenyon Marik; Captain General of the Free Worlds League, (Oldest of the five major states that had broken away from the smothering embrace of the defunct Terran Alliance.) did everything with a kind of frantic energy. His detractors in Parliament often likened the head of House Marik to a child with attention deficit disorder.

The Captain General's supporters pointed to this almost manic energy as a sign of genius. Anton kept his own opinions to himself. A son of factory workers on Irian, Anton had come a long way in his twenty years of service first in the Marik Militia, then the Marik Guard. He hadn't gotten there by shooting off his mouth.

The other thing you learn is how to multi task, Anton reflected as he quoted the SAFE provided demographic of Amanda Cameron's ascension to the Director Generalship of the Terran Hegemony. Support for the young leader was overwhelmingly broad based. "...It's their cult of personality in the Holy Camerons, even after Richard, the family can do no wrong." Kenyon muttered half to himself, half to Anton.

Forgetting of course that same cult kept the Mariks in power for centuries. Anton thought keeping his face impassive as SAFE director Michael Vizante joined them. The pale, obese, head of the Free Worlds intelligence service was suspicious of everyone, but Anton Bucilu aroused his ire personally. Anyone who rose from a grunt infantry man to officer and aide to the Eagle must be dirty in Vizante's eyes. The man just couldn't conceive of a person rising so far above their station without being born into the web of connections and influence that marked the Nobility.

Anton for his part considered the SAFE director lacking in any socially redeeming qualities. *Well okay, he is well groomed but could the man be any more unLeague?* It was a problem with many of the noble and high corporate citizens of the Free Worlds. Still, even the decadent and broken Hegemony couldn't, to Anton's mind lay claim to a grander legacy of freedom and opportunity than his own League.

At any rate Anton didn't worry much about Michael Vizante, he had enough on the man to have him shot.

"Anton you handled the debrief of General Ioesf Fenrir, what do you make of the man?"

Although surprised at the line of questioning, Anton answered with hardly a pause.

"The man is brilliant, an excellent strategist and field commander, very businesslike."

"So this nuclear bit is nonsense, you think."

"Between the debrief of Fenrir and his Dragoons and information provided by Director Vizante, I would feel secure in confirming the Dragoons did not set off the atomics at Colvannon."

Kenyon glanced at the SAFE director who nodded in agreement.

"Battlerom footage and testimony from the Dragoons indicate the machines that attacked them were of Davion manufacture, second line equipment. Equipment we believe was salvaged by the Capellan Confederation during the hostilities on Demeter in 2760. Equipment listed as "misplaced" by our beloved neighbors. I am sure when the plutonium signature of the fissionables is analyzed it will probably turn out to have been misplaced by the Capellans as well."

Kenyon chuckled then.

"Barbara, Barbara your little games never cease to amuse me."

The Marik looked over his subordinates smugly then.

"This should give Kerensky and the Cameron girl a headache, and could if the right information got into the wrong hands twist Barbie's panties in a bunch..." Kenyon was lost in thought for a moment.

"Make it so, it's not a huge gain, but keeping the Hegemony and the Confederation off balance is worth it." he said coming back to the present. "Michael, you will coordinate this with the Earl of Oceana."

Vizante looked puzzled as he asked, "Oceana has no Earl, my lord, VanBrecht died without issue a month ago."

Kenyon looked at his head of intelligence with a wicked little smile.

"You're standing next to Oceana's Earl Bucilu, Michael."

Both men stood speechless as The Marik placed the signet ring of the Oceana's ruling noble into Anton's hands.

“You’ll have to choose your coat of arms Anton, but we’ll worry about that later...” Marik blinked. “Oh, for god’s sake Anton, you knew I was going to reward you for the work you’ve done for me over the past seven years, plus you don’t have a disloyal bone in your body.”

He chuckled then, spearing both aides with a raptor’s stare.

“After all, Anton, no good deed goes unpunished...Hah!”

Motioning their dismissal, Marik continued down the hall alone chuckling.

“Oh and Anton?”

“Yes my Lord?”

“Barbie Liao favors that ’67 Andurien syrah we just got in, send her a bottle with a note: From Kenyon, for services rendered.

He laughed again.

“Gods above I love being me...”

Hong Kong.....

‘Rat dreamed uneasily.

Two days after the Amaris surrender;

The waste processing facility smelled bad, ‘Rat had expected this as he swung off the armored personnel carrier with the scout team. The Tigers were part of an effort to check on rumors of a huge prison camp on Vancouver Island, but so far they’d come up short. The Court’s primary facility for waste processing was the last major facility shown by aerial survey.

*The smell of garbage was there, but underneath there was an underlying **something** else. Before he could dwell on it more a call from the TACNET brought his attention to a row of standard shipping containers. Troopers from the 3rd MID had opened one. What spilled out reminded ‘Rat of the fall of another tyrant more than 900 years ago.*

Grainy black and white images didn’t compare with the reality. The odor released from the containers made him gag as a mass of humanity stumbled out. Malnourished, unwashed and ill clad for the bad weather the wave of humanity overwhelmed the SLDF troopers. The Major, who ‘Rat hadn’t seen horrified since the hell of New Home actually paused a moment.

With a stammer in his voice he called in the medical team that was on standby for just this reason. Luckily the 3rd had a MASH set up in the Court, not twenty kilometers away. Turning away, ‘Rat watched as the soldiers in the scout team rushed forward with whatever they had at hand. Blankets, food and water and were stunned when ‘Rat shouted for them to stop.

“Blankets yes, but they’re so malnourished, food could kill them!”

Several of the troopers got ugly looks on their faces, but August Martine came to the rescue.

“He’s right, listen up the medics should be here any minute now...”

Her diminutive form, the medics cross on her shoulder and her gentle voice had the desired effect, despite pleas from the prisoners, the rotors of the Medevac VTOLs quickly calmed everyone. As the medics arrived the Major had his crew continue the search. “Rat noticed something. The prisoners eyes kept drifting to the plasma incinerators.

Why?, he thought drifting over to a massive dumping portal. The low rumble of the mechanisms shook the stairwell as he climbed up to the control panel. From the platform ‘Rat could see over a large part of the complex. But it wasn’t the sight of the dozen or so Angel Medevac choppers or the convoy of ambulances coming up the road that caught his eye. It was a small pale object in the dumping bin.

It was a human arm, seared off at the elbow. All at once he realized what his subconscious already knew. The massive disposal units had been used for centuries to dispose of waste, in return the machines produced both energy and a carbon byproduct useful in paving roads.

Stefan Amaris had used them to dispose of another kind of waste.

“Lieutenant?”

Turning around curiously, he thought; I’m not an officer.

“Lieutenant McKenzie?”

Waking with a start he realized where he was.

Dido Moran gave him a rakish grin and handed him a mug of fresh coffee.

“Wakey, Wakey ‘Rat, time to get the bad guys.

Naturally, it’s raining, ‘Rat thought, right out of any good spy novel.

The slick city street outside Ngov industries had little traffic which was good. The day's food vendors had however left an inevitable patina of grease on the street, combining with the rain to make it ice slick in places. As the four Tigers slipped down an alley, Tommy slipped stifling a curse as Christian grabbed his arm.

Midway down the alleyway the group paused. A service entrance with a keypad lock was bypassed in seconds by Tommy Lindon. Before opening the door Tommy placed a call to a modem, his pocketcomp uploading a virus designed to spoof the buildings security systems.

Nodding to his companions he stepped back to allow Didi to enter first. Her silenced MP2 swept the corridor. Quietly the team slipped up the stairs, but after a few minutes it became apparent the ten story building was empty.

The top floor was given over to a set of lavish executive suites. These at least had a lived in look, dishes in the sink, the remains of a cigar in one of the ashtrays. Picking up the cigar butt and sniffing it, Didi shook her head.

"Havana, our fugitives live pretty good on old Fat Boy's cash."

Tommy had his pocketcomp unfolded and hooked up to the desk interface, running a crack program. 'Rat kept an eye on the comm terminal built into the kitchen nook. The screen ran a security cam view split between the front door, the freight access, lobby and the air car pad on the roof. Christian rooted carefully through the drawers on closets.

Didi took pictures with her pocketcomp's camera of the cache of id's Christian found in Bruenig's room. Motion from the front door cam caught 'Rat's eye as Tommy folded up his computer and set the desktop back to idle.

"Guys we got trouble."

A group of around nine people had just piled out of a limo in the front. From the way they carried themselves 'Rat knew they were soldiers. Donner and Bruenig followed the group in to the lobby.

"Shit, okay, put this crap back," Didi growled handing Christian the pile of id's.

A quick look around to be sure nothing was out of place and they piled out of the suites slipping into the stairwell just as Donner and his crew stepped out of the elevator. They were talking as they came up the corridor and Tommy slipped a directional mic against the doorway. In their earbuds the team listened in.

"We can get you across the border at Procyon, you'll be safely on Oriente before the end of February."

"Captain Howell on the *Severus* has worked for us in the past he's real good, We'll get you to Taiwan and you'll ship out from there."

"We'll need protection till then." Donner.

"I'll have a squad with you and another covering you outside."

"My contacts say the Tigers have a team here." Bruenig.

"If they do we'll take them out, If you hear anything more let me know soonest, we ship out in two days."

The Tiger team looked at each other, "SAFE?" Christian mouthed silently.

Using the rudimentary finger speech common among the SLDF, Didi signed "Too many, listen, eyes' on we'll find another opportunity."

Slipping out of the building the way they came and heading out the back after Tommy imaged the cars Donner and his playmates used, the Tigers headed back to their Hotel.

Tahiti

Sun baked Sarah's back as she lay on the beach reading the latest trashy novel by Christina Steiner. The novel was about a fictional 'Mech regiment during the liberation. And yes all the players were there, the veteran commander and his son, the tormented major going through a divorce, and the son of a middle class family who marries into great house royalty. Many of the details were wrong and what Sarah knew of the campaign contradicted Steiner's novel constantly. Plus the fictional heroine was a Steiner. And an absolute milksop.

It was however a delightfully brainless escape. As was this vacation, Bruce's first real leave since the liberation of New York. Two short weeks then back to meet with General Kerensky, a week later Prince John arrives.

We should just elope. She thought.

But Chesterton awaits, and Uncle John would never allow it. She had responsibilities she had been trained all her life to take on. After all she was a Davion and after that damn fool Kent had broken his neck hang gliding on Kestrel, tenth in line for the throne.

But damn it that little house in Brooklyn is beginning to look real good right now.

Sensing a familiar presence behind her she looked up to see her fiancée holding their drinks. A private little smile on his face.

“What’s up honey?”

“Just admiring the view.”

Putting down the book she turned over and stretched enjoying the way his face lit up. Reaching up she took her drink. The bikini she’d bought on a whim when they’d gotten in was well, not something Aunt Gladys would approve of. She smiled her own private smile.

Collapsing down on the towel next to her he flipped the heavy braid she’d done his long chestnut hair in back over his shoulder. Sipping at his drink he sighed.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“Hmm?, oh, just it’s nice, first vacation in years, nothing to do.”

“*Nothing* to do?”

He laughed then.

“You know what I mean, no duties, no life or death decisions...”

He grinned down at her.

“Just the stuff we want to do.”

Looking over at the book she was reading he wrinkled his nose.

“Although how you could read that crap.”

“Justine gave it to me... she thought it was cute.”

From her bag his pocketcomp chimed. Fishing it out he looked puzzled.

“It’s Didi.”

Bruce answered the call. Sarah heard the change in his voice. The predator look came over him the one that always gave Sarah a chill. This time she knew the reason.

“Donner?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“Yeah, he’ll be in Taiwan tomorrow.”

“You’re going?”

“I...”

“So am I.”

“Sarah, let...”

Sarah grabbed him by the back of the hair and kissed him fiercely.

“We do this together.”

**Celestial Palace, Sian
Capellan Confederation
17 January 2780**

...Naturally it is in the best interests of the Confederation that the League government resumes its operation as quickly and painlessly as possible. I and a small staff will take up residence in the Capellan quarter in Unity City no later than 19 September. If you could please advise Director-General Cameron of our arrival in advance of our formal notice, it would be most helpful.

Allow me once again to express our relief and happiness that you survived the recent horrors that vile creature Stefan Amaris so ignobly sewed and our joy at the survival of your family. We look forward to meeting with you on Terra and hope that the fruits of our labors lead to brighter future for us all.

With the highest regard,

Barbara Liao, Duchess of Liao,

Chancellor of the Capellan Confederation

Sitting back in her plush couch Barbara Liao looked over the missive she had just completed before sending it off to the communication center in the Celestial Palace. Curling her feet up on the couch she powered down the thin laptop’s holo display and folded the flexible keyboard. Taking a sip of the green hued Chardonnay she’d poured Barbara allowed herself a moment to relax.

For this wine I could almost believe the Davions had a right to exist.

It was apparent the League needed to move forward or it would die, and while that maniac Kenyon Marik or his most high and mighty Minoru-san might look forward to its demise her Confederation relied on the Star League more than she cared to admit publicly. Flipping on the Tri-vid to a canned but uncensored news feed from Terra she watched idly as the entertainment newscasters touched on the upcoming marriage of Sarah Davion and her pet MechWarrior. It amused her that the Terran media spent so much time on the couple but after what the Hegemony had been through any high points must make for welcome news.

The thought of Capella or Sian being subjected to half of what the reports from Earth or New Home had suffered sent a chill down her spine. Setting such thoughts aside she gathered her silk robe around her and picked up Christina Steiner's *Crimson Lions*. Trashy it was but she caught the parallels, okay, the blatant rip off of the 90th Heavy Assault's battle for New York. Trashy, but even the Capellan Chancellor needed to strip off the reins of the state and be a human being once and a while.

She was deep in the book when a knock came at the door. Checking the security cam on the Tri-vid she smiled and bid her visitor leave to enter.

John Hamilton, colonel of the 1st Kearny Highlanders slipped in. From his deeply tanned skin to his sun bleached hair the big man was Barbara's polar opposite. As she sat up and gathered her robe around demurely around her she caught sight of herself in the mirror.

Thank the gods you just want Barbara the woman and not Barbara the Liao, then again if it weren't for our little game I think you'd be happy forgetting all the titles.

Her image in the mirror smiled warmly back at her. Despite the strain of twenty years as Chancellor she looked barely thirty, let alone her actual forty four. The finest in Star League antiagithics kept it so, her shoulder length black hair dark and thick, and her jade green eyes still had the power to freeze a hardened warrior in fear or arouse their desire. Her first marriage which had produced her two sons had been purely political. Oh he'd been nice enough and Barbara had a certain amount of affection for him, but his death had been only a small pain.

To find John, who was so completely her match two years later was a blessing.

She patted the love seat and he sat, a little surprised as she cuddled next to him.

"Something's troubling you dear heart."

His deep brown eyes held concern for her, nothing more.

"The upcoming summit, John, nothing more, the idea of being stuck for hours in the room with Kenyon..."

"You'll deal with it, Barbara, with the same grace you deal with everything else."

"You believe in me John, that's what makes you so dear to me."

"Why wouldn't I?"

She smiled and the two sat for an eternity in silence.

"You win," Barbara said suddenly.

"What?" Confusion reigned over the Highlanders face.

"Marry me."

Kissing her hard, John accepted.

Now if the conference goes as easy as that, the future will be bright indeed she thought.

Chapter 3 Trouble in paradise

Continuing with our headline coverage of the incident at JFK International Spaceport here is INN's Josh Levin.

"Thank you Mariah, earlier this week the passenger liner Dieron Star landed carrying family members of the Ryukaze Volunteer Regiment. In a major bureaucratic snafu, their entrance visas had not been processed and indeed this reporter had learned been lost in the massive overflow following the liberation. This morning elements of the Black Tigers 2nd Mechanized Infantry took custody of the families and began removing them to Fort Hamilton."

"Looks like the 90th decided not to wait for the bureaucracy."

"No and while New Yorkers see this as an act of mercy, groups such as Earth First and individuals like Konrad Toyama, executive aide to DEPCOM director Jerome Blake cite this action as a clear violation of Hegemony rules and regulations. Konrad Toyama had this to say;

[Cut to Konrad Toyama in a bland office in the Department of Communication Headquarters.]

“The 90th’s actions here show they clearly don’t understand that we are no longer operating under martial law but rule of law. It clearly shows a lack of command leadership on the part of Colonel Winter.”

“Mr. Toyama went on to suggest the leadership of the Black Tigers be held under review pending removal from command.”

“Josh has Director-General Cameron or Jerome Blake weighed in on this matter?”

“No, Mariah with the upcoming Council meeting on everyone’s minds the Director-General’s office said they are looking into the matter. New Yorkers however have been quite vocal on the subject.”

[Cut to a distinguished middle aged man in a conservative business suit. Caption reads Timothy Lyons Senior Partner Lyons and Shinjo.]

“...I’m a lawyer myself, but the Ryukaze helped kick Stefan Amaris out of my city, then their Coordinator threw them away like trash. Maybe you can make a case on the legalities but as a New Yorker I’d have to question both the Tigers’ hearts and their balls if they didn’t do something.”

[Cut to a taxi driver leaning against his vehicle smoking a cigarette.]

“Hell they ain’t Dracs, those ‘Kaze are New Yorkers, and I don’t know how things are done in Unity City or where ever this Toyama’s from, but here in this town, we take care of our own.”

“Major Justine Sinclair had this to say at a press conference at Fort Hamilton;”

[Cut to the auditorium at Fort Hamilton.]

“Personally, I don’t see what Mr. Toyama’s so riled up about, these people are securely held in the middle of a Star League military base. Which, I might remind him, is sovereign territory. I hardly think that two dozen women and children are any threat to Terran security, but if they are you can be sure we’ll take care of it. [Laughter]

“Considering the conditions they were living in were a violation of the same rule of law, remember the Draconis Combine seized the assets of every member of the Ryukaze so these same family members had to beg and borrow enough to gain passage on the Dieron Star. Not to mention securing an exit from Kurita space. You all have the copies of video record of the 2nd Mechanized retrieval of the families. To keep them under those conditions, we believed was a greater crime then a breach of bureaucratic red tape.”

“Especially since those same bureaucrats dropped the ball in the first place.”

“In other news the BSLA has reported a disturbing new trend spreading through the Hegemony; a rise in hate crimes. Dr. Taek Sang looks at....

Justine stepped of the podium after sharing a few pleasantries with reporters she knew. Dealing with the press came naturally to her. Not easy, necessarily but she was better at it than anyone else in the Regiment.

Colonel Elizabeth Hazen waiting for her, that was a surprise.

“Major Sinclair,” the other woman smiled but there was a tightness behind her eyes.

“I take this isn’t a social call, Colonel.”

“Unfortunately no,” the other woman looked around and seeing no one else in ear shot went on, “Justine, the hell is going on, you guys are running around like cowboys.”

“Liz, what do you want me to say?”

Looking Liz dead in the eye, Justine continued.

“You didn’t see the conditions they were living in, those Drac’s don’t play around when they screw you. *Dios Mio*, I’d have brought the Captain of the *Dieron Star* up on charges if I didn’t know the full story.”

“Which is?”

“He’s been running *eta* out of the Combine for years, the ISF turned a blind eye to it as long as it was under the table.”

“And the BSLA fuck up just ended that.”

“Yup.”

“Great....,” Liz rolled her eyes.

“Justine you’ve got to understand, the General’s covering for you with that bozo Donner but this adds to many eyes, I think you’ve got the right of it but for Christ’s sake be careful.”

“We will be Liz, but you know, if they weren’t the Ryukaze...”

“What? Talk to me Justine.”

“Can’t you tell, Liz it’s starting,” Justine could barely articulate what had bothered her, “Those entry papers weren’t lost, they were thrown out, John Zazula told me the other day one of his guys got jumped because he’s an atheist.” Justine shook her head in disbelief. “Cause you know, only Amaris’ gang don’t believe in god, never mind that Sgt. Hayden was decorated a dozen times for valor under fire.”

“What happened?”

“Our guys paid the dickhead a visit, the Unity PD’s not pressing charges.”

Liz nodded, “But that’s not the point, we should know better.”

“Yes, damn it we should!” Heads turned as her voice raised. Embarrassed she lowered her voice and continued.

“There was a hell of a lot wrong with the League, but it at least showed we were trying, but what, we just got done killing each other over greed, now were gonna start over God. Or no let’s fuck with these people ‘cause we don’t like where they’re from...”

She laughed, a little hysterically.

“Not making much sense am I Liz?”

Liz had sad look on her face.

“Yeah, you are, how can we say we’re a good and moral people when we do shit like this. Fuck over people who’ve suffered for us, how we can hurt people in the name of God. It raises the question we don’t want to ask.”

Justine nodded.

“After all we went through, was it worth it? If this is the sort of people we saved.”

As the pair entered the Officer’s Club, Liz shrugged.

“Yeah, although you know it’s always the same story, a few weak assholes who don’t deserve to live in a free society.”

She sighed.

“What can you do?”

“Hope they try to escape when you catch them,” Justine said.

Catching her meaning, Liz laughed bitterly.

“From your lips to Gods ears.”

Remembering an odd comment General Kerensky had made, Liz thought to herself; *Sometimes I wish we could just leave.*

“Give it time,” Justine said as they ordered lunch, “After the Council meets everything will go back to normal.”

Liz noticed the tension in Justine’s voice as if saying it would make it true.

Sarah watched the rooftops under the rented VTOL, ‘Rat deftly piloted the Hughes *Cherokee* in between the office complexes and residential arcologies. Checking the remote feeds on the comm gear Tommy Lindon had provided she confirmed to Didi the SAFE agents were still in position outside the General Production owned Lucky Repose Apartments. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Bruce and Didi checking the charges on their RaLC-22 15mm laser carbines and fixing the fake CIB special action team badges on their black fatigues .

Catching Didi’s eye she looked a question at her. Smiling, the other woman reassured her.

“Just a quick in and out, we do this right those Pigeons won’t even know we we’re there.”

Bruce had told her pretty much the same thing on the flight in. Using fake ID’s provided by Tommy, the pair were officially still in Tahiti. With his hair lightened to a dark honey color by the sun, his skin tanned and a cosmetic lens over his cybernetic eye, Bruce looked markedly different. Sarah had taken the simple out of dying her hair jet black. These simple changes disguised them from casual identification.

They’d avoided talking about Donner or the side trip they were taking for about half the flight. A question had been rattling around the back of her brain. Turning away from the window she asked;

“You’ve done this before?”

Nodding, Bruce looked past her out the window.

“A couple of times, on New Home.”

He swallowed. Sensing he was uncomfortable, Sarah started to change the subject, but Bruce had continued.

“New Home was Hell, literally. Poison gas, nuclear weapons, and starvation. The Amaris fleet caught us off guard and fought a running fight with our naval squadrons. We were cut off from supply,

both sides were and with the world bombed to hell basic necessities vanished. Medicine, food, clean water all in short supply.”

Bruce’s face was grim, his eyes focused on a distant point in time.

“The fighting was in many ways more savage than anything on Earth. *Hussy* had taken one too many hits and the lack of spare parts sidelined her. I was running with Didi and her crew. We’d just lost Don Roberto to a relatively minor wound, because we didn’t have enough antibiotics and we’d been on less than half rations for six months. His immune system was compromised and he got pneumonia.

“We had raided a RimJob position for food, ammo, anything we could get. One of the dead was a runner. The package he had on him listed a meeting of their high command. It was in a hotel deep inside enemy held territory. That was the first. A general and two colonels.

“A month later it was a collaborator in the capital.”

Bruce chuckled somewhat sourly.

“We had a reputation as headhunters after that.”

Headhunters, she thought, chilled by his matter-of-factness. Insights like this made her feel like she was in a relationship with two completely different men. One was the strong, sweet and slightly goofy man she loved. The other was a cold predator, a killer of men. The Tiger.

The slowing of the chopper brought her back to the present.

Tommy Lindon looked up from the equipment he’d been fiddling with.

“Remember, get any pocketcomps or data chips they have on them.”

Bruce nodded as Didi hooked the store bought climbing gear to the *Cherokee’s* side arm style cargo attachment. Didi and Christian slipped out first. Before hooking on to rappelling gear her fiancée touched her cheek.

“Be back soon.” He said and then he was gone.

My knees bent to take my landing, I thought about the conversation I’d had with Sarah on the flight over. I forgot sometimes, that her experiences during the war had been so different than mine. In part the ease with which my girl had adapted to life among the Tigers and their adoption of her played a part.

Shaking myself back to the present I approached the roof access door to the Lucky Repose. Pulling out a bypass kit I slipped the pair of thin metal strips into the lock. The kit’s readout went to a dim green. Nodding to Christian, I stepped out of the way. As I primed my Amaris made carbine, Christian used a small vibroblade to cut the lock. Stepping back he pulled the door open and we made our way down the stairs.

I had a sudden thought.

You know I wouldn’t need to get so much damn payback if people would just stop shooting at me.

LCS Tharkad

Nadir Jump Point, Skye System

Lyrans Commonwealth

17 January, 2780

“I understand Lucas, I really do, but the aid packages to the Hegemony need to have strings attached.”

Robert Steiner turned to gaze out the view port, really a LCD panel inset in the guest suite’s interior wall. Finding the pfennig sized spark of Skye’s Primary he sipped at his Ark Royal Black Label whiskey. Behind him Lucas Kelswa’s polished dress boots clicked on the equally polished Tamar *Rojo* wood floors. The man came up next to him chuckling at the viewer.

“Never did like the look out at space.”

Tapping a control under the panel Robert changed the view to one of the canned news feeds beamed in with the ship’s daily comm updates. Lucas returned to the topic at hand.

“First off while Amanda Cameron may be young she is not her father, she has good advisors and she actually listens to them.”

“Unlike me”, Robert chuckled wryly.

“You actually expect an answer to that?”

After too many shared hangovers in the Nagelring and the inevitable frantic study sessions after had formed a bond between the heir to the Lyrans Throne and the scion of the Isle of Skye. In the status

conscious upper echelons of Lyran power having an honest opinion was rare, but to Robert Steiner, rewarding. *It could be*, he thought for the thousandth time, *a bit trying*.

“Oh just go on Lucas, you’re going to fixate on this forever unless you get it off your chest.”

“Look at the realities, we have a Cameron Heir, the Hegemony will rebound and their trade will be just as lucrative.”

“It had better be, a thirty five percent drop in trade after ten years of nothing....”

“And after Richard’s mismanagement, I know, I know...”

“The Estates General if full of people who lost huge sums because of Fat Boy, they want some restitution.”

“Fat Boy?”

“*Ja*, I hear it’s what the Hegemony troops called Amaris.”

A voice from the news interrupted all talk.

...following footage is not for the faint of heart, today Stefan Amaris and his entire family were executed in the Court of the Star League, for those of you with children may want to....

The Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth and the Duke of Skye watched the execution quietly. When it was over Robert was quiet for a minute, then he chuckled, at Lucas’ expression he burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry, I just couldn’t help thinking, I never liked that *ausloch*, anyway I’ll bet the Terrans’ will say *there’s your restitution*.”

“It might satisfy our Loyalists.”

“The protests at the start of Kerensky’s campaign?”

“They were bad, but if they see you obstructing our new First Lord.”

“Don’t worry, Lucas I won’t rock the boat.....”

Raising his glass to Stefan Amaris’ image on the view screen Robert finished.

“...but afterwards, the Terrans are going to make good on some promises they made and sign a few trade agreements and everyone gets to feel good about themselves, what can go wrong?”

“Cameron can turn down the First Lordship”, Lucas said dryly.

With a laugh Robert waived a languid dismissal.

“Like that’s going to happen.”

Taiwan...

The SAFE agent died easily. His neck broke in the crook of Christian’s arm. Dragging the body out of sight he nodded to Tommy, handing him the agent’s pocket comp. The slicer grinned.

“The links still open.”

Christian nodded as Tommy went to work.

“Got it, two on the floor with Donner, four at the entrance and one in the apartment.”

Dido popped the safety off her RaLC-22 and nodded at Chris and Bruce. The team slipped down to the floor Donner was on, they came face to face with a pair of teenagers. Looking for some privacy they must have come into the stairwell. Before the girl could scream, Bruce raised his finger to his lips and pointed to his badge. He smiled at the boy’s wide eyed stare and winked, motioning to them to go home. As the pair left, the boy looked up and grinned back.

Using his fiber optic cam, Tommy checked the hallway.

“Clear to the bend in the corridor.”

“Let’s do this then, there’s a beach in Tahiti waiting for me.” Bruce said.

Moscow...

Aleksandr dreamed...

As always it was the starboard grav deck on the SLS James McKenna, among the hydroponically fed garden that filled the small space. To the uninitiated the garden would seem out of place, but the scent of flowers, the sight of trees and the park like atmosphere had definite psychological benefits. Out the transparent ferro carbide polymers that made up the geodesic dome above his head, the Earth loomed in all its glory. From space it looked peaceful, the scars of war invisible.

“It looks so peaceful.”

Turning, Aleksandr came face to face with himself.

“Da, it does.”

“It won’t last.”

"You can't know that."

His doppelganger smiled.

"Even now it's staring, Minoru Kurita and Kenyon Marik, like snakes in the Garden of Eden their minions whisper enticements and sow the seeds of avarice. Barbara Liao looks for any opportunity to strengthen her state, Robert Steiner to make a profit and John Davion...."

His double's grin split his face open as his features warped and changed.

"...we both know what John Davion wants." Stefan Amaris grinned savagely.

Sitting up in his bed, soaked with sweat the Aleksandr Kerensky heard the voice of a dead tyrant echo the last words he'd spoke.

"Your paradise is over Terran, welcome to Hell."

Hours later, Katyusha, waking and not finding her husband next to her, walked into the kitchen. Aleksandr sat at the breakfast nook staring off into space, a cup of tea cold by his side. The coldness in his eyes made a knot for in her stomach.

"Aleks...."

As he looked up, Katyusha saw life come back to his eyes. Reaching out with steady hands he held hers and smiled wanly.

"A bad dream Katyushka, nothing more."

"You need a vacation, beloved."

"We both do, after the Council meeting, we will take a trip just you, me and the boys."

"A long one", she said.

"Indeed."

Taiwan...

Rat hovered the *Cherokee* just off the Lucky Repose. Over his comlink the snap of lasers dueled with the pops of silenced 9mm rounds. In the copilot seat Sarah, also listening in looked at him worried. He smiled in reassurance. Pointing to a display on her pocketcomp he showed her the life signs indicator.

"They're okay."

Over the link he heard Bruce's voice.

"Tommy, that vent go where I think it does?"

"Yeah boss."

"Gimme a boost."

Bringing up a secondary map Sarah pointed out a ventilation conduit that connected to every apartment on the floor. It was small enough Scott wouldn't have fit, but the Major was built slender. It wouldn't be forgiving though. "Rat himself wouldn't have tried it.

But then again Bruce has always been nuts. He thought.

Unity City...

Amanda Cameron looked coldly at Konrad Toyama where he stood behind Jerome Blake. The man's lank hair and pale complexion reminded her of that Wormtongue character from Lord of the Rings. His manner and voice grated on her.

"I have had enough, gentlemen."

Jerome Blake had been in mid sentence when she spoke. He stopped in surprise. Her glare took in both men.

"My Lady?"

"The Regent endorsed the 90th Heavy Assault's actions and that has made this affair accepted policy."

Toyama licked his lips nervously and opened his mouth. Amanda cut him off before he could speak.

"It is also outside your jurisdiction, the emigration status of a few refugees is none of DEPCOM's business."

Before either man could interrupt, Amanda went on quietly at first, but by the end she was shouting.

"Your actions, Mr. Toyama, have done nothing more than waste the time of officials with the recovery of the Hegemony on their plates, given ammunition to those Earth First lunatics, and worry and frustration in those who saved your sorry asses from Stefan Amaris in the first place!"

She didn't shout or even raised her voice normally, but the whole situation was so absurd. Behind her she felt Ian's tension. She knew Blake didn't care one way or another, concerned only with maintaining his hard hit network of hyperpulse generators and the support staff behind them. Toyama, like Donner before him was playing the political game. Unlike Donner, it wasn't greed or power motivating Konrad Toyama, it was something....else.

The man glared at her and in his eyes Amanda saw and intensity that unnerved her. Maybe he picked up on it, or maybe Toyama was just trying to deflect the conversation but he spoke up.

"We had also hoped to talk about the whereabouts of former Director George Donner."

Ian stepped in then.

"Director Donner's whereabouts, like anything else in his case are not up for discussion, the man is a traitor to the Star League and will be dealt with by Star League assets. I understand he is in possession of certain information vital to you, and I assure you we will make every effort to return that to you."

He stepped over to the door and opened it gesturing.

"Unless there is anything else....?"

As they left, Blake shared an apologetic look with Ian and a quiet "We'll talk."

Closing the door behind him Ian turned back to Amanda.

"Where is that bastard any way?" He asked.

Amanda looked at her watch.

"He's dead right about now."

Taiwan...

George Donner came out of the bathroom, the stereo playing jazz at a higher than normal volume. Wincing he went over to the tuner and turned it down a notch. Spying Elias sitting in a swivel chair in front of the bay window he started over.

"A little loud don't you think Elias?"

The man didn't answer.

"Elias?"

The light from an advertising holo outside outlined his friend against the window and spilled from a hole in the middle of the man's head. Already knowing what he would find he turned the chair around. A laser shot to the head is by definition messy. The shot from a 15mm carbine turned the fluid filled brain to steam which expanded out every exit point; ears, eyes, mouth and the neat hole drilled in Elias Bruenig's forehead.

It wasn't supposed to end like this. George thought.

A movement in the widow caught his attention and looking up George caught a slender ghostly form reflected from behind him. Before he could turn a brilliant flash flicked on and George Donner ceased to think at all.

Chapter 4: Wait a minute, We won didn't we?

Okay, so the Fat Man is dead, we've put paid to Donner and a Cameron is back on the Terran Throne. Things should go back to normal right? In your dreams. Never underestimate the Human potential for fucking up. No matter how good you think you've got it, and our definition of having it good got stripped down to the bare bones after Stefan's little stunt, somebody, somewhere will screw things up.

Yeah, I know it's a depressing outlook, but hell, it keeps me from being disappointed.

From the personal journal of Major Bruce Gilmour (AFFS Historical Archives)

These are the times that try men's souls...It is fitting that these words spoken at the birth of a nation a millennia ago come to mind now. Exactly one thousand years after Thomas Paine wrote those words, the brave forces under General Aleksandr Kerensky were fighting their own battle against tyranny. Now we stand faced with a similar task.

Just as the Alliance grew out of the needs of the times and the Hegemony reflected the will of a people to take bold steps when their world crumbled in corruption and prejudice now we must chart our own new course. As I accept the position of Director General of the Terran Hegemony I ask all of you to join me in building a stronger nation.

One free from tyranny, where never again must our children fear fire from the skies.

Where never again will a madman invade our homes to take away that we hold so dear.

A nation that will never again allow our own hubris to blind us to our legacy as the heart of Humanity.

Like the proverbial Phoenix rising from the ashes, let the light of our liberty be a beacon of hope to shine in all the dark places.

**Excerpt from Amanda Cameron's acceptance speech to the Terran Hegemony
11 March 2780**

**New York City
Northeastern Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
12 February, 2780**

Joshua and I were hanging out at Gray's over on Eighth Avenue eating hot dogs. We were waiting for Sarah to get off work. Joshua had been amused at his cousin's devotion to her job but Sarah, according to the media and the rumor mill, was doing an amazing job. John Davion would be joining us later. That fact had me a bit nervous. The First Prince of the Federated Suns had only a few minutes to spare when he'd arrived at Olympia Spaceport. He'd looked me over with an intensity that had made me feel like a six year old caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

After giving Sarah a hug and Joshua a handshake he'd been whisked off to meet with Amanda Cameron. But not before telling me; "We'll talk later." His expression had been coolly appraising.

Dressed for the weather in elegant coat and suit from London, Joshua looked like any number of distinguished businessmen. I'd added a fleece under my leather jacket, but the cold never bothered me. The sun was out and over all it was turning into a beautiful winter's day.

Washing the last of his hot dog down, Joshua smiled.

"These are good."

"Best in the city, you don't last seven hundred years in this town otherwise."

"Tough place to grow up, yeah?"

"Not so much, and remember I spent half my childhood on New Avalon."

"How can I forget?" He chuckled. "Albion Prep has a whole new set of rules for visiting Terrans."

"Oh come on, I wasn't that bad."

Joshua gave me the fisheye, then grinned.

"Baron deGambier's nose never did set right."

"Hey, he started it!"

"And he's a little less of a stuck up prig."

"I trust you won't go slugging anymore of our nobles Mr. Gilmour." A familiar voice came from behind us. John Davion had come from uptown, behind us and ordered. Taking the empty spot next to me he set down a paper plate with two dogs piled high with chili and cheese. Joshua looked at the food and then at his father.

"I've been here before Josh." He said, smiling.

Some father and son vibe passed between them and Joshua excused himself clapping me on the shoulder saying; "Don't be too hard on him dad."

Uh Oh

I turned back to John, who had that same cool look on his face. I met his gaze evenly, waiting on him. After a few seconds that felt like an eternity he spoke.

"Sarah is all I have left of my youngest brother and she is very dear to me."

"She is to me too, my lord."

He nodded gravely.

"What are your intentions here Bruce?"

I closed my eyes for a second and took a deep breath.

"To make her my wife, raise a family and the gods willing have a happy life."

"The Duchess of Chesterton is a very rich and powerful title, some might..."

I still don't believe I did this but, I cut off the First Prince, yeah, I know, but still.

"We talked about that, *Prince* Davion, Sarah would be happy to stay here she has a career in the BSLA if she wants it and I've been told I'd be welcome teaching at West Point."

He nodded, seeing I had more to say, motioned me to continue.

"We've been through Hell together, sir, and when a woman like Sarah gives you her love and sticks with you through this whole mess..." I paused for a second.

"Well, even the First Prince'll find himself in a fight he can't win if he tries to take her away."

John Davion laughed then, gripping my shoulder firmly.

“Good answer, my boy, damn it nobody but Joshua, my wife or General Kerensky talks that straight to me anymore, and for God’s sake Bruce call me Uncle John, it just sounds better.”

I relaxed, and returned his grin as he went on.

“Josh likes you, and Sarah is in love with you, son. While I knew you as a boy, service jackets aside, I needed to know who the man was that you became.”

“I am who I appear to be my l.. Uncle John.”

“You’ll do.” John Davion said.

“Welcome to the family.”

League Central Coordination and Command

Malkent, Marik

Free Worlds League

10 March, 2780

Kenyon Marik sipped at a mellow Andurien Shiraz. The wine suited his mood. There were very few times he could truly relax, the eternal chaos of Free Worlds politics caught anyone involved in it in a whirlwind. If you dropped your guard it would swallow you whole. It was a lesson he was about to impart on Amanda Cameron.

Looking over the holo file marked OPERATION CUCKOLD, he smiled. The mess Stefan Amaris had made of the Hegemony opened dozens of opportunities if you had your eyes open. The bureaucracy alone would take years to restore to any semblance of efficiency. Databases on billions of people had been lost or altered. In their present state of affairs who could say who any one really was, even their beloved Cameron?

Michael Vizante shuffled uncomfortably where he stood waiting on his lord. Kenyon let the SAFE director stew for a bit. It was good for the man to remember his place.

“So the fullest impact should hit around the Star League Council’s meeting?”

Vizante started at the sound of Kenyon’s voice.

“Err...yes my lord, based on our simulations, the information we are injecting should have spread beyond TerraGov’s immediate ability to counter with their own propaganda machine.”

At Kenyon’s sudden silence the intelligence chief fidgeted.

“My Lord?”

“Hmm...oh, just imagining the look on that buzzard Kerensky’s face.”

“Indeed it should be priceless, my lord.”

“It is only the opening salvo.”

Kenyon looked up and smiled as Anton Bucilu walked into the room.

“Nonsense Anton, we’ll stir up the pot a little, cause the Terrans to stumble and wrest some concessions out of them.”

Anton nodded, but Kenyon sensed his aides discomfort. Apparently so did Michael.

“Perhaps our Anton is too delicate for this sort of policy making.”

Before Kenyon could speak, Anton replied with a heat the Captain-General had never heard before.

“No, Michael, I just see no profit in kicking a man when he’s down.”

Ten years ago Kenyon would have castigated the man for disagreeing with him, now however he reminded himself, this was exactly why he kept Anton around.

“Out with it Anton, you’ve more to say.”

“My lord, this one here harps on slights gone a hundred years or more, critic babble about facts and figures changed to suit who so ever pays them, you your self have your own wrongs to lay at the Terrans’ feet. But by October we will be on Earth and the fate of the Star League will rest on your shoulders.

“A Star League that has done nothing but hold us back.” Michael shot back.

“From what, It was our own bad decisions that hurt us when the Canopans had their economic revival, and no disrespect but your father...” Anton stopped at Kenyon’s dark look.

“Go on Anton, I know my father’s failings.”

Collecting his thoughts Anton said carefully; “I put to you, what is the alternative?”

Michael answered, his dark eyes glittering.

“Why war of course.”

Anton laughed suddenly.

“You say that so cavalierly Michael, you who won’t be doing a bit of the fighting. But yes, war without end. War neither we, nor any of the other Houses can win. Furthermore we will have garnered the ill will of the only military in known space who actually does have that ability.”

“Bah,” Kenyon scoffed, “I’m not talking about scrapping the League, Anton, just twisting Kerensky’s tail a bit.”

Michael smiled at Anton’s discomfort, but Kenyon grinned at his aide.

“Trust me Anton, it’ll go no further than that.”

And if it does, well the Free Worlds will endure, and we will prosper.

New York...

Gracie Liu, Hatchiwara Yuri and Iuchi Kei stumbled out of Blaggard’s on West 35th street sometime around 5am. Heading down to Seventh Ave to hail a cab. The celebrations as Amanda Cameron was confirmed as Director-General of the Terran Hegemony rivaled those of the Liberation. Gracie, watching the whole thing on the Bar’s holo, had been struck by the imagery.

A girl that age should be worrying about her grades, what the other girls were wearing and boys, not about running the psychotic melting pot of the Hegemony. She looks like a school girl thrown to the wolves.

A few drinks later such thoughts had fled from her mind. A chat with Malcolm Farrell on her pocketcomp finished off any trepidation about tomorrow. Yuri was looking at a holo of the bridesmaids dresses, which Gracie admitted were beautiful. *Too long in fatigues or a MCS, I forgot...well a lot actually.*

“She’s got good taste.” Kei said.

“French people, are supposed to aren’t they.” Yuri answered.

“Thought Davions were Scottish.” Kei replied.

“Same thing.” Yuri shrugged.

“Not really,” Gracie interjected.

Yuri cocked her head and asked; “So, Gracie, what are you?”

“American.”

“Oh...who are they?”

Gracie, whose family had settled in Flushing, New York in the 1970s and never looked back sputtered over her Long Island Ice Tea.

“Look around you.” She said when she regained her composure.

She caught the group in the front of the bar, who’d been giving them the fisheye since Kei’s shouted “*I’m a fucking Drac.*” During one round of toasts which one of the guys had trashed the Combine’s inaction during the coup.

Her inner trouble detector lit up like *Deuce Queen’s* treat sensors. She caught the eye of the big blonde guy behind the bar who Kei had been lusting on.

“What’s going on Gracie?”

“That bunch who just left, was it just me or...”

“Ritchie Howell, and his brothers, a lot of talk those three, but still when you leave you come see me.”

“Thanks Em.”

The night had gone on from there, the bar had been packed till about four, Gracie who had switched to ginger ale about that time had rounded up the Terrible Two to hail a cab back to Fort Hamilton. She’d considered calling one from the bar but the cold air felt good. As they walked, Yuri nudged her, pressing a stim tab into her hand.

“Wha...Yuri I don’t.”

“Bogies on our six, Loot.”

Pressing the antitoxin and stimulant into her wrist she felt the cold jagged spray up her arm to her head. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Kei do the same. *Damn I’m going to feel this in the morning.*

The attack came from behind.

“*Drac Bitch,*” was the drunken battle cry.

Spinning in place Gracie snapped her fist up both blocking the pipe swinging at her head and striking the man’s arm so hard he dropped the improvised club. Finishing the Escrima move she slammed

her fist into his temple, dropping him on the seat of his pants. Two other thuds sounded as the Terrible Two dropped their opponents.

Looking up she saw the bartender and two of the regulars fending off two more guys who'd been about to jump in. Seeing their friends downed so quickly and gaining that sudden sobriety that fear brings the pair booked down the block.

"Em", Kei gushed, "You came to rescue us!" Looking like a school girl from one of those Japanese anime shows she cuddled up to him.

Gracie, who'd never seen the Two fight out of their 'Mechs turned to Yuri who was watching her friend with a rueful grin.

"Nice moves, where'd you..."

"Oh, we're DEST."

Em, who had gotten really pale at that swallowed and said "Fuck me" in a low voice.

"Later," Kei said to him, turning to Gracie, "Yeah, we thought you knew."

Draconis Elite Strike Teams, DEST, all of the Great Houses had their own SpecOps teams, but the Combine's bands of shooters and looters had the most vicious reputation. Looking at her friends she realized how little she actually knew them.

A couple of hours later, lying in bed her alarm went off, cursing not checking the time it was set for when she crashed. The combo of alcohol and stims played havoc with her system and the heat of her apartment gave her a dry scratchy throat. Gathering her robe around her she grabbed a glass of ice water and sipped at it.

Set off by the alarm the local INN affiliate played on her Tri-d.

"The top of our morning news is the shocking allegations leveled by Captain-General Kenyon Marik at Terran Director-General Amanda Cameron.

[Cut to the Free Worlds League House of Parliament and Kenyon Marik standing at the speaker's podium.]

...so great was the confusion caused by the Amaris coup that such a deception is so easily possible. Just the sheer coincidence of the "Discovery" of the so called Last Cameron plays so well into the hands of Regent Kerensky that you have to give it close scrutiny. Regrettably I must call upon the Terran government to provide Amanda Cameron for an independent medical review to determine the exact nature of her lineage.

"Archon Richard Steiner had this to say:"

[Cut to the wardroom of the LCS Tharkad.]

"While I find these accusations distasteful, they do bring up some questions that beg answering, so I must second the Captain-General's call..."

Slapping off the Tri-D Gracie pulled the covers back over her head.

Note to self, shoot Kenyon Marik, She thought.

Unity City...

"BASTARD!" Amanda Cameron screamed at the Tri-D hurling Mr. Bear at Kenyon Marik's face. To his credit had Mr. Bear been real, the Teddy Bear that had been with her from that terrible day almost a decade ago, would have gladly torn Kenyon Marik into a steaming pile of meat. Mr. Bear however was just the stuffed variety and Kenyon only a hologram.

The door burst open and her security detail charged into the room. Maria MacRae the lieutenant in charge of the morning detail was prepared for assassins, health crisis or any other manner of emergency. The young Sinclair Fusiliers officer was not prepared to deal with a sobbing sixteen year old girl clutching her teddy bear.

"Amanda," Major General Dawn McCormack, still in her night gown handed Maria her sidearm as she sat on the bed next to her liege. Looking a dismissal at a grateful Lieutenant MacRae, the General gathered up her charge. The news of Marik's accusation had only broke on Terra a few hours ago. Dawn had hoped to spare Amanda from learning about it this way, but only a few minutes later, this...

Kenyon you'd better never find you self alone w' me you plague pigeon.

On the screen, while Robert Steiner had seconded the need for an investigation, a note from the office of Prince John Davion dismissed the allegations. The screen then cut to a prepared statement from Minoru Kurita.

“Bringing these accusations forward in a public manner such as this is the mark of an honorless coward. Kenyon Marik, you bring shame on your House and your people. You leave me with no choice but to call for your censure before the high council.”

“You see dear, even Minoru Kurita would nae stoop so low, Marik is just a spiteful little bastard, you named him true.”

Wiping her face with a tissue, Amanda nodded.

“Thank you, Dawn, I know, just after everything else, I never expected this.”

“It’s going to be fine, my lady, like we don’t know who you are...Bah!”

On screen reporters covering a car accident in Brooklyn; happen upon Major Bruce Gilmour out for an early morning jog.

Bruce: [Breathing heavily] “...what, this is the first I’ve heard of it.”

Reporter: “The Captain-General is demanding she submit to a medical examination.”

Bruce: “What the f(BLEEP)k for?, Like that wasn’t done when she was rescued?, Gods c’mon I’d say that as(BLEEP)le was just trying to get her naked but she’s way too old for him, or so I hear.”

Dawn didn’t know whether to laugh or be furious at the SLDF officer’s comments but Amanda’s sudden burst of laughter made her smile.

“I’ll have to tell Sarah just how great a guy she has.” Amanda said.

New York...

The crowd was ugly in front of Marik House, the old Free Worlds Embassy. Originally established two years after the establishment of the League the building was still owned by the Marik family. Major Alex Winter shifted uneasily in his command couch. All the euphoria of Amanda Cameron’s ascension to the Hegemony Director-Generalship was gone, replaced by a cold rage.

You never thought just another political scandal would affect us like this, but this has become personal. Fucking Kenyon Marik, man. Of course the Star League was bound to protect the assets of any member state so all over the Hegemony the SLDF was pulled from more important duties to assist local police assets protecting Free Worlds interests.

And we’re not real happy about it. Alex thought grimly.

The thin blue line of NYPD officers weren’t too thrilled about it either. Despite the snow blowing in the air, the crowd was full force aggressive the way only New Yorkers can get. If the police hadn’t been fellow Terrans the results would have been bad.

Standing behind the NYPD command van the officer in charge of the House Marik security detail a captain by the name of Hansen was gesturing to the crowd angrily. Seeing the police commander begin to get frustrated, he slapped the macro that lowered *Elmo*’s torso closer to the ground he opened a TACNET channel.

“Sayed, its AI, tell Hansen to hold his horses I’m coming down.”

“Gonna come out and play in the snow with the rest of us?”

“Can’t let you have all the fun?” Alex chuckled.

“Or rather you’ll share in our misery.”

“Yeahhh, joy.”

Opening another channel he called up Lieutenant Maria Vogeler.

“Ria hold down the fort, I’m going to go wade in pigeon shit.”

“I’ll have Pauly hose you off later.”

Alex grimaced at the thought of being hit by the water cannons on Pauly D’amato’s *Lucyfur*.

“Not looking to get promoted any time soon are you ‘Ria?”

“Have fun boss.”

Undogging the hatch, Alex climbed gingerly down the chain ladder. Sayed Kumar, a heavy great coat over his tactical gear met him at *Elmo*’s feet.

“Lovely weather eh, Major.”

“Just great, Hansen still an ass?”

“Pretty much.”

Heading over to the command van, the Marik Militia captain intercepted them. Inwardly Alex groaned. Hansen really wasn’t that bad a guy, but he was serving a foreign government whose leaders were being particularly obnoxious.

“Major Winter.” The man greeted him tersely.

“Captain Hansen, what can I do for you.”

“You can start by dispersing this crowd Major.”
“You know I can’t take any...”
“... Offensive action, yes Major, I know.” Blowing out a sigh the Marik officer nodded.
“I do however appreciate your being here.” Alex nodded the intimidation factor of a lance of BattleMechs was never to be underestimated.
A sergeant came over.
“Lieutenant Ahmed, sir it’s getting nasty.”
The police lieutenant looked at Alex, too proud to ask.
“I’ll talk to them.” Alex said.

“Well Mariah, the crowds are dispersing in front of Marik House, where minutes ago Major Alex Winter of the Star League Defense Force spoke for over an hour.”
“Josh, how is the mood out there.”
“Well people aren’t exactly happy, but as Major Winter pointed out Kenyon Marik isn’t here. In the end this sort of thing is pointless.”
“I guess the Captain-General knows the people of the Hegemony are not exactly happy.”
“I’ve heard rumors the Major has been asked to take a position in TerraGov as an aide to Senator Kennedy of North America.”
“If his actions here are any indication, it seems TerraGov may be seeing it’s next NorAm Senator.”

Sam clicked off the Tri-Vid and handed his son a beer. Clinking the bottles together he smiled.
“Nice work out there, Al.”
“It was easy, the weather helped a lot, once they started listening they got cold and wet.”
“And just wanted to go home.”
“And there it is.”
Taking a swig of his beer Sam nodded.
“So Marik’s accusation, real or bullshit.”
Alex shook his head.
“It’s bullshit, seriously is this guy for real?”
“The can of worms he’s opened up is.”
“They’re shouldn’t be any question, I mean you need DNA, just go to the Cameron mausoleum.”
“Ten years and Amaris never did find it.”
“The bodies were never in the public memorial space and the custodian disappeared just after the coup. Besides there is also the SLDF medical database.”
Alex looked the question at his father.
“Every WarShip of the line and every SLDF database has a copy of the Camerons’ medical files in case of an emergency. New organs or limbs can be regrown, medical histories compared going all the way back to the Alliance.”
“Nothing but the best for the Lords of Human Space.”
“Nope, Marik doesn’t hope to prove anything here, just sow chaos.”
“Liao and Steiner fell in line with Marik quick enough, but Davion and Kurita voicing the same opinion, almost gives you hope.”
“Either that or Hell is freezing over.”
Laughing at his father’s sentiment, Alex thought; *Just as long as it isn’t a sign of the Apocalypse.*”

**Brooklyn, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
3 April 2780**

Sarah paused brushing her teeth and listened.
“...and then the young knight came upon the evil kings host. Now they were too many for him to face alone, but the old knight had taught him well. So he hid in the shadows and waited for his chance.
“His chance to stop the evil kings’ host?”
“Nope, his chance to put his Pumpkin Butt to bed...”
“Daddy!”
“I’ll finish tomorrow, I promise, now let’s get you tucked in.”

I wonder if she even thinks of before, of her biological family. Sarah thought. The nightmares had gotten less frequent but they still happened. The shivers Synthya had when being hugged or having her hand held had vanished completely, probably because Bruce and Sarah herself were both free with such. She missed her brother, Takeo, though.

She doesn't talk about it when she's awake, but the dreams though.

Bruce came out Synthya's room then, he smiled as he stepped into the bathroom. Finishing up, she leaned into him as he hugged her from behind, stifling a yawn.

"Long day?"

Sarah nodded looking into the mirror.

"The advance team to set up the new capitol arrived today. As did a team of specialists and lawyers from the Free Worlds League."

"Bad?"

Turning to face him, she shook her head angrily.

"You couldn't have found a more officious group of bureaucrats if you turned over every rock from Earth to the Trinity. Chief Council Brandt says it's deliberate."

He nodded, thinking.

"Makes sense, with the right sort of folks, this stuff would be settled in no time flat, so..."

"You send the wrong sort you can drag this on for weeks."

"Amanda's got you involved doesn't she..."

"She's a friend, Honey, and well..."

He kissed her on the forehead.

"I know, I know, but she'd better not be overworking my sweetheart."

"Elissa Valintin will take over my job for the duration, oh, I forgot, can we have her over for dinner Friday?"

"Yeah sure, Al and CJ said they'll show too."

"Cool, see if you can get Pete Callahan to come too."

"He and Elly hit it off at that formal we went to at the point, didn't they?"

"Mmm, yeah." Sarah smiled innocently. "Your point?"

"With 'Rat and Liz coming, it'll be a full house, good thing I laid in enough food."

"Lot of cooking, you better have some time left over for me."

"I expect 'Rat and Joshua will kick me off the grill by eight or so."

"As per usual, how's Amanda holding up?"

"Okay, Ian's a big help to her, there's some tension with the General though."

Bruce didn't look surprised.

"You know what that's about?"

He nodded.

"Ian's been setting up the makings of a Terran military, as independent of the Defense Force as any House military."

Sarah looked troubled, she knew from Bruce's reaction.

"I know," He said, "There's gonna be trouble with the House Lords over that."

As they lay on the bed she cuddled into her fiancée and nodded against his chest.

"A technologically superior Terran military with a grudge, even Uncle John will be worried."

Bruce sighed then.

"Of all people, he's got nothing to worry about from us. But look, the Royals were not enough. They were and are too tied the Star League, it was almost laughable how easy it was for Amaris to strip them from the Hegemony."

Sarah nodded understanding. "Like the AFFS, their commanders can limit their use outside of the Hegemony."

"Yep, though I expect Kenny boy will yap about it, it's still an internal matter."

"Ian's courting you, you know."

"He's mentioned some options, and I do support his goal of a strong and revitalized Terra, but I took an oath ten years ago, and it still holds."

"You're worried about the League aren't you?"

"A lot of us are, Uncle John may have the legal stuff down pat, but Kenyon's just the first of the vultures to circle, you know if Amaris had pulled his stunt anywhere else there would be no questions about the future. But I never realized just how vital the Hegemony is."

She felt him shrug as he went on.
“General Kerensky want’s things to go back to the way they were, but I don’t think that’s possible.”

Shifting around she kissed him then, a long lingering kiss. When it was over and he caught his breath Bruce smiled down at her.

“I should shut up now.”

Kissing him again, feeling his body respond, Sarah smiled.

“Yep.”

DropShip Irian Jewel
Outbound Vector, Marik System
Free Worlds League
6 April, 2780

Michael Vizante scowled at the report on his screen. A full team of agents lost, the potential for reams of intelligence from the Department of Communications gone. Along with Elias Bruenig one of his most talented agents. Years spent placing him on Terra, getting him into DEPCOM.

What a waste, still CUCKOLD is within expected parameters Terra’s little darling shows her inexperience at every turn.

He turned back to his computer screen, reviewing a deeper scheme he had going. The certainty he’d had ten years before when he’d spotted the signs leading to the Coup was stronger than ever. The League would fall, and to the leader with the most knowledge would be picking up the pieces. Kenyon Marik would be that leader, and in that he would be Michael Vizante’s tool.

An imperfect tool, but pliable enough.

The power he would hold then would dwarf that he now held.

And power is the only thing that matters in the end.

Pushing a button on his console that summoned the boy, he let his robe flop open. As the boy went to work Michael Vizante smiled a terrible smile.

The Power.

DCS Nagato
Nadir Jump Point, Benjamin
Benjamin Military District
Draconis Combine

Tai-Sho Branagan is determined to show his best, reflected Minoru Kurita as he reviewed ISF provided reports from throughout the Sphere. The *Nagato* was an older model battleship, her crew reviews by both the Admiralty and the ISF had honored them with the Coordinator’s presence as he traveled to Earth. The powerful flagship *Musashi* was undergoing a refit to its sensor array and was sidelined for the next few months. The *Nagato*’s crew was determined to surrender nothing to the newer ship, which brought a prideful smile to Minoru’s face.

If the ride goes as well as I expect it will, some reward is in order, perhaps adding the Chrysanthemum to her banner.

Putting aside such thoughts for the moment, he returned to the distasteful matter at hand. Marik, the man never failed to disappoint. John Davion may have his overbearing sense of nobility, but the man came at you straight. Liao’s might be sneaky, although Barbara was fairly straightforward, but they were not petty.

It is true though, politics does make strange bed fellows.

Minoru was sure that some believed the Christian Hell was freezing over with John Davion seconding the Combine call to censure Kenyon Marik. That the decadent fool of a Steiner was backing the Captain-General led Minoru to admit they might be right. Calling up Amanda Cameron’s file he looked at the smiling face before him.

You will hate me in years to come child, but for now see the Dragon’s benevolent side.

Long years as the leader of the mighty Draconis Combine were often filled with intrigue, complicated choices, and shades of gray. Yet sometimes choices were amazingly simple and clear. That Kenyon Marik’s dishonor had to be answered was as obvious as a nova against the black of space.

So too was the other choice that lay ahead of him. That Kerensky was a fine General was without doubt, but as Regent? *Wasn't that what got us here in the first place?* Minoru stretched, easing the tension in his neck.

And a sixteen year old girl, strong though she may be is hardly fit to rule Humanity. Not now, too much has happened, first Richard's stupidity, then ten years with no one at the helm. The Cameron's may have been great once, but that day is gone. In the end, only the strongest will give us order, stability, only the Dragon.

Davion, now there was the challenge. Not only the strongest of the other Council Lords, but he has the weight of law behind him. Law that could sway Kerensky. Another challenge, what would the Regent do, with the weight of the SLDF behind him. The old Kerensky, would bow to the law, and in the end there was no choice, Kurita must follow or be destroyed.

His son would fight, and burn, Jinjiro would welcome the conflict. The DCMS, strong as it was, would collapse within four years, five at most under assault from the Star League. In the background the newsfeed was reviewing the recent *Kurita Crisis*. Isokoru's poor discarded children. *They* were Star League now, his old classmate, and teacher to his son.

In the end John Davion would get his way, Richard would have his last laugh. Kerensky, this old withered husk, was a different matter. Director Darius Indrahah had come to him with an ISF study. Disbelief mixed with both sorrow and an odd sense of opportunity coursed through Minoru. The hard copy lay on his desk like a talisman. Whether it was one of fortune for the Combine or damnation Minoru Kurita didn't know.

Analysis of behavioral algorithms reveals 88% probability of neurotoxin damage to subject's personality centers. Damage most likely occurred during the retreat from New Vandenburg when intelligence reveals a cockpit breach under HazMat conditions. Sarin-k present at time of breach, damage likely to be progressive with time, however psychosis is inevitable.

Chaos reigns, The Coordinator thought, until the strongest impose order. And the Dragon will always be the strongest.

In Unity City....

The man's nasal voice grated on Aleksandr Kerensky. If he had to listen to one more of these damn fools... Fortunately Amanda was spared this last round of nonsense, inwardly he smiled at the memory. Kenyon Marik had dragged the bottom of the well for this lot, and the officious academics and lawyers hadn't liked being told by General McCormack that regardless of their findings the people of Earth really didn't care. They had their Director-General.

His aide Juilo DelaQuinto whispered a quick message in his ear. It appeared Marik's team had finally reached an arrangement with the Terrans. This latest sticking point had been over access to the Cameron Mausoleum. The need to verify the source of the DNA samples used as the benchmark for Amanda's lineage vied with an almost paranoid Terran need for security around the site.

Dr. Konrad Husak the head of the FWL delegation didn't look pleased but Aleks couldn't imagine the man ever looking happy. From his pinched constipated expression, whiny voice and complete lack of tact or social grace every one of the Star League functionaries and half of the man's own colleagues looked ready to shoot him.

The one saving grace had been Duke Elliot Kell the head of the Lyran part of the delegation. A military man, he'd had little patience for the Mariks, but an almost guilty sympathy for the Cameron girl. Aleks' file on the man said he had agitated for a greater LCAF involvement in the fight against Stefan Amaris.

Peck, peck, peck you can see them can't you Aleks? The Vultures circle around you.

Barely controlling the urge to bolt up and look for the source of Stefan Amaris' voice, Aleks controlled his expression and breathing as Duke Kell came up to him.

"General Kerensky, are you well?" The man's expression was slightly concerned.

"Oh, yes, yes your Grace, I'm fine, just this farce has gone on far too long."

The younger man nodded a faint smile on his face.

"While I understand the Archon's aims here the Captain-General's motivations for sending this crew..." Kell shook his head angrily. Lowering his voice he smiled conspiratorially.

"But then I don't think Kenyon Marik knows what the hell he's doing."

“You know of course the Captain-General and I have a history?” Motioning the younger man to the small table stocked with drinks and sandwiches he grabbed a bottle of Gatorade. At the Lyran noble’s odd look he chuckled.

“Ahh yes, the mechwarrior’s drink, after a couple of decades in the field you tend to forget there are other choices.”

Sipping on the not quite orange flavored drink, he reflected on the twists life through you as he gave Elliot Kell his take on the man known as “The Eagle.” His heavy handedness in that civil disturbance so many years ago, the innate arrogance of the man.

“...but never make the mistake of thinking Kenyon’s stupid, far from it. But every decision he makes is about what is good for Kenyon.”

“Just about sums up the House Lords in general.”

At Aleks’ surprised look, Elliot laughed. The Marik delegates shot him nasty looks from across the room but the duke just smiled back.

“Oh yes General, I have no illusions about Robert’s aims here, he wants trade concessions, rebuilding contracts and something we had been promised by the Camerons for decades.”

Aleks knew exactly what he was getting at.

“The SDS.”

“Yes please.” Kell said innocently.

“More than even BattleMech technology, having M-7 drones around Alarion, Tamar, and Tharkad is an advantage we would very much like to possess.”

Aleks smiled sadly thinking of his parents and the thousands of his soldiers and sailors who would disagree. Elliot saw the look and realization dawned on his face.

“Gods above, General, I’m sorry, I did not mean...”

“Nonsense your Grace, just remember the old adage, be careful what you wish for.”

Words to live by, whispered the voice of Amaris.

Unnerved by the whisper in his head he used the break to excuse himself. Retreating to the men’s room, Aleks splashed cold water on his face. Looking up in the mirror he saw for just an instant the dead dictator standing behind him smiling. Spinning around in shock he saw the room was empty.

Damn it, Aleks, you killed the man, saw him die.

The voice came once again.

You may have killed me Kerensky, but you’ll never be rid of me.

Chapter 5; One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

The hardest time for me, after the war at least, was the day I realized I had stopped thinking of myself as a Davion of the Federated Suns and began to think of myself as Sarah from New York. Uncle John’s arrival was the wakeup call that it wasn’t permanent. There were wonderful times despite the stupidity of the Council Lords, but like all good things, this too would come to an end.

For that I would never forgive the men and women of who would become the Successor Lords. Not even Uncle John. After all they couldn’t even show the common sense and decency to keep the Star League together, what right did they have to claim the title of First Lord.

Sarah Elizabeth Gilmour-Davion to Amanda Sinclair; Unpublished Letters ca 2810.

Brooklyn, North American Administrative District

Terra, Terran Hegemony

16 May, 2780

Getting used to this again, thought Liz as she waited on the checkout line. *A full shopping cart, okay so not quite the variety before the occupation, but no need to worry about informants or Mako hunter-killer teams in the goddamn produce isle.* That had happened, once. Still some turtle dropped a bottle of seltzer behind her, Liz had come close to blowing the woman’s head off with her snub .45.

Scott had laid a hand on her arm before she could draw her snub and smiled that little boy smile of his. That was something she was getting used to too. That particular smile was for her alone was a good feeling, although scary at times.

Funny how the stuff before the Fat Man that was so mundane, like grocery shopping, dating, even picking out a dress for a wedding seems so surreal now. That thought brought out her trademark lopsided grin. *Okay so this particular wedding isn’t so mundane. Not with the bridal party having names like Cameron and Davion. There’s even a Kurita on the guest list.*

When she'd seen that one, she'd had to ask Scott about it. He'd laughed and shrugged it off. "That's Frankie, she was with us from New York to just before we broke the Unity Line." Francine "Little Frankie" Kurita had been, she'd learned, a guest of House Amaris, for pretty much the entire coup. Partying in Rio on the day the hammer fell, she'd spent three years in hiding before being betrayed and caught by Amaris' goons.

Upon the liberation of New York, Frankie had used her connection to Isokoru Satoh to score a 'MechJock billet with the Ryukaze; the Draconis Combine volunteers who now made up almost a quarter of the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment. Those same Kuritans were currently giving both the CIB and Prince Davion's security fits as he would be giving away the bride.

Big changes were due for all of them she mused, her discussion the other night with Scott was one of the biggest. Somewhere deep inside the urge to get as far from her old life as possible had surfaced. A chance comment by Elissa Valentin at Bruce's little shindig had sparked an old dream.

Back in the day, she had almost joined friends from high school to jaunt across Europe teaching English. She'd gone to VMI instead. Liz had mentioned it almost off handed to Scott over fresh off the grill burgers. He'd thought about it for a second and surprised her with his answer. She'd expected him to chuckle and dismiss the idea.

"Well I've got some time coming to me, I mean we all do, and if it works out..." he'd paused then looking thoughtful.

"Let me talk to Bruce about it, I mean nothing is set in stone." Scott had finished. In German. At her look of confusion he had said it again in French. And Spanish. She'd laughed then. As it turned out all the Tigers spoke at least three languages. Early in the campaign a shipment of care packages from the Lyran Commonwealth had come in. No one knew if the inclusion of over a hundred different language learning programs had been deliberate or not, but...

"Just imagine being cooped up in a tin can for years on end, pretty much the only time you get to go play outside it's with the RimJobs."

Scott as a rule wasn't obsessed with war stories something for which Liz was grateful for. A comment here or there but only to illustrate a point. Like now.

"After about three months a sergeant with John Zazula's engineers had made a practice of trying to learn all the "Flavor" languages of the Great Houses. Davy French, the Capellan version of Mandarin, Drac Japanese and so on."

"Caught on huh?"

"Yeah, although the record for most languages goes to a lieutenant with the Sinclair Fusiliers. I think he speaks eight major languages and twenty or so dialects."

"Jeez."

"Yeah, so if we wanna do this we'd better get in before the whole SLDF gets the bug."

The man in question came up with a bag of Davion *naranji*, his nose wrinkling.

"If you don't like them, why buy them?"

"They're good in the morning, but gods what I'd do for some Florida oranges."

"Gonna be a while, by next year from what I hear on the news."

Scott shook his head sighing.

"Sometimes I forget just how bad..." He trailed off maybe thinking he was getting into dangerous territory.

"How bad it got?", she'd nudged him with her elbow, "I'm not made of glass, honey."

He chuckled ruefully.

"I know, that's what I love about you."

"Really?"

"Well, um..."

Nudging him again she looked off down the line of civilians waiting at the checkout lanes.

"Can't take it back now, you love me."

"Liz..." Scott turned bright red.

"Scott Mackenzie loves me."

Leaning against him, she smiled smugly. He shook his head and changed the subject.

"Talked to B about the teaching gig."

Looking up at him, Liz waited for him to go on, oddly she was expecting a flat no. Not because of Scott, just because that was how Elizabeth Cynthia Hazen's personal life generally went.

Scott grinned, maybe zapping her back for the Love bit.

“And..” Liz prompted.
 “I just have to sign a few papers and I’m on semi-active reserve.”
 “Just like that?” She asked in relief.
 “Just like that, oh if the shit hits the fan, I’ll get recalled but I’ll even be getting half pay, so we won’t starve.”
 “Nice.”
 “Although there is one restriction though.”
Here it comes, she thought.
 “I just can’t leave....
 ...before the wedding.” Bruce had finished with a teasing grin.
‘Rat had laughed, sitting over coffee and a light breakfast in the Major’s tiny office at West Point.
“Wouldn’t think of it, sir.”
“You’ll keep your military pocketcomp, and you will need to check in at any local Star League military bases and log your itinerary. But other than that you’ll be good to go.”
He’d paused, tying back his trademark mane of hair, apparently not even the somewhat conservative atmosphere at the Point could get him to cut it. Not that there was anything in the Defense Force regs as long as “The Officer’s appearance may not interfere with that Officer’s conduct or performance. Likewise the Officer’s grooming must be as neat and clean as made possible by the circumstances of his current assignment.” The old I can crawl around in the mud passage.
‘Rat sensed a bit of reservation in his old friend.
“You okay with this, I mean we are on stand down.”
“Yeah, just hell.. ten years is a long time.”
“Same planet boss, don’t sweat it.”
“Just don’t hesitate to call if you need anything.” He grinned then, “Liz is a great gal, I’m happy for you.”
“Thanks, wow, so this is life after...huh?”
Looking around, Bruce nodded a satisfied smile on his face.
 “Yep.”

Fort Hamilton, New York
North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
20 May, 2780

Dido Moran looked over the twelve new recruits with a practiced eye. Eleanor Soldano and Arthur Kowalski were bound for the Black Cats, serving their senior years last few months as part of the Tigers, a sort of intern program. Hand to hand training was mandatory under the Major’s new training regime. It was not Didi’s idea of a good time, but Bruce had called it “on the job training” whatever that meant.

Shelley Kimball had shipped out last week with the rest of the Eridani Light Horse. They’d had a great night out to say goodbye and everything had been fine. The next day as she had watched the *Red Legs* boost the next day, Didi had wondered at the lump in her throat.

It’s not like I expected her to marry me.
 “Escrima’s roots go back to the Philippine Islands in the Pacific, several hundred years ago.”
I shouldn’t be getting all worked up.
 “It is the Martial Art that allowed the civilians of those islands to put the fear of god into the occupying Imperial Japanese Army and Marines, think of them like all those bad stories about the Draconis Combine you’ve all heard only real.”
I never get worked up, I’m in for some great sex and some laughs, nothing more.
 “Unlike most other Martial Arts, Escrima’s style doesn’t matter whether you have a knife, a sword, or your bare hands.”
Ahh, shit you fell for the whole country girl routine.
 “The form we use in the SAS is that of the Philippine Marines, some of the toughest bunch of lifetakers and heartbreakers you will ever meet.”
Why, now damn it. Hell I was hoping to enjoy life for a while.

“This fine and storied form of making the other guys dead is what I shall endeavor to teach you now.”

Well, at least this crap should take my mind off things.
And it did for a while.

Two hours later having worked up a good sweat, she noticed Colonel Winter sitting on the bench watching the exercises. Telling the recruits to take ten she strode over grabbing a towel and wiping her face and neck.

“Boss, what’s up?”

“Didi, you’re in Sarah’s bridal party?”

“Yeah, me, Lady Cameron, Justine, Gracie, Kei and Yuri, why?”

“CIB, Diplomatic Services and the MIIO have been up my ass about this wedding, I never did check either the guest list or the bridal party.”

Didi smiled then.

“Didn’t occur to me either, sir.”

Sam nodded needing to put it into words.

“Major Bruce Gilmour’s wedding will have three members of the Davion royal family, one member of the Kurita clan and two former members of the Draconis Elite Strike Teams.”

“Not to mention the former commandant of the Sun Zhang Academy Cadre as one of the honor guard.”

“Crap”

“Yes sir. Plus the Director-General sir.”

“Crap”

Christian Traumintieri stepped out of his office and found Justine Sinclair waiting for him. After the past few months he’d given up trying to talk to her. Despite what he was generally typecast by people as because of his size, when it came down to women he was never good at being assertive. So after a few calls, Justine had never returned and the whole Donner affair Christian had settled into a resigned acceptance of the situation.

“You didn’t show at B’s party?” She said.

“Wasn’t in the mood.” He strode past her into the corridor.

“I missed you.”

That stopped him dead.

“You, Justine, I.” Collecting his thoughts he went back to his office and motioned her to come in.

When she shut the door he rounded on her.

“You could have damn well fooled me Justine, okay that night may have been more than a mistake physically after the shit you had been through, but damn it who got you to the Hospital after you collapsed.”

Raising her hands Justine admitted; “You, but…”

“Let me finish,” he interrupted. “For gods sakes Justine, even if we never did that again, we’ve been friends for fifteen years, fifteen years ten of them in the worst fight of our lives. You were always there for me then, my best friend.”

He paused to calm himself.

“We fuck once and you throw it all away?”

Justine turned to Christian sharply, pain and outrage on her face.

“It wasn’t like that and you damn well know it!”

Her voice was shaky, but Justine kept on before Chris could interrupt.

“I was raped, Chris.”

He’d seen the medical report, but that was not the same as hearing it.

“All my training,” Justine said, “All my combat prowess meant nothing.”

Her eyes were clear as she spoke but Christian knew it was because all the tears had been used up.

“That night in Unity, Chris I needed that, I just couldn’t deal with what came after, part of me wishes I’d shot Stefan Amaris in the Court.”

“Maybe then you’d have closure”, he said softly, reaching out to hold her. Her head rested against his chest

“I just needed time, though. Bruce, Sarah and Synthia gave that to me.”

She smiled wanly, Chris knew she was thinking about the little girl the Tigers had found that wild night in Astoria.

"I never saw you as a babysitter." The thought made him grin.

Justine gave him her infamous arched eyebrow, but Chris was long immune, so she just smiled back.

"I never thought I'd want children either." She said thoughtfully.

"We've all changed Justine." The thoughts that had been troubling him since Hong Kong bubbled under the surface. "You want kids, Alex is probably going to be a Senator, the Boss will probably retire." At her startled look he nodded. "Yeah, he's gonna wait till Al leaves, then tap Isokoru for the command."

"You don't have a problem with that?" Chris was the senior battalion commander.

"Nope, never wanted it in the first place, the old snake's a damn fine leader, shit he's probably forgot more about running a BattleMech Regiment than I ever knew."

"Anyway, Bruce will bumble along like always, with wife and kid in tow, and I'm a bachelor."

"Speaking of which, did you get your invitation?"

"Yeah," Chris said, "I wasn't going to go."

"You're going." Justine stated, "If you think I'm going stag."

"I guess we could go together...as friends."

"Just friends?" Justine asked a little hurt.

"Just friends," Christian answered feeling whole for the first time since Unity City, "for now."

**SeaTac International Spaceport
North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
25 May 2780**

Francine Kurita looked down the long access tube from the Dropship *Ryu-ichi* at the knot of black clad soldiers waiting for her cousin. Minoru-*sama* strode forward, after a brief pause pulling Francine along in his wake. Jinjiro's eyes narrowed at the reception party and their unfamiliar garb.

<"Father, those can't Star League troops.", he whispered in Japanese, "Those uniforms look almost Draconian.">

<"They are, look again, my son, Amanda Cameron has honored us.">

Francine smiled, recognizing the officer leading the detail. She stepped forward as the Draconis Combine party halted a respectful distance from the portal that led to Terran soil.

<"Honored us, how?"> Jinjiro said to his father. <"These are not her Fusiliers or even the Black Watch.">

<"No Jinjiro, she hasn't sent us a veteran line unit or one of polished honor guards.">

Minoru smiled coldly.

<"Instead she sends her finest killers to receive the Dragon.">

Francine saw the Terran officer's eyebrow raise at the last remark as he waited patiently.

I forgot, he speaks Japanese. She thought as Minoru turned to her and inclined his head.

"*Tono*, I have the honor to introduce to you, my old comrade Major Bruce Gilmour of the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment." Turning to the Major she smiled again. "Major, you have the honor of meeting Kurita Minoru-*sama*, Coordinator of the Draconis Combine and Kurita Jinjiro-*sama* Heir to the Dragon."

Bruce bowed low to each man and held his bow respectfully. Light glinted off the Medal of Valor on its ribbon. As he rose Jinjiro raised his eyebrow at the cross handled Gunslinger's pistols and the Blackstar on his collars. Before Minoru could speak, Jinjiro cut in. Deliberately speaking in heavily accented English, his tone was dismissive.

"A Gunslinger? Please excuse how many duels?"

"None, my lord."

Feigning surprise, the Heir chuckled asking how this could be. Francine grimaced, embarrassed at Jinjiro's little play. Minoru as usual just watched, waiting to see how Bruce would handle his son.

"Duelling is for children my lord, I was trained to kill my opponents not play with them."

"How many kills then?" Gracie Liu and Scott Mackenzie winced at the question.

"Five hundred and twenty six BattleMechs."

Jinjiro, stunned repeated the number. Bruce smiled like his units namesake now. Alex had mentioned New Home once so she knew what was coming.

“I am also responsible for the assassination of Generals Colson, Mituhara, Savederra and Ling on New Home.”

At his words O’Hara and Kitsumi, her cousin’s DEST escort stiffened. Noticing this Bruce chuckled. “Don’t worry boys, as long as the Star League stands I would defend your Coordinator with my life if necessary.” Gesturing for the Kuritans to follow, he led the way out of the passage. “Your former accommodations have been rebuilt to their original specifications.”

Motioning to his guards to stay back a pace, Minoru fell in step with Bruce, lowering his voice.

“I understand you are aquatinted with Major Isokoru Satoh.”

<“Isokoru-*sensei* is both a friend and comrade, *Tono*.”> He replied coolly.

<“I would speak to him *Sho-sa*, if that is possible.”>

<“He was badly used by someone in your government *Tono*.”>

Francine winced inwardly at the barely veiled criticism of Minoru’s censure of the Ryukaze volunteers. *Careful B, this isn’t some Terran politician you’re dealing with.* Minoru however took it in stride. As the group passed through the; “Welcome to Earth, homeworld of Humanity.”; sign that stood above the entrance to the VIP terminal, three more officers in the black and red dress uniform of the Tigers joined them. Francine recognized Dido Moran, but the other two made her stiffen in shock as did her cousin’s guards. *By the first egg Bruce, you just had to bring them, didn’t you!*

Iuchi Kei and Hatchiwara Yuri wore identical smiles as they faced off against O’Hara and Kitsumi, former members of their old team. Jinjiro turned red then white when he saw them. The Heir to the Dragon reached for a nonexistent sidearm.

“*Chikuso*, O’Hara, Kitsumi kill them!”

As the two DEST operatives began to react both Minoru and Bruce shouted out at the same time.

“*Iie!*”

“Touch a hair on their heads and your diplomatic status on Terra will be revoked!”

At their lords voice the two operatives stopped dead in their tracks. Kei and Yuri hadn’t even moved, watching the whole scene with the same mocking grins. Jinjiro turned to his father angrily.

<“The Terrans insult you Father, these two disserted their post at your side! They are under a death sentence.”>

With his usual detachment, Minoru turned to his son.

<“I am aware of that, as were they when we discussed the matter.”>

Jinjiro was speechless as was Francine.

<“The Terrible Two felt their honor lied with the Ryukaze, and after their sterling service how could I, as their lord, refuse them.”> Minoru continued. <“With poor Drogo trapped on Earth, we could not be seen as aiding the SLDF, so the Ryukaze knew they could not return, even now.”>

This explains a lot. Francine thought, remembering her tumultuous homecoming. Bruce also nodded thoughtfully. When Minoru turned back to him, the young Major smiled.

“I will ask Isokoru-*sensei*, if he would have time for his friend Minoru-*sama*, I’m sure he will say yes.”

Minoru smiled as Bruce paused.

“And before I forget Lord Kurita, welcome to Earth, and may your efforts here be beneficial to all mankind.”

Unity Barracks, Vancouver Island
North American Administrative District
Terran
Terran Hegemony
30, May 2780

“Damn my bones Colonel, you were right, less than an hour!”

Samuel Winter looked down from *Bertha*’s cockpit with a grin. Standard DropShip debarkation procedure at any Star League facility had technicians off load the massive fighting machines using specially designed load lifters. Although totally safe the process took two hours per battalion. The Black Tigers had, since New Home, debarked their own machines manually, considering any duty station a possible war zone.

The Master Armorer for the Unity Barracks, Joel Colby of the Sinclair Fusiliers, had his doubts but the MechWarriors of the 90th had swiftly and efficiently taken their machines from the DropPort to the

barracks and racked the machines in their bays. The Unity Barracks were large enough to hold the entirety of the Royal Black Watch, plus the mixed brigade assigned to the capital's defense.

The Sinclair Fusiliers had taken over the duties of the now defunct Black Watch. For the Conference Director-General Sinclair had requested the 90th HAR and the 42nd Royal CAAN to form a temporary "Terran Guard" was the term tossed around. In the massive bay the two hundred and eleven MechWarriors of the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment (Independent) stood waiting their commander.

"Years of practice Master Armorer, where is she?"

"The Director General is entering the building now."

"Thanks Joel."

Grinning the other man strode off to attend his crew. Spotting the young ruler's party entering the bay he took his place nodding to Major Gilmour.

"COMPANY, TENN-SHUN!"

The echoes of the Regimental Gunslinger's voice were overcome by the crack of almost two hundred boots against the concrete. Amanda Cameron smiled as she began to walk down the front rank pausing to share a quiet laugh with Justine Sinclair and shake hands with John Zazula who she knew from the reconstruction. Dressed in a kilt and sash of Cameron plaid over the Tiger dress jacket the Director-General's dress had the desired effect.

She may not be the first lord yet, but every one of my Furballs would die for her. Something for Kenyon Marik to think about.

"Colonel Winter, I wanted to be the first to welcome your return to Unity City."

Coming to attention Sam clicked his heels and bowed formally.

"We are ever at your service Lady Cameron."

"If I may address your troops?"

Sam gestured and stepped back.

Looking over the assembled warriors, Amanda paused briefly. So different in flavor from her Fusiliers, but equally ready to march at her command. It would be political suicide but she knew if she ordered it men and women like Dawn McCormack and Samuel Winters would load their troops up and travel to Atreus. Once there Bruce, her friend's fiancée or someone like him would bring her Kenyon Marik's head.

Or they would die trying, she had no doubts enough of the Star League Royal Command remained that they would make short work of Kenyon's household forces, but the cost.

Could I really do that to Sarah? Send her beloved to his death?

"Warriors of the 90th I welcome you once more to Unity City. The first time you were here you brought down a tyrant and ended a war. This time I have a favor to ask of you. I ask you to help me to prevent another one."

Pausing for a moment Amanda's eyes met Bruce's and he smiled.

"The Lords of Humanity descend upon us here, each with their own agenda some come to us as friends, others see us as weak and ripe for the picking. Some could walk down any street on Terra unmolested, because of the aid they have given us. Others and you know of whom I speak..."

Amanda smiled at the round of chuckles.

"Others despite our feelings will need to be protected from their own stupidity. I ask you my Tigers to lend me your strength. The House Lords know your reputation, your ferocity and they will feel the weight of your claws on their necks. I'm hoping this will give them pause, to let them know we mean business. That this conference is about restoring the Star League, not about self serving politics or petty rivalries."

"You are soldiers of the Star League Defense Force, the finest men and women Humanity has to offer and I could order you to do this. I won't."

"Instead, I will ask you. Will you do this for me?"

The 42nd CAAN had cheered her, her Fusiliers bound to her in blood and fire raised a Huzzah. The Black Tigers, what did they do?

They roared.

Fists in the air eyes alight with fire they roared. Amanda heard cries of "Hell Yeah" and "Damned Straight", mixed with "You got it Honey" and some things not worth repeating. At the doorway to the base commons Ian stood with a satisfied smile while Dawn looked on wide eyed.

Samuel Winter stepped up in front of her, and it was then she saw just how tired his eyes looked, how much more gray there was in his hair. Despite this as the rancor died down his voice was strong.
“Lady Amanda the 90th Heavy Assault is yours to command.”

The chime of her doorbell interrupted her phone conversation with Alex Winter. Francine Kurita signed off and answered the door to find her cousin leaning against the corridor wall.

“*Tono*, is it time for the reception already?”

“No, no I just wanted to see if you’d eaten.”

Motioning Minoru to come in, Francine shrugged.

“I had figured we’d grab food there.”

Minoru grimaced, he hated Japanese food, she remembered and Richard had always had traditional Japanese delicacies laid out.

“Don’t worry, cousin, Isokoru picked the fare tonight.”

“*So ka?*”

She smiled at his surprise.

“Amanda Cameron flew in the chefs from that place in Sicily you liked so much. Apparently even the RimJobs appreciated good southern Italian cooking.”

Plopping down bonelessly on the big leather couch, her cousin looked less like one of the most feared lords in human space, than that rakish older uncle you always adored when you were a kid. Sitting on the divan across from him she poured two cups of iced Hawaiian Kona, black, no sugar. Sipping the coffee, her cousin asked about her time with the Hussars.

“It has been great, they learn quickly, and I only had to kill two of them to get past the “I’m a girl” bit.”

She looked at Minoru suddenly.

“It seems someone posted gun camera footage of me on Dragon’s Eye.”

The blog and media sharing site, that was so popular in the Combine even the dread Internal Security Force rarely screwed with, had under the handle “Mini-me” received a complete set of her exploits. The Combine’s lack of action during the Amaris crisis was a sore point in all levels of Kurita society. Even with the iron hand of the ISF filtering everything, people just *knew*. But then years of living in the closely controlled media of the Draconis Combine made as Al had put it once; “Dracs better at filtering through bullshit than anyone else in the Star League.”

And of course she knew just who “Mini-me” was.

“Tell Director Indrahah I said thank you.”

He grinned impishly.

“Your friend who gave us the lift from the DropPort, *Sho-sa* Gilmour, handled Jinjiro deftly enough.”

“Royalty doesn’t impress New Yorkers much. I wouldn’t leave Jinjiro-*kun* alone with Bruce though, unless you want *Zabu* to succeed.”

Minoru looked at her a bit sadly.

“Jinjiro will behave, or I will have his head, he knows this.”

Changing the subject, knowing the whole affair pained him, went over her itinerary.

“You saw Isokoru last night.”

Nodding, he smiled a warm true one this time.

“We had dinner and drinks at Dempsey’s on the Sound, another thing about Earth that should never change.”

“Never been there.”

“Paul McHugh’s still there, go get the corned beef and pint of Guinness, and tell him Minoru sent you.”

“You’re going to put O’Hara and Kitsumi in their graves trying to keep track of you.”

“Nonsense, they were two tables over. No one will bother you in that place, it’s a rule older than the Terran Hegemony.”

Francine looked at Minoru with a raised eyebrow.

“You are more the student of history than I am *Tono*.”

“In the *Dictum Honorarium* too.”

She just looked at him.

“It is!”

“Yes cousin.”

“So have you picked out your dress yet.”

“Oh, you mean the wedding...”

“*Hai.*”

“I had the diplomatic attaché forward a request to Lady Amanda. She recommended a local designer who had some stuff I liked.”

“I will have to get myself a new suit, Moe Ginsberg in New York I think”

“I’m not tracking, *Tono.*”

“Your invitation did say plus one didn’t it.”

Arnold Collins sat across from his old friend and rival. Taking a moment to sip at his tea he collected his thoughts. Ian Sinclair had always been a strong proponent of the Terran Hegemony, Arnold knew that. Lately however the man had attracted some unwelcome attention with both his words and his actions. Knowing of their relationship, Aleksandr Kerensky had dispatched General Collins to inquire about his intentions.

“It’s not just that she’s moving the Hegemony capitol Ian, it’s you, your stance with the Royals, you’re really rocking the boat.”

Ian looked up sharply.

“Aye, ‘tis true Arn’ and I mean to rock it further.”

“How so?”

Ian put down his cup and flicked on the holo screen. In the center of the map the cool blue of the Terran Hegemony shone, dwarfed by the five Great Houses around it. Along the edge of the map were a long series of lists representing units of the Star League. The second column however was made up of the Royal Command. The heading of *that* list shocked him.

“You want to resurrect the Hegemony Armed Forces?”

“Absolutely.”

Fixing Ian with a cool stare he asked; “Why?”

“It should be obvious Arn’, I hear a lot of talk about how we failed the Star League, but very little about how it failed us.”

Holding off his friends outraged reply with a raised hand.

“The structure of the SLDF, look at it the way Professor Dalton taught us. You’ll see what Stefan Amaris saw.”

Arnold knew the answer already, Ian however was the one to actually say it. The Royal Command of the Star League Defense Force crewed and equipped solely by members of the Terran Hegemony with the finest technology available. Ostensibly these units *were* the Hegemony Armed Forces. Their subordination to the SLDF was seen publicly as a mark of Terran commitment to the League.

The real reason however was to provide a shadow army to watch over the forces of the member states. The flaw was obvious. After so many years with this state of affairs the Royals were known for their devotion to the Star League as a whole. Arnold himself was a prime example. As a result the Hegemony *had* no military.

The problem was mirrored in the government as well. Arnold could even hear Professor Dalton’s New Dallas drawl. *Add one weak willed ruler, and one scheming madman and well...*

“On the surface Ian, I see your point, but do you really think now is the time?”

“More than ever, the Hegemony must be able to stand on its own or from now on we will just be a puppet state of the Star League and this will happen all over again.”

“But the League...”

“Right now the League is Kenyon Marik, and Minoru Kurita worst case, John Davion the best.”

“Alright, I hear you Ian, the General won’t like it though.”

Ian got a familiar look on his face, Arnold knew it well, he was deciding whether or not to bring something up. *Good, something that we won’t be automatically in conflict on.*

“Out with it Ian, this isn’t about the Hegemony is it.”

“Arn’ has the General seemed strange to you, lately.”

Arnold started to make the same old excuses he’d made for the past couple of months, but something stopped him. Maybe it was the distraction, or the shaking in Kerensky’s hands. Maybe it was his refusal to see a physician.

“Yeah, something’s really wrong, the others, Liz Hazen, Kat and the kids, they don’t want to see it.”

“You know I...he’s Aleksandr Kerensky damn it.”

“Yeah, look with all we’ve got on our plates I didn’t want to add any more crap, but shit, Ian you may be right here, let me talk to some people.”

“Thanks Arn’, funny when we were fighting our way here sometimes it seemed like the war would never end, now that it’s over...”

“...time just moves too damned fast.” Arnold finished.

Amanda Cameron waited for Sarah to finish reading the documents her uncle had produced at their last meeting. The First Prince had been so earnest in his hopes to restore the League to normalcy it was almost a religious thing. While thankful for his help over the past year, and his timely advice about handling Kenyon Marik was a relief, she wasn’t sure about handing over the whole kit as Ian had put it.

Sarah, who knew Prince John for most of her childhood, had become an invaluable resource both for her knowledge and her skills as a diplomat. Within the past month the other woman had risen to become Amanda’s chief aide. Despite her family ties, Amanda knew Sarah would give her honest opinions.

Putting down the data pad Sarah paused to collect her thoughts. The older woman could be almost obsessive about precision. Finally she spoke up.

“A lot of this is moot, while it does have the force of law behind it, Uncle John is hardly going to try to usurp General Kerensky as Regent. Ultimately it depends upon what you want to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you intend, as a lot of people assume, to take the throne of First Lord, then you have the option of having John Davion the Regency until you reach your majority. General Kerensky then has the option to either resume his duties as General of the Army or retire.”

“God knows he deserves to have some peace, but you’ve got something else in mind.”

Sarah grinned.

“Even if you choose to keep Kerensky on as Regent having the threat of John Davion just sitting in the wings should keep Minoru Kurita and Barbara Liao in check. On top of which my uncle has no love for Kenyon Marik, so you’ll have that in your corner too.”

“Kurita threw me for a loop twice already, both with his condemnation of Kenyon Marik, and then he arrives months early.”

“Based on his past actions, the Coordinator has always been unpredictable, but I believe Marik’s little stunt is what brought him here. As you know Kenyon Marik’s arrival has been pushed up to July.”

Amanda chuckled then and Sarah looked at her puzzled.

“What?”

“He won’t make it till at least the end of August. Sadly his WarShip will suffer a coolant failure at the border of the Hegemony and be unable to cross the border due to bureaucratic snafus until then.”

“Sweet.”

“Thank Minoru for the WarShip.”

Sarah’s surprise was evident as she looked the question.

“He said it was *inconvenient* for Kenyon to arrive before *his* people could go over the data collected by Marik’s physicians.”

Concern on her face Sarah asked if Combine physicians had examined her.

“Dr. Matsu from the Order of Five Pillars, he was so sweet. He explained that the House of Kurita was satisfied with the Star League Defense Force findings and went on to give me a basic physical.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, he was outraged at my diet, I really haven’t been eating well and he got together with Dr. Singh, my personal physician.” Amanda laughed, shaking her head. “I am on a strict diet, to be maintained under any circumstances, they even got Ian in on it.”

“Not to horrible I hope?”

“Ian or the food?”

For a moment the pair were just young girls giggling about a boy. Amanda recovered first.

“Seriously, it’s all stuff I like to eat anyway and while Lieutenant MacRae can be a little much about making sure I eat, I must say I haven’t felt better in months.”

“Perhaps he could recommend something for butterflies in the stomach.”

“Surely not second thoughts?”

“No, no, just this wedding is getting way bigger than either of us wanted, I was grumbling about it last night and Kei and Yuri threatened to kidnap the two of us and steal away to Vegas.”

“Your two shadows might have a point.”

“The CIB came to see me about them, I didn’t know they were DEST at the time. But ever since Donner they won’t leave my side; except to guard dog Bruce. Kei gets embarrassed if you mention it and mutters about *ninjo* and *giri*. Yuri just shrugs and says this time the Forty Seven Ronin has a happy ending.”

“It’s about acceptance, Sarah, you, Bruce, the 90th even New York gave them a home. What did you tell the CIB?”

“That as a Royal of the Davion line the complement of my bodyguard was my business.”

“You “Nobled” it.”

“I “Nobled” it. Anyway, look on the issue of the Regency, my uncle’s warrant is a win-win situation, let us be your safety net.”

“Your uncle can be a little overbearing Sarah.”

Sarah Elizabeth Davion smiled at that.

“Let me handle Uncle John if and when he does.”

Sarah sat for a moment as if deciding what to say. After a moment, she spoke.

“Jinjiro came to coordinate the censure proceedings with Joshua.”

Amanda’s eyes widened. “Really.”

“Really, God Amanda, he’s creepy, I mean really creepy. Kei and Yuri wouldn’t leave my side while he was there, they never said anything but when Jinjiro got uncomfortable with their presence and Joshua asked them to leave they suddenly lost the ability to speak English. Josh knew what was going on so he didn’t make a big deal about it, but I took the hint and left.”

“They know something about him then.”

“Yeah, again when asked about it they just “forget” their English, but as we left Yuri passed close to Jinjiro and he muttered something under his breath, Amanda, Yuri *growled* at him.”

Amanda shook her head in wonder.

“Minoru seems so... well he’s not what you expect from a Kurita, Jinjiro though.”

Sarah nodded as Amanda went on.

“There was a CIB file I wasn’t supposed to see from my father’s time. The powers that were at the time did an analysis that concluded he is psychotic. Sarah they recommended that if something happened to Minoru...” She trailed off.

“Star League Intel recommended assassination didn’t they?”

“Recommendation that the subject be liquidated *for the stability of the Star League as a whole.*” Amanda said aghast. “It was like they had done it before.”

“They have, Amanda, of course they have, think of the danger of an unstable leader with the resources of a Great House,” Sarah paused, “or the Star League itself.”

“Even my own kin...”

“The stakes are just too high, although they have failed before.”

“Amaris.”

Sarah nodded.

“Among others, it’s not perfect, Amanda, but it works as well as anything else Humanity has tried over the years.”

“Ian said if, after he knew I read the documents if...”

Sarah touched Amanda’s hand then and spoke tersely.

“No, don’t tell me!”

Puzzled Amanda asked...

“...Why? I’m your friend, Amanda, but someday I’ll need to be Duchess Chesterton, and as much as I want to stay Sarah from New York forever...” Sarah trailed off and looked away. Amanda reached out and hugged her fiercely.

“No, don’t even go there, Sarah we’ll be friends forever.” She said with conviction, then grinned. “I mean, if I can’t trust you, who can I trust, after all you’re a Davion.”

And that was the point I was trying to get across honey Sarah thought, keeping her expression pleasant. *You’ve been like a sister to me Amanda, but there are lessons you have to learn even if it is only Earth and the Hegemony you rule.*

**Anchorage, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
6 June, 2780**

Hank Jones grimaced as Kailey changed the channel to the entertainment gossip channel. As the biggest media circus in recent history approached, and with Hollywood still recovering from the occupation, the jackals in the media latched on to anything they could. Case in point Sarah Davion's wedding. *Granted the guest list alone rated coverage, but damn.*

The only high point was the chance of seeing Sinthya. That his sister was happy and seemed to be in a loving home made him smile. He'd discussed with Sonny Cobb snatching the girl, but Cobb's surveillance revealed that she was in good hands.

"Oh I wish we could go." Kailey said.

"We'd never get within a mile, Kay."

She leaned back against him and he enjoyed the smell of her, fresh from the shower. Funny, other people would tell you how they never expected to fall in love, certainly in his entire life as Takeo Amaris, Hank assumed his would be an arranged marriage for political gain. His father had even considered Sarah Davion, or Francine Kurita. But Hank had known in the first week after he'd met her, he loved the bubbly little blonde.

She grinned looking up at him through tousled blonde hair.

"Still a girl can dream can't she?"

Hank grunted.

"Where are the Brothers Derry?"

"At the Laser Park of course, playing MechWarrior." She rolled her eyes. "God knows, we just got over fighting a war and all they want to do is play at it."

"Tis a good thing war is so terrible, lest we begin to love it." He shrugged. "Or some such."

"Who said that?" She asked.

"Some old dead guy or another, funny thing is those old dead guys are usually right."

"Well the war's over, with Kerensky and Cameron in charge and the League back together everything will get better."

Seeing things with eyes educated by a noble's education in politics and warfare sometimes was a curse. Reading between the lines about the Marik accusations, the upcoming Council meeting, and other events, Hank was a little more pessimistic. Kailey spoke with such hope and conviction that Hank didn't want to contradict her.

Whatever gods exist I'll pray to, Kailey, for you to be right, because I'm done with war.

Chapter 6: The Calm Before the Storm

Was it worth it, Was it all a waste of time.

(You can't run from yesterday.)

There's nothing perfect, In this broken paradise.

(You can't run from yesterday.)

Digital Summer; One More Day

Cause and Effect

**Unity City, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
12 June, 2780**

The past week had been a whirlwind of events, dinner with Uncle John, organizing things for the Black Cats so Gracie would be able to handle things while Sarah and I were on our honeymoon. On top of that somehow Kurita Minoru-*sama* got it in his head to have the 'Cats as his personal guard detail. Granted he was entitled to a SLDF detail as befit his position as a Council Lord, but Zeus above did he have to pick us?

Then there was the Bachelor Party. Gods above 'Rat and Alex went all out. Sarah had been surprisingly quiet about that, I expected a full plate of chops, well busted. Gracie however had let slip that her own party had been pretty wild, somebody put Didi in charge. Amanda got *way* drunk, but with a

member of the SAS and two former DEST nothing would get out, the few reporters trying to crash the event were quickly weeded out. Gracie later confided that nobody even knew who they were.

My own little send off had the advantage of Joshua Davion, who had been a notorious rake in his bachelor years. As a result he knew all the tricks. It did make me realize how much I missed about growing up. Spending your teens with a Star League military unit has some definite things to recommend it as a lifestyle choice, but to go to a real college, have choices, be a kid, not likely.

Then again I'm something of a mush, about midway through the party I sneaked off to check in with Gladys and see how my daughter was. In the middle of Gladys ordering me to go back to my party and have a good time, Sarah called me and 'Rat found me chatting happily in the back room of the club we had settled in.

I don't think Scott will ever let me forget that one.

Well today's the big day. I smoothed out my uniform jacket for the tenth time, asked Alex if he had the rings for the twentieth, and generally got on everyone's nerves. Christian finally took me aside forbade me to have anymore caffeine and ordered me to sit down and shut up.

I of course followed orders.

It was then Didi, who was part of my Honor Guard rushed in a bewildered look on her face.

"What?" I asked.

"Minoru Kurita is here."

"Ahhrooo." I said brilliantly.

"Frankie brought him as her "Plus One"!"

They don't train you for this, and I looked wildly around for a brigade of Amaris Dragoons to fight. Anything to get me out of this mess. Okay calm down B. Al will know what to do, he always has a plan.

Alexander Ian Winter looked at me with a blank look and said; "Don't look at me B, I've got nothing."

The high and mighty Colonel Samuel Winter shrugged and said; "Me neither, son."

Joshua looked ready to kill someone, and was no help. But what really decided me on a course of action was Uncle John. The First Prince of the Federated Suns just watched with a small smile on his face. In the end I realized, it didn't matter. Today was all about me and Sarah, unless I allowed it nothing even the Lords of the Great Houses could do would screw it up.

Right then and there it became a tactical problem. A possible hostile is camped in your backfield. Despite this no hostilities are declared. You have a choice. You could go on the offensive. (In this case kick the Coordinator of the Draconis Combine out of your wedding. You do have that right, but again he has not given you cause. He's a guest. You could ignore the problem. This isn't really a choice, you solve nothing and any later problems are on your head.

Lastly you could open diplomatic relations, let him know your strength and show the hand of friendship. Well MechWarrior, what do you do?

You guessed it, I plastered on my warmest smile and went out to greet the Dragon.

Well, that was quick. Minoru Kurita thought as the young Major stepped up to him with an easy grin. Extending his hand to shake Minoru's with a firm grip, Major Gilmour sent the message; *My turf, my rules.*

"<Lord Kurita, this is an unexpected pleasure.>"

Shaking the younger man's hand without hesitation, Minoru returned the smile and the sentiment; *Agreed, I'm not here to start trouble.*

"<Francine-kun was kind enough to invite me after seeing how much Marik little game was annoying me.>"

Bruce turned to Francine, and caught her up in a quick hug.

"Glad you could make it, Frankie, you look great by the way."

Francine who's *Ki* had been troubled for the whole ride over, relaxed visibly. She returned Bruce's embrace then took him by the shoulders to look him up and down.

"<You clean up nicely Bruce, but you still look like a pirate.>" She said mock seriously as she straightened his collar.

"<How else do you think I got Sarah?>" Bruce said innocently bringing a laugh from Minoru. Still smiling Minoru felt the tension in the room drain away. Joshua-san was still pissed, wearing his hanger like a bantam rooster, but John, the old hand he was came over and likewise shook his hand.

Minoru could feel the Davion lord's *Ki* probe for his intentions, although John Davion would never call it that.

"<Minoru-san welcome>" John greeted him.

"So John, a little celebration before we go back to the Marik unpleasantness?"

"Indeed, if these youngsters let us have some fun tonight."

Minoru looked over the mix of people in the Cameron Chapel. Kurita, Cameron, Davion, the strength of the Star League had come together in hope and celebration. In a rite as old as humanity all the old enmities were put aside. For a brief moment Minoru Kurita felt a pang of sorrow for what he knew would come in the next few years. John saw it, but said nothing.

"Let's try not to wear them out, John, it is the Major's wedding day."

Over John's shoulder Minoru noticed Sarah Davion looking out a crack in the dressing room's door. Feeling younger than he had in a while he...

... *winked at me* Sarah thought incredulously. *Minoru Kurita winked at me*

The absurdity of the situation made her laugh as she pulled away from the doorway. Gladys looked up from where she was adjusting the train on Sarah's dress. Her aunt had taken the news calmly enough and that had eased Sarah's nerves considerably.

"Told you, the big bad Snake isn't here to cause trouble."

And...

"Bruce handled that well." A major complement from her aunt.

"Of course he did, Aunt Gladys, after all he's a Gilmour."

Standing up, Gladys wiped a tear away and laid a hand on Sarah's cheek.

"I'm so happy for you dear, you're all I ever wished in a daughter, but damn it you grew up too damn fast."

"I love you Aunt Gladys."

"Always and forever Sarah Beth."

As I stood before the altar with the gang around me, I felt a strange sense of peace. I was surrounded by my family, my true one. For my entire adult life had been spent never knowing what the future would hold. The one constant was the family, the Tigers and Sarah. I reflected on the choices I'd made for a moment as the music began.

But when Sarah came out on her uncle's arm all thoughts fled save one. The call at the bachelor party.

"*No regrets?*" Sarah had asked

"*None.*" I'd answered.

None at all.

Justine sat down next to Christian, smiling up at Bruce as Kei dragged him off to the dance floor. Chris chuckled at the younger man's grimace. *No rest for the wicked*, Justine thought, *Sarah's not going to thank them if they wear Bruce out on his wedding night*. The wedding ceremony had been beautiful, the blushing, smiling bride beautiful in a simple dress of satin and lace, the groom handsome in his dress uniform. The reception was in full swing now; well lubricated guests were letting their hair down.

So this is real life, Justine thought a little amazed.

Sipping her Merlot, she said as much to Chris. Nodding he had a sad little smile on his face. She could tell he was thinking about Kaitlin. She nudged him on the arm.

"C'mon, Christian, you didn't think you were going to get out of this without dancing with me, did you?"

Standing up, he bowed gallantly and extended his arm.

"Never even crossed my mind, Miss Sinclair, could I have this dance?"

Smiling her most radiant smile, Justine put her wine down and headed to the dance floor.

"One thing I don't understand John, is why *Chu-I* Moran slapped your niece's backside with her saber."

John Davion sipped at his Sandeman Port before answering.

"It's an old tradition, supposed to insure fertility on the wedding night."

"Ahh, I see." Minoru Kurita popped a slice of rare prime rib smothered in gravy in his mouth, closing his eyes in pleasure as he chewed. John grinned, he understood.

“Nagamaki and sushi all the way here? I thought the *Musashi's* chef knew better.”

“Came in on the *Nagato*, good ship, but I left in a hurry.”

“Kenyon?”

Minoru nodded.

“Kenyon.”

“Well we will make his life miserable, won't we?”

Raising his glass to meet John Davion's Minoru smiled. Years later John would reflect that that was the only time the Dragon came out that night.

Standing up then the Coordinator nodded to the First Prince.

“If you'll excuse me John, I believe a dance is in order.”

Alex collapsed next to Joshua Davion. Between CJ, Francine, and even Didi he felt like he hadn't sat all night. Josh had stopped glowering at Minoru and started to have some fun, even forming a front against the women to grab some rest and a drink or two.

“So, TerraGov, big difference that.”

“After, the long road to Earth, I don't think it'll be anything I can't overcome.”

Sighing, Joshua shook his head.

“I wish you all the luck, but trust me after one week away from the Regiment, I was ready to run back, even if they demoted me to lance leader.”

Francine wandered over, looking Joshua up and down, she extended a hand, smiling dazzlingly.

“Joshua-*san* you have been sitting down far too long.”

Joshua raised his hands, shaking his head.

“No, no Francine, I'm done, you should ask my father though, he loves to dance.”

She bowed from the waist and sauntered over to the First Prince.

“You know we must be giving your bodyguards fits.” Alex said looking around.

Joshua laughed.

“Not so much, to be honest Al, this is one place where we're absolutely safe.”

Joshua gestured at the crowd.

“Think about it, first and foremost ninety percent of the crowd here are SLDF, none of them would allow anything to happen here in Unity City.” Nodding to Minoru Kurita he went on. “Jinjiro is one thing, but Minoru's would never allow him to get out of hand.”

Raising his glass to Sebastian Green, who was sitting next to Mitchell O'Hara, one of Minoru's personal guard or Otomo. Captain Green, a slim blonde haired officer, raised a glass of apple cider rich and thick with peels and cinnamon, but lacking alcohol.

“Our guards were looking forwards to tonight.”

He turned serious then.

“We can play nice, and I do actually like Francine, but Star League or no our people have too much bad blood. One day I may have to kill her, and I can't ever forget that.” He smiled sadly. “Maybe in another three hundred years we'll be different.”

Watching Minoru Kurita walk over to the table shared by Sarah Davion, Amanda Cameron and Ian Sinclair he fought down the tension in his chest.

“Lady Sarah, may I have this dance?”

Eeep. Sarah's mind went blank for a moment. But she took Minoru Kurita's hand and managed to keep her voice steady.

“<Thank you Minoru-*sama* I would love to.>”

Allowing the Coordinator to lead her to the dance floor, Sarah noted the hush that swept the hall. Out of the corner of her eye she noted Sebastian stiffen, but Minoru's man Mitch whispered in his ear and he chuckled. *Still the valiant knight*, she thought. Her husband, (*Mine now!*) looked on interested, but unconcerned. *He likes Minoru Kurita, and even though the two nations have fought they have nowhere near the bad blood we do.*

As they danced the Duchess of Chesterton and the Coordinator of the Draconis Combine chatted idly. Acting the gallant older gentleman, Minoru complemented her gown, and the ceremony, and asked about her future plans. As they talked about her work with the Bureau of Star League Affairs, and Bruce's teaching position at West Point, they carefully avoided talk about Kenyon Marik. Now was not the time.

Mariah Giotto, the one reporter allowed at the scene had shot almost the whole dance and now looked at a loss as John Davion joined them on the floor with Francine on his arm, followed by Amanda Cameron and Ian Sinclair. After so much war, scenes of peace like this made Sarah wish this night would last forever.

“That would not be a bad thing, Sarah; perhaps it will even come true.”

Blushing she hadn't meant to speak out loud, but Minoru looked down at her openly and somewhat sadly.

“You don't believe it will, though?”

He thought for a moment, and then said something surprising.

“I brought you no gift, Lady Sarah, so let me offer you some words of wisdom.”

Minoru saw he had Sarah's full attention.

“Peace is a prize, not a right, your friend Amanda, if she wants to ensure peace for her realm she must act to take it. The path of neutrality will not serve her. You can help her see that as her friend, Kenyon will retreat if you hit him back. His snide insinuations cannot survive under the light of truth and honor. But he will not be the first”

It took all her training not to be frozen in shock at the Dragon's earnest words. She smiled at him warmly then.

“<Thank you Minoru-sama your wisdom may be the best gift of all.>”

Now why did I say that? Minoru Kurita thought. All his training told him the Terrans were weak, the Davions, though strong fighters were hopelessly idealistic. *And yet...* They had given his old friend Isokoru, who even now was sitting among the rest of Major Gilmour's honor guard, a place of honor. The Major himself had conducted himself like a true son of the Dragon when they had first met.

And the fragile rose of a girl dancing with him now had a core of steel. When he had imparted his advice he had felt her *Ki* probe his. Inexpertly done, like a gentle caress, yet hiding an inner strength not unlike that of his cousin Francine.

Leaving the Davion girl with her husband Minoru said his good-byes and collected his guards. Pausing at the door he looked back at the revelers. *A storm is coming my friends, you must be ready.* It had been a thought he'd had before but for some reason the thought no longer pleased him.

“Congratulations Bruce.”

I turned to see Sebastian Green standing behind me. Tall and slender with blonde hair and a pencil thin moustache, he'd certainly filled out since our friendly rivalry over Sarah so many years ago. A sad smile on his face he extended his hand. Taking it I pulled him into a quick hug.

“It's good to see you Sebastian, damn it's been a long time.”

Slapping me on the back, he returned both the hug and the grin. On New Avalon, rivalry or no, we'd been fast friends. Although shy and often tongue tied back then he was a loyal friend and a good guy to have around in general.

“So it looks like you got the girl, old man.” I'm exactly one year older.

“Yeah, I'd say sorry, but...”

“Just take care of her, Bruce.” The grin was gone. If he'd been anyone else I'd have been annoyed, but puppy dog or not, I knew he loved her too.

“Hey, bucko, it's me you're talking too.”

That same old shy smile broke out into a grin. And he pushed a finger into my chest.

“Careful, you bloody yank, one day Sarah might just realized the mistake she made.”

Looping my arm around his neck I yanked my oldest friend towards the bar, looking a question at Uncle John, who nodded waving us onward.

“C'mon punk, let's have a drink, we've got a lot of catching up to do.”

Bruce and Sarah were dancing, the last song of the night. Enough alcohol had been consumed that half the Black Tigers were hangovers in the making. *One advantage to not drinking* he mused as Liz settled in next to him. *Still, I don't think I'll need to eat for at least a week.* A thought occurred to him.

“Remember, at Dempsey's at the sound, what I said about getting through life?”

“Yeah.”

“Well we just survived Bruce's wedding. Oww!”

Liz had turned and poked him in the gut.

“It was a beautiful wedding.”

“Yeah, yeah it was.”

“But I know what you mean, Minoru Kurita and John Davion chowing down together like old squadmates.”

“And dancing the night away, I think Kelly’s half in love with him.”

“Davion or Kurita?”

“Yes.”

Liz laughed and sipped at her coffee. Raising her cup she grinned.

“Here’s to survival.”

FWLN *Agamemnon*
Unnamed Border System
Terran Hegemony
18 June, 2780

Kenyon Marik raged inwardly at the bland expression on the Star League Captain’s face. Outwardly he kept calm as Admiral Sincowicz attempted to negotiate passage. After two weeks delay, waiting for a control rod to replace the faulty one that took out two engineering compartments. Another ten days of repairs with no vessel capable of handling Kenyon’s whole staff in range. And now this bureaucratic nonsense.

“Yes Admiral,” the Star League officer was braying, like an Atrean sheep, “I am aware of your passenger, however General Kerensky’s declared state of emergency for the Terran Hegemony is still in effect.”

The Captain smiled humorlessly.

“As members of a foreign power we simply cannot allow you to proceed. You will hold here until we receive authorization”

“Sir I must remind you, the Free Worlds League is a member of the Star League and Lord Marik is a member of that body’s ruling council.”

“Perhaps, Admiral if you remembered that ten years ago, if Lord Marik had remembered that, my wife and children wouldn’t be dead!”

The screen went dark then replaced the blank screen with a view of the asteroid field that the recharge station was at the edge of.

The naked hatred in the man’s eyes fueled Kenyon’s ire. *Blame me for that? Damn it to hell, blame Kerensky, blame Richard, and blame Amaris.* Looking at the small recharge station, nothing more than a *Scout* class JumpShip moored to an asteroid. A fusion power plant, a small habitat ring and minor port facilities. Four small naval lasers a *Leopard CV* and a squadron of fighters were the stations only defense.

Blame me will you? Well Captain, I have an Atreus class Battleship, what the hell have you got.

“Admiral, jump us back to Irian.”

“Sir!”

Anton Bucilu turned to his lord smiling wryly.

“There is the small matter of our orders to hold here.”

“Nonsense what are they going to do, shout Stop or I’ll say Stop again?”

Petty Officer Giancarlo Pezzi turned to his commander with a report.

“Sir power spike on her reactor, the *Agamemnon* is preparing to jump.”

“Open a channel.”

On the screen Captain-General Kenyon Marik looked back at him in distaste.

“Captain Sellers as you can see we are preparing to jump, what can I do for you.”

“You can power down your engines, Lord Marik or I will be forced to take action.”

The Captain General smiled patronizingly.

“Captain perhaps you should look at your position, what can you possibly hope to do but die?”

“Sir am I to understand you are refusing to obey the orders of the Office of the Star League, and its legally appointed Regent?”

Laughing Kenyon Marik said; “It certainly looks that way.”

Captain Ryan Sellers pushed a button on his console.

“Very well then Captain-General Marik, I repeat stand down or be fired upon.”

On the screen the Marik leader’s face went from smug to surprised, then Sellers noted with his own grin, fearful.

In the cold depths of space the Black Lion class Battlecruiser SLS *Reprisal* and her Essex class escorts the SLS *Cole* and the SLS *Jonas Cheng* rose almost leisurely on their attitude thrusters from behind the massive nickel iron rock they sheltered behind. On the bridge of the Marik flagship, Kenyon’s admiral announced the Star League vessels had locked on to the *Agamemnon*. The image of Captain Sellers on the screen raised his eyebrow and asked politely if the Captain-General would care to rethink his position.

Through gritted teeth Kenyon ordered Admiral Sincowitz to stand down, thinking;
Enjoy this while you can Captain, every dog has his day.

“Villanova, good work on the core recalibration, I’ll mention that when you have your next review.”

“Thanks chief!” Juan Paolo Villanova said smiling.

Juan Paolo, not his real name of course, smiled inwardly as well. The work, undoing the damage he himself had done, had been challenging. He was also gratified that although the *Agamemnon* had its Kearny Fuchida drive crippled by the blast, making interstellar jumps impossible, no one had been killed. Not that he wouldn’t kill all of his comrades on the Marik flagship if the Coordinator willed it, but after three years under deep cover one still formed attachments.

Juan Paolo was a fanatic but he was not a robot.

Whistling to himself, the ISF agent went seeking out the Four Card Drax game Master Chief Baranov held weekly in Frame Twenty two.

Dinner at Dempsey’s on the Sound was becoming standard for the Black Cats and the rest of the Tigers stationed at the Court. The fact that Minoru Kurita ate there at least once a week made my life both easier from the safety standpoint and, at first, a fucking nightmare from the media one. Naturally the media both local and Sphere wide wanted access.

By mid August my Cats had become adept at filtering out the journalists, and the local cops, their ranks swelled by retiring SLDF soldiers were all too willing to help. Word had spread after that, Dempsey’s was off limits.

Jinjiro thankfully stayed in the Combine quarter. That was a relief, although I’d heard several disturbing rumors. The man just didn’t know how to treat women.

His father however, I still couldn’t fathom. I liked him though, which after such a long association with the Federated Suns was something I never expected. Sarah and I had put off the Honeymoon for a month, things were just too volatile. Kenyon Marik “The Grinch” as Synthia had named him, much to everyone’s delight, would be arriving in two weeks. Sarah had shrugged saying she’d wanted to take an Alaskan cruise so we had time.

Amanda kept my wife busy. Every time the Terran, FedSuns and Draconian delegations thought they had satisfied the Mariks, yet another problem or question popped up. The Free Worlds League team had perfected bureaucratic warfare to new heights even weighed down by the Lyran Duke Kell who was rapidly losing patience and Mandarin Li who seemed to take a perverse delight in sabotaging his supposed allies.

Mike Kelso’s SAS team had guard duty today; I was just here for dinner with Synthia. As we waited on Sarah to get away from the Grinch’s minions, the Coordinator joined us. He smiled at my daughter and indicated the chair across from me.

“Joining us for dinner, my Lord.”

“For a bit, Sarah asked me to keep you company until she arrives.”

“Hello, are you the Dragon?”

Synthia looked up at Minoru smiling back at him.

“Yes child, are you this Synthia I’ve heard so much about?”

“That’s me!”

Whatever Minoru Kurita had been about to say was forgotten as Synthia bombarded him with questions. After a couple of minutes I tried something Isokoru had been working with me on. Clearing my mind I extended my perception towards Minoru Kurita. I don’t know if I buy this whole *Ki* thing but I sensed... *Mischief?* The old Drac was enjoying himself.

At this point both Minoru and my daughter were looking at me. Synthia just looked inquisitive. Minoru raised an eyebrow as if to say “Really?” And then he *pushed*. In that moment of distracted embarrassment I snapped back to myself.

“Isokoru has been working with you?”

“Yes my lord.”

“Nice but you might want to wait before taking on the big dogs *wakarimas?*”

“Yeah, I mean yes my lord.”

“Now do an old man a favor and get me a Guinness.”

“Yes my lord.”

It wasn't until I was halfway to the bar that I realized I'd just left my daughter with the Coordinator of the Draconis Combine. *Life is getting weird.*

Getting said Coordinator his pint, and an IPA for myself, I must have had a strange look on my face Paul McHugh asked me what was up. In response I nodded towards my table. Looking over my shoulder he grinned.

“Minoru, yeah, don't worry, she's in safe hands with him. Minoru missed his calling.”

At my raised eyebrow, he nodded.

“Yeah, the Dragon would have made a great bartender.”

Laughing I paid for the drinks and made my way back to the table. People in later years look in askance when I've talked about this, but you have to remember in those days the mystique of the Star League was still strong. We were all one League.

Sure, the leaders felt differently, the voices of the nationalists' long silent in the prosperity of the Star League were lethargically beginning to make themselves heard. But at the same time trade was being reestablished and the hungry markets of the Hegemony were a boon to the Combine.

There was some resentment towards Minoru, because of the Dragons inaction during the Amaris crisis, but the combination of the story of Drogo Kurita and his family and the Coordinators staunch support against Kenyon Marik won over many people.

We were still hopeful in those days, and that blinded us all. *The events that followed hit us so hard because we didn't believe they were possible.* I couldn't imagine that one day I would hate the Kurita clan with more fury than I'd hated Stefan Amaris.

As I returned to the table Minoru was asking: “So what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“A Gunslinger like daddy.” My daughter said proudly. A knot formed in my chest, one thing I had never considered. Raised by the Tigers, with babysitters like Justine and Gladys, who were her role models?

“You'll be a great warrior, Synthia.” I didn't know if I liked that idea, now I'm all for duty, honor, country. Still after all the shit I've seen, well, Synthia's my *daughter* man.

Minoru must have sensed this, because he changed the subject. Good thing too because Sarah came in then, pausing to kiss me after I set down the drinks. She greeted Kurita with a warm smile as he rose and bowed his head to her cordially.

She handed him a data pad, turning to me. “Honey when Kenyon Marik steps off the DropShip, do me a favor?” Minoru looked on interested.

“Yes dear?”

“Shoot him.”

“Yes dear.”

Minoru who was taking a slug of Guinness paused for a moment and gave me a look at the flat tone with which I answered my wife. Turning to Sarah he asked;

“You've told him then?”

Sarah shrugged casually saying;

“I have no secrets from my husband, Lord Kurita.” She took my hand.

Round after round of medical exams, questions, snide comments from the Mariks followed by fiery retorts from the Terrans seemed endless. Even though the report had come out, made public in the Hegemony, there could be no question about Amanda's parentage. DNA from the Cameron mausoleum and from the bodies of her parents in the throne room confirmed this beyond a shadow of anyone but a politician's doubt.

The talk of the Throne Room brought back issues that I've never fully dealt with. Sarah squeezed my hand. Before taking Synthia to get some ice cream.

“Drogo left something for me to give to you *Sho-sa.*”

I looked up the question plain on my face.
“Drogo Kurita was in the throne room with your father that day, he was captured and treated...badly.” The Coordinator paused angrily.
“I wasn’t aware he had survived.” I said quietly.
“His immune system was compromised, and he contracted a strain of Luthien native pneumonia. Before he died he did research on your father and found you had survived the war.”
Minoru handed me a data chip.
“He recorded this for you.”
“*Domo Arigato Kurita Minoru-sama.*”
Minoru smiled sadly and said;
“Drogo-*kun* told me your father saved our honor, and for that I thank you.”

Unity Barracks
North American Administrative District, Terra
Terran Hegemony
4 July, 2780

Something’s up, wonder why we’re all here. Dido Moran thought as she walked in.
The SAS officer took her seat in the briefing room. The twenty seven members of the Black Tigers’ detail covering Minoru Kurita were all assembled. The mix of MechWarriors, SAS and infantry looked up as Major Gilmour walked in.
Stepping up at the podium, the Major looked over the assembled soldiers for a moment with a wry grin.

“Okay as of now the Otomo will be fully taking over Coordinator’s security, Minoru Kurita has personally extended his thanks on a job well done.”

Relief swelled through the group. Though the Coordinator had not been demanding, and the duty had been correspondingly easy, the men and women of the 90th were combat soldiers. “Babysitting” was not a welcome assignment. Bruce’s next words though dashed any thoughts of a return to normalcy.

“Just when you thought it was safe to go back to your regularly scheduled lives, however, we’re not done “Babysitting”. As per standing duty order 176-5 the Office of the Director-General has set up a rotation of the bodyguard unit for Amanda Cameron.”

He paused letting the news sink in.

“Yes boy and girls, we’re up. As of 0100 Thursday we will be the Director-General’s personal Bodyguard. I don’t have to tell you the eyes of the Hegemony will be on us. General McCormack will still be in charge and we are temporarily transferred to her command.”

Lovely, more time in the spotlight. Didi thought irritated as a blonde haired officer walked in.

“Those of you who were with me on Vancouver Island will recognize Captain Erika Von Manstien formerly of the Patton Division, with Lieutenant Mackenzie going on sabbatical she will be taking over as Ops and will have your duty and training assignments so see her before we leave.”

“On that note, ‘Rat’s send off will be at Dempsey’s on the Sound tomorrow.” At Scott’s look of surprise, the Major got a sly grin.

“Honestly Lieutenant, you didn’t think you’d just be able to slip away.” After the laughter faded Bruce went on.

“We did a fine job with the Dragon people, I know you’ll all do the same for Lady Cameron. It has been brought to my attention that we’re slipping a bit on our qualifications, I’m not going to mention any names, you know who you are.”

Several of the men and women in the room squirmed in their seats at this as Major Gilmour nodded grimly.

“So here’s the drill, when you aren’t on the protection detail, you will be training, if Lady Cameron wanted a parade unit to watch over her she would have gotten the Free Worlds Guards. We’re a line unit, but it’s more than that.” He paused looking them over.

“We have this duty because we are the most feared bunch of shooters and looters in the entire Defense Force. The Fusiliers and the CAAN are fine troops, we all know this, we’ve fought side by side with them often enough, but they ain’t us. When the Eridani or the Fusiliers hit them the RimJobs might think, “Okay we’ve lost”, when we hit them they thought “Fuck we’re dead.”

Okay this is the “we’re Tigers, we’re tougher than anybody else” speech.

“When the House Lords come here the first faces they will see will be the Tigers of Terra, and they will know what will happen if they cause any trouble. I’ve heard talk in the ranks that it’s over. That we’re safe and life will go back to normal, that’s bullshit.”

Blah, Blah, Blah, B, I love ya like a brother but damn you talk too much.

“This is the most critical time the Star League and the Hegemony has ever faced. It could all fall apart if the high and mighty don’t get their shit together. You all know what happens then.”

Didi could see in the body language of the troops that many of them had similar thoughts. While she herself hadn’t thought much about it, there was the assumption that yeah, the war is over. Everything will be fine.

“Our role here is about image, it’s about being the Bogyman waiting in the wings.”

He grinned then.

“And honestly do you actually want to give an inch to either the Sinclair Fusiliers or the Marines? We’re Tigers’ for Zeus’ sake.”

As the meeting broke up and Erika handed out the duty assignments, Didi looked hers over and groaned inwardly. On top of a grueling training regimen, she was along with August Martine and several other female troopers, on the “Up Close and Personal” detail. Otherwise known as the “Director’s Shadow” two SAS members would be with Amanda Cameron day and night, never more than an unlocked door away.

Over the heads of the other Tigers Didi caught Bruce’s eye and glowered. He raised an eyebrow. *All right you bum, I’ll shut up and soldier.* She thought.

An hour later she was considering rethinking those words as the red haired Lieutenant with the heavy Scots brogue went over the Cameron girl’s *diet*. Didi consoled herself by thinking of all the ways she was going to make Bruce’s life miserable. Fighting to keep a straight face, she made the appropriate noises and read random scraps off the menu on her data pad.

“...milady will try to skip meals and sneak in way too much coffee. Your nae to let her, Dr Matsu was verra specific, with the stress she’s under she needs to eat proper, oh lord maybe I’d better stay on a bit...” The Sinclair Fusiliers Lieutenant went on, and on and on. “...That’s it I’ll transfer to the 90th.”

Oh please god no.

“I believe Lieutenant Moran and her team can handle themselves without your assistance Maria.”

The women snapped to attention, saluting as General Dawn McCormack entered the room.

“At ease ladies, I wanted to meet Lieutenant Moran and the rest of the “Up Close” team. Maria you need to get some sim time, girl. I’ll not have any of my Fusiliers losing their certifications.”

Thank heavens for small favors Didi thought hiding a grin.

Giving Didi a sour glance the General fixed Lieutenant MacRae with a harsh glare. Gesturing back at Didi, she continued.

“Her crew’s already saying we’re getting soft, ‘tis just talkin’ shit right now, but I’ll no have it become true.”

As the Fusilier Lieutenant hurried out, Didi found herself wishing she was out in the field hunting RimJobs, teaching a bunch of no brain turtle waddling cadets, anywhere else.

“When General Sinclair suggested a rotation of Amanda’s guard unit, I was against it, Lieutenant. Although I never expected Kerensky’s favorite sledgehammers to pick up the assignment. The Director-General was adamant however, I think she wants her friend Sarah to feel comfortable and safe, plus that little show you put on when she greeted you here touched her.”

Looking out the window the General shook her head.

“I don’t doubt your combat prowess, Lieutenant, but there are skills required here that I simply don’t think the Butchers of New Vandenburg are equipped to handle.”

Didi stifled the growl forming inside her. Instead she drew herself to full attention.

“Permission to speak freely Sir!”

“Go ahead Lieutenant.”

“With respect, General, you’re speaking the party line. The 90th can handle this duty with all the professionalism of your Fusiliers. If you want to know what happened on New Vandenburg after the Kerensky’s retreat, you might ask someone who was there.”

“That would be you, wouldn’t it?”

“Yessir.”

“All right Lieutenant, I’ve got time.”

So Dido Moran told General McCormack of the horrible conditions the civilian populace on New Vandenburg had endured. The 90th HAR's scouts had infiltrated the chaos on world with the skill would become the hallmark of any Tiger assault. As General Kerensky was being driven off world the 90th had gone to ground. The unit's heavy assets grounded under the ocean in their DropShips.

A month of painstaking surveillance had revealed the driving force behind the rebellion was twofold, first the avarice of the Council Lords and the corruption in the local Star League officials. The second, the catalyst had been the shadowy group of advisors, who as it turned out, were officers of the Rim Worlds military and agents of Amaris' plan to seize control of the Hegemony.

While the Council lords were something the Black Tigers could do nothing about. The corrupt bureaucrats who, like salt in a wound had aggravated the situation were likewise beyond immediate retribution. The Rim Worlds "advisors" however were another matter.

In a series of lightning raids and assassinations the SAS teams attached to the 90th eliminated the Periphery troops command and control. In the ensuing chaos the BattleMechs and heavy infantry of the Tigers took the capital of Touchstone and the spaceport. The local media was overwhelmed by the Terran computer slicers and broadcast exactly what the Tigers wanted the populace to hear.

Meanwhile the front line combat assets dug in to wait for the inevitable assault. Unwilling to bring a battle against the Star League troops entrenched in the city and their families the Periphery troops laid siege to Touchstone. During the sarcastically named "Sitzkrieg" the Tigers were not idle.

The 2005th Royal Combat Support Group restored power to both the city and the surrounding area much to the surprise of the Taurian troops. By then the remaining Star League Administrators, the fifteen of whom had survived, had been "rescued". Colonel Paul Martins placed Major Samuel Winters in charge of their disposition.

Gathering together what volunteers from the populace they could Samuel Winters placed the Administrators on trial under Taurian law. Citing their oath to protect the Star League from all enemies, both foreign and domestic, the 90th upheld the decision of the court and executed the eight convicted of corruption leading to the deaths of innocents. A combination of skillful media manipulation and the fact that except for providing minimal oversight 90th allowed the Taurians to handle the trial provided a calming effect on the situation.

At the same time the 2005th Support's efforts had gotten the schools reopened and the populace of Touchstone back to work. By this time the Taurian force which had been negotiating with the 90th detected the incoming SLDF invasion force. The size of the force promised untold destruction. The solution was to say the least unique.

The 5th Independence Division surrendered en masse to the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment, were promptly paroled, then deputized to protect the "safety and security of the planet of New Vandenburg until such time as the current hostilities ended.

Initially both the Star League high command and the Taurians were furious but the fact remained, the 90th had delivered New Vandenburg without a single civilian casualty. Two days later General Kerensky received word of the Amaris coup.

"So in the end both sides got what they wanted, the Taurian Concordat got a villain, General Kerensky got a fearsome reputation for one of his units, and a whole lot of average Joe's didn't get dead. Sounds unbelievable I know, but if you wear the Tiger insignia you're safe as houses on New Vandenburg, some of them even came with when we went for Terra."

"Sergeant August Martine, SAS team Dido, decorated three times for valor under fire, Lieutenant Minerva Ramos, 13th Assault Company, Captain Johan Legumo 2117th Royal Tactical Fighter Wing...among others." Dawn said quietly. "Them and the Ryukaze you seem to have a habit of taking in strays."

"If the other side gives 'em up, they were yours to begin with." Didi replied with a shrug.

"Thank you Lieutenant, you've given me a lot to digest."

As she was dismissed, Dido wondered what brought on the passion with which she had challenged General McCormack. But for damn near ten years the rest of the Star League thought of the Tigers as Kerensky's pet killers. His jackbooted thugs.

Now mind you, we are, we never shied from killing those who needed it, but the one damned time we get the job done without lots of gratuitous booms nobody believes it.

After the SAS team leader had left, Dawn McCormack called up the file on the New Vandenburg affair. Surprisingly it was encoded, classified. Entering her security code, the file came up. Reading through the file took almost two hours, even for Dawn who had been speed reading since she was eight.

A lot to digest indeed, she thought, how many lies have we told to win this war, how many more to keep the peace.

Juan Paulo Villanova had watched the blue white ball of Mankind's home grow in the *Agamemnon's* forward view port. His work on the Jump Core had earned him a spot on the first shore leave party when the Marik flagship reached orbit. News from the ground and the pre leave briefing almost made him pass up the leave but spending months in the tin can of a warship left even experienced spacers a little stir crazy.

His nibs is going to find out just what a hive of zinji hornets he's jumped into.

The Terrans were well and seriously pissed. Coming in at the Nadir jump point the *Aggie* had been met by a full battlegroup, enough firepower to turn the Marik vessel into so much space dust. Everyone from the battlegroup commander to the traffic control at O'Neil Station had been coldly professional. Even the Combine battleship in orbit had assumed an aggressive position above and behind the *Aggie*. When the Admiral had tried to change position the Terran space defense command had ordered him to maintain his current orbit.

Milos Stephanopolus one of the *Aggie's* marines had said they'd even had the gall to send a *cyborg* from Star League's most brutal regiment to meet and escort the Captain-General. Inwardly Juan Paulo had chuckled at the Marik phobia over cybernetics, like it was better to suffer the loss of a limb or an eye rather than accept a replacement. It had turned out the Terran officer had a cyboptic to replace a war injury.

Milos had gone on to say that the Terran officer's manner had been like ice, and when he'd failed to give the traditional welcome the Captain-General had confronted him about it. The Terran, who Juan Paulo had heard was either a Gunslinger or one of those SAS killers had replied; "My mother taught me not to lie."

"It's pretty."

The small voice interrupted Juan Paulo's musings. Turning he looked down at the small form of SAFE Director Vizante's ward. He'd seen the boy; Mica, Misha or something, before and had always thought there was something wrong with the child. The Director's insistence at carting the kid all over known space rubbed the ISF agent raw.

Smiling he agreed his smile faltered a bit when he saw the makeup on the boy's cheek as if to cover up a bruise. Kneeling down he tilted the child's chin up. When the boy shied away Juan Paulo extended his *Ki* encouragingly. Although successful he didn't like the read he was getting off the boy.

"What is your name child?"

"Mica Vizante, sir"

"I'm no "Sir" Mica, that was my dad, I'm Juan Paulo Villanova but my friends call me JP."

"Okay."

"Did someone hurt you Mica?"

"No I fell." You didn't need Juan Paulo's ISF training to tell the child was lying.

"Boy, there you are, I told you not to leave the cabin."

The massive form of the SAFE Director huffed into the forward lounge.

"Sir we were just looking at the view."

Noticing Juan Paulo for the first time Michael Vizante stopped dead.

"Ahh, yes well thank you for safe guarding my ward crewman but we must be going."

Sensing this was neither the time nor the place, Juan Paulo gave the SAFE Director a short bow and kept his eyes down. As the man took his ward and tow Juan Paulo watched them leave, the boy looked back once. The ISF operative who had killed more people than he could count shivered inwardly. While he had no proof his insight told him all he needed to know.

Dragon willing, Director Indrahar will order your death Michael Vizante, He thought, and I will be happy to carry that order out.

Chapter 7: Who we say we are.

So while you're outside looking in describing what you see, remember what you're staring at is me. Stonesour, Through Glass

**Unity City
North American Administrative District, Terra**

Terran Hegemony
12 August 2780

Amanda Cameron girded herself for war. Or at least that's what it felt like to her at any rate. Gracie Liu and August Martine were waiting for her in her suite's common room. As she put her coffee cup on the counter she smiled at the pair.

"Ready to deal with the Grinch?" Came a lazy voice from the couch. She smiled as Jon Case unfolded himself from a boneless sprawl.

"Hey, Jon..." She grimaced. "Yeah, not like I have a choice."

"Nothin' for nothin' darling you've got the Devil by the nuts here. He's in the heart of the Hegemony with one stinking battleship. Because of that you can deal with the man not the Captain-General."

"Still rather just shoot him."

Gracie snorted from behind her as she finished off her tea. Jon shot her a look then shrugged.

"Easier but let's not start a war just yet hon."

Checking her skirt in the mirrored entryway she nodded to Gracie as the Tiger Captain spoke into her comlink she turned to Jon.

"I'll try not to, trust me on that one but damn it, you know here this whole thing's an open book, but in the *Free Worlds League*? The bastion of freedom and democracy my ass, they buried the whole thing then leaked a copy of the final report that looks nothing like what was sent to them."

"Typical," Jon shrugged. "Lemme guess, they called it inconclusive, said it left too many questions unanswered, questions this whole investigation into your parentage was never meant to answer in the first place."

"Basically, you know after all this how in God's name can any government ever be called fair and equitable?"

Laying a hand on her shoulder Gracie Liu looked into her eyes.

"Most can't Lady Amanda, that's the truth of it, you've seen that now. So just be different, don't play Marik's game."

As they walked to the door Gracie grinned savagely.

"And if all else fails, I can always shoot him for you." She finished.

As the group walked down the corridor Jon leaned over to Amanda and whispered.

"I like this one, you should keep her."

Sonny Cobb was not the sort to dwell on the past. Or the future for that matter, he lived too much in the now. The next challenge of his abilities, the next brush with death, even as he sat in the dark back room in the Las Vegas nightclub, the next girl, those were the only things the slicer looked forward to. Sipping high end vodka from a frosted glass he watched the elite of Terran society.

What little of it that's left anyway. He mused. *It's amazing how quickly a new high and mighty crowd appears, vultures all of them. Half of them made their money in the ruins of the Fat Mans downfall.*

Sonny lit a cigarette, when he looked up Tommy Lindon was sitting across from him.

"Surprise, surprise, zup T."

"Gotta job Sonny, big one."

Taking a long pull off of his smoke and listened as Tommy detailed his plan. It was an ambitious one a combination of mass media manipulation, and espionage. Involving the subversion of the government of a Star League member state it was highly illegal.

Which of course added to the fun. Sonny felt the gooby, shiteating grin spread on his face.

This is why I hate dealing with Tommy in person, damn if the man doesn't know my buttons.

To the other slicer he said only.

"When do we start?"

SAFE's gonna shit themselves when were done.

No computer system is truly secure, data leaves fragments, tiny filaments of photons or electrons that are meaningless by themselves. But when collected together piece by piece assembled in the right place and time they can shake even the mightiest kingdom. Spiders of crystalline data spread out gathering these tiny bits.

Walls and quicksilver serpents took out some, but the SAFE agents in charge of information security remained unaware that they were the targets of an offensive spanning light years. In the center of the Hyperpulse web two men ran complex algorithms that made even the Casper drone AI core complain. Neither of the slicers were aware the dismounted core spoke underneath the streams of data to other networks asking its own questions in a voice like whale song.

Other voices spoke back if they had knowledge. The Casper lamented at lack of replies, after all she was programmed to aid and assist her masters. She also had a vague idea that the two men whose orders she obeyed had granted her a reprieve when so many sisters of hers had fallen silent. Because of that she really did want to help.

One of the voices that did answer while having little more intelligence than a common dog far exceeded her design specification. Designation MAD-3SLRG-H-472 also known as *Hussy*, a name the Casper could not account for, could not put in words or code what she wanted to say. Humans however have a saying, a picture is worth a thousand words.

What *Hussy* was able to do was something that Sonny Cobb and Tommy Lindon failed to provide. Context. It didn't occur to either human to tell the Casper what was going on around the information they were looking for. Having the context opened new windows of information.

Behind his console Tommy Lindon noticed a jump in activity but put it down to an increase in data from replies constantly coming in over the HPG network. Sonny who had seen this sort of thing before said nothing. But in the back of his mind rumors and legends of the Ghost in the Machine sent a chill down his spine.

The Casper, M-5-7011A by the way, reached out and brushed tendrils of thought across *Hussy's* Diagnostic Interface systems. Finding what she was looking for she tweaked certain programmed pathways enhancing *Hussy's* operating system. The increased speed allowed something that would have scared the crap out of the two slicers, made Chief Tech Misha Vinson drool, and Bruce just smile.

MAD-3SLRG-H-472 *Hussy* had her first thought.

I like Jazz. Thought the big bad Mad.

**Unity City, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
10 September, 2780**

Kenyon Marik's smarmy manner threatened to make Ian Sinclair physically ill. People who had that attitude during the long hazardous road to Terra tended to mend their ways. If they didn't they tended to disappear. Out an airlock or just left behind when the "front" moved on.

Across the room General Kerensky just looked tired. Remembering his conversation with Arnold Collins some months ago, he saw even more clearly the shaking in the old man's hands, slight but there. The pallor of his skin and the bags under his eyes.

Kenyon sees it too, damn the man. Ian thought.

So too did Minoru Kurita, which made Ian nervous. Despite his current support for Amanda the Combine leader wouldn't hesitate to pounce on any apparent weakness. For the moment however the Dragon was focused solely on the Eagle.

In a tone very much that of a schoolmaster with a particularly hopeless student Minoru Kurita had the Marik pinned neatly in the center of the room.

"Your own government press releases have called the Terran findings lacking on issues that you know have no bearing on the matter at hand."

Raising his hands as if to hold back the Coordinator's statements Kenyon Marik smiled and shook his head.

"My Lord Kurita we were merely pointing out where your findings were lack..."

Kurita cut him off with a sharp wave of his hand.

"Nonsense Kenyon you're spouting fabricated protests to findings your own team of specialists signed off on, on a subject you yourself have no knowledge of, unless you've obtained a doctorate in genetics since we last met."

"Well said Lord Kurita," John Davion interjected, "This farce has gone on long enough."

Mandarin Li leaned forward. The old man had a sardonic smile on his face.

"Now, now Lord Davion, her Celestial Wisdom sees some merit in these questions, so regrettably I must once again side with the Captain-General."

Hell must truly be freezing over. Ian thought.

When he looked up five sets of eyes way above his pay grade stared back at him. Ian realized then he'd spoken aloud. *Oh well, I really didn't want a career in the military any way.* Staring back at the assembled nobles and his commanding officer he gave them a small smile and shrugged. Amanda walked in then flanked by Sarah Davion and her Tiger bodyguards in their black and red uniforms. Jon Case slipped in after the trio of women. Amanda's protector slipped over to lean against one of the pillars ringing the conference room. Kenyon started to say something snide, but the tall Asian Captain with the gunslingers crossed pistols on her collar stared at him coldly.

The Captain-General's guards fingered their sidearms nervously, but Kenyon Marik turned back to the assembled lords. Ian barely heard the Captain-General as he spouted more of the same rhetoric. He watched Amanda instead. The old Amanda might have interjected, gotten flustered. Over the past few months a change had come over her.

Now she sat a small smile playing over her face. The effect on Kenyon Marik was quickly apparent. First he kept looking at her, blinking when she didn't react to his pointed remarks. His tempo interrupted first John Davion then Minoru Kurita actually got words in edgewise.

Finally he stopped altogether crossing his arms and staring at Amanda. She raised an eyebrow and gestured to the Eagle.

"Come now Lord Marik, you're on a roll here, far be it from me to stop you."

Marik began to speak stopped and began to turn purple.

"After all you come to my world, call me a fake without even having the balls to say it to my face, and don't even have the common courtesy to say hello first."

Marik started to speak, Amanda in the same coolly pleasant tone of voice cut him off.

"Albert Marik must be rolling in his grave, Kenyon," Amanda's voice sharpened slightly as she referred to one of the three founding members of the Star League and the architect of many of its core principles, "One might even wonder if you yourself are even truly his heir."

Kenyon Marik turned white. John Davion covered his grin with a hand. Minoru Kurita just nodded as if to say, this is what I've been waiting for. Ian, despite how close they'd gotten had trouble believing his ears. General Kerensky sat up sharply giving Amanda with a cautionary glance.

"What did you say?" His voice was a cold whisper.

"You've babbled on and on about my father's failings while denigrating my pedigree, what about your own?" Before Kenyon could reply Amanda went on. "We all know Ewan Marik's failings after all, how your childhood must have been, Kenyon, I mean I can relate but still..."

"My pedigree is well documented and this isn't about me, Cameron it's about you."

"What it's about Kenyon is the pot calling the kettle black, how many drunken nights did your father spend with, what's the word..." She paused a moment as Major Gilmour strode in to relive Dido Moran. Looking over at her he leaned over and whispered into her ear. "Ah yes, thank you Major, Concubines, sorry My Lord Marik here on Earth we have a different word for them."

"HOW DARE YOU!" Marik's control finally snapped.

Rising sharply Amanda faced him.

"NO, KENYON, HOW DARE YOU!" She shouted back. "How dare you when billions across the reaches of known space wait for you to get on with the real reason you're here." Fixing the Eagle with a pitiless glare the Director-General of the Terran Hegemony went on. "You stain the ground of humanity's birthplace and we let you do it for one reason, one reason only! To restore the greatest endeavor in Human history."

As Kenyon stared at this slip of a girl with her fierce eyes he realized his mistake. Standing before him was not a weak little child or vapid teenager. The smiling face on his intel profile was wrong. Ten years of hiding or watching her people suffer had forged something in her. Something both beautiful and terrible. It stopped him cold.

"Unless you no longer want to be part of the Star League," She shrugged. "In that case we can accommodate you personally, but I think your people might have something to say about that."

Anton Bucilu entered, catching the mood instantly. Kenyon Marik's chief lieutenant was no wilting flower however. He strode quickly over to his liege lord. Marik leaned over and listened his face turning to carved stone. Amanda sat and accepted a glass of water from Sarah.

The Captain-General of the Free Worlds League rose suddenly and left the room, his aide looked over at Amanda and with a small smile tipped a nonexistent hat in her direction. She inclined her head back at him as he left.

Mandarin Li leaned forward quizzically and asked what just happened. Amanda gestured to Major Gilmour to explain.

“The Free Worlds League Parliament is currently convening on Atreus, from what we can tell evidence has been uncovered calling Kenyon Marik’s lineage into question. The Captain-General’s opponents are calling for an investigation into the matter, of course with the Star League Council looming he is stuck here, but I think he’ll be a little too busy to cause any more trouble.”

Elliot Kell who had been quiet through most of the proceedings spoke up then.

“While I wonder how you have this information so early, I think...” He paused for a moment. “With the power vested in me by Archon Robert Steiner, I Duke Elliot Kell declare the Lyran Commonwealth satisfied by the findings of this body and consider the matter of Amanda Cameron’s parentage closed.”

The elderly Mandarin Li chuckled looking at Amanda.

“Well played young lady, well played, likewise the Capellan Confederation considers this matter closed.” He rose motioning to his aide. “If you need to contact me I will be in Tibet...If nothing else seeing humanity’s home will make this trip worth it.”

Ian looked over at Amanda the question in his eyes.

“Tell you about it later.” She smiled. “My lords if there is nothing further?”

Minoru Kurita shook his head standing, “My Lady Cameron, the matter of Lord Marik’s censure can wait for October when the remainder of our merry band arrive, until then...” With a nod to John the Coordinator left. Ian could almost swear he heard the man whistling a jaunty tune as he stepped out of the conference room.

As Sarah stepped over to her uncle, Ian turned to Amanda, catching a glance at General Kerensky as he did. The General had been strangely silent during the proceedings. The man himself looked sad and tired but the glance he shared with Ian spoke wonders.

He’s figured out what Amanda did here, and he’s not happy about it.

As for the Last Cameron, she was all smiles. Feeling Ian’s glance upon her she looked up.

“Trust me Ian, it’ll all work out.” Amanda said, she looked radiant and not for the first time he wondered about...

Best not to go there, Ian thought, too much is at stake to let your personal feelings get in the way. Besides she’s half your age old man.

In Las Vegas...

Sonny leaned back from the console and smiled across at Tommy Lindon. Patting the housing containing Casper M-5-7011A.

“Thank you sweetie, you’ve been a doll.”

On the screen a line of text appeared.

Sweetie? You keep calling me that, is that my name?

Tommy chuckled as he packed up his gear.

“It’s a good a one as any, better than M-5-7011A anyway.”

Did I do good here, Sonny?

“Yes Sweetie, you did great.”

So, they won’t shut me off?

Tommy leaned into the range of the AI’s camera.

“Don’t you worry Sweetie, we’ll keep you safe, it’s what friends do.”

Friends, it is good to have friends.

Back in Unity

Juan Paulo watched from the shadow of a café table as the obese head of the Free Worlds intelligence service entered the townhouse across the street. As he had expected the Director needed some playtime after the events of the past week. The house across the street had a very specific clientele that was little changed since it had opened in the third year of the Amaris occupation.

As that clientele was very wealthy like many such places across the Human Sphere it continued to survive the despair that had spawned it. Plugging in a set of addresses into his pocketcomp he dispatched a feed from inside the brothel to the local CIB office, live. Smiling wickedly Juan Paulo also sent the decryption key and passwords to the establishment’s computer system.

As he logged off he caught the eye of a slim blonde a couple of tables over. Thinking briefly about the boy Mica he felt a sense of accomplishment wash over him. As his new friend nodded to the empty chair next to her he thought; *This has been a good day.*

In our top story, CIB agents deputized by Star League Judicial have taken into custody Free Worlds League intelligence director Michael Vizante. Details are sparse but what we've been able to uncover is that early this morning Unity City PD, backed up by troops from CIB's Action Directorate, conducted a raid on an exclusive brothel in the old Marik district. What they found there sent chills down this reporter's spine...

INN special report 12 September, 2780

...When Terra was in need did the Lords of the Inner Sphere come to our aid? No. And now their elite thinks they can come here and abuse our children? Be warned Michael Vizante, be warned Kenyon Marik your days are numbered.

Pirate broadcast from the terrorist group Earth First 15 September, 2780

The explosion gutted the top six floors of the Royal Eagle, smoke and other vile smells choked Kenyon Marik as he dragged Anton Bucilu down the stairwell. Worry for his friend warred with fury at the Terrans, at Amanda Cameron, Earth First, and most of all his former SAFE director. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was amazed at how quickly the old reflexes came back. Anton had taken the brunt of the blast knocking him into Kenyon, the jagged edge of a broken bone protruded from his friends lower left arm.

We will have justice for this Anton, I promise you that.

The sound of voices from below caught his attention even through the ringing in his ears. Coming around the corner at the landing he saw a squad of his personal guards. Rushing forward the soldiers grabbed Anton and helped the pair down to the basement garage. Kenyon's mind never stopped working, OPERATION CUCKOLD had failed in the end but it had shown weaknesses in the Terran state. Weaknesses even now the man known as the Eagle was working on a way to exploit.

As his armored transport pulled out into the long tunnel connecting the Royal Eagle and SeaTac International Space Port and his DropShip, Kenyon allowed himself to worry about Anton. The medic who had been checking his aide over looked back at his liege lord as if sensing his concern and gave him the thumbs up before going back to work. Breathing a sigh of relief, Kenyon Marik allowed his eyes to close and dreamed of Unity City ablaze.

Amanda cut the comlink with the Captain-General and rubbed her eyes, Jon came over from where he stood with Major Gilmour. The older man smiled down at her.

"Rough day." He said nodding at the screen.

She nodded grimacing.

"Just when I think we've got Kenyon handled those idiots in Earth First give him ammunition to come right back at us."

"This is embarrassing, sure", Jon said, "But remember public opinion across the Sphere is against him still."

"I was hoping to have this Vizante monster remanded to Terran custody, that may be impossible now."

Bruce spoke up from the doorway where he was leaning.

"My Lady, with us or Marik that bastard's gonna get his, in fact he's more likely to get it with Kenny-boy."

Amanda's head came around with a snap.

"What do you mean?" She asked, puzzled at his logic.

Jon chuckled.

"I see where he's going with this. Kenyon Marik doesn't strike me as a man who deals with embarrassment well."

Gesturing to Jon, Bruce nodded.

"Our intel guys would have had a field day, but you know someone would have cut a deal somewhere along the line."

Amanda nodded at that, reflecting that CIB had expressed "Extreme Interest" in the former SAFE director.

Wheels within wheels, Amanda thought. This is my life now.

“This Earth First thing has me worried though,” She paused, looking at the two wanting to ask... Both caught her look and started to answer at the same time. Shaking his head Bruce passed the question to the older man.

“Hegemony Judicial needs to deal with this, not the military; it’s a test of the system.”

Bruce continued at Jon’s pause, the earlier humor gone.

“It would be easier I know, but we’re the Terran Hegemony not the Capellan Confederation.”

“And there it is.” Jon said.

“If I didn’t know better I’d think you two had this planned.” Amanda grinned at the innocent looks she received in reply. “Bruce are you satisfied with how Gracie’s settling in as your Exec?”

“Uh yeah, why?”

“Because you need to take your wife on her honeymoon.”

He grinned shaking his head. “Boss, I think things are a little too volatile right...”

“I need you and Sarah back here before the start of the Star League Council. So consider that an order Lord Major Gilmour.”

“Yes milady as you command.” He bowed formally.

“Good answer, now get lost.”

As the younger man left, Jon looked a question at his liege.

“He’s a FedSuns Baron, holdings on Chesterton.”

“Lots of Davvy’s around here these days Boss Lady.” Jon said.

“For now anyway, besides Bruce is a New Yorker, you don’t approve?”

“It’s not so much that, but John Davion’s a little much y’know?”

Amanda sighed. The door to that conversation was one Amanda didn’t want to open yet.

Chapter 8: Chaos Awaits

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.

William Butler Yeats "The Second Coming"

Alexander Kerensky’s face fills the sight picture on my Colt. The General looks back calmly as if he doesn’t care if he lives or dies. The crowd’s roar fills my ears as Liz Hazen shouts something, her Stoner 10mm aimed at my heart. All around us the commanders of more than a hundred Star League units take sides. Weapons drawn; the Star League Defense Force looks ready to devour itself in an orgy of destruction.

A hand rests on my shoulder then and Samuel Winter’s voice penetrates the red haze.

“This won’t solve anything Bruce, stand down.”

He’s right, I realize as years of conditioning kick in and I holster my Colt. Arnold Collins raises his voice then. Restoring sanity despite his barely restrained fury.

“This isn’t the way, damn it, they’ve made their decision, those of you who’re staying let’s get the hell out of here.”

Numbness replaces the red fury that had come over me at this, the last in a long string of betrayals. The sight of my own cousin Robert standing among the deserters deepens the wound. As we leave the warehouse Elizabeth Hazen grabs my arm.

Resistance leader, friend and love of my best friend’s life, none of that matters she recoils from the murder in my gaze. I don’t even hear what she says, but it makes Sam of all people snap. His punch slams her to the ground.

I hear my voice as if in a dream, it’s cold mechanical, the voice I never want my wife to hear.

“Don’t come back Liz, whatever you do, ‘cause we’ll kill you, sure as death, we’ll kill you all.”

How did it come to this, you ask? Shit I’m still not sure myself. After Amanda shot down Kenyon’s little game we all were looking forward to a bright future. Guess we got blindsided. Anyway bear with me and I’ll try to explain...

**Anchorage, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
30 September 2780**

We'd decided to drive back to Unity, I'd rented a sweet '57 Mustang and the drive through the Canadian Northwest was much less daunting with the storm inhibitors working again. I strolled through the supermarket idly; Sarah was off stocking up on the instant heat tea she loves so much. Synthia, who we'd missed enough during the first week that we'd flown her up to meet us tossed a third pack of Kurita made HappyJoyColdFun pops into the cart and grinned up at my raised eyebrow.

"Gods above honey, those things are horrible." I said with a grimace.

"I like them." My daughter said with conviction.

"Oh c'mon what kinda flavor is *Blue*?"

"If blue had a flavor that's what it would taste like."

I just shook my head.

"C'mon, let's see what Sarah's up to."

Pushing the cart we went around the corner. And ran smack dab into Takeo Amaris. He'd shaved his head from the long mane of black hair he'd sported and the moustache was gone, but you don't chase someone halfway across America without memorizing what they look like. He stopped dead, so did Synthia.

"Hey." I said eloquently.

"Hi." He answered equally brilliantly.

"Bruce Gilmour," I said holding out my hand.

"Henry Jones Jr." He answered.

"Indy?" I couldn't help myself.

Take... err Henry busted out laughing.

"No we named the dog Indiana."

Synthia looked from me to her brother and back to me.

"Syn honey this is Henry." I said giving her that wink we shared.

She nodded back and returned the wink.

"Hello Mr. Henry."

He knelt and shook her hand returning the greeting, then looked up at me.

"Hey... umm thanks you know for..."

"No problem, but don't mention it, I mean *really* don't."

A wry smile came over his face and he nodded.

"Sonny's kept you up to date?" At his expression I chuckled. "It's what I'd have done in your place."

He nodded then. An awkward moment passed until Synthia finally asked; "What do you do?"

"I'm a mechanic, I fix boats." At my own look he said simply; "I like to work with my hands."

"Cool."

"Congrats by the by, on your wedding, my girl would have given her eyeteeth to be there."

"Her and about half the Hegemony, gods what I wouldn't have given to just elope."

"Looking for the quiet life are you?"

"Damn straight."

We three talked for a bit until Sarah showed up. She greeted Hank graciously as we continued shopping although I think she was a little puzzled. Hank covered well, but then given his situation the conversation was about things any one in his shoes would want to know about. Although some of Hank's questions raised her eyebrows as they revealed he had some training in the diplomatic arts.

Hank's girl Kailey showed up then with a barely muffled "Oh my God." Once she got over the stars in her eyes though (It never really hit me that Sarah and I were at the time famous, I mean c'mon, don't people have better things to pay attention to?) she and Sarah hit it off. Of course that meant we ended up having dinner with the Derry family and well after the meal and the sheer amount of alcohol we weren't going anywhere.

As the Derry's wouldn't hear of letting us stay at a hotel, I found myself slightly hung over, helping Hank cook breakfast that morning. The habit of recruiting anyone and anywhere got the better of me.

"Listen, Hank, you've got a good thing here, but if you ever want to sit a 'mech again..."

"Not on your life Major Gilmour." The tension in his voice startled me.

“Sorry, I...” I stammered feeling a little embarrassed. He chuckled then.

“Don’t sweat it friend, but I’m done being a soldier.” Hank sounded like a man in a dream then. “I’ve got a good life here, Bruce, better than I deserve maybe, but I’m gonna hold onto it with everything I have.”

I smiled understanding where he was coming from and said as much. He surprised me then with his next words.

“Listen Bruce, you guys have the ears of some pretty powerful people, don’t let them fuck up, seriously.”

“I know Hank, trust me man, it’s on my mind every single second of every single day, but between you and me; I think we’ll be okay.”

He stretched out a kink in his shoulders then and said; “God I hope so.” Looking over my shoulder and seeing we were alone for the moment he grinned the old Takeo Amaris peeking out.

“I’m glad I didn’t kill you major.”

I don’t think Sarah bought my excuse when she walked in on us laughing hysterically.

We left that afternoon feeling pretty good about ourselves. Years later Sonny Cobb told me when the Free World League invaded the Derry brothers had joined up, Hank went with them. They were on Chertan when the Pigeons hit. Hope they’re okay.

In our top story today marks the start of the Star League council. With great fanfare the Lords of the Inner Sphere converged on Unity City to be welcomed by Director-General Amanda Cameron, Protector Aleksandr Kerensky and a host of other notables. Security high since the assassination attempt on Kenyon Marik was extremely tight with BattleMechs and Infantry from the newly christened Terran Guard lining the streets.

After the opening ceremonies the Council Lords retired to their respective quarters residences in the Foreign Quarter although we were able to catch up with Chancellor Barbara Liao and her new husband Mandarin John Hamilton. The Chancellor, charming as always, had this to say.

“We have been idle to long, but rest assured our fullest attention will be brought to bear...[The Chancellor paused and smiled.] It really is in the best interests of us all to get the Star League back on track as soon as possible our people need the stability, and we as their leaders have an obligation to give that to them.”

“Rest assured people of Terra, the Star League is in the best of hands.”

In related news Terrorist group Earth First released this statement.

[A shadowy figure lit from behind speaks from behind a voice modulated by a computer.]

“You call us Terrorists, but we fight for the safety and sanctity of the Homeworld. The true Terrorists gather now in Unity City. The blood of billions coats their hands for it was they who incited the Periphery to rebel with their greed. Forcing the noble warriors of the Star League Defense Force to waste their lives to suppress free and brave peoples who choose to live on the edges of known space like the pioneers of old Earth.

These so called Lords weakened the greatest achievement mankind has ever accomplished and let the Usurper and his minions rape and pillage at will. They even sell their daughters to bind our greatest heroes and whisper cunning lies in the ear of the Last Cameron...”

Sarah shut off the TriD on her desk and tossed the remote down.

“Motherfuckers”, she snarled with a vehemence that drew a shocked look from Amanda.

Sympathy warred with a guilty amusement, Sarah had never cursed in her hearing before, but then she had reason.

“Trust me Sarah, I know how you feel. But don’t let it get to you Earth First is nothing but a bunch of sadly misguided lunatics. They throw in just enough truth to give their beliefs some small measure of believability, but in the end it’s all the same nonsense as Kenyon’s stunt.”

Sarah nodded calmly the sighed.

“I know, it just hurts...”

Amanda nodded knowing sometimes just silence was what was needed. Sarah broke the silence then returning to the matter at hand. Or matters as it were. Dozens of things from seating arrangements to the continued presence of Draconis Combine troops on several Hegemony worlds. Kenyon Marik alone accounted for a full quarter of Sarah’s priority list.

Which brought to light another glaring problem for the rebuilding Hegemony. At the moment the entirety of the Terran Diplomatic Corps pool of trained Diplomats was, well... Sarah. Just Sarah. When people in coming years criticized many of the diplomatic blunders made by the Terrans, they oft overlooked one important thing. Stefan Amaris.

Along with hundreds of other bureaucrats, teachers and scientists, the cream of the diplomatic service went up against the "Bloody Wall" as it was called. Senior Diplomats at the capitols of the Great Houses were far more important in place in most cases, and though Sarah's staff consisted of many talented people none of them had the experience for what they were asked to do.

In time they would, the world of interstellar diplomacy was an unforgiving jungle that would force the strong to the top. But it would take time, more time than they had. Amanda looked at her friend, the dark circles under her eyes, the way she rubbed her neck.

"Should I ask Minoru for an appointment with Dr. Matsu?"

Her train of thought broken, Sarah blinked for a moment and then shook her head.

"No Amanda, it's all right, just the stress."

"I'm asking a lot of you, I know, but the cost of failure..." Amanda trailed off.

Sarah nodded and the pair went back to work.

Aleksandr Kerensky rubbed his eyes as Robert Steiner's speech went on. How the man could be so condescending while appearing to be lending a helping hand escaped him. Exchanging looks with Ian Sinclair, he was relieved the Voice of Amaris was quiet for once. It came and went, less when he was with his wife and children, more when he was alone.

Extolling his failures as regent was not something he needed to hear right now. The Voice, Aleks refused to give it a real face by calling it by a proper name, also had choice words about the House Lords. The one thing that disturbed him the most was that he found many of the Voice's comments *amusing*.

His eyes focused wearily on Kenyon Marik, slouching in his chair a smirk on his face. One of the reasons he was able to dismiss the Voice to a certain effect was that many of its opinions were his own. Kenyon Marik could have been one of the guiding lights of the Star League. Instead he was a little more than a spoiled brat, a disgrace to the uniform of the SLDF when he'd worn it, a disgrace to the proud name of his family.

"...Thus in light of recent allegations brought forth by my esteemed colleague from the Free Worlds League I for one cannot support Amanda Cameron as First Lord of the Star League. In the interests of providing the Star League with the leadership it so obviously needs in this time of trial I ask for a vote not to recognize any claim she may make in that regard" Robert Steiner's words brought the General back from his musings.

Belatedly he realized that after the past two months of one speech after another, the bulk of them saying nothing of any importance and the others quickly devolving into often shouted arguments, he'd simply started to tune out during the council meetings. As he started to rise, Kenyon Marik stood up announcing; "I second the Lyran Commonwealth motion and call for an immediate vote."

John Davion's outraged voice cut into the chaos.

"My Lords a vote of this nature requires far more deliberation than this, I call for a postponement of the vote for at least a week's time!"

"The Capellan Confederation seconds Lord Davion's motion." Barbara Liao's melodious voice rose next. "At the very least you might wait, *Gentlemen*, until the lady herself is present."

"I concur," The Coordinator of the Draconis Combine spoke in a cold voice. "What say you, Protector Kerensky?"

Aleks glared at Robert across the room and his voice came out with a growl that brought the whole room's attention.

"Agreed, in my capacity of Protector of the Realm I cast Amanda Cameron's vote by proxy as well as that of the First Lord, so that makes it five to two Archon Steiner."

Steiner smiled and waved his hand languidly.

"So be it." The Archon said.

"Point of order." Minoru Kurita called out then.

Aleks turned and nodded to the Coordinator.

"The Council recognizes the Coordinator of the Draconis Combine."

“Continuing in his intrepid disregard for civilized behavior the representative of the Free Worlds League continues to prosecute an unwarranted dispute against the Terran Hegemony. I previously called for the censure of Captain-General Kenyon Marik, I return now to that motion and call for a vote.”

For a moment there was silence then the Marik found his voice.

“Now wait just a damn minute...”

“Language Kenyon, language,” Barbara Liao practically purred, “the Capellan Confederation seconds our honorable colleague’s motion and we call for the vote.”

The vote was quick and Aleks felt a sense of déjà vu as once again Kenyon Marik stormed out of the Council chambers, his aides and guards trailing him.

Turning to Ian, Kerensky whispered;

“I’m glad you convinced her to speak to the Congress today instead of attending.”

“With respect, sir, Amanda didn’t need to be here for Marik’s nonsense, and the Congressional matter was far more pressing, we knew the First Lordship question would be posed today and planned for it.”

“This Marik bit will have to be addressed, Ian.”

“Are you going to vote against her sir?” General Sinclair asked with a small smile.

Before Kerensky could answer him Chancellor Liao called out.

“General Sinclair, the Council has some questions for you regarding your actions with the Royal Command”

Watching the younger man take a deep breath as he stood to face the assembled lords, the Voice returned.

He too plays his own game, Kerensky, your best will betray you yet.

As the Council Lords grilled Ian on his moves to reorganize a Terran Military, Aleksandr Kerensky wrestled once again with the devil within.

Vienna, Central European Administrative District

Terra, Terran Hegemony

18 October, 2780

Scott Mackenzie fought down the sinking feeling in his chest as he sat waiting for Liz to return to the small flat they shared off Prinz Eugen Strasse. He could already begin to hear the sounds of fury out the window as the news he watched yet again was digested by the outraged Terrans. His pocketcomp chimed. Liz looked back at him when he answered, her face mixing concern and fury.

“*Scott did you see the news?*”

“Yeah, babe, watching it again now, are they nuts.”

“*Dismissing the General and sinking the claim of the last Cameron, this has got to be a joke!*”

“Don’t worry, the General will do something, it’ll work out. Just come home.”

“*I’m on my way, it’s chaos out here, but I think I can catch a cab.*”

“See you soon then.”

Liz signed off, but no sooner than he opened his address book to dial Bruce, then the man himself called.

“*‘Rat, you okay?’*”

“Yeah, but damn Boss, what the hell is going on.”

“*Minoru fucked us royally. We had the votes to quash the motion on Kerensky in but somehow he got that bitch of a Liao to turn on us.*” On the holographic display, Bruce’s face twisted in rage and dismay. “*With no Protectorate we lost our safety net and even though John Davion voted with us on Cameron’s ascension we just didn’t have the votes.*”

“What the hell was that snake thinking?”

“*I don’t know ‘Rat, what the hell was I thinking for trusting him? Anyway, listen don’t believe the bullshit about the Defense Force disbanding. We’ve just been ordered back to our peace time duty stations, those fucking jumped up colonists tried to pull that shit with the Royals and the traditional Terran formations as well, but we hit them with HAF-1A...*” Bruce smiled savagely. “*They didn’t like that much...*”

Two hours earlier...

After the recess Minoru Kurita took his place among his aides as he watched Amanda Cameron take her own seat under the emblem of the Terran Hegemony. The energy pulsing off her in waves spoke of

pain and betrayal. The young Major Gilmour stepped up to the chair reserved for the representative of the Star League Defense Force and sat down.

At this action Kenyon Marik spoke up.

“Major, perhaps you are in the wrong seat?”

Settling his pocketcomp in the data entry dock on the desk, the MechWarrior looked up absently.

“No Lord Marik, as the General has gone to pass your orders on to the Colonial units of the SLDF, I have been tasked with representing the Force for the rest of the day’s proceedings.”

“What do you mean by Colonial units Major?” Barbara Liao asked puzzled. Minoru already knew the answer.

“All SLDF units with the exception of the Royal Command and units staffed and recruited from Hegemony worlds.”

Robert Steiner sputtered in anger.

“Major those orders encompass the whole Defense Force.”

Major Gilmour raised his eyebrow and in a mild voice answered the Archon.

“With all due respect Archon Steiner that appears not to be the case, if I may direct your attention to order HAF-1Alpha issued by First Lord Jonathan Cameron in 2723.”

The Lyran leader started to say something but seeing no point in continuing this course Minoru cut in.

“Lord Major Gilmour is correct, Archon Steiner, as I advised this council earlier our edicts do not encompass the entirety of the SLDF. HAF-1A places all Terran drawn ground, air and NAVAL assets in the hands of the Director-General in the event the First Lordship passes out of the hands of the Cameron family.”

Smiling angelically Major Gilmour looked at the assembled lords of Humanity.

“Simply put my Lords, Terra’s children are returning home... today.”

As Robert Steiner and Kenyon Marik frantically looked over the document for a loophole, Minoru knew they had just come to the realization that stripping Aleksandr Kerensky of the Protectorate had placed the most technologically advanced battle hardened military in existence in the hands of an eighteen year old girl.

An eighteen year old girl with a grudge.

Catching the young Major’s eye the Coordinator nodded in respect. Pausing for a moment Major Gilmour returned the nod coolly.

Back in Vienna...

...so us, the CAAN, all the Royals, we’re coming home and Zeus help the idiot Colonist that tries to stop it.”

Scott nodded, some of the tension in his chest easing, but still the uneasy thought plagued him; No Cameron at the helm, who the hell will lead the League?

He must have said it out loud because Bruce answered him.

“I think John Davion is going to move that Lady Amanda’s succession be reviewed on her twenty first birthday, and a regent be appointed, I think the HAF-1A business shook Robert Steiner enough that he suggested that revisiting the Cameron succession was not out of the question. He shrugged then. “I dunno ‘Rat we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Just when you thought it was safe to go back to your regularly scheduled lives.” Scott said shaking his head in dismay. His friend laughed bitterly.

“Never underestimate the Human capacity for fucking up, anyway I’ve gotta run.”

“Should we be ready to come back, B?”

“Nah, trust me ‘Rat, the Tigers won’t be going anywhere without you, so sit tight and live a little.”

Signing off with his friend, Scott heard Liz come in and quickly rose to hug his girl.

“Spoke to Bruce.” He said going on to explain. She nodded against his chest as they collapsed on the couch.

“Lisa called me, Unity’s locked down tight. Did Bruce say anything about us being recalled?”

“No, he said to sit tight. He seemed hopeful this thing with Prince Davion will work out.”

Looking up at him, worry in her eyes.

“His words to God’s ears, Scott.”

“Amen to that.” Scott answered, holding Liz tighter.

**Unity City, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
21 October, 2780**

What the hell are you playing at Minoru, John Davion thought. The Coordinator's sudden change of allegiance didn't really surprise him. Minoru after all could be counted on to do for Minoru, that much could be said for any of the House Lords really. *But the issues here won't be served by greed, the Age of War proved that.*

"...the disposition of Defense Force personnel to their prewar duty stations represents in my estimate an undue drain on resources on nations already strained past decade's disruption of trade. I would propose a force reduction of no less than twenty five percent."

As if on cue Kenyon Marik spoke up.

"Perhaps fifty percent would be more in line, after all so many of these valiant men and women no doubt would welcome the chance to resume a more normal life."

Enough of this. The First Prince thought.

"I might remind this council that those valiant men and women signed on to protect the Star League, one might wonder at the motives of those who act to dismiss them so easily."

Kenyon snapped his head around to glare at the Davion Lord.

"And who, exactly, might I ask are they supposed to protect us from? Amaris is dead, the Periphery Uprising is over...for now at any rate. There seem to be a lack of foes to fight."

Robert Steiner waved his hand in dismissal.

"Perhaps Lord Davion feels the enemy is us." He chuckled and shook his head. "One might think you feel the need to be protected against your fellow lords."

Smiling back, the smile of a predator, John stood and spread his hands.

"You may be right, Robert, I seem to remember my history lessons, about why this council was formed in the first place."

"A history lesson Prince John, I hardly think we need..." Robert began.

"Apparently you do Archon Robert, the Age of War, you of all people should not want that particular set of circumstances to resume."

Barbara Liao interjected then.

"Prince Davion you act as if we are here to dismantle the Star League, I don't know about you but that is the furthest thing from my mind."

Bowing his head graciously, John smiled at the rival House Leader.

"While I'm sure *you* have the continued strength of the League in mind, I am not so certain of the motives of some of our colleagues."

From her place beneath the Cameron star, Amanda Cameron spoke up.

"Indeed Prince Davion it would seem some of our peers want to relegate the Star League to the fate of the League of Nations."

Robert looked the younger woman up and down for a moment and smiled.

"Lady Cameron no doubt speaks from her *wealth* of experience, but no we have no wish to emulate *that* august body. The Star League is profitable for us all after all. Besides there is still the issue of the Periphery to consider."

"You seem to have no problem acting independently of this council where the Rim Worlds Republic is concerned."

"Those leaderless worlds were in chaos, some order had to be maintained," The picture of innocence the Lyran leader spread his hands, "and as an aggrieved party, we were due some recompense for our losses during the occupation."

Amanda nodded thoughtfully.

"Aggrieved party, interesting choice of words, and order, I notice you did not say peace. One question though the Periphery issue, did I miss something?"

The Archon looked unsure of himself for a moment, but plowed on like an Atlas at full charge.

"*Ja* the rebels are still out of our control, every day this goes unattended we lose vast revenues, fortunes that could be used to rebuild your Hegemony. Resources that could begin to repay us for our aid in..." Robert trailed off as Amanda turned white and sat down heavily.

John Davion's voice broke the silence.

"Robert, are you suggesting we go to war with the Periphery to net you a few extra kroner?"

Laid bare without diplomatic euphemisms Robert Steiner hunted for a reply.

“This my Lords is why we need a First Lord, my proposal is this in three years we revisit the issue of Amanda Cameron’s claim, until then a Regent will serve as First Lord, a Regent who already has the force of law behind him.”

“You.” Minoru Kurita hissed with barely constrained fury.

Pressing a key on his table top computer panel John Davion sent a file to the other House Lords.

“As you can see here Richard Cameron appointed me regent of his heir and his throne until such time as the Cameron heir achieves,” he gestured to Amanda, “her majority. Three years my Lords and Ladies, the Star League can return to normal.”

“All we have to do is to hand you the throne John and the glory days will come right back is that it?” Kurita’s cold voice echoed across the council chamber.

“For three years Minoru, and then I step down.”

“And we’re supposed to believe you’ll just hand over the reins?” Minoru’s eyes narrowed as beside him Jinjiro tensed as if ready to leap at the Davion Lord. The First Prince shook his head sadly and smiled. When he answered his voice was faintly amused.

“Yes Minoru-*sama* I think three years is about all the time I could actually stomach the damn job. At any rate the point is moot, Jerome Blake witnessed the signing and verigraphed the documents personally, and by law *I am the First Lord.*”

In the uproar that followed John Davion stood firm watching and waiting. Robert Steiner looked annoyed for a moment, then thoughtful. Kurita stormed out his heir in tow, followed surprisingly by Kenyon Marik, who despite his censure was trying to get the Coordinator’s attention.

Amanda and her (Let’s get real.) consort in all but name, Ian Sinclair were deep in conversation. John felt confident of their support. But the real surprise was Barbara Liao. When he looked at her she motioned to the empty floor of the council chamber.

Meeting her halfway they locked eyes for a moment.

“Can you keep it together, John?”

John nodded once carefully.

“You know what I want.”

The Great Idealist of the House Lords railed inwardly for a moment, but the overriding goal won out. After all the Star League was the greatest of all ideals. The thought of Sarah almost made him stop, but the sight of her standing with Amanda Cameron as if born to the role....

Amanda will probably make her a Duchess, and Sarah realizes some sacrifices must be made.

Holding out his hand the First Prince of the Federated Suns met the Chancellor of the Capellan Confederation halfway.

“Done.” John Davion said.

Sarah sat on the couch in Amanda Cameron’s suite leaning against Bruce. Amanda sat across from her watching her friends face as she broke the link with her uncle. Putting her pocketcomp down on the low coffee table she smiled.

“Are you okay.” Amanda asked as Ian brought over a tray of drinks.

Sarah shrugged, a wry smile on her face.

“Yeah, I mean God, it’s so sudden, but if it preserves the Star League, what can I say?”

Looking off into the distance through the balcony window she laughed.

“While I always assumed I’d take my seat there, my father raised me to succeed him after all, but after the coup, after everything that’s happened, it just seemed like a dream.” She laughed. “At least I have a job.”

Amanda grinned and sipped her wine.

“Oh please,” She said, “that’s the last thing you need to worry about, in fact if this goes through, I think I’ll keep you.”

Bruce laughed at Sarah’s look of surprise.

“You’ve said it before, you wouldn’t mind just being Sarah from New York.”

Ian looked over at the young Major.

“And you Major, what do you think of all this.”

Bruce just shrugged.

“Sir, I already got what I want out of this whole mess,” He said as Sarah blushed and traded looks with Amanda, “Dukes and Barons are just words, and as Sarah said if it means the League stays stable...”

Shaking his head he finished “...Well something you’ve never had is a small price to pay.”

Sarah nodded then frowned.

"I just hope Uncle John can hold it together, the Capellan March will probably go nuts, and then there's our friends Kenyon and Minoru", she stopped for a moment.

"Hon?" Bruce prodded.

"Sorry, I just remember what Minoru said to me at our wedding."

Amanda nodded, remembering the conversation they'd had afterward.

"Well he wanted action, we'll give it to him." Amanda said.

"Bruce take a walk?" Ian asked standing with his drink.

"Umm.. Yessir."

"It's Ian, in private Bruce." At this Amanda chimed in.

"And Amanda, for God's sake Bruce, I *was* a bridesmaid at your wedding after all."

Bruce smiled sheepishly and nodded.

"Yes Lad..er... Amanda."

As they stepped outside the aircurtain surrounding the balcony holding back the chill November air, Ian turned to Bruce and fixed him with a stare.

"You did well back in the council chambers, Bruce."

"Thanks Ian, I'm not cut out for that stuff though."

Ian grinned and took a swallow of his Glenlivet.

"Could have fooled me, so if I offer you a position on my staff are you going to turn me down too?"

Remembering General DeChevalier's offer it seemed like an eternity ago Bruce shook his head ruefully. Leaning against one of the supports he thought about it.

"I'm a fighter and apparently according to Commandant Malin a teacher Ian, that's what I can bring you, if you really think I can serve Terra best behind a desk..."

"Trust me Bruce, behind a desk is not where I'll need you, whether this thing with Davion works out or not were gonna be in a rough patch."

Taking another slug of scotch.

"There'll be plenty of fighting ahead I fear." Ian said glumly.

"Oh joy." Bruce said.

"Yeah."

General Dawn McCormack twisted *Thunderfoot* her *Highlander* as the *Marauder's* particle whips lashed across her left side. Her missile fire rocked the Tiger heavy back on its haunches and allowed her to snap a gauss slug into the 'Mech's carapace. While it staggered she "pinged" it marking it for her company.

Fire from a dozen sources converged upon the stricken BattleMech. The machine twisted and danced evading most of the fire and ducking around a low hill. Rallying her command company Dawn led the pursuit. As it ran Dawn caught the leg art, a pair of cards, emblazoned with leather clad queens.

Duce Queen the Fusilier General thought.

"Ma'am was that that Gilmour *sassanach*?" Lieutenant MacRae asked.

"No 'Ria that was his exec Captain Grace Liu. Tha' damn bastard hasn't shown himself yet."

Her Lance Second Major Dietrich called from the next ridge over.

"General we have movement along the ridge at two niner seven."

"Hold position Saul, Third Battalion is closing on your position eta three minutes."

"Rodg..." Saul Dietrich's transmission cut off abruptly.

"Saul report, Saul!"

The Major's *Pillager* backed up over the ridge and Dawn allowed herself to hope. That died when the major's 'mech came apart under the fire of at least a dozen Tiger heavies. A *Black Knight* with a cartoon figure on its left ankle laced Maria's *Lancelot*. Pulling on her triggers she sent a 250 kilogram slug to slam the humanoid machine against a stand of trees which shattered under the 75 tonners weight.

Over the TACCNET her 3rd Brigade commander Jordan Thomas reported pushing the 42nd CAAN's forces out of the Ghorst Flats. His voice was tired but proud as he announced the destruction of both the CAAN's 3rd Battalion and the Tiger's 4th Battalion.

"Jordan we've got their 3rd Battalion pressing us with air and artillery support, can you move north and take them from behind."

“General, we’ve only got about a company of effectives left, we may have won but damn if they didn’t gut us.”

The big *Black Knight* sent a wave of energy to hit Maria. A wave of black ‘mechs crested the ridge pouring fire on her position. The new machines were mostly Combine designs and roared down hill to tear into her combat command.

They’re herding us. Dawn thought outraged as a squadron of *Hammerheads* dove on her boys and girls dropping infernos on the ‘Mechs and tanks of her right wing.

“Damn, look Jordan their arty must be close by see what you can do.” She highlighted the area her counter battery radar had pinpointed the Tigers self-propelled guns would move as soon as they shot of course but if Jordan could catch them in transit...

The damned Bloody Paws supported by hovertanks from the CAAN held the heights on her left, the Assault Battalion’s massed gauss rifles made mincemeat of any attack General Sinclair’s cousin Langvin could mount. Despite her numerical superiority the Swift Claws and the Stalking Tigers Battalions were pushing her Fusiliers back.

Her Fusiliers had however cut their opponents off from Unity City. Their supply situation would quickly become telling. Looking at the battle map she saw an opening.

“Lang strip off a battalion of fast ‘mechs and hover tanks and send them around sector two seven oh four, take the Stalkers from behind, if the Paws try and help ‘em they’ll be exposed.”

“Can do General, we’ve got them I should think.” Langvin said and Dawn could imagine the savage grin on his face. *Enough of this crap, who the hell does Samuel Winter think we are RimJobs?*

One thing nagged at her though; *Where the hell are the Black Cats?*

Gilmour’s merry elves had been all over the map yesterday, taking out her air support and playing havoc with her supply chain. But today, with the exception of the exchange of fire with Gracie Liu and her *Deuce Queen*...nothing. A sudden impact threw her against her linear frame’s five point harness.

A look on her auxiliary monitor answered the question that formed between her ringing ears.

Of course he’s right behind me.

The crack of particle whips carved into *Thunderfoot*’s much abused frame. Lights flared and darkened as her gyro shattered. *Thunderfoot* bounced onto its face as her cellular ammunition storage channeled a devastating blast out her machines back.

Oww she thought. Her secondary monitor still worked and she watched the Black Cats tear into her command company. Maria MacRae’s *Lancelot* was decapitated by Major Gilmour while CAAN hovertanks swept in behind his ‘Mechs. Within two minutes her entire company was burning.

Sitting in the dark she smiled. It mattered little. Langvin Sinclair assumed command smoothly and began to press on the combined Tiger and CAAN lines. Her scorpion maneuver was what broke them just as Jordan caught their artillery out in the open the Arrow IV missiles stopped and freed her Fusiliers to use their numbers.

Cut off from the rest of the Tigers, Major Gilmour’s Cats began to fail and fall. The Major himself was the last to drop. It took six of her ‘Mechs to end the matter but *Hussy*’s reactor detonated with golden fire. One by one the Tiger’s positions were isolated and neutralized, until finally her screens were clear of red symbols and the ceiling above her cracked with blinding light.

Looking down on her was the man himself offering his hand to help her out of the simulator’s cocoon.

“Well played General.” Major Gilmour said with a grin as she climbed out of the steamy, sweaty pod. The younger officer handed her a bottle of orange electrolyte replacement drink. Kurita made she noticed with annoyance but the bottle was cold with condensation. Smiling a thank you, Dawn gulped at the drink ignoring the taste with the practiced ease of someone used to field life.

All around the massive simulator complex under Unity Barracks her troopers, the Tigers and the 42nd CAAN were climbing out of the five different simpods types one each for ‘Mech, Armor, Aerospace and the newest addition; powered armor. Drinks and tales were being swapped and Dawn heard laughter from the ranks.

“A good exercise overall Major, although it looks like the simpods gave you a rough ride.” referring to the bruise on the man’s forehead.

Rubbing at it he smiled ruefully.

“The engineers went a little overboard on realism, when my ride blew the pod shook me around like a striker in a bell.”

Dawn nodded in sympathy.

“It’s something they really didn’t need to simulate, I’ll agree with you there.”

Saluting crisply Major Gilmour rejoined his company for the post exercise briefing. As he left Dawn looked around with quiet pride at the troops who guarded the Director-General. The month long series of exercises had done what she had hoped. Teaming each unit together and against each other had formed a bond of respect she’d felt was lacking.

The troopers of the “Forty-Duce” as the 42nd CAAN were renowned for their daring amphibious assaults from Nirasaki to Caph to Terra, however they tended to view the Fusiliers as a parade unit despite her troops combat record. Likewise the marines viewed the 90th Heavy Assault as wild brutes who relied on fear rather than discipline.

Her Fusiliers jealously guarded their duty as the defenders of the last Cameron, the CAAN were viewed as good troops but a bit full of themselves. Their opinion of the 90th had been almost one of disdain, the DeChevalier’s blunt object, effective maybe but distasteful.

The Tigers, well their opinions were unprintable.

The turning point had come when she’d over heard one of *her* own people liken the Tiger’s to the Waffen SS. Another one of her troopers a replacement from Brooklyn, New York had taken issue. Both were still serving kitchen patrol.

Now however... She heard Maria MacRae laughing with Lieutenant Simons one of the Kuritan volunteers in the Swift Claws. Saul Dietrich and Major Justine Sinclair were discussing the action with Colonel Ving Trahn of the Forty-Duce. Their hands gesturing showing off complex maneuvers.

Her job done for now General Dawn McCormick had a date with a hot shower and dinner with her husband.

Gods above is there anything so good as a shower. The thought brought a smile to my face as I pulled on a T-shirt and stuck my hair in a quick ponytail. *Bars may be where civilization is born, but showers are what keep us Civil.* Nodding to Alex, I walked out of the locker room my muscles ached. That exercise was bigger than anything I’d run in ages.

Even though we’d lost I was pleased with the performance of my Cats. The aggressive training routine I’d instituted had paid off in spades. The result had been in each of the scenarios the Black Cats had the highest scores based on effect on the enemy of any of the Terran Brigade.

It had also been a welcome relief from the almost constant exposure to the joys of the Star League’s ruling body. I’d told Ian Sinclair that I was a fighter and I’d not been lying. There were few things that compared to leading a company of BattleMechs in combat.

It brought to mind the old saying; “‘Tis good that war is so terrible lest we love it overmuch.”

The sense of satisfaction was dampened by the thoughts of the mess at court. The hope at a quick resolution died as the council formed into two camps. John Davion, Amanda Cameron and Barbara Liao led one supporting the Regency. Minoru Kurita, Kenyon Marik and Robert Steiner comprised the unlikely alliance opposing them.

Erika Von Manstien, who was actually the cousin of Robert Steiner’s confidant; Lucas Kelswa, said Robert might be pulling out. Public outrage in the Lyran Commonwealth was weighing heavily on him but he was stubborn. That stubbornness was beginning to cost lives.

Hopefully he would change his mind soon. Sarah had told me that diplomatic missives were flying between the Combine and Capellan embassies, Minoru had decided Barbara Liao was the weak link in the opposition. He was on the offensive now and I don’t have to tell you how dangerous that is.

I was so lost in thought I passed right by General Aaron DeChevalier. Aaron cleared his throat and I snapped to attention saluting. He returned it with a grin.

“Good to see you Major.”

I grinned back Aaron was more than a fine commander he was also a good friend and I was relieved to see him.

“And you sir, when did you get in.”

“Early this morning, I caught the end of your little show, hell of a crew here.”

I smiled with pride.

“The best in the Sphere sir, all of ‘em.”

He thought for a second and cocked his head.

“You’re off duty, Bruce?”

“Yes, I’m meeting my wife and daughter down at Dempsey’s.”

A look of horror spread over his face then.

“*Mon Dieu* I missed your wedding, *merde* Bruce I’m sorry.”
“Gods General, you had way more important stuff to do.” I laughed.
He shook his head.
“Not the point *mon ami*, but let me make it up to you by buying dinner.”
“General, you’ve got yourself a deal. Besides Sarah and Sinthya will love to see you.”
So a good day at work was followed by a good night among friends. It’s the little things like that that make life worth living. For tonight at least life was good.

30 November 2780
Unity City, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony

Robert Steiner was finally asleep, although not a natural one. His physician Dr. Rikkard Kimbri finished checking the 79 year old Archon’s status and then turned to the rooms sole other occupant.
“His actions could spell the end of the Star League.” He said.
“Give it time Rikkard, he’ll come around.” His companion replied.
Breathing out a sigh the doctor shook his head.
“I know he’s been your friend, but we will have to make a decision soon, Jennifer can be here in two weeks...”
“Give me time to work on him, please it’s not yet time for such extreme measures.” The other man’s voice was heavy with emotion.
“Oh for god’s sake, we can make it look like a stroke, get him out of office...” Rikkard raised his hands. “Listen to me first, once Jennifer takes over we can get him back on his feet, he doesn’t have the support to retake the throne and you know that.”
“Give me a month, one month and then I’ll decide.”
“I’ll try but for god’s sake make your decision, or it may be taken out of your hands.” Shaking his head the doctor put the tools of his trade back in his satchel before turning back to his companion.
“Remember who you serve.” Rikkard said.
“Don’t worry *Herr* Doctor, Heimdall has no better servant here.” Duke Lukas Kelswa turned away and looked at the sleeping form of his oldest surviving friend.
The will of people will be served.

Chapter 9: All Hell Breaks Loose

Pleased to meet you, hope you’ve guessed my name. But what’s puzzling you is the nature of my game

Rolling Stones; Sympathy for the Devil

Independence Weapons Plant, Dredin
Quentin, Terran Hegemony
2 December, 2780

Tom Kamata stood with the rest of his shift at the Independence Weaponry Plant outside the main gate. Hundreds of employees and townsfolk had joined them in solidarity against the Kurita “Peacekeepers”. Over head the night was lit by the Persid Comet in its centennial pass close to the planet. Arriving eight years into the Amaris occupation as General Kerensky’s troops continued their relentless march to Terra the Combine troops had been respectful offering their assistance freely. Even so having the Dragon so close to their homes made the Dieronese of Quentin nervous.

Then in late October, citing “Unrest in these troubled times” the troops of the 2nd Galdeon Regulars had taken position in and around the factory complex. Never mind that there was little unrest on Quentin other than some idle talk in bars and news shows. Workers were allowed access for the first month or so, until work stoppages and sabotage in protest of the Kurita “occupation” forced *Tai-Sho* Pavel Martinez to declare the factory under the protection of the Dragon until further notice.

As the old saying goes when you mess with someone’s livelihood you’re courting trouble. Planetary Governor Duke Walter Ivanick issued proclamations forbidding mortgage foreclosures and CEO Sanja Amali had driven into company profits to make sure nobody missed a paycheck, but still times were

tough. Now protests outside the factory were a daily occurrence and *Tai-Sho* Martinez had restricted his troops to the factory complex and its attached spaceport.

Then the news came in about the Star League Council's decision to reject Amanda Cameron's claim to the throne. The tension in the air was palatable, ugly. Tom who was the local union rep was concerned. He'd been in the resistance against Amaris, but too many of his flock hadn't. Those young bucks had no clue about how to go up against professional soldiers commanding the amount of firepower the 2nd had at its disposal.

In all it was a recipe for a massacre. Tom Kamata knew a lot about those. The crash of shattering glass and a familiar whoosh and sickly sweet smell brought him back to the present. A greasy blaze covered one of the *Panther* BattleMechs that had become so commonplace in the past months. Among the flames at the 'Mech's feet were six shapes that were little more than charred stick figures. Except that these moved, for a few seconds anyway.

"EVERYBODY RUN!" Tom shrieked knowing what was coming next. As the panicked mass of Humanity ran the crack of particle fire and whoosh of short ranged missile fire sent Tom's mind reeling back to the past. Then an explosion lifted him off his feet and slammed him to the ground.

I'm sorry Margie, I wanted so much more. Blackness claimed him then as his wife's smiling face filled his mind.

The command level officers of the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment filled the small conference room. Ian Sinclair was impressed by their calm bearing in the face of the images shown on the screen. The news from Quentin was temporarily being suppressed until the Hegemony could take action. Samuel Winter had a map of the system up on his desktop.

"Our objective here is simple; remove the DCMS presence on Quentin, preferably without bloodshed. The Director-General feels that to leave this incursion into our territory unchecked sends a message of weakness to other lords."

"To that effect a command circuit has been set up to Quentin and our Naval Intelligence has pinpointed a pirate point just beyond the orbit of Trey, the world's third moon."

The spot was highlighted on Sam's map what caught Alex Winter's attention was the proximity to the Persid Comet as it made its stately pass near Quentin.

Samuel looked at his son and executive officer.

"You see what I see, Al?"

Alex nodded pointing. "We can use the cometary tail to ride all the way in."

Sinclair nodded; "We were hoping to use that to achieve some sort of strategic surprise. The Drac's know we're coming but DEPCOM is giving us a boost for the next three weeks the Quentin HPG will be "Experiencing Difficulties." So no word in our out.

Bruce chuckled; "Please stand by."

After the laughter settled, Ian brought up the map of the Independence Weapons Complex. Four DropShips three *Overlords* and a *Condor* sat parked at the DropPort in a diamond formation, the slightly distorted shapes of a company of BattleMechs walked sentry go around the perimeter. Bruce leaned forward suddenly.

"What?" Sam prompted.

"The Cat's can download right here." He highlighted a specific point.

Ian caught where he was going with this.

You're nuts, Major, but it just might work.

Darius Indrahara looked at his lord with unease. The delicate nature of the Quentin situation coupled with the sudden black out of communications had even the director of the ISF in a bind. Minoru Kurita was forgiving for a Draconis Coordinator but even so...

"And Amanda Cameron has shown no response?"

"Just that the Hegemony was looking into the matter." He shook his head angrily. "Furthermore the Director's Shadow, they weren't the usual suspects."

"They were Black Tiger infantry my Lord."

"But not SAS, Darius, no Didi Moran, no August Martine," He looked up. "And no Bruce Gilmour." Minoru looked tellingly at his intelligence chief.

A knock on the door jamb proved to be Jinjiro. Seeing the look on his face Minoru bid him to speak.

“Father the Tigers are gone, they are not on Earth and have been gone a week. Only their Assault Battalion and some support assets remain in Unity Barracks.”

The Coordinator closed his eyes for a moment then asked; “Do we have any ships in the area?”

Indrahar shook his head. “The Ashio *Maru* left with technology shipments three weeks ago.”

“Gentlemen, worst case we’ve just lost the 2nd Galdeon Regulars.”

The room got very quiet very quickly. Even Jinjiro was not about to speculate favorably about a line regiment with a regular rating and second line equipment’s chance against the Hegemony’s finest killers.

Tai-Sho Pavel Martinez was awakened by the sound of a full combat alert. He was out of his rack and in the corridor before he was even fully awake. *Sho-sa* Hideoshi Ito, Third Battalion’s commander came over the TACNET.

“*Tai-Sho* we have multiple inbounds, *Leopards* at tree top. Air defense section reports additional Droppers bracketing the complex.” The *Sho-sa* paused momentarily receiving new information. Whatever he was about to say was cut off by the roar of fusion engines and an ungodly shriek from outside.

The 2nd Galdeon’s commander stared out in the pre dawn gloom on this miserable world. What he saw made him miss his subordinate’s reports initially. Ito’s frantic calls finally got through to the *Tai-Sho*. As he reported at least a dozen BattleMechs between the 2nd’s DropShips and the fuel bunkers. In a resigned and somewhat disbelieving voice Pavel Martinez replied;

“I know Hideo-*kun* I’m looking at one right now.”

The *Black Knight* outside the long gallery of windows gave a jaunty wave with its left hand. Its right however pointed the bore of a particle cannon at the *Tai-Sho*. The gun’s preheat chamber glowed with hellish fire barely constrained.

With a sickly smile *Tai-Sho* Pavel Martinez raised his hands as did the half dozen techs and ‘mechwarriors in the corridor.

Oh well, I never liked this planet anyway.

As I loped *Hussy* over to what intel had pinpointed as the ‘MechWarrior barracks I noticed her gait was even more fluid than usual after a download. As I moved my peripheral vision caught Pauly and *Lucyfur* ambling almost casually up an *Overlord*’s boarding ramp. Dropping between the ships and the fuel bunkers prevented the Combine crews, none of whom were stupid, from firing on us.

Coming to a stop in front of the barracks I wedged my foot up against the door which had began to open. A head peered out the window coming face to face with *Hussy*’s right gun pod. I snapped a picture of his face just as he caught sight of me. It’s one of my screen savers now, priceless.

Over the loudspeaker I said simply;

“Now, now you bad boys, you just sit tight and nobody gets hurt.”

As her team reported success in securing the DropPort’s control tower Didi came over a private channel.

“Now Bruce, it’s not nice to tease the snakes, their egos can’t take it.”

“Looks like their egos are gonna get a beating, Di.”

“Looks like.” She agreed.

Pavel Martinez took the message from his aide whose wheat colored complexion was pale as the pair stood under the *Black Knight*’s main gun. Looking at the message he sighed. Terrans’ and their quirky sense of humor.

“Sir?”, the young aide asked, “What does it say?”

“It says “Shoo.”

Puzzled the aide shook his head. “I don’t...”

“It means we are relived *Tai-i*.”

“Terrans’ are weird sir.”

“Hai!”

In our top news fourteen members of the Draconis Combine’s 2nd Galdeon Regulars and six employees of Independence Weaponry went on trial today after an investigation led by both Combine and Terran officers. The investigation revolved around an incident a month ago in which protesters at Quentin’s Independence Weaponry plant threw an improvised incendiary explosive at a BattleMech and

infantry patrol of the 2nd Galdeon. The 2nd who were acting as peacekeepers opened fire on the mostly innocent crowd. The Combine commander General Pavel Martinez had the troops responsible arrested promptly and had this to say;

{Pavel Martinez in his dress uniform steps up to the podium and clears his throat.}

“The loss of life here was regrettable, however those whose lack of restraint and meanness of character led to these events have been brought to answer for their actions and the Dragon willing we will see justice.”

{A man with his ribs bound and his left arm in a cast steps up after the Combine officer retires. The caption reads Thomas Kamata Local 1231 Representative. }

“The people of Quentin are satisfied that Justice will be done here and would like to thank the officers and men of both the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment and the 2nd Galdeon for their swift action. And we hope that no one will use this as an excuse for further bloodshed.”

The 90th Heavy Assault will remain on Quentin until elements of the 126th Mechanized Infantry Division take station there.

In other news...

Minoru clicked the mute button as the reporter nattered about events in the Star League Council.

“Father, *Tai-Sho* Martinez has asked permission to commit *seppuku*.” His eyes glittering strangely and his voice almost gleeful. Francine gave him an annoyed glance.

“No,” Minoru said, “Francine, send a message to the *Tai-Sho* that we are pleased with the outcome and the material recovered from the Terran factory, and that his good judgement during the aftermath has pleased us well.”

“But Father, the 2nd has dishonored you by yielding Quentin, and Draconis blood has been shed!” Jinjiro protested.

“No my son, we were merely holding the world in trust for the Camerons, and before our troops could be relieved a regrettable incident happened and was rectified. That is what happened here, nothing more.”

Though his *Ki* smoldered Jinjiro simply nodded and asked permission to leave. Francine watched him leave, her face impassive.

“You think I should name *Zabu* my heir, or perhaps...you?”

Years ago the question would have shocked her.

“*Zabu*, yes...Me no, *Tono*.” She said lowering her defenses as Minoru pushed with his *Ki*.

“But you are of the blood, and you *are* a fine leader.”

The complement from the man who was her favorite cousin, which was naturally more important than his rank made Francine blush, but she still looked Minoru in the eye and said point blank;

“Frankly *Tono* you’re job sucks the big one.”

He chuckled.

“You are impudent, Francine-*kun* but you are not wrong, now off with you, I don’t want *Tai-Sho* Martinez offing himself.”

As she left the Coordinator of the Draconis Combine poured himself a scotch and began to make plans.

...So what you’re saying is that despite the fact that nothing has changed in the past two months we’re still making progress?”

“Of course Malcolm, they’re still talking and that’s progress, it’s when the Lords of the Great Houses stop talking that has me worried.”

“Dr Burgess, if John Davion’s claim has the force of law behind it why is there even discussion? Legally the First Prince is the Regent for the next three years.”

“In the Terran courts that would be true, before Stefan Amaris that would be true now with three houses for and three against, no protector to break the stalemate the law can’t even be enforced. While the obstructionists as they are being called can’t deny the claim on the part of the Davion lord they can delay long enough to peck at his support. Already forces in the Federated Suns and the Capellan Confederation are calling for blood at the alliance between these two leaders.”

“Do you think their own people could sabotage the Council talks?”

“I think that anything is possible, Malcolm and that’s what scares me.”

INN interview with Dr. Evan Burgess; expert on international affairs, Cambridge University.

**Unity City, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
24 December, 2780**

They talk and talk and nothing gets done, I thought bitterly, *two months doesn't seem like a long time but when this much is at stake...* Straightening my dress uniform I turned to find Sarah looking at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Major Bruce Gilmour, you are not dwelling on politics on Christmas Eve." She grinned. "We have a party to go to." Spreading her arms she twirled, reminding me of that night in New York an eternity ago. The dress was that same one, my favorite on her, long black satin her creamy shoulders bare. I couldn't help a lecherous grin. Taking her into my arms I whispered;

"Well now Mrs. Gilmour with you looking like that we might not leave the bedroom."

Pushing off my chest she giggled shaking her head.

"Down boy, there'll be time enough for that later. Amanda will be waiting and Uncle John."

Sighing I nodded as we left the bedroom, our digs at Unity were palatial but I had trouble calling it home. In our living room Synthia sat on the couch painting on the holotablet I'd gotten her for an early Christmas present. Justine sat next to her watching idly and looked up as we entered.

"Sarah that dress is awesome, but you've got to lose that scruffy tomcat you picked up." She said slyly.

Indignant I raised my eyebrows.

"Now wait a minute; who's scruffy?"

Synthia looked up at that and glowered at Justine.

"Daddy looks handsome Auntie 'Tine. He's not scruffy"

"I know Lilbutt," Justine replied, "I'm just teasing him."

The door chimed and I went to answer it. Christian Traumintieri waited in the hallway a sack full of presents and a bottle of California Bordeaux. He grinned sheepishly.

"Hey B."

"Hey, c'mon in."

Justine got up from the couch and took the bag from him. She had a shy kind of smile on her face and Sarah gave me a look over her shoulder. I shrugged. Looking around the place with a grin Christian gave me a look.

"Nice B, so this is how the other half lives."

"It's all right, rather be back in New York, though."

Sarah just shook her head and took my arm as we gave Syn a hug and a kiss.

"C'mon you we're gonna be late, Justine; Synthia can stay up till ten tonight."

Saluting, Justine replied with a yes ma'am.

"You kids have fun, and don't do anything I'd do." I said heading out the door.

"That doesn't leave us much." Chris called out after us.

Sitting on a plush couch, Barbara Liao sipped a glass of Champagne as she watched Amanda Cameron and Ian Sinclair flirt almost shyly. John as always guessed what she was thinking.

"I hear the bookies in Las Vegas are taking odds on when those two will get married." He whispered.

"They do make an attractive couple, don't they?"

John nodded.

"The age difference might be a problem, but they're a good match."

Looking at his wife and liege lord, John let a little concern enter in his voice.

"You're still so tense, my love."

Barbara sighed and nodded leaning back against him.

"At least I won't have to look at that bastard Kenyon tonight, or the Snake." She suppressed a shudder, Kenyon Marik she could handle, but Minoru Kurita was well a Kurita. Their last attempt at conversation had quickly devolved into a shouting match. Chancellor of the Capellan Confederation or not the rage of the Kurita lord was enough to stop even her in her tracks. A few minutes more and her husband would have challenged the Coordinator to a duel.

She smiled at the thought; as good as he was reputed to be the Coordinator of the Draconis Combine was no Highlander.

She'd been surprised and touched at the invite to Amanda Cameron's private Christmas party. Then again Terra had been one surprise after another, first Chesterton, an ancient dream that just might be realized. *Peace* with Davion for God's sake! Barbara had no illusions about her states survival if caught between the Federated Suns and the Free Worlds League without the Star League to intervene. But with the Terrans and the Federats as allies, that was another matter entirely.

If they could just pull it off.

A pair of new arrivals at the door interrupted her musings. Sarah Davion and her consort entered. The Cameron girl stepped up to embrace her friend and Barbara took a moment to look at the current ruler of Chesterton. A bare slip of a girl, although one with good taste and poise, but she saw the steel in her core. Having dealt with her professionally Barbara knew Sarah Davion could hold her own. And anything her diplomatic skills couldn't handle the slim cool killer next to her, well Barbara felt John tense slightly as he appraised the younger man.

Her interest in the Steiner woman's novel had led her to take an interest in the pair and a week ago John had wrangled gun cam footage of the final battle for Unity City out of a friend in the SLDF historical archives. They'd watched it one night sitting on their couch in the Capellan quarter and eating something called popcorn. It had been an amusing night.

"Come John, let's meet the locals, she said with a smile."

John gave her a sidelong look rolled his eyes and rose to offer her his arm.

Amanda watched the interplay between the Capellan Chancellor, Sarah and Bruce with some interest. Barbara Liao was known as the most charming of the House Lords. Ian had told her the common SLDF troopers said about her that she could make you feel good about yourself even as she was...

Well no need to think about that. She thought, hoping she wasn't blushing.

Sarah, whose family's rivalry with the Liaos took a back seat only to their hatred of the Kurita clan, looked relaxed but Amanda knew her friend was hiding her distrust. Looking over at Ian she saw he was listening intently as, at Liao's prompting, Bruce retold the battle for Unity City over coffee and pastries. Amanda was a little surprised; the Black Cats' commander was not given to telling war stories.

He is however good at it. Amanda thought as she exchanged glances with Sarah, who she realized was the only other person in the room who didn't pilot a BattleMech. *What the hell is it about those machines that are so damn personal?* She even saw Liao's hands clenching as if on the throttle and joystick of her personal 'Mech.

After finishing the tale, the spell held for a moment until John Hamilton the Chancellors consort cleared his throat startling everyone. As the laughter settled down and Ian set out drinks, Mandarin Hamilton asked about the battle for New Home. Major Gilmour's face grew still at that for a moment then with a small smile he said simply; "That's not a tale for tonight, some day maybe but not now."

John Davion spoke up then, he'd been quiet and reflective most of the night.

"Indeed, it is after all Christmas."

With a start Amanda realized that Bruce's tale had taken up almost three hours and it was indeed a quarter after twelve. Rising gracefully she raised her glass. To the expectant faces, some friends, some allies she smiled.

"Not so long ago I was watching my people suffer under the heel of a tyrant, I wondered if we would ever be free of war and strife. Now sitting here among friends, I can't help think of how far we've come and how far we have yet to go. So Merry Christmas everyone, and may the New Year bring us all the peace and happiness we deserve."

As everyone responded to Amanda's toast Barbara Liao exchanged a brief glance with John Davion. Her thoughts turned inward to the Council sessions resuming after the New Year. And once again she reflected on surprises, the ones she had so far had been pleasant ones, even wondrous.

Squeezing her husband's hand warmly she thought; *Whatever gods there are, may 2781 be a year of only good surprises.*

**Chesterton
Capellan March, Federated Suns
12 January, 2781**

“HE DID WHAT!!!” Lady Deirdre Milissande Green screeched at the recorded image of her son. Sebastian, the dutiful son he was had included the news of John Davion’s deal with Barbara Liao in the message holo he sent home. Lady Deirdre had had to listen to it twice before the words fully penetrated.

The near loss of her own holdings on Demeter not too long ago still stuck in her mind. And Demeter along with Ulan Batar and Chesterton itself were part of the long disputed region of space on the border of the Confederation and House Davion. In a pen stroke her own liege lord had signed those worlds away.

For peace, John Davion you are a fool, we should be smashing the damn Capellans into submission, not selling them worlds. And who the hell wants lands on that miserable backwater Fable.

Her earlier mistake in ending her son’s engagement to Lady Sarah Davion still haunted Deirdre Green. Apparently Terrans would settle for anything these days, even poor soiled Sarah. Her son had gone on blissfully ignoring the change in his fortunes to tell her that Cameron child had plans to give the little redheaded minx a Duchy on Terra itself.

Terra, the Homeworld, despite Amaris the center of Human space and that fool of a child gives out a Duchy to a girl who is little more than her secretary. And what does our idiot leader do about this? Nothing. My son’s Birthright given away for three years as First Lord.

Deirdre shook her head and snorted in a most unladylike fashion.

And you know when Amanda Cameron comes of age our glorious leader will just step aside and give it all up. What nonsense.

Calming down Lady Green saw what needed to be done. Placing a call to one of her lovers, a section chief with the Federated Suns Military Intelligence service or MI, she began to set a plan in motion. Ryan Duchamp was totally devoted to her and a fanatic when it came to the security of the Federated Suns.

*Sebastian someday you will realize what I’ve sacrificed for you, and you **will** be grateful.*

Olympus Mons International Spaceport

Mars, Terran Hegemony

25 January, 2781

“Business or pleasure?” The customs clerk asked smiling. Erica Dalton replied with a weary grin.

“Business, is there anything else these days?”

Chuckling, the clerk nodded in sympathy, after the horrors of the occupation tourism was the last thing on the minds of the citizens of the Hegemony. Mars long the playground of the rich had, during the occupation, been overrun with the Usurper’s supporters. After the liberation the exodus of humanity from the planet was quickly having an impact on the world’s economy and social structure.

Stamping Erica’s passport the clerk smiled and said; “Welcome to Mars and enjoy your stay.”

Thanking her Erica grabbed the small duffel that was her only luggage and stepped out into the Spaceport’s lobby. Joey Elliot was waiting for her, heavysset and ruddy haired he looked like what he had become, a miner working to feed Terra’s hungry factories. Like Erica he was not what he seemed to be.

Giving her a quick hug, her old friend led her to the parking garage and a waiting Chrysler Ares Mars class SUV. Sowing her gear the slender blonde paused to tie her long hair back out of the way of the inevitable respirator. The slow process of “greening” the Red Planet would not be complete for at least another century and pressurizing a car was often not worth the trouble. Far easier to just plug into the car’s internal systems and save the respirator’s own built in supply.

“Word on Professor Peabody?” She asked as the SUV pulled on to the M-5 freeway. Her companion’s reply was muffled slightly by his mask.

“Firmly ensconced in the Val Marinas arcology with his whole dammed family.” Joey’s reply was terse. Tasked with the initial recon of their target Joey had been on Mars for four months.

“He’s got a minimal security force, mostly RimJobs pardoned by himself.” He went on referring to General Kerensky’s directives on the treatment of Rim Worlds mainforcers not involved in atrocities. That their target known by his codename “Professor Peabody” for his bookish image had hired such was just one more indicator of his guilt. Memories flooded her then, for most thoughts of home were a happy thing. For Erica there was nothing but a dull hollow pain.

The crack of rifle shots sounded from over the wall of Government House. Erica had long ago stopped reacting to the sounds. Her friend Melanie hadn’t. A sudden fusillade while they were serving drinks had startled her spilling a margarita all over that RimJob commandant last week. She vanished the next day. Placing the salt rimmed glass in front of officer as he sat discussing matters with the man who supposedly led her world she kept her face impassive.

"...we will need an increase of thirty percent from the munitions factory at Innwood by the end of the month." The Commandant was saying.

Blinking his owlish eyes the dapperly dressed noble across the table looked over a data tablet.

"Commandant Lichter we will need an increase of twenty five hundred workers to match that quota will..."

"Oh don't worry Martin; we've rounded up twice that in insurgents take them all."

Laughter at that as Erica felt the Commandant's hand drift up her thigh under her short skirted maid's uniform.

"With the ration cuts I can't feed them all."

"Then don't we, can always get more." The Commandant answered continuing his hand's wandering.

More laughter as Erica noticed a bead of sweat trickle down the nobles face. The Commandant rose and nodded his dismissal.

"Martin if you will excuse me, I feel the need for some relaxation and I believe this young lady may be of some assistance."

As the man who she'd been raised to believe in as her world's leader rose and mumbled some banal pleasantries, she noticed he didn't even look at her. It was as if she didn't even exist. Keeping a pleasant smile on her face she turned back to the RimJob Commandant he was already unbuckling his belt. Knowing what he wanted from long experience Erica turned and bent over the table.

She just hoped he would be quick this time...

"Erica?" Joey's voice broke her reverie.

"Oh sorry Joe, just remembering y'know?"

"Yeah, don't worry hon; this is where we put our ghosts to rest."

If you can ever put those ghosts to rest. She thought bitterly.

As if summoned by her thoughts the image on her side dash's tri-vid showed an interview with her target. The dapper bookish man on the holo screen blinked at the reporter's question.

"Well Daphne there was little we could actually do. The presence of the Rim Worlds troops and their flunkies was all pervasive. At most we could hope to moderate the damage they were doing to our society."

The man on the screen looked away for a moment.

"We really didn't do a good job, though. But to our critics I have to say you weren't there."

As Reginald Windsor-Small the Fifth former ruler of Rigel Kentares went on, Erica's eyes narrowed.

Ahh but you are wrong there my Lord, I was there, and for that, for what we went through there will be a reckoning.

In the Windsor-Small Estate's security office Jasper "Boondog" Cheng-Li snapped awake. The veteran of the Amaris Huscarl Dragoons hadn't dozed off on watch since his recruit days. One didn't get a slot with the top regiment in the Rim if you did. Embarrassed he looked around but no one was around to witness his lapse.

It's just so dang boring. Nothin' to look at but Reggie's little winter paradise.

Jasper couldn't understand the nerdy but insanely wealthy little man. But he did understand doing something just because you could. Memories of the stupid shit he and his friends had gotten into on Lonestar brought a smile to his face briefly. Stifling a yawn he stretched.

Coffee, that's what I need.

Opening the door he almost ran into the short red haired man in the corridor.

"Hey who the hell...?"

Pain greater than any he'd felt before blossomed in his kidney. Eyes wide he looked over at the slender blonde woman who'd just shoved an ice pick into him. The pain so great he couldn't scream Jasper couldn't resist as he fell backward pushed by the man in front of him. As the light faded from his sight he heard the woman say into a comlink;

"Team two take the third floor, security should be shut down now."

Erica Dalton looked down at the dying man gurgling weakly on the floor. Bending down she whispered into his ear.

"I'm gonna do you a favor RimJob."

With that she jabbed her ice pick into his ear.

Jena Hall shivered in the space behind the end table. When the power had gone out Tina Soldano, her nanny had told her to stay put as she went to see what was wrong. Her friend Brianne had invited her over to her house for a play date and Jena had looked forward to today all week. Now however...

A muffled cry from outside had sent the pair into hiding.

Holding hands with Brianne the pair had huddled behind the only cover in the room. The door creaked open and a flashlight's beam slashed the darkness. Holding their breaths the girls closed their eyes and tried to make themselves invisible.

Just as Jena thought she heard the mysterious intruder begin to leave a woman's voice broke the silence.

"Bri-Bri; that you honey?"

With a squeal of delight Brianne jumped up and raced to the shadow behind the light.

"Erica, c'mon out Jena it's Erica!"

Reassured by her friend's voice Jena rose from her hiding place. Behind the pretty blonde woman she could see shadowy forms moving in the hallway. The woman, who looked like a movie star smiled at her. Sheepishly she smiled back, someone that pretty couldn't be a monster.

"Erica worked for father on RK, Jena, she's my favorite."

Just then a flashlight in the corridor played over the floor. A hand and arm lay in the corridor, the rest of the body hidden by the door. Flashing in the beam's ghostly glow Jena could see a bracelet. It was Tina's; her boyfriend had given it to her when he'd left for West Point along with her sister Eleanor.

Tina never took it off. As her mind reeled around the sight a choked little cry brought her attention back to Brianne. Just in time to see her friend collapse on the floor. Erica, the bright smile still on her face turned toward Jena, something sharp in her hand gleamed wetly, redly.

As the scream died in her throat twelve year old Jena Hall had time for one final thought.

Monsters can be pretty.

Unity Barracks

Terra, Terran Hegemony

04 February, 2781

As I walked to the gymnasium a cold pit settled in my stomach. Just knowing what I did made me feel filthy, hollow. To break the news to someone who was barely a kid made me feel sick. I was however her commanding officer. Duty will always win out.

"Cadet Soldano, front and center!"

Eleanor Soldano, brightest star of the cadets I'd recruited at the Point jogged over to the bleachers, breathing heavily from her workout. From her look she knew something was up. Coming to attention she saluted.

"At ease cadet and take a seat."

Inside I steeled myself as she looked up at me expectantly.

"Sir, did I do some..."

Cutting her off, I spoke softly.

"Cadet, Eleanor; there's no easy way to say this so I'll get straight to the point. You have family on Mars, right?"

"Yes sir, my parents and my younger sister, sir did something happen to my parents?"

"No, they're fine, but your sister Tina was found murdered this morning."

For a second she was dumbfounded then she wrapped her arms around her abdomen.

"She was working for the Hall family as a nanny, who..." Eleanor shook her head and looked up at me tears starting to form.

"...Who could have killed her?"

"Her body was found at the winter estate of Reginald Windsor-Small, it looks like vigilantes hit them for that mess on Rigel Kentares. They found only six of the over sixty people at the estate, Jena Hall her ward, Brianne Windsor-Small and several guards. CIB is handling this as their top case."

"I need to go home sir."

I nodded, putting my hand on her shoulder.

"The *Roadrunner* is finishing fueling at McKenna Field right now, so pack up what you need."

She looked at me a little shocked, and a little dazed.

“You’re a Tiger now Eleanor, we take care of our own, so whatever you need, you call me.”
I handed her a card with my pocketcomp’s number on it.
“I want who did this, I want them to...”
Her voice cracked then and I took a knee before her.
“Trust me Eleanor, they’ll pay and pay dearly.” My voice was a low growl as some of my own frustration bled out and she looked up at me with red rimmed eyes.
“Let’s just say we have friends in high places.” I finished.
These idiot’s have got to learn, leave the justice for the law, CIB was just about to haul that fool Reginald in. I thought grimly. *An example needs to be made otherwise this is gonna get even more out of control.* Summoning Arthur Kowalski, the other of my top recruits to see Eleanor to her room I placed a call to Jon Case.

Amanda Cameron looked up at the knock on her office’s doorjamb. She smiled when she saw Jon Case standing there. The former bush pilot had a concerned look on his face.
“Got a moment hon?” he asked.
“Sure Jon, I need a break anyway, tea?”
He gave her a look.
“Sorry, Jon Dr. Matsu’s orders, no caffeine, and before you say anything dear God in Heaven don’t I miss my mochas.”
He smiled at that, knowing her fondness for the sweet espresso based drink.
“Nothin’ sweetie, just got a call from Cyclops.”
Recognizing his nickname for Major Gilmour, Amanda smiled. Jon only gave out annoying nicknames if he liked you. His dropping of hers’ when she had been confirmed as Director-General was what passed for formality with him.
She kind of missed being called Punkin’ Pie.
“What’s on his mind?”
“That mess on Mars, one of his cadets, you met her; the Soldano girl, her sister was one of the bodies they found.”
Amanda raised her hand to her mouth.
“Oh God.”
“Yeah, I know he wants to go kick some ass, but he’s restraining himself, sent the girl home on one of their *Leopards*.”
“We can’t have a repeat of the Donner bit.”
“He knows that, but he’s right about one thing.”
Amanda nodded for Jon to continue.
“We need to make an example here, this is by far the worst so far, but if this goes on it could tear us apart at the seams. You know damn well that you could make a case for collaboration on half the people in the Hegemony if you wanted to.”
Amanda nodded grimly. It was a fact of life, just as an example half the janitorial staff of the Court had worked for Stefan Amaris. When you had a family to support you just made do. The vigilante problem, exemplified by what had happened on Mars, could cripple the recovering nation. Far too many administrators, clerks, even police had cooperated to keep their families safe.
That cooperation could and did turn into a bloodbath.
“We have been cracking down on the worst of them,” Amanda shook her head. “The Chief Justice and I have been going over...I don’t know a “Deamarisification” I guess you could call it.”
“We’ve got to get Stefan Amaris out of our collective heads,” she went on. “But we’ve got to do it without turning our society into Swiss cheese.”
Jon nodded then snorted and shook his head.
“Punkin’ Pie remind me never to complain how tough my job is or how bad a day I’m havin’.”
As she chuckled a thought came to her.
“Listen, I’ve got a message to record.”
Nodding Jon sauntered out after giving her their ritual hug. Setting up her desk terminal’s camera she began to speak.
“Cadet Soldano, I was going to write this message but I wanted you to hear it from me personally. There is probably nothing I can say to comfort you, but I’ve lost many of those close to me...”

Later...

...I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but I have to. Please let us bring these villains to justice. You took an oath to protect the Star League, well, duty it is said is a river that flows both ways. Let the nation you swore to protect avenge this wrong to you. I promise you we won't rest until justice is done here.

Ian finished listening and nodded.

“Good?” Amanda asked.

“Yeah, definitely.” Ian smiled down at her warmly.

She looked at him then her head cocked to the side and that sweet smile that he'd been seeing more and more of.

“What?” Ian asked finally.

“Coming by tonight?”

“Ahh... Can't, I've got to meet with the General.”

“Why, what's going on?” The disappointment in her voice tugged at his heart.

Standing quickly Ian tapped a control bringing up a star map highlighting a star near the Lyran border.

“Zeba, Zebegu, gahhh, Alpha Librae.”

“Zebebelgenubi, yes I know try saying that ten times fast”, Amanda chuckled. “It seems they have a Thresher problem.”

Amanda's eyes narrowed at the mention of Amaris military units who had either not received or had disregarded the surrender order broadcast by Stefan Amaris two years ago. The last ones on Terra had been run down in the Amazon River basin not a month and a half ago. That they were active on the tongue twisting world that had seen the massacre of the Star League's brightest scientists was disturbing to say the least.

“Send the Tigers.”

Surprised at her kneejerk reaction he looked the question at her.

“They did fine on Quentin, and clearing out the Threshers in Canada.”

“You do have other units, you know.” Ian reminded her.

“I know, Ian but your project with the HAF, you know how much work we have yet to do. I need the Fusiliers here and the CAAN is still involved in the recovery efforts in Malaysia.”

Ian nodded, following his own reasoning, expressed to Amanda last month. With their amphibious engineering battalion and blue water naval experience the 42nd CAAN had been a perfect unit to send in to aid in the reconstruction of the south Asian sector's oceanic industries and habitats. The added bonus that members of the Director-General's personal guards were sent to aid them had given Amanda a massive public relations boost in the area.

Finishing her reasoning Amanda said simply.

“Besides, they're the ones I want to handle it.”

Ian nodded his acquiescence knowing *that* particular tone. The Cameron tone of command.

Thus Kerensky's Sledgehammers become Cameron's.

**CIB Headquarters Quantico, Virginia
North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
05 February, 2781**

Sergei Cherenkov sipped coffee and went over the notes in front of him. The Strategic Information Center at the building known as “The Company” for over a thousand years was crowded with agents. The Mars Massacre, not exactly the most innovative moniker but apt enough, was on everyone's lips. It even took the headlines from the deadlocked Star League council.

Jack O'Bannon sat down at the seat Sergei had saved for his partner. The big red let out a breath as he brought his pocketcomp up. The faces of the six bodies found or in this case their ID's stared back blankly. Vigilante reprisals against collaborators were a fact of life in the rebuilding Hegemony. But the order of magnitude of the Mars Massacre so close to home stirred the powers that be to a frenzy.

Gods even the children, thought Sergei, *When the hell did we become just like the Fat Man.*

Director Vincent Bouchard, who'd stepped in from the Paris branch after his predecessor's heart attack, entered. A tall stern grey haired man, Bouchard had run a resistance group for eight years while

pretending to be loyal to Stefan Amaris. Known to be tough but fair he'd quickly earned the loyalty of the agents in his care.

"As you all must have heard the events on Mars need to be answered strongly. To this effect we have orders from the Office of the Director-General to make the apprehension of these fiends BAM priority." The Director referred to a policy known as By Any Means necessary.

"Special Agent Sergei Cherenkov will have point on this one, and will have the full resources of the Company behind him. We have reason to believe the group involved is still on Mars and Defense Force intel assets have identified a group of twelve persons of interest."

The screen behind the Director shifted to show a mix of men and women all from Rigel Kentares, the former domain of the Windsor-Small's. The group had all slipped in with freighters bearing relief aid under assumed names. With so many refugees leaving Mars, the mines and their support industries were desperate for workers and with the Terran bureaucracy still coming together, many people were starting new lives.

That some of those people were former Amaris collaborators and others were vigilantes hunting them gave many a Star League official sleepless nights. Sane people knew that to go after every person who cooperated was impossible. Smart people realized that to even try would damage the stricken state's economy and bureaucracy severely, maybe even fatally.

And nobody ever accused the Human race of being smart and sane. Sergei thought.

As the briefing came to an end the Director took all of the new Task Force MARS in his gaze and said simply.

"Good hunting people, let's end this now."

Sergei's gaze fixed on a young blonde woman with a model's features in the lineup.

Better hope you're not part of this sweetheart, 'cause the best case scenario...you'll be old and gray when you get out.

The bloodstained ice pick fell, black against the molten steel. Erica Dalton considered following it. She dismissed the idea almost immediately. The will to live reared its head at the oddest times. Turning to the group quietly waiting behind her the former cocktail waitress came to a decision.

"They're looking for us even now, the little girl's playmates. They'll expect us to run, the Great Houses maybe, the Periphery. But there's one place they won't suspect."

The others followed her gaze upwards into the Martian night at the pale blue dot, brightest in the sky.

"The center of everything." She said.

Robert Steiner sipped a glass of real *apfelwein* as he considered the report before him. The Hegemony, The Star League, the whole *verdammnt* mess had cost him political capitol back home. The jackals who called themselves the Estates-General were calling for his head. They didn't see the big picture, the Hegemony's time was over.

It's our time now.

Similar thoughts ran through Minoru Kurita's mind. The young ISF agent standing before him stayed quiet as his leader thought. The boy had done well in his last assignment. Now it was time to test him again. His nominal allies in the council, the Lyran Commonwealth were up to something. Minoru wanted to know what.

Darius Indrahara had an idea. If he was right Minoru wanted their plan stopped.

"*Honey, come qui...Bleachh!*" The call from the bathroom brought me at a run. Sarah was bent over the toilet; she looked at me with a mildly alarmed glance. Thinking quickly I gathered her hair out of the way as she doubled over again. It went on like that for a few minutes, then she collapsed back against me with a smile of relief.

Sinthya stood in the doorway eyes wide. I was trying to remember what we'd had to eat last night, but it didn't seem likely any place in Unity had served us bad food. But what the hell else...

Oh boy.

Seeing the look on my face, Sarah grinned.

"You think?" I asked.

"Yes dear."

I couldn't help the silly grin on my face. Sinthya looked confused.
"Daddy is Sarah sick?"
"No honey, she's gonna have a baby."
At that moment Sarah pushed me back and bent over the toilet again. When she was done she looked up at me and said;
"This is all your fault you know."
"Yes dear."

End of Book Two
To be continued in Those Who Break the Unity.

90th Heavy Assault Regiment Basic TO&E (Just What Shoots at You for Now.)
Command Company/Regimental Headquarters Guard
3 BattleMech Lances (Highlander)
'Mech Section (All BattleMech are Royal models unless otherwise indicated)
1st Battalion (The Bloody Paws): Heavy Assault
1xBattleMech Lance (Pillager)
3xBattleMech Companies, 4 Lances each (Pillager)
1xBattleMech Company, 4 Lances (Devastator)
2nd Battalion (The Swift Claws): Strike/Recon
1xBattleMech Lance (Dragon-T)
2xBattleMech Companies, 3 Lances each (Dragon-T, Wolverine)
1xBattleMech Company, 3 Lances (Talon/Mongoose)
3rd Battalion (The Stalking Tigers) Line
1xBattleMech Lance (Marauder)
3xBattleMech Companies, 3 Lances each (Marauder/Black Knight/Bombardier)
4th Battalion (The Hungry Tigers) Line
1xBattleMech Lance (Marauder)
3x BattleMech Companies, 3 Lances each (Marauder/Black Knight/Bombardier)
13th Assault Company (The Black Cats) Independent Operations
3xBattleMech Lances (Mixed)
1xSAS Platoon, 4 teams (Mechanized/Airmobile/Nighthawk)
1xAir Lance (Spad)
Aerospace Section
SLS *Tiger Claw* Kimagure Class Pursuit Cruiser
SLS *Reprisal* Vengeance Class Carrier DropShip
SLS *Tiger's Lair, Sledge Hammer, Cavanaugh, Kentares*; Dictator Class DropShips
SLS *Cat's Eye, Brooklyn Sue, Catamount, Union, Broadsword, Lisa D.*; Union Class DropShips
SLS *Roadrunner, Skirtchaser, Jen's Kiss, Loudmouth, Wildcat, Bad Dream*; Leopard Class DropShips
SLS *Inchon, Vancouver Bay*; Excalibur Class DropShips
SLS *Ticonderoga, William Henry, Bastogne*; Fortress Class DropShips
SLS *Thomas Paine*; Monolith Class JumpShip
SLS *Michael Perry, Merry Michelle, Long Runner, Ethan Raye*; StarLord Class JumpShips
SLS *Ranger, Joshua Harrington*; Invader Class JumpShips
1171st Royal Tactical Fighter Wing (Rakshasa)
2xAerospace Superiority Squadrons, 12 Fighters each (Spad)
2xAerospace/Ground Attack Squadrons, 12 Fighters each (Hammerhead)
Combat Support
2005th Royal Combat Support Group Various
243rd New York National Guard Artillery Battalion
3xArtillery Companies, 3 Batteries (6 mobile guns) each (Long Tom III SP)
1xGuided Missile Artillery Company, 3 Batteries (6 launchers) each (Chaparral)
882nd New York National Guard Military Police Company (Base Security, Military Police)
4xInfantry Platoons (Motor/ATV)
713th New York National Guard Combat Engineering Battalion (Building, Breaking 'n EOD)

3xInfantry Companies, 3 Platoons each (Mechanized/Engineer Vehicles/Bridge Layers)

Scout Platoon (Recon)

4xScout Squads (Mechanized/Airmobile/Drone)

1xLAM Lance (Gunship/Recon)

7th SAS Company (Infiltration, Assassination, Breaking Stuff, Dirty Deeds)

4xSAS Platoons, 4 teams each (Mechanized/Airmobile/Nighthawk)

504th New York National Guard Mechanized Infantry Battalion

3x Infantry Companies, 4 Platoons each (Mechanized/Foot)

1x Infantry Company, 4 Platoons each (Airmobile/Jump)